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“WHAT’S THE USE OF TRYING TO READ SHAKESPEARE?”:  
MODES OF MEMORY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF’S FICTION AND ESSAYS

by

SARA REMEDIOS BLOOM

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York

2016

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Modes of Memory in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction and Essays

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Sara Remedios Bloom

This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in English in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## ABSTRACT

“What’s the Use of Trying to Read Shakespeare?”:  
Modes of Memory in Virginia Woolf’s Fiction and Essays

by

Sara Remedios Bloom

Advisor: Carrie Hintz

This dissertation maps the relationship between Virginia Woolf’s fiction and essays, and William Shakespeare’s person and plays. I argue that Woolf’s writing is intended as an interactive practice of cultural memory, challenging her readers to become responders and to engage critically with the canon. I further argue that Woolf offers herself as inheritor of a literary practice that actively seeks to shape the values and social ideology of the time. The introduction defines three modes of memory operating in Woolf’s work: memory as opiate; memory as political instrument; and memory as dialectic. The first chapter shows the cultural memory of Shakespeare in Woolf’s time as both opiate and instrument, and traces Woolf’s reaction against such reduction in “A Room of One’s Own.” The second chapter examines Woolf’s use of direct allusion and quotation in her early novels, culminating with her masterful use of the dialectic memory of Shakespeare to critique the British Empire in *Mrs. Dalloway*. The third chapter examines *The Years* and *Three Guineas* as Woolf’s effort to engage with the memorial project of a Shakespearean history play. Finally, the last chapter considers Woolf’s masterpiece, *The Waves*, as her own retelling of *Hamlet*, an elegy for an empire that she knows must fall, and an effort to define the succeeding narrative.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Writing the Nation: History, Memory, and Literature

“From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock.”

“A Sketch of the Past” 72

“For 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. Jane Austen should have laid a wreath upon the grave of Fanny Burney, and George Eliot done homage to the robust shade of Eliza Carter—the valiant old woman who tied a bell to her bedstead in order that she might wake early and learn Greek. All women together ought to let flowers fall upon the tomb of Aphra Behn, which is, most scandalously but rather appropriately, in Westminster Abbey, for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds. It is she—shady and amorous as she was—who makes it not quite fantastic for me to say to you tonight: Earn five hundred a year by your wits.”

“A Room of One’s Own” 71-72

In “A Room of One’s Own,” Woolf famously asserts that “masterpieces are not single and solitary births; they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common, thinking by the body of the people, so that the experience of the mass is behind the single voice” (*A Room* 65). What she means is twofold. First, Woolf means to assert that masterpieces are produced within a cultural context that shapes the horizon of artistic possibilities at that time. Politics, religion, values, education, artistic traditions, social norms, means of production... all these influence the artist’s experience of the world, and in so doing, they influence what the artist produces. Moreover, to the extent that all these things—political structures, religious institutions, social conventions, education, infrastructure—are inherited from one generation to the next, the culture that influences the artist in the moment of production is itself influenced by the past, by what has been collectively thought and said and done by past societies, and actively



and passively brought forward into the present. The “experience of the mass” of individuals from the past who contribute to the lived experience of the artist in the present is therefore expressed by and through her art. The birth of a masterpiece is not “solitary” to the artist, but inclusive of the culture and the mass of individual voices culture contains.

Second, just as the birth of a masterpiece is not "solitary" to the writer, it is also not "single." Masterpieces are reborn again and again in being made part of the canon, as each new generation engages with the art and reaffirms its value and meaning. That's to say: a masterpiece is a masterpiece not in itself, but because we continue to read it, and because each time we pick it back up, we reaffirm its importance, and thereby increase its importance for generations to come. Each time the piece is picked up, it is reborn for that generation and for generations to follow. Art is influenced by history and culture, and art influences history and culture going forward.

This idea of the masterpiece as temporally complex—as evoking the life experience of many, and as being itself re-imagined and re-created over generations through the canon—anticipates a version of cultural memory that understands art as reflexive and anachronic. Woolf anticipates Frederic Jameson’s insight in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) that “texts come before us as the always-already-read; we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or—if the text is brand-new—through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions” (Jameson 9). She also anticipates Alexander Nagel's and Christopher S. Wood's theorization of the temporality of art as at once authorial—produced by an individual in a specific and bounded cultural and temporal moment—and substitutional—“sustained across time by the stability of its name and by tacit substitution of its parts” (Nagel and Wood 1998, 8). This introduction will explore different theorizations of

history, memory, culture, and art in relation to Woolf's theorization of the masterpiece. My goal will be to develop a vocabulary with which to explore Woolf's use of masterpieces and literary allusion in her writing as engaged in the formation and negotiation of cultural memory. I want to understand Woolf's use of masterpieces as self-consciously engaging with memorial practices in British high intellectual culture, formulating through literary practice a set of implicit theoretical understandings (of literature, art, culture, and nation) to which we have since given language and structure.

Before diving into how Woolf does this, it is useful to pause briefly to define what is meant by culture, and what is meant by cultural memory. Ray McDermott and Hervé Varenne write in "Culture 'as' Disability" (1995) that

The coherence of any culture is not given by members being the same, nor by members knowing the same things. Instead, the coherence of a culture is crafted from the partial and mutually dependent knowledge of each person caught in the process and depends, in the long run, on the work they do together. Life in culture, Bakhtin (1984[1940]) reminds us, is polyphonous and multivocalic; it is made of the voices of many, each one brought to life and made significant by the others, only sometimes by being the same, more often by being different, more dramatically by being contradictory. (McDermott and Varenne 326)

In this construction, culture is an amalgamation of a set of beliefs and practices that operate simultaneously within a given time and place; to speak of culture is to speak not of a normative consensus but instead of a dialectic process in which collective identity is negotiated. This is the definition I will be using in this project, as it is the one I find to be implicit in Woolf's fiction and essays.

One of the defining characteristics of Woolf's writing is the way she constantly showcases the same social situations, literary references, and historical events through many different sets of eyes. We might compellingly understand her work as a series of separate but overlapping narrations that reveal separate but overlapping experiences of separate but overlapping events. McDermott and Varenne's description of culture could be borrowed without any change as an apt a description of any one of Woolf's novels: all are "polyphonous and multivocalic"; all are "made of the voices of many, each one brought to life and made significant by the others, only sometimes by being the same, more often by being different, more dramatically by being contradictory" (326). From a more formally subtle approach in *The Voyage Out* to the most experimental approach *The Waves*, the narrative structures of the novels in particular require that we understand the events from multiple perspectives; we are asked to understand Woolf's characters both as individuals and in light of one another, with the social criticism delivered through the negotiation of the individual in a social/political world. As such, the social/political stakes of the novels—stakes to which Jane Marcus, Christine Froula, and many others have called our attention since the late 1980s—are expressed through a polyphonic and multivocalic literary world, interested in capturing the "real" historical world being represented. Woolf writes life in culture as a way of writing culture; that culture is complex and dialectic.

Because culture is dialectic, and because those beliefs/values/experiences that go into the cultural dialectic are sustained and passed down across generations through processes of education, socialization and acculturation, incumbent within culture as so defined is cultural memory. Mieke Bal, in her introduction to *Acts of Memory: Cultural Recall in the Present* (1998), argues "that memory can be understood as a cultural phenomenon as well as an

individual or social one” (Bal ix). Just as an individual forms and processes memories of past events as a way of constructing a narrative of personal identity—“I am who I am because of what I have experienced”—, Bal argues that cultures form and process memories of shared historical or political events as a way of constructing a shared cultural identity. The living memory of individuals is transformed into a shared set of cultural references, access to which defines participation in the community. If, as McDermott and Varenne postulate, "the coherence of a culture is crafted from the partial and mutually dependent knowledge of each person caught up in the process and depends, in the long run, on the work they do together" (McDermott and Varenne 326), then the "process" of culture building is one in which shared identity is crafted, and "the work they do together" is that of creating a narrative.

For McDermott and Varenne, this process is simply a given, and its mechanics—that is, the process by which cultural memory forms—are not of primary concern. For Woolf, the process is essential. The value of cultural memory as a theoretical framework for approaching Woolf’s fiction and essays is not as a construct in and of itself, but as a way of getting at a set of questions Woolf asks again and again in her writing. That is, if cultural identity is bound up in a (unstable, evolving) set of shared references and scripts, then from where do those scripts come? Is identity and memory simply an accident, or is it consciously created? And if memory is, at least to some extent, consciously created, then how is it created? And by whom? Who has the right to shape memory and identity? For what purpose, and to what end, can that right be invoked? This last, I think, is Woolf’s central guiding question, recognizing that the negotiation of cultural identity and memory happens in a world of complex power relationships. Woolf’s representation of culture as "polyphonous and multivocalic" is used as a way to call attention to

the way power structures influence ways of thinking and reinforce and undermine available understandings.

In this dissertation, I will trace three modes of memory with which Woolf engages, with three separate sets of answers to these larger philosophical questions. The first mode is memory as political instrument. As we shall see, Woolf continually calls our attention to the use and abuse of memory for political gain and at the expense of the disenfranchised, particularly (though not exclusively) women. We see, for example, Clarissa Dalloway's way of seeing the world against that of her husband the parliamentarian, against that of Peter Walsh the imperial administrator, against that of Septimus Warren Smith the soldier and pawn of the imperialists. We are given to see the way each characters' biography and role within a political structure influences his or her way of understanding the shared narrative of cultural (now political) identity, and the relative influence of each understanding in the broader society. In the memory as instrument mode, memory is used to serve the needs of those in power, with the institution prescribing "correct," flattened interpretations of cultural identity to help ensure civility and unity.

The second mode of memory is memory as opiate. Woolf shows the ways in which society uses its memorial practices to sooth itself, with individuals substituting memorial practice for active intellectual engagement, substituting tradition for belief in power of change. In this mode, memory, identity, and meaning are all created by those who come before. The present generation has neither the right nor the obligation to challenge inherited beliefs, but rather should accept the views and interpretations that create the least conflict in society. This mode is closely tied to memory as political instrument, with the primary difference being that the opiate mode shows the public willingly seeking out a selective memory, willingly abdicating responsibility

for asking questions about from where cultural identity comes and whose responsibility it might be to take ownership of culture and identity. If, as Jan Assman writes, the “Crystallization of... collectively shared knowledge is a prerequisite of its transmission *in the culturally institutionalized heritage of society*,” then opiate-memory is the crystalized product taken without question, and without continued, conscious engagement with the dialectical process Assman identifies as essential (Assman 1995, 130). Put another way: whereas instrument-memory emphasizes the agency of those who manipulate scripts for gain, opiate-memory emphasizes the equal, if abdicated, agency of those who accept scripts without question. Opiate-memory is to be accepted without knowing or caring about the stakes and consequences that derive from political identity.

The third mode of memory, and that which Woolf privileges as best, is memory as sustained dialectic. This mode posits memory as an active intellectual engagement with society at large, including not only the present generation but also the great thinkers of generations past. Dialectic-memory is what Woolf invokes when she talks about masterpieces and Shakespeare. When she says that “there is no Shakespeare,” she does not mean to disavow Shakespeare’s authorship of his work, or his talent—clearly she was an avid admirer. Rather, she suggests that his skill was only authorized by the extent to which it allowed his writing to serve as a lens for the collective experience of his time, by creating texts that speak for the masses by actively resisting any single, static reading. In the dialectic mode of memory, the identity of a nation can be shaped by a skilled individual using her skill to engage the masses in the dialectical process of meaning formation—but her skill is only authorized as it helps overcome the abdicated agency of opiate-memory, drawing those around her into the conversation and the identity-formation

process. The individual has the right only to ask or imply questions, and it is the responsibility of the whole of “the mass” to engage in the process of finding answers.

In searching for critical frameworks to best express these modes, I settled upon three, all of which would have in many ways made up the intellectual ether of Woolf’s cultural milieu. Culture and memory as we currently understand them were still being defined in Woolf’s moment, but the strands that have emerged today into a robust critical field trace back to three writers we know to have been influential for Woolf: Nietzsche, Marx, and Shakespeare. I want to argue that we can productively understand Woolf’s view of what we now term culture and memory as a fusion of Nietzsche’s assertion that history is a selective remembrance that benefits society, and Marx’s claim that history is a record of class warfare, deployed in a literary context as a means of cultural activism. I do not mean to suggest that Woolf ascribed wholly to either’s philosophy—Nietzsche’s amorality in particular would clearly not have resonated with Woolf’s profound sense of duty and ethics. Rather, what I mean to suggest is that Woolf, like the opportunistic autodidact she often showed herself to be, essentially cherry-picked (consciously or unconsciously) elements of Nietzschean and Marxist philosophy to which she would almost undoubtedly have been exposed through her father’s library and through dinners at Bloomsbury Square. By coupling elements from two major philosophical schools of Woolf’s time with the literature she so revered—and through which she engages in her own historical projects—I hope to show where Woolf learned her craft and her particular brand of literary activism.

### *History with a Purpose: The Nietzschean Framework*

Since the publication of Friedrich Nietzsche’s seminal essay “On the Use and Abuse of History in Life” in 1874, the notion of a philological history capable of reconstructing events of

the past with fidelity and objectivity has been under attack. The past is, to Nietzsche and to those who have followed him, both irrecoverable and inseparable from the contemporary perspective; what we think of as history is always but a forced-narrative construction of key moments or ideas in a society's history, and always marked by the intentional repression or "forgetting" of those moments or ideas that do not fit. Nietzsche tells us, in other words, that the crystalized cultural memory (a concept that has emerged in no small part because of Nietzsche's exposure of the subjectivity of ostensibly objective historical record) will always be to some extent flattened, will always be selective, and will always be formed in service of a way of understanding itself that most benefits society of the moment. What society remembers and what society forgets is rightly dictated by the way in which society wishes to understand itself, and by what is most comfortable and convenient with respect to that understanding.

The challenge for society is to make sure what is remembered is also productive, serving the interests of the present generation. In the forward to his essay, Nietzsche writes:

To be sure, we need history. But we need it in a manner different from the way in which the spoilt idler in the garden of knowledge uses it, no matter how elegantly he may look down on our coarse and graceless needs and distresses. That is, we need it for life and action, not for a comfortable turning away from life and action or merely for glossing over the egotistical life and the cowardly bad act. We wish to use history only insofar as it serves the living. But there is a degree of doing history and a valuing of it through which life atrophies and degenerates. To bring this phenomenon to light as a remarkable symptom of our time is every bit as necessary as it may be painful. (1)



What Nietzsche means by this is that, while history is necessary to provide context and identity for a society, at a certain point too much emphasis on history and too much value placed on inherited values and institutions becomes toxic. There is, for Nietzsche, a “degree of history,” a “borderline at which the past must be forgotten if it is not to become the gravedigger of the present” without presupposing that all history must always be forgotten (3). He continues,

There is a general principle: each living being can become healthy, strong, and fertile only within a horizon. If he is incapable of drawing a horizon around himself and too egotistical to enclose his own view within an alien one, then he wastes away there, pale or weary, to an early death.... This is the specific principle which the reader is invited to consider: that for the health of a single individual, a people, and a culture the unhistorical and the historical are equally essential. (4)

In the three history modes, what we can trace back to Nietzsche is the recognition that history can be used as instrument, and that there is danger it will turn to opiate. Nietzsche argues that society—or at least, Supermen—must engage consciously with what was to determine in order what should be, to resist the tranquilizing effects of institutional historical inertia and ensure that society’s understanding of itself is healthy and framed so as to allow for growth and prosperity. Nietzsche’s call to history becomes, in some ways, Woolf’s authorization for the kind of historical and memorial practice she uses in her writing. She makes herself, so to speak, a Superman.

Understanding this in theory, and applying it in practice, are two very different things. Where the first part of Nietzsche’s essay works to develop in the reader an understanding of the benefits and dangers of historical practice—and particularly, the dangers of history as Nietzsche

observed it practiced by those around him—the second part of his essay reads as an instruction guide to the powerful man who wishes to make instrumental use of history. This is the model I argue Woolf cherry-picks, treating the literary canon as the historical record of which the present generation of writers not only can but must make instrumental use. Of the “right” way of understanding history, Nietzsche writes,

In three respects history belongs to the living person: it belongs to him as an active and striving person; it belongs to him as a person who preserves and admires; it belongs to him as a suffering person in need of emancipation. . . .

History belongs, above all, to the active and powerful man, the man who fights one great battle, who needs the exemplary men, teachers, and comforters and cannot find them among his contemporary companions. (7)

The “powerful” and “exemplary” men of history should be understood by the exemplary man in the present as his true “companions” in shaping and leading society; their contributions to the historical record, their intellectual and philosophical and political and practical contributions to social structure and institutions, are there not as a limit on the present man but as a conversation with which he must and should engage. History is a conversation among the men who stand outside of time, who negotiate the historical record on behalf of the lesser men around them.

Here is what I believe Woolf takes away. The exemplary writer, as Woolf understands her, stands equally outside of time, engaging with those builders of culture and voices of social value and critique that have come before. It is her right to take ownership of the canon, as a way of re-negotiating its crystalized beliefs and values in her own time. Where Woolf moves away from Nietzsche—where she takes only what suits her, and leaves the rest—is in adding a layer of ethics and social responsibility to this outside-of-time framework. Woolf sees it as her

responsibility to use her power in service of those in her time—and to engage those around her in the meaning-making process. This latter effort I argue she learns primarily from Marx.

*History for the Masses: Transforming the Marxist Superstructure*

Nietzsche does not question the morality of the unhistorical actor, of the powerful man who takes ownership of history in his time. Rather, he promotes the "use and abuse" of history for political purpose as an inalienable right of those in power, keeping within his larger philosophical framework of power justifying itself, viewing traditional morality as a tool of the weak. It is Marx, writing with diametrically opposing politics, who challenges the legitimacy of historical record as a means of social control, and who in so doing opens the door for using history as a weapon not only in service of but also against those in power. I argue that Woolf's understanding of history, memory, culture is a way of reading Nietzsche through the lens of Marx. Woolf takes Nietzsche's account of history as belonging to the exemplary man, and the use to which Nietzsche argues exemplary men should and must put history, and layers onto it a Marxist political critique, wherein abuses of history in her time, the need for an exemplary actor to envision and work towards a model society, the effects of social institutions on the agency and horizon of possibilities of the everyman, and the right of all to a just and peaceful society all coalesce to drive her literary project.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> It should go without saying, but Marx and Nietzsche, as leading German intellectuals writing within the same time period, both on the subject of history, were working in the same territory and in many ways engaged in a conversation—if only one constructed through critical hindsight. As Ian Forbes writes, "While Marx and Nietzsche cannot be compressed into the same theoretical mould, it can certainly be demonstrated that their critiques have been formative influences in the subsequent development of western perceptions of self and change in society. Equally, both thinkers place themselves within a historicizing tradition of understanding and discovery. They presume the existence of change and discontinuity, crucial aspects of which have already occurred, are unfolding in their present, and will exercise a major influence on the immediate future. Marx and Nietzsche accept the necessity for change, but neither is didactic about its ultimate outcome" (ed Ansell-Pearson, 2011, 145). Understanding Nietzsche and Marx together, and considering the ways their views of history and social change complement and complicate one another, was a project in Woolf's moment, and scholars have of late increasingly sought to reconcile their

What is most at stake in Marx's account of history is his overarching assertion that history is a record of class warfare, and that class warfare is fought through and over control of the means of production. In "The German Ideology" (1932), Marx writes that "The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas; i.e., the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force" (ed Tucker 172).<sup>2</sup> Those in positions of material power also have control over social and political institutions, both because their wealth buys influence and because their wealth allows them the leisure for education and intellectual pursuits. The values of the ruling class, values Marx argues are predicated on self-interest and maintaining control, become the consciousness of the time—the superstructure, the conditions of social relations and of intellectual production. As material conditions change, the social relations and intellectual products of earlier times linger and become constraints that ultimately must be thrown off, as the "theory, theology, philosophy, ethics etc." come "into contradiction with existing relations... because existing social relations have come into contradiction with existing forces of production" (159). Over time, the result is a "national consciousness" and a "general consciousness" that do not reflect one another (159). Put another way:

These various conditions, which appear first as conditions of self-activity, later as fetters upon it, form in the whole evolution of history a coherent series of forms of intercourse, the coherence of which consists in this: in the place of an earlier form

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philosophies into a single framework (for example, Judith Norman's "Marx, Nietzsche, and the Workshops of History" in *Journal of Nietzsche Studies*, Autumn 2015).

<sup>2</sup> Although *The German Ideology* was not published until 1932, it was written between 1845-1846, two years before *The Communist Manifesto* was originally published in 1848. Because *The German Ideology* takes as its primary interest a philosophy of history, I have chosen to quote from it rather than *The Communist Manifesto* despite the anachronism with respect to Woolf's early works. I made this choice with the understanding that the passages to which I am referring are consistent with the ideas that would have been circulating in Woolf's moment through other Marxist writing and through the legacy of the Communist League that had been headquartered in London from 1847-1852.

of intercourse, which has become a fetter, a new one is put, corresponding to the more developed productive forces and, hence, to the advanced mode of the self-activity of individuals—a form which in its turn becomes a fetter and is then replaced by another. (195)

History as Marx understands it is a record of changes in systems of belief that result from changes in ownership of the means of production.

Putting Nietzsche and Marx together, the understanding of history becomes this: the pattern of remembering/forgetting in historical record (that is, historical fact filtered through the cultural memory) serves not what benefits the people as a whole, but what benefits those with political and economic control, who control the means of production—and therefore the means of cultural transmission—and whose interest is primarily in maintaining their own status. The role of the exemplary man is to see outside the prevailing consciousness of his time, recognizing the material conditions and the values on which they are predicated and which they prescribe. If "history" is "memory" and memory is a way of establishing shared identity; and if history is at the same time a record of changes in social control; then cultural memory is a way of perpetuating the control of those in power until the “fettters” are thrown off.

Woolf departs from Marx in viewing literary production as not only a means through which material/economic control is maintained, but also as something with inherent value in itself, a means of valuable production in its own right. It is the history that is rightly and necessarily brought forward, in the Nietzschean framework, to give companionship to the exemplar who cannot find such in her own moment. Literature engaged in memory-building and in challenging memories already built is inherently engaged in class warfare. Not only that, but because the job of literature is to create a cultural memory, to negotiate identity within the

present in light of the past, then literature is also always and inextricably engaged in a kind of class warfare. Woolf's writing is political not because she has strong convictions that are expressed through her writing, but because she understands writing—because she understands all artistic production—as a key site in which identity and power are negotiated, as a site in which thinking in common is not only expressed but also born, in which there lives the possibility of changing thinking in the future and reclaiming ways of thinking from the past. Shared identity is expressed through cultural memory is expressed through literature. The ways memory and identity are defined are inherently politically charge and vested with structures of power. It follows, then, that literature is always and inextricably either a tool of those in power or an exercise in renegotiating power. In either case, it is an exercise in class warfare.

Nietzsche tells us that history is memory—it is a record created for the maintenance of a shared cultural identity. Marx tells us that history is a record of class warfare—it is a record of changes in control of the means of production. Woolf puts the two together: the way identity is defined and maintained is a way of defining and maintaining power within a political society. She writes:

And then they went & Janet talked to me about literature, & I fell into a passing gloom. She says that a great many novels are written, & it seems fairly evident that none are “immortal”. I suppose I referred this to my own novels; indeed, she urged me to write a biography for Basil Williams. But I fancy that what depressed me was not only the personal question, but the smell of musty mortality. None of us came up to the scratch—not Lytton or Forster or anyone; but I felt beyond this fairly safe criticism the depressing effect of talking to some one who seems to want all literature to go into the pulpit; who makes it all

infinitely worthy & safe & respectable. I was lead into trying to define my own particular search—not after mortality, or beauty or reality—no; but after literature itself; & this made Janet a little anxious & insistent, as if, conceivably, she might have missed something. Where did I find it? How did I explain it? We agreed upon a certain passage in Sophocles; but as she capped this one in Lear, I think we were talking of different things. (*Diary of Virginia Woolf* 3 November 1918)

Literature for Woolf is not static, not “worthy & safe & respectable.” It is by its fundamental nature is an act of class warfare, and must function either on the side of those in power (as opiate and instrument) or on the side of the oppressed (a communal dialectic). Engaging in literary production is either idolatry or iconoclasm; it is nothing in between. Understanding this, Woolf writes as a way of getting into the trenches.

### *Woolf and Shakespeare: A Love Story*

There is one last model of memory that is central to the way I read Woolf, and that gives rise to the modes of memory I identify at work in her fiction and essays. I cannot prove Woolf read Shakespeare in the way I will shortly propose. What I can prove is the huge importance of Shakespeare for Woolf, not just as a literary influence but as a kind of ideology through which Woolf approached the world. Her letters and diaries are riddled with references, and her fiction and essays (as I will shortly show) contain almost constant allusions to his works. Taken together, we find strong evidence that Shakespeare was for Woolf not just a way of literature, but a way of life. My objective in turning to Shakespeare is to develop that way of life, that ideology, not through a theoretical lens but through Woolf’s own statements in her letters and

diaries, and through a close reading of Shakespeare's plays that is complimented by the views of history and institution and literature that were in the ether of Woolf's intellectual life.

So, how do we know Woolf learned from Shakespeare, that she would have read him so carefully and curiously as to justify reading her works through the lens of his? We know because she tells us herself, indirectly through her continual allusions in the fiction and essays (unpacking which will be the project of this dissertation), and directly through references in her letters and diaries. From her first reading of *Cymbeline* in 1901 on, Woolf is obsessed by Shakespeare and frames much of her thinking in relation to his figure and plays. On 10 September 1918, three years after the publication of *The Voyage Out* and one year before the publication of *Night and Day*, Woolf writes in her diary:

Has any great poem ever let in so little light upon ones own joys & sorrows? I get no help in judging life; I scarcely feel that Milton lived or knew men & women; except for the peevish personalities about marriage & the woman's duties. He was the first of the masculinists; but his disparagement rises from his own ill luck, & seems even a spiteful last word in his domestic quarrels. But how smooth, strong & elaborate it all is! What poetry! I can conceive that even Shakespeare after this would seem a little troubled, personal, hot & imperfect. I can conceive that this is the essence, of which almost all poetry is the dilution. The inexpressible fineness of the style, in which shade after shade is perceptible, would alone keep one gazing in to, long after the surface business in progress has been despatched. Deep down one catches still further combinations, rejections, felicities, & masteries. Moreover, though there is nothing like Lady Macbeth's terror or Hamlet's cry, no pity or sympathy or intuition, the figures are majestic;



in them is summed up much of what men thought of our place in the universe, of our duty to God, our religion. (*Diary of Virginia Woolf* vol. 1, 193)

She praises Milton here, but her point of comparison is Shakespeare: he is the highest standard to which all else is compared. To say that “*even* Shakespeare” might feel “troubled” by Milton is to hold him up as the paragon, as the ideal. Moreover, her reading of Shakespeare might be troubled because Milton provides an *even* stronger means of accessing “our place in the universe, our duty to God, our religion,” because his art *even* better reveals the life beneath the cotton wool that Woolf believes all art strives to reveal.

On 7 January 1923, she writes:

This was my state, & most peoples. We collided, when we met: went pop. Used Christian names, flattered, praised, & thought (or I did) of Shakespeare. At any rate I thought of him when the singing was doing—Sh[akespear]e I thought would have liked us all tonight. (*Diary of Virginia Woolf* vol. 2, 223)

Not only is Shakespeare Woolf’s standard for measuring literature, he is moreover her standard (at least at times) for evaluating life. Shakespeare is what Woolf thinks of while enjoying a party, and it is his approval she seeks, not just for her writing but for her daily life. She earnestly believes (perhaps we might say, hopes) that Shakespeare “would have liked us all tonight,” seeking his approval and invoking his name in the same way a more conventional or traditional person of her time might have evaluated a party by whether or not God would have approved. Indeed, Shakespeare was Woolf’s religion, an external metric and system of values, expressed through “liking,” through the human experiences, about which Woolf thinks and around which we might understand her to be organizing her beliefs and experience of the world. In a letter dated 1919, Woolf describes holding “religious meetings together praising Shakespeare” (*Letters*

vol. 2, 383). She records a conversation with Leonard in a letter to Ethyl Smythe dated 9 May 1931, in which she bemoans a friend not understanding her, to which Leonard replies, "but I'm the only person who does." Woolf's response: "You and Shakespeare" (*Letters* vol. 4, 335). By Woolf's own account, Shakespeare was her religion and was a way of seeing the world that made sense to her, that she felt was missed or misunderstood by others. Woolf viewed Shakespeare, expressed in and through his plays, as a priest inviting her into a world in which she could connect with something higher than herself. For the atheist Woolf, we tend to read references to religion as empty, but I would argue in this case the easy dismissal misses something important. Woolf may have not been traditionally devout, but her writing is marked by a search for a higher power – not God, but humanity, and empathy.

The stakes of Shakespeare as a religion, an ideology, operate for Woolf precisely because it is an ideology that is grounded in human experience rather than in the divine. Woolf sees Shakespeare specifically as representing history, as a record of the best that was thought and experienced. In a letter to George Rylands on 27 September 1934, she writes, "I wish you'd read the hated Antiquary and see whether you can't discover the last relics of Shakespeare's soliloquies in some of the old peasant speeches" (Letter 2936). Shakespeare's plays provided the literary cultural memory of antiquity, and moreover a record engaged in class politics and recording the full society, in which "old peasant speeches" were remembered and put forward along with those of kings and fools.

Woolf also shows herself interested in self-conscious and critical assessment of the plays; her passion does not preclude her scrutiny, but rather she seems fueled by the plays' ability to engage her in intellectual debates of the sort we still engage in today. Of *Romeo and Juliet*, she asks Ethyl Smythe, "Do you think he could love Juliet so soon after Rosalind? Doesn't

Shakespeare spoil his psychology on account of the play?" (Letter 2084, 26 November 1935). We see in the simple question that Woolf was continually, even after 30 years, engaged in the question of how and why the characters interact, reading the characters for their humanity and expecting real fidelity, real feeling, from them. We read also a clear indication that Woolf saw Shakespeare as having a "psychology," "*his* psychology," a coherent framework for presenting humanity and a consistent (and we might see Woolf as claiming, accurate) portrait of human nature and human values woven into the fabric of the plays.

What's more, Woolf wants those around her to understand that she sees and reveres Shakespeare in this way. On 25 February 1918, she writes to Saxon Sydney-Turner,

...I don't think that being happy makes one want ones friends less—Is this partly selfish?

Perhaps it is; but not all your craft shall persuade me that my feeling for you has more than a thread of vice in it; the rest is heavenly true.

Perhaps you don't realize that those are Shakespeare's words. (*Letters* vol. 2, 220)

Woolf borrows from Shakespeare not only language, but idea, belief, to use in response to a perceived argument from a friend. She shows off her technique—points it out to him directly, to ensure she gets credit for the allusion—in such a way that tells us the allusion is important to her. She wants it known by her audience that "Shakespeare's words" are words to which she feels entitled, and that he should be looking for them and understanding her through Shakespeare even in her letters. She writes in allusion, and asks to be understood through such.

We will return to this system of allusion much more closely in Chapter 2. For the moment, though I could go on and on with references and allusions, I will pause. The main point

I hope to have illustrated is the enduring importance of Shakespeare for Woolf as a frame of reference, a paragon of literary technique and of a system of values through which Woolf approached the world. Woolf speaks of Shakespeare as a living memory that is part of her heritage, part of the institutionalized culture she has inherited. At the same time, she understands him to be somehow thinking through his plays—an active agent, someone who speaks still and who might (or might not) approve of the world in which she participates, someone representing intellect and complexity and *life*. We see in Woolf's letters and diaries that she sees Shakespeare as a record of shared identity, and as an important figure of English ideological formation—he embodies a set of shared cultural values and expectations that are used as a reference point for Woolf's art and life, that is invited and imposes itself on her intellectual experience of living in the world. We might reform this into critical terms that reflect Nietzsche and Marx: he is an unhistorical actor, and an author of the superstructure of English cultural identity. Shakespeare is a site of history and cultural memory: a lasting influence on the present, and an opportunity to engage with and renegotiate the recorded values of the past. He is at least one of the entry points Woolf chooses for getting into the memorial trenches—and an entry point to which we might imagine Woolf understanding herself to be invited, through the model of nation- and culture-building we can read (without needing any external theoretical constructs!) through Shakespeare's words themselves.

### *Literature as Cultural Artifact: Nation Building in Henry V*

The reading that follows is, as I have said, not one I can prove Woolf to have ascribed to herself, nor is that my intention. In turning to Shakespeare, I hope to show the political stakes of *Henry V* and the negotiation of political identity and cultural value operating within the play as a

precedent within the canon for the work Woolf does in her fiction and essays. That is to say: I will show Shakespeare doing the kind of cultural work that Woolf will ultimately emulate, as a way of illuminating one possibility for why Woolf so greatly esteemed Shakespeare, and one explanation of what she wrote to Leonard Woolf that only he and Shakespeare understood about her and her philosophy of art. If, as Nietzsche tells us, the exemplary man (or writer) learns from those exemplary men of the past, I offer this reading of *Henry V* and this understanding of Shakespeare's project in the history plays as one example and lesson Woolf may have learned, valuable only in the extent to which it resonates with the readings of Woolf's own fiction and essays I will offer in the chapters that follow.

In *Henry V*, historical events are transformed from history into memory through conscious manipulation and performance, as audiences both of and in the play are asked to engage with past events and filter their understandings through their own experiences and private memories. At the same time, awareness of the temporal and cultural separation of the present from the past breaks through this performative memory to suggest that the exchange of history for memory is not complete: rather, the two work in cooperation, as part of a double-consciousness (developed within the play for Henry V's soldiers and by the play for the Elizabethan audience) that recognizes a simultaneity of meanings and intellectual obligations within a single historical narrative.<sup>3</sup> The play offers, in other words, a model of the same kind of recursive engagement with values and standards that we see in Woolf's approach to Shakespeare

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<sup>3</sup> Art in the authorial mode of history, as Nagel and Wood define it, is a performance, with emphasis placed on "its punctual, time-sensitive quality" and its relationship to "those conventions" which "anchor the individual innovation in custom and fashion, [in] collective norms" (Nagel and Wood, 2010, 15). Performative art seeks to offer "an individual memory" as part of the historical record, positioning itself as one of the "cables that hold a society together through time" by providing unique insight into a unique historical moment by providing an image of how that moment appeared (15). Put another way, though we might understand the performance of art in the authorial mode as but a performance, as engaged in but another form of memorializing rather than accurate and objective presentation of historical fact, the key distinction lies not in what the work does from the theoretical perspective but rather in what it strives to do, in how it positions itself vis-à-vis time.

in her letters and diaries, as a standard she calls forward and continually strives to understand and contextualize in the present. From Canterbury's first words to Henry in Act I Scene 1, on through Henry's speeches at Harfleur and Agincourt and finishing with Chorus's closing plea that the audience "In your fair minds let this acceptance take," the movement of *Henry V* is driven at every level by the effort of the present incarnation of English and French nobility to connect with and fulfill their obligations to those who come before and after—a courtly approach to the literary stewardship and sense of duty that guides Woolf.<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare's King Henry uses reflection on the past as a way of authoring an ideology that unifies the soldiers, and Shakespeare reflects on Henry himself to similarly inspire fraternity and nationalism in Elizabethan England. Both do so without losing consciousness of the extent to which they reflect on "real" historical events with meanings and consequences that might be felt outside their narrative constructs. The play itself, in exploring and engaging in the deliberate formation of nationalist historical narrative, presents a case study on the extent to which Nietzsche's radical interpretation of the use and abuse of history, Marx's views of the class manipulations achieved through historical record, and the (counter)productive possibilities of engaging with historical artifacts might not be so radical, after all.

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<sup>4</sup> Woolf writes in "A Sketch of the Past," "...though I still have the peculiarity that I receive these sudden shocks, they are now always welcome; after the first surprise, I always feel instantly that they are particularly valuable. And so I go on to suppose that the shock-receiving capacity is what makes me a writer. I hazard the explanation that a shock is at once in my case followed by the desire to explain it. I feel that I have had a blow; but it is not, as I thought as a child, simply a blow from an enemy hidden behind the cotton wool of daily life; it is or will become a revelation of some order; it is a token of some real thing behind appearances; and I make it real by putting it into words.... From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole of the world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself. And I see this when I have a shock" (*Moments* 72). Woolf's philosophy of art is a desire to capture the human experience on behalf of all, to become a voice speaking for the mass that allows all a way of connecting with a shared identity hidden behind the cotton wool.

Though understated in many ways, the theological logic of the play offers a key insight into its perception of the relationship between individual and social function, particularly as regards the King, and offers a useful place to start in considering the role of history and memory, authors and substitutes, in the England *Henry V* portrays. Shakespeare's model of kingship is one akin to the model of authorship and artistry Woolf espouses. Crucially, because the office of king is understood to be divinely inhabited, the individual is understood to be subsumed, and to understand himself to be subsumed, by the "celestial spirits" operating through him. The first description in the play of Henry is particularly telling: reformed from his previous frivolity and having assumed his duties on the death of his father, Canterbury describes Henry as one who has "whipp'd the offending Adam out of him,/ leaving his body as a paradise,/ To envelop and contain celestial spirits" (I.1.29-31). Where Henry once was an individual motivated by his own interests, he is now seen as being above the concerns of humanity and mortality, acting on behalf of an immortal nation.<sup>5</sup> He is, as king, but a vehicle for kingship, a substitute filling a role that in some sense is seen as subsuming the individuality of the man who fills it, replacing it with a static and omnipresent sense of God's grace for England filtered through the individual voice and actions. This emphasis on the substitutability of great men is one that becomes fundamental to Woolf's literary philosophy; we might think of Shakespeare's Henry saying "There is no king" with the same force with which Woolf later says "there is no Shakespeare; there is no Beethoven..." (*Moments* 72).

And yet, this exchange of individual for office is imperfect at best: though Canterbury and others see Henry as having come to "reformation in a flood" (I.1.33), having perfectly

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<sup>5</sup> That this description comes from Canterbury, and that the change in the king is described as loss of "Adam" for "celestial spirits," is particularly telling as regards the way temporality and substitutability is perceived relative to religion: the office of the king, because it is understood to be divinely occupied, operates substitutionally precisely because it operates in theological rather than chronological time, in which the individual is incidental to the "celestial spirit" that will inhabit him.

reshaped himself into the mold of a king, they are yet able to recognize the individuality of the man who has been reformed and refashioned—it is “this king” (I.1.37) of whom they speak, descended from “his father’s body” (I.1.25), and not an abstraction. The role then, even while substitutional, and even while subsuming identity into divinity, still maintains some authorial dimension. The recurring emphasis on Henry’s personal history and family background is key: even while recognizing the role and responsibilities—and even judgment—of king as graced with extra-chronological divine inhabitation, the court also recognizes an authorial narrative in the making, developing a prime example of the divinity and surpassing nature of the throne precisely through the abolition of Henry’s personal vices at the moment of his coronation. That “The courses of his youth promised it not” (I.1.24) and that there might be narrative intervention to describe the “reformation in a flood” (I.1.33) that “whipp’d the offending Adam out of him” (I.1.29) provide an authorial model to reinforce the substitutional nature of the office, showing the individual becoming the office as a way of elevating the office, but in doing so implicitly reifying the individuality of the life being elevated. The individual and the social role work in concert, as compliments and antagonists, each highlighting and reinforcing and undermining the other—much as, we shall see, Woolf’s deeply interior focus in developing her characters works both to privilege the individual perspective, and to ground that individual perspective in the social forces that have helped shape and develop it.

Henry himself is acutely aware of this separation between his person and his office, as it is perceived by others and as it is experienced primarily. In Act 1 Scene 2, speaking to the French ambassador in response to the Dauphin’s mocking gift of tennis balls, Henry asserts that he will “Be like a king, and show my sail of greatness” in defending his claim on the dukedoms—that he will inhabit a space and a set of actions and conventions he sees as existing



independent of himself, on behalf of his country, despite the Dauphin's expectation that Henry will behave in keeping with his reputation (I.2.275). A few scenes later, as the treason of members of his court is revealed, Henry again separates himself as a person from his role as a king, telling the traitors that

Touching our person seek we no revenge;  
But we our kingdom's safety must so tender,  
Whose ruin you have sought, that to her laws  
We do deliver you (II.2.178-181).

Here not only is separation enforced through language, but an explicit hierarchy is established prioritizing the divine, substitutable role over the individual who performs it—a hierarchy that depends upon the king's ability to see himself as a double-object, an individual (author) and an office (substitute), and weigh the claims of each in his decision-making process. That Henry believes that he must “tender” his “kingdom's safety” above his own feelings suggests a consciousness that as arbiter of the laws, occupant of the office of king, he represents more than his person alone and acts on behalf of more than his person alone—immediately the welfare of his people, and figuratively the welfare of the nation as an abstraction manifest through the lives of his subjects. This level of perspective, and ability to separate the whims of the person from the needs and best interests of the many, is what Woolf seems to call us back to especially in her more mature writings, constantly emphasizing her characters' inability to see themselves in context, unable or unwilling to take responsibility for the consequences of their actions on others.

Part of Henry's double-consciousness includes recognition that as occupant of the office of king, he is responsible to the memory of those predecessors who have manifested kingliness in

the eyes of history—to live up to those who have been authored into what it means to be a divine substitute. Canterbury, trying to convince Henry to fight, tells his king to

Stand for your own; unwind your bloody flag;  
Look back into your mighty ancestors:  
Go, my dread lord, to your great-grandsire's tomb,  
From whom you claim; invoke his warlike spirit,  
And your great uncle's, Edward the Black Prince (I.2.101-105).

That this kind of argument is most appealing to the court, and that it is seen as most likely to convince Henry, is telling of the belief in the relationship between the individual, the office, and the larger nationalist narrative permeating the court: Canterbury bases the legitimacy of Henry's kingship on his situation as part of a long line of successors, from "great-grandsire" to "great-uncle," who have come to signify kingship in the eyes of the nation. For Henry to be legitimated as a king, particularly given the upheavals within the monarchy that have led him to the throne,<sup>6</sup> he must prove both familial and substitutional continuity to those who are historically and memorially legitimate. As such, Henry is tasked with "Stand[ing] for" his "own" not only literally but metaphorically as well, standing in place of his ancestors in defending their claim by "invok[ing]" their "warlike spirit[s]" and making himself into their living incarnation, precluding questions about his historical right to rule given the break in succession under Henry IV by making a greater substitutional claim of right (I.2.101, 104).

This effort to find legitimacy in and through office, to become a living incarnation of a great historical figure, is a close parallel to the project we see Woolf undertaking in seeking to

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<sup>6</sup> Because Henry IV usurped the throne from Richard II, Henry V is more vulnerable to claims of illegitimacy and threats of being deposed himself; he must stake his "claim" in his royal ancestry preceding his father and Richard II, going back to his great-grandfather Edward III and Prince Edward, who never assumed the throne but was loved and esteemed by the nation for his military valor.

become Shakespeare's own inheritor. We might understand Woolf's heavy use of allusion—to Shakespeare and to the many, many other literary figures she invokes so regularly in her fiction and essays—as a way to prove her claim; she knows the canon, she can speak the language of the culture, and by so doing she asserts her right to shape the canon for those who follow her. Her assertion in “A Room of One's Own” that it is “the experience of the mass behind a single voice” (*A Room* 65) at stake in masterpieces, and her bold claim that “there is no Shakespeare; there is no Beethoven” in “A Sketch of the Past” (*Moments* 72), are a different way of framing the same project Shakespeare shows Henry to be engaged with: that of seeing oneself as an individual and as a figure in a larger historical narrative, occupying an important role that has been filled before, and will be filled after.

It is not only Henry V who seeks to balance his role as individual and as substitute; this understanding that kings are legitimated through substitutability is echoed throughout the play. The king of France, speaking to his own court regarding the threat from England, describes Henry as “bred out of that bloody strain” (II.4.51) and “victorious stock” (II.4.63) that defeated France at Cressy, a claim for which France must recognize and “fear/ The native mightiness and fate of him” (II.4.63-64). The authorial legacy of the House of Plantagenet is seen by France as inhabiting the present king, making Henry not only a venerable opponent in his own right but moreover a substitutional surrogate for prior French defeats. Henry must be feared because he, as a descendent of the “sire” (II.4.57) of Edward the Black Prince, is likely to possess his own “native mightiness” (II.4.64); he must also be feared because he, as a new incarnation of the house of that sire, is inhabited by the same “fate” (II.4.64), the same ability to “Mangle the work of nature and deface” (II.4.60) the French nation.

At the same time, the French king and princes must legitimate themselves by overcoming their historic defeat. Henry's threat, while on the one hand presenting a danger, on the other hand presents an opportunity to change the terms of their own substitutional memory by eradicating the failure "That haunted us in our familiar paths" (II.4.52), namely the "too much memorable shame" (II.4.53) of "Cressy battle" (II.4.54). Henry, then, is recognized as a substitute not only by way of respecting the threat he poses but moreover because such recognition is of utilitarian value to the French nationalist discourse. By using Henry as substitute for his predecessors they make stand for those who have damaged France in the past someone who might presently be defeated. In this sense, the "too much memorable shame" (II.4.53) of French fathers can be overcome if the "princes... strongly arm to meet" (II.4.49) and defeat this present threat. The right of substitutability is in this way underwritten by a burden: on the one hand to live up to affirming authorial histories by proving continuity and equality, as France expects Henry to try to do, and on the other hand to overcome injuring authorial histories by rewriting the narrative to erase by repairing the injury. Seeing this dynamic at work in Woolf's writing, we might think here of Rachel Vinrace in *The Voyage Out*, of Katherine Hillbury in *Night and Day*, of Woolf's own struggles with and against her parents' legacy, and the recurring attention to the mixed blessing and burden of inheritance in her works. Certainly Woolf's biography would have primed her to be especially sensitive to and perceptive about this kind of language, and we might imagine it resonating profoundly.

Importantly, this way of understanding the individual role in the larger national narrative is not one limited only to kings and courtiers. In his address to the soldiers during the battle at Harfleur, Henry extends the right and burden of substitutability beyond royal office, to the nation as a whole; he imagines the whole nation as, in many ways, occupying the position of author that

Woolf seeks for herself. By rallying the soldiers through memory of their ancestors, the king implicitly asserts the obligation of each man to his familial and social substitutes, highlighting the authorial dimension of English nationalism as collapsed into the substitutional in making each man stand for his own family history in the same way as does the king. Woolf's positioning of herself as Shakespeare's sister and inheritor—as his substitute—makes this same implicit argument: it is her duty to intervene into the formation of the national narrative if she has the skill and something to say. Henry pronounces his troops “you noblest English/ Whose blood is fet from fathers of war-proof!” (III.1.17-18), calling on them to “Dishonour not your mothers; now attest/ That those whom you call'd fathers did beget you” (III.1.22-23): the battle is occasioned as precisely an opportunity to test the men's substitutability with their fathers. If, as Henry asserts, his troops are not products of “Dishonour” by their “mothers,” they will prove as capable in battle as were their fathers twenty years before at Cressy (III.1.22). The challenge of the battle is to “Be copy now” (III.1.24) of “so many Alexanders” (III.1.19) who “have in these/ parts from more til even fought” (III.1.24-25) and prove that each man is “worth [his] breeding” (III.1.28)—prove that the nationalist memory England has of herself as a victorious nation, based on the authorial histories of so many past soldiers, is one that survives into the present. The ability to do justice to the role and the script laid out by historical and memorial traditions becomes the justification for keeping the role, and maintaining the traditions going forward.

On the one hand this tactic of motivation through historical-memorial reflection is productive, a rallying cry in the midst of a battle that asks the soldiers to take heart from the knowledge that they come from those who have done this before, coupled with praise and encouragement to “summon up the blood” (III.1.7) and “Disguise fair nature with hard-favour'd rage” (III.1.8) and “imitate the action of the tiger” (III.1.6); it is ultimately successful in spurring

the men on to Harfleur's surrender in Scene 3. On the other hand, the specific choices in language and rhetoric suggest a deeper thematic investment than simple encouragement, revealing the personal and psychological stakes of the battle, for the individual soldiers and for a king still struggling to prove himself fair substitute. Set in context of the king's disguised conversation with the soldiers and his speech before the Battle of Saint Crispin's Day, we see written into the speech at Harfleur a negative understanding of national history and memory as emotional constraint.

In asking his soldiers to prove themselves as worthy on the battlefield as their fathers, Henry casts the battle of Harfleur not only as a test of England's military might, but moreover as a test of the legitimacy of the present English national body as a substitute for iterations past. When Henry calls on his soldiers to remember their "fathers of war-proof," he does so not as positive inspiration but as a legacy of prior substitutes they run the risk of disgracing should they lose, suggesting themselves illegitimate to their familial and national legacies, begotten from fathers other than those by whom they were raised (III.1.18). The true stakes of the battle are not the dukedoms or the immediate French enemy but the larger question of whether or not these men "are worth [their] breeding"—that the king proclaims to "doubt not" the value of his own troops does not preclude him from posing the question (III.1.28). Nationalism, in this sense, is not just a means for the present nation to understand its cultural identity, not only a set of tropes and histories setting the parameters through which individuals might understand them substitutes; it is also a set of very high standards to which the nation must live up. This emphasis on both the gift that has been given and the incredible value that stands to be lost, that is at risk of being squandered, is writ large in Woolf's fiction and essays—and in fact, is most strongly articulated in her bitter condemnations of characters failing to live up to the gift left by

Shakespeare himself, as we shall see in Chapter 2. It also resonates with the insecurity we know her to have had about her subject position as author—her awareness that an intervention into the memory of the time was needed, her desire to be the voice of that intervention, and her fear that as an uneducated woman in a deeply patriarchal society, she may not be able to do justice to the need and make herself understood.

This understanding of national memory as burden is fundamental to the characterization of King Henry, casting light back on his earlier efforts to separate his person from his office in a way that suggests them to have been motivated not only by recognition of duty but also by fear of relative inadequacy. The larger-than-life authorial histories layered onto the meaning of English kingship set the expectation that every future king will be equally estimable. Henry, conscious of this expectation and his place in a larger national history, sees himself as separate from his office specifically because he knows himself to be less than what the office is perceived by others to be. The incognito conversation with his troops is here telling: Henry says,

For, though I

Speak it to you, I think the king is but a man, as I  
am: the violet smells to him as it doth to me: the  
element shows to him as it doth to me; all his  
senses have but human conditions: his ceremonies  
laid by, in his nakedness he appears but a man; and  
though his affections are higher mounted than ours,  
yet when they stoop, they stoop with the like  
wing. Therefore when he sees reason of fears, as we  
do, his fears, out of doubt, be of the same relish

as ours are: yet, in reason, no man should possess  
him with any appearance of fear, lest he, by showing  
it, should dishearten his army (IV.1.98-109).

The vulnerability of the king as a man, the weight of knowing himself to be elevated by “ceremonies”(IV.1.102) without being any different “in his nakedness” (IV.1.103), is brought forward with great poignancy. Though history judges each king by the fate of the nation under him, and though the nation expects from the king a fearless leader removed from “the offending Adam” (I.1.29) and who offers a perfect substitute for what it has been taught by history to expect from a king, the experience of kingship by the king himself is strikingly different. For the king who, like Henry, has the self-awareness to know himself to be less than the confluence of historical example, the experience of kingship is one motivated by the same fear of shame through which Henry motivates his troops at Harfleur: fear of being judged not “worth [his] breeding” (III.1.28).

This understanding of the weight of history on national memory forms the thematic conflict of the play, in parallel to the practical conflict of the battles; the climax and resolution for both come in the form of the Saint Crispin’s Day Speech. In a dramatic break from his earlier fears and anxieties, Henry emerges in this speech as king not only of the present England but of English history and memory as well: where before he was weighed down by the burden of the past and the struggle of the individual to live up to the memory of his office, the speech on Saint Crispin’s Day reflects a changed understanding of nationalist memory, which reinterprets the debt-and-debtors relationship between the present, past, and future as one over which the present has ownership. Where the speech at Harfleur emphasizes the obligation of the present to its predecessors, the speech on Saint Crispin’s Day focuses instead on the agency of the present



in dictating how it will be authored into the future and in what terms its connection to the larger narrative of nationalist history will be cast, with license to consume rather than be consumed by substitutes. We might imagine Woolf learning from the speeches the modes of both instrumental and dialectical memory, joining Henry in understanding the historical narrative to be authored, and joining his men in seeing not one but many voices having the responsibility for helping shape the narrative.

The argument of the Saint Crispin's Day address is twofold: first, that the men who fight claim more honor for themselves by having fewer to fight with them; and second, that by fighting, the men are writing for themselves a new national history in which they will become either martyrs or heroes, in which their bravery and sacrifice will not be seen in vain. Henry says, "If we are mark'd to die, we are now/ To do our country loss; and if to live,/ The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (IV.3.21-23); he continues that

He that outlives this day, and comes safe home  
Will stand a tip-toe when the day is named,  
And rouse him at the name of Crispian  
...  
This story shall the good man teach his son;  
And Crispin Crispian shall ne'er go by,  
From this day to the ending of the world,  
But we in it shall be remember'd (IV.3.42-60).

By positing glory as a fixed resource in which "The fewer men, the greater share of honour" (IV.3.23), Henry begins a train of authorial-historical reasoning in which the benefit of being outnumbered is that it sets up a better story—either the men will die fighting gloriously against

impossible odds, “mark’d to die” by fate and not personal failing (IV.3.21), or they will win in the face of impossible odds and set a new precedent for strength and glory in the English national memory. In this sense, both halves of Henry’s argument collapse into one: if the purpose of the battle at Harfleur was to prove themselves worthy inheritors of their fathers’ legacies, the purpose of the battle at Agincourt is to author their own historical legacy that builds upon their fathers’ victories not as a metric against which they might fail but as proof positive of their valor, whatever the outcome. The smallness of their numbers and the idea of greater glory is simply another side of the same coin, an assumption that lets them write a better story.

Part of this desire to author his own history includes an implicit desire to surpass history and become memory. Henry says that he is

not covetous for gold,  
Nor do I care who doth feed upon my cost;  
It yearns me not if men my garments wear;  
Such outward things dwell not in my desires:  
But if it be a sin to covet honour,  
I am the most offending soul alive (IV.3.25-30).

In distinguishing material goods from social goods, the king privileges the claims of nationalism and historical perception over present life: the history they are in the process of creating is not one which is valuable in how they will be rewarded materially in the present but rather for how they will be rewarded by history in living on beyond themselves. The honor Henry seeks is not more credit from his soldiers, allies, foes, but the honor of becoming a heroic example of a new definition of substitute, claiming honor so as to become what later Englishmen think of when they think what honor is. He seeks to be remembered, to be worth remembering.

This idea of memorialization through historical documentation is characteristic not only of the content of Henry's speech but its rhetorical tropes as well, particularly the allusions to transubstantiation. Henry bids Westmoreland to "...proclaim it... through my host/ That he which hath no stomach to this fight,/ Let him depart" (IV.3.35-36); he later claims that the names of "Harry the king, Bedford and Exeter, Warwick and/ Talbot, Salisbury and Gloucester" (IV.3.54-55) will "Be in their flowing cups freshly remember'd" (IV.3.56) when men celebrate Saint Crispin's Day in later generations. Transforming first himself into the bodies of his troops, "host" for his spirit in the same way Eucharist is figured as "host" for Christ's body, and embedding his own legacy and the legacy of those fighting with him in the "flowing cups" of nationalist-sacramental wine, Henry creates through implication his own future memorialization as a Christ figure, living on after his own death through his willingness to risk sacrificing his life to the battle. Without quite approaching sacrilege, Henry borrows from the Christian tradition as a way of putting himself and his men into history through their deeds in this moment, which will be made into precisely authored narrative histories of the events of the battle, and at the same time taking them outside of history by making this moment one that will never be forgotten or lost from national memory by being made into a nationalist memorial trope.

Where a cynical reading of Henry might see this desire to be memorialized as selfish, the larger context of the play suggests it instead to be a kind of emotional victory of the present king and the present nation over the nationalist historical memory with which Henry has struggled throughout the play. Inasmuch as we have borne witness to Henry's struggle under the weight of history, and inasmuch as his lesson is confirmed and rewarded by the soon-to-come English victory over France in the battle at Agincourt, the play makes its own argument that Henry's drive to be memorialized is productive, the right approach for the leader of a state that

understands itself in and through the terms of heroic authors and legitimate substitutes. Rather than the insincere manipulation of troops contemporary critics might see it to be, or like evidence of the consciously corrupting influence of the political institution in shaping historical discourse, Shakespeare holds Henry up as an example in and through his speech on Saint Crispin's Day as a model of the way nationalist history should be properly understood. It is this model, of self-authorship as a way of defining values and claiming agency in the face of changed and challenging circumstance, to which Woolf calls readers. It is this idea of writing your generation—as it is, in order to call out and challenge others to live up to what it should be—that we see in her fiction and essays. Woolf aspires to be Shakespeare's inheritor—we know this through her letters and diaries, through her memoirs, through her essays—but she does this by becoming one of his characters, by becoming not just the Shakespeare but the Henry of her time.

This, then, takes us back to the larger play as a whole, how it posits history and nationalism not only in its internal arguments but moreover in its own conscious dialogue with authorial performativity and memorial substitution. The role of the chorus here is key: the constant attention to the impossibility of doing justice to the “real” history—real historical figures and real experience of battle—in a theatrical representation affects the same kind of anxiety over the legitimacy of serving as substitute with which Henry struggles throughout the first three acts of the play. Shakespeare begins,

Oh for a Muse of fire, that would ascend  
The brightest heaven of invention  
A kingdom for a stage, princes to act  
And monarchs to behold the swelling scene!  
Then should the warlike Harry, like himself,

Assume the part of Mars (*Henry V* Prologue 1-6).

The play distinguishes itself from its subject in the same way Henry distinguishes his person from his office, suggesting that its King Henry could only be “like himself” (Prologue 5) should a “Muse of fire... ascend” (Pro.1) and inhabit the production and acknowledging their “flat unraised spirits” (Prologue 9) as “unworthy... to bring forth/So great an object” (Prologue 10-11) as historical representation.

And yet, that the actors position themselves as unworthy does not preclude their effort: rather, they resituate responsibility for fidelity to representation in the audience rather than in themselves as substitutes. The chorus’ prologue argues that “’tis your thoughts that now must deck our kings,/ Carry them here and there” (Pro.28-29) and “Turning the accomplishment of many years/ Into an hour-glass” (Pro.30-31); he likewise bids the audience in the prologue to Act III to “Work, work your thoughts, and therein see a siege” (III.Cho.25). The prologue questions whether “this cockpit [can] hold/ The vasty fields of France” and in Act III is answered in the affirmative, in spite of the reservations of the chorus: though the company might on the surface be unworthy to perform or inhabit history, by performing they make themselves worthy by becoming figured as substitutes in the eyes and imaginations of the audience (Pro.12). Legitimacy of the historical project, then, is staked not on personal value but on relationship to a larger historical narrative, and the ability to connect present experiences—however unfaithfully they represent the material realities of the history—to the abstract meaning that has been constructed of the history as memory for present consumption. It is this conscious engagement with history and memory, moving self-consciously and reflectively between abstract and concrete, that Woolf sees as lacking in her time. It is this form of historical-memorial practice that she challenges those around her to take up, in calling them to dialectical memory.

As a point of contrast to the opening questions, the chorus' parting words reinforce this sense of legitimacy through memorialization. The chorus says:

Thus far, with rough and all-unable pen,  
Our bending author hath pursued the story,  
In little room confining mighty men,  
Mangling by starts the full course of their glory.  
Small time, but in that small most greatly lived  
This star of England: Fortune made his sword;  
By which the world's best garden be achieved,  
And of it left his son imperial lord.  
Henry the Sixth, in infant bands crown'd King  
Of France and England, did this king succeed;  
Whose state so many had the managing,  
That they lost France and made his England bleed:  
Which oft our stage hath shown; and, for their sake,  
In your fair minds let this acceptance take (Epi.1-14).

Though the recognition that the play does not do material justice to the history remains, that recognition has become beside the point: this play is presented not because it believes itself factually or materially accurate but rather for the "sake" of those who know only the history of England after Henry V, when managers for the infant Henry VI "lost France and made his England bleed" (Epi.12). It is, to put it in other terms, a presentation of history intended specifically to author national memory, to create a legacy of heroes and a national imagination of substitutes through which England might understand itself not as burdened by loss but as capable

of reclaiming and rewriting its own narrative. Without relying on the same terms, Shakespeare implicitly posits the purpose of the play as analogous to Henry's purpose, for himself and his troops, in fighting the battle at Agincourt: to create a model of engaging with the past that gives not only the responsibility but the custody of authorship to the present. In one sense, Shakespeare fulfills what Henry projects: the play, in serving as a "rough and all-unable pen" (Epi.1) in which to confine "mighty men" (Epi.3), becomes the "flowing cups" (IV.2.55) of men paying homage to past kings. In another sense, in showing its own contemporary audience how to understand and engage with nationalist history as memory, it performs the same kind of lesson on behalf of the theater that Henry performs on behalf of the court.

Philip Schwyzer argues that Shakespeare crafted in his plays "among the most profound expressions of the national ideal in the history of English literature," inventing the conceptual framework through which we now conceive of nationalism (Schwyzer 9). Narrowing further, he argues that the task of *Henry V* in particular is to realize "the nation in the present" by "opening a gap within the present moment itself, through which Britain might enter in," such that the "journey undertaken by Henry V and his followers" in the play is, "in more than one sense, 'unto the breach'" (Schwyzer, 2004, 135). Though I agree with his claim that the interest of the play is to engage with nation-building discourse, and that this play and the rest in the canon are essential examples of by which means and in which way nationalism has been instantiated into English literature and Western political consciousness, I would argue that the way Schwyzer stakes his claim is too limiting. It is not that the idea of Britain as a nation is entering into the present in or through *Henry V*, for the conception of the individual as obliged to his ancestors (both social and familial) is fundamental to the play from the beginning—if *Henry V* is "haunted" (as Schwyzer posits) from the beginning, then the "breach" has already occurred long before the players take

the stage. Rather, the task of the play is to reform the breach itself by providing a functional model of historical-memorial production that works without burden in the present. Shakespeare creates, in essence, a Nietzschean history-as-selective-memory model in which the stakes are reframed not as pursuing power but as serving human emotional needs: what we might think of as the amorality of Nietzsche's claim is mitigated in Shakespeare by first the need to overcome emotional baggage, and second the sincerity with which the memorial figure conceptualizes his own narrative. Shakespeare creates nationalism that is subjective and constructed without being malicious; he offers not manipulation, but representation, intended not to deceive but to instruct. He offers, in other words, history mobilized with a purpose that serves the present needs of the present generation. He offers the kind of history Woolf hopes to reclaim in her own moment, as we will see in the chapters that follow.



## CHAPTER 1

### Shakespeare for Girls

...My real object in writing is to make a confession, which is to take back a whole cartload of *goatisms* which I used at Fritham and elsewhere in speaking of a certain great English writer—the greatest: I have been reading Marlow, and I was so much more impressed by him than I thought I should be, that I read *Cymbeline* just to see if there mightn't be more in the great William than I supposed. And I was quite upset! Really and truly I am now let in to [the] company of worshippers—though I still feel a little oppressed by his—greatness I suppose. I shall want a lecture when I see you; to clear up some points about the Plays. I mean about the characters. Why aren't they more human? Imogen and Posthumous and *Cymbeline*—I find them beyond me—Is this my feminine weakness in the upper region? But really they might have been cut out with a pair of scissors—as far as mere humanity goes—Of course they talk divinely. I have spotted the best lines in the play—almost in any play I should think—

Imogen says—Think that you are upon a rock, and now throw me again! And Posthumous answers—Hang there like fruit, my Soul, till the tree die!<sup>7</sup> Now if that doesn't send a shiver down your spine, even if you are in the middle of cold grouse and coffee—you are no true Shakespearian! Oh dear oh dear—just as I feel in the mood to talk about these things, you go and plant yourself in Cambridge....

Virginia Stephen to Thoby Stephen, 5 Nov. 1901

Virginia Stephen's 5 November 1901 letter to her brother Thoby at Cambridge marks the beginning of a long and profound engagement between the future Virginia Woolf and the "great" William Shakespeare. Though many elements of the letter demand attention—her sense of the flatness of *Cymbeline*'s characters; her reference to a "feminine weakness in the upper region"; her envy of Thoby's role as student—one question, easily overlooked, seems a crucial starting point for exploring the presence of Shakespeare in Woolf's fiction and essays. That question is this: if Woolf had not before this moment read Shakespeare, how did she come to her early opinion of his work? If, as she says, she read *Cymbeline* with the intention of evaluating whether or not "there mightn't be more in the great William than I supposed," a project which suggests at least limited experience with the plays and more likely none at all, then from where did her

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<sup>7</sup> *Cymbeline* V.5.262-5

“whole cartload of goatisms” denouncing his greatness emerge? Who or what was the Shakespeare Woolf knew before she read *Cymbeline*?

This chapter will propose to answer that question with two rarely considered but profoundly influential sources in Woolf's intellectual and literary development: William Black's *Judith Shakespeare: Her Love Affairs and Other Adventures* (1884) and Mary and Charles Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare* (1807). These texts were hugely popular and widely read children's stories in Woolf's time; they also represent strong examples of the didactic, jingoistic, patriarchal form of Victorian children's texts. By reconsidering the nature of the texts in themselves, through the lens of children's literature criticism, we find a compelling insight into the cultural memory of Shakespeare in the late Victorian period. Shakespeare, both his person and his plays, was being self-consciously packaged for children through redaction, reduction, and outright changes, in a way meant to limit the horizon of interpretable possibilities that might be considered in adulthood. As my later chapters will show, this use of literature to limit, rather than to engage, intellectual understanding and cultural identity is precisely that which Woolf lambasts and deconstructs throughout her writing career. As such, I propose that we might understand these two novels as forming an essential foundation against which Woolf positions herself, examples both of what she refuses to do and of what she constantly warns her readers against. This dynamic is seen most productively in the relationship between the two children's texts and Woolf's long essay (for lack of a better descriptor) “A Room of One's Own.”

### *Background and Scholarly Context*

I cannot prove unequivocally that Woolf read either the Lambs' *Tales* or Black's *Judith*. What I can say is that there are compelling reasons to believe that a variety of works of

specifically children's fiction would have been familiar to Woolf as a young child, and that there are equally compelling reasons to believe those works would have included *Tales from Shakespeare* and *Judith Shakespeare*. *Tales from Shakespeare*, to begin with, was by Woolf's childhood a widely-read classic of children's literature. Frederic William Maitland, in a 1906 biography of Sir Leslie Stephen (Woolf's father) published by Duckworth & Co (owned and operated by Woolf's elder half-brother, Gerald Duckworth), describes the Lambs' *Tales* as a "lifelong friend" that helped satisfy "Leslie's 'craving for society'" during a childhood of poor health and loneliness (32-33). New editions of the *Tales* were published regularly throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, including editions in 1883, when the Stephen children were in their infancy; and in 1888, when Virginia Stephen (later Woolf) would have been six years old, Adrian Stephen five years old, Thoby Stephen eight and Vanessa Stephen (later Bell) nine. As the book was easily available and a favorite of their father, and as Charles Lamb remained a major figure in the English intellectual tradition of the time, we might imagine a high probability that a copy of one of these editions would have found its way into the Stephen nursery.<sup>8</sup>

Another mark in favor of the *Tales* being read by the Stephen children is their adherence to the style of writing for children favored by Julia Stephen, their mother. In her unpublished children's stories, written for the benefit of her youngest four children, Julia Stephen employed plots and a style designed to gently instruct her children in proper behavior—particularly proper behavior for Victorian girls.<sup>9</sup> The stories, "though not really didactic," yet include lessons in "fostering home relationships" and "being kind to animals" (Gillespie and Steele, 1987, 30); the girls in her stories exhibit a "tenderness of heart and anxiety to please" so starkly in contrast with

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<sup>8</sup> Lamb's entry into *The Dictionary of National Biography*, though not edited by Leslie Stephen himself, was published in 1892 only a year after he resigned editorship of the project.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Steele in her chapter "Stories of Children" dates the stories to the early 1880s, describing them as written "to amuse and educate her own young ones and perhaps sell the results to publishers" (Gillespie and Steele 32).

descriptions of the Stephen girls' early personalities that Diane Gillespie, in her essay "The Elusive Julia Stephen," speculates that it was "to tame [their] attitude" that the heroines were created (30). We might easily imagine Julia Stephen to have sought the same taming models of docile girls and women in the books she brought in from the outside.

This rather traditional approach to literature for children might seem at odds with the education Woolf is described as having had, of free access to her father's library and close tutelage from both her parents. And yet, however extensive was Virginia Stephen's education in later adolescence, given Julia Stephen's views on education for girls, it is extremely likely that her daughters' reading habits were subject to much closer scrutiny during their early childhoods, up until Julia Stephen's death in 1895 (when Woolf was 13).<sup>10</sup> Describing the early correspondence between Leslie Stephen and Julia Duckworth, Hermione Lee writes, "in their letters they discuss their views on, for instance, the education of girls, with Laura as their subject. (Leslie wanted Laura educated well enough to earn a living; Julia was quite opposed to his views on 'female education.')" (Lee, 1997, 100). Julia's opposition, combined with her consciousness of the "appropriate" role and duties for a woman in Victorian society, would likely make stories with clear gender roles and expectations, and which model "proper" behaviors and values, well-regarded reading material, particularly for willful daughters influenced too much (if we take Gillespie's line of thinking) by their father's liberal attitude.

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<sup>10</sup> It is also worth noting that the "freedom" and the value of Woolf's adolescent education has likely been overstated. Woolf's 1901 letter to Thoby hints as much. When Woolf writes that "just as I feel in the mood to talk about these things, you go and plant yourself in Cambridge," she suggests the extent to which she depended on her brother for second-hand instruction, implying that he was the only one with whom she could "talk about these things," and her envy of his ability to "go and plant yourself in Cambridge" (in a classroom in which "these things" were being continually discussed) is clear from the bitterness of tone. Her reference to a "feminine weakness in the upper region" later on is equally telling: even if we take her to be speaking ironically, it's clear that Virginia Stephen recognized her intellectual abilities to be somehow suspect because of her gender. In Woolf's own estimation, in her 1901 letter and in her later essays and letters on the subject, the education she received at home was inadequate and incomplete relative to the educations available to her brothers.

*Judith Shakespeare: Her Love Affairs and Other Adventures* was also popular fiction for girls in Woolf's time, telling a combination adventure/love-story about Shakespeare's youngest daughter that ends with her engagement. Virginia Stephen's frequent fictionalized letters and stories involving love affairs and marriages in the "Hyde Park Gate News" make it particularly likely that she would have been interested by such a book. The novel has already been noted—albeit rarely—as a possible inhabitant of the Stephen nursery, and influence on the adult Woolf. Jane Marcus includes a paragraph on the novel in her 1987 *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* on the possible relationship between Black's novel and the Judith Shakespeare Woolf invents in "A Room of One's Own." In her footnote, she notes that Woolf's aunt by marriage, Annie Thackeray Ritchie, "includes the remark that she was glad to join in the William Black Memorial Fund" (200), suggesting the possibility the aunt might have supplied the novel for her nieces; she also notes a production of *Judith Shakespeare* for the stage put on by an avant-garde theater community with ties to Gerald Duckworth, with which Woolf would likely have been familiar, and might even have attended herself (200). A very brief essay by Cristina Ruotolo in *Virginia Woolf Miscellany* in 1996 also considers the relationship between Black's novel and Woolf's essay, arguing if not a direct connection then the importance of scholarly exploration of ways in which the two texts engage and inform one another.

As far as the broader critical conversation, little exploration of Woolf's childhood reading is available. Quentin Bell, in *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* (1974), describes briefly the Stephens' efforts to educate their daughters at home, with Julia Stephen teaching "Latin, history and French, while Leslie took... mathematics" (26); he also notes Woolf's early writing in the "Hyde Park Gate News," published weekly from February 1891 through April of 1895 (28). He is, however, essentially silent on the subject of Woolf's childhood reading. Hermione Lee's

*Virginia Woolf* describes Woolf as “reading avidly, from very early on, under the guidance of her father” (111). Lee does specify titles of some books that were read aloud to all the Stephen children by their father (“*Tom Brown’s Schooldays* and *Treasure Island*... the thirty-two volumes of the Waverley novels, which... when we had finished the last he was ready to begin the first over again,’ as well as Carlyle’s *French Revolution*, Jane Austen, Hawthorne, Shakespeare, and the great English poets, especially Milton”), but she does not note what Woolf read independently, nor does the list of what was read aloud seem meant to be exhaustive (111). Moreover, since Lee’s list is compiled from letters and references in the *Hyde Park Gate News*, I would argue it is entirely possible that the “Shakespeare” being read is just as likely to have been the Lambs’ *Tales* as the original plays, given their fathers’ affection. As for primary sources, we have the collected library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf available, but it is in the first place incomplete; as well, the titles are primarily adult readings and acquisitions and do not include many titles likely to have been read by Woolf in her childhood and adolescence.

Juliet Dusinberre’s excellent *Alice to the Lighthouse* (1987) explores Woolf’s relationship to children’s literature, and it is her approach that most informs my arguments in this chapter. Dusinberre provides excellent analysis and close comparison of modernist literature with works by Lewis Carroll, Robert Louis Stevenson, Rudyard Kipling, Kenneth Grahame, E. Nesbit and on, and shows particularly how central elements of Woolf’s literary technique emerge from, for example, the Golden Age tradition. Much of my approach here will mirror Dusinberre’s, both in methodology and in argumentation. Methodologically, I intend to draw on parallels and patterns to corroborate a relationship between Woolf’s later writing and the children’s texts, just as does Dusinberre, because archival evidence is simply is not available at this stage. Instead, the most compelling evidence that Woolf read and was influenced by children’s stories about Shakespeare

is their appearance in her later fiction and essays, and so it is on the basis of those appearances that I stake my analysis. Further, my argument parallels DusiBerre's in contending that Woolf's adult literary practice was informed directly by lessons gleaned in childhood reading. The difference is in my essential claim: where DusiBerre uses comparison to prove a positive influence, I intend to show instead a negative influence. That is to say: not only did Woolf and other modernists borrow aesthetically from children's literature to perfect an experimental form (DusiBerre's compelling claim), but Woolf, at least, also developed an intellectual and political approach to literature that explicitly and self-consciously rejects the (anti-)intellectual core of childhood reading practice in her time (my own intervention). Girls read not Shakespeare, but what Shakespeare was made to represent. From the nature and tone of Woolf's early "goatisms," it would seem highly likely that the girl Virginia Stephen was familiar first and foremost with Shakespeare for girls; from her adult writings, it is clear that she challenges us, through her understanding of literature and through her unique aesthetic, to reject representations and go back to the original source.

### *Writing and Re-Writing Ideology: Shakespeare's Sister*

John Stephens writes in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction* (1992) that all children's fiction is marked, at least to some extent, by "an impulse to intervene in the lives of children," and all participates in the set of "cultural practices which exist for the purpose of socializing their target audience" (8). Joseph Zornado, in *Inventing the Child* (2000), argues that the author "learns the unconscious, ambient ideology of his or her era first and foremost at the hands of the adult world and the relationships the child is forced to participate in" (xiv). He goes on to note that "received histories, children's stories, and the literary expressions of child-rearing

traditions” not only reflect views about childhood, but more broadly about “human relationships at the time of literary production” (xiv). Put another way, children’s literature models ideology for children, and becomes a source of ideological understanding for those children who grow up to be writers. Childhood is invented as a separate space in relation to adult cultural practice, to be molded and brought forward into the adult world; that same space is occupied by the reader of any didactic or ideology-heavy literature, as one in which conscious understandings are unconsciously shaped by different choices in representation of the narrative.

I would argue that this learned relationship is central to the Modernist “rejection” of the Victorian.<sup>11</sup> John Leonard Clive’s *After the Victorians: Private Conscience and Public Duty in Modern Britain* argues that the tendency to accept Woolf’s assertion that “In or about December, 1910, the Human character changed”—that is, that “a movement in literature” emerged “that had begun to throw off the overpowering weight of Victorian social convention and form”—has been taken too much as truth by scholars (1). He continues that

the liberal intelligentsia after the 1880s by no means simply rejected the values of their Victorian forebears. Far from ‘retreating’ into an intimate realm, the writers and reformers... sought to maintain not only a quintessentially ‘Victorian’ tendency to link private behavior to public morality, but also their parents’ concern to reconcile democracy with those cultural and aesthetic values that they usually described with the laden term, ‘civilization’. (Clive 2)

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<sup>11</sup> Let me be clear: I am not saying that all modernist literature is explicitly interested in challenging and/or shaping ideological formation, nor am I saying that all modernist writers read and were influenced by the same British children’s literature. Rather, I am claiming that the way we understand ideology in children’s literature is a productive lens through which to consider ideology-heavy and didactic writing of the Victorian age, and linking (in the case of Woolf in particular) the existing scholarly conversation about the relationship between Victorian and Modernist literature to this fundamental understanding of how didactic literature works.



Clive situates Modernist literature as an extension of the Victorian, rather than a complete departure, applying new aesthetic moves to the same underlying values and project; he sees the continuity as at odds with Woolf's assertion of radical change and the scholarly tradition of "rejection."

Without disputing Clive's point that the Modernist rejection of all things Victorian has likely been overstated, I would argue that his explication of Woolf fundamentally misunderstands the nature of the change taking place between the Victorian and the Modern. Woolf's use of Black (to which I will turn momentarily) is absolutely telling: by rewriting the Victorian narrative, Woolf creates a continuity with Victorian stories while also positioning herself as diametrically opposed. She is, as Clive notes, tethered to what she rejects inasmuch as the ideas of private behavior and public good remain linked, inasmuch as the text remains inherently political. It is in the politics themselves, the understanding of how private behavior and public good are best served, that she severs ties. In that sense, the "change" Woolf describes was not a complete departure from political aesthetics or culture-building literature, but instead a change in the nature of the politics being expressed, the culture being built. Art became used to question institutions and effect political critique, where it had previously been used (at least in broad strokes) to reinforce institutions and preclude critique. As Christine Froula writes in *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde* (2005), Woolf's inherently political approach to aesthetic expression is best understood as situated "within a modernity understood as a 'permanent revolution'... not laying down the law for generations to come but always debated and contested, actively reaffirmed or creatively transformed by the living" (xi). Woolf understands literature as cultural memory to be actively shaped and reclaimed.

She understands children's literature in particular as one prominent way in which cultural memory is transmitted. Children's literature generally, and Black's novel particularly, is one site of the literature/ideology/memory nexus to which Woolf calls our attention in "A Room of One's Own," and one which we might imagine to have been influential in her early years. Black's novel and the tradition of girl's stories—and especially girls stories about cultural icons—is one important manifestation with which she asks readers to wrestle—one direction in which she calls for the "permanent revolution" to be taken. By directing us back to Black in "A Room of One's Own," Woolf emphasizes the importance of childhood reading and education in adult beliefs and values. She does so within her Judith narrative and as we consider the relationship between the didacticism eviscerated by her retelling and the essay's larger call to reconsider education for women.

At first blush, there seems to be little in common between the protagonist of William Black's 1882 novel *Judith Shakespeare: Her Love Affairs and Other Adventures* and the tragic heroine Virginia Woolf imagines in the fourth chapter of "A Room of One's Own." Black's Judith is the daughter of the already-famous playwright, illiterate by choice and interested in nothing more than earning her father's approval. She is beautiful, charismatic, naïve and happily entrenched within the strictures of Early Modern patriarchy, which she comes to embrace as salvation at the novel's end. Woolf's Judith, by contrast, is Shakespeare's sister, blessed with equal talent but without education or means of expressing herself; her downfall is drawn in parallel to her brother's rise. Punished for her art and abused by the theater community, Shakespeare's sister is ultimately left desolate and pregnant, killing herself in "the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body" (Woolf 593). In content, in character, in tone, the two Judith Shakespeare narratives differ exceedingly.

Looking more closely, it is precisely the differences between the two Judith Shakespeares that tie them together. Woolf, writing nearly fifty years after the publication of Black's novel, shows herself deeply familiar with both Black's *Judith* and the model of Victorian girlhood it represents. In her brief but powerful portrait of Shakespeare's sister, Woolf calls attention not only to the patriarchal oppression of the female artist in British culture, but also to the self-fulfilling, self-supporting, male-authored prophesy of female inferiority upon which that oppression is staked.

That prophesy is writ large in the pages of Black's novel. The most striking narrative characteristic of *Judith Shakespeare: Her Love Affairs and Other Adventures* is its unapologetic didacticism. Black's novel is labeled in contemporary reprints as "A Romance," but is productively understood as a work of children's—specifically girl's—fiction, following the conventions of "writing down" outlined by Barbara Wall in *The Narrator's Voice* (1991).<sup>12</sup> Breaks in tone and veiled and overt criticisms of Judith's values and behavior suggest not only an adult judging a child protagonist, but furthermore continual instruction to girl readers of what is and is not acceptable. The narrator interjects, for example, that "It is grievous that [Judith] should have been concerned with such frivolous thoughts" when Judith wishes to be understood to be more than a "mere country wench" (Black 28); she is described as having "in her nature an odd element of what might be called boyish generosity—of frankness and common-sense and good comradeship" that threatens her "maidenly dignity" (139). *Judith Shakespeare* is marked

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<sup>12</sup> Wall argues that children's literature is defined generically by the relationship between the reader and narrator: a work of children's fiction is intended to be read by a child audience and therefore accounts for the needs of child readers as regards interest, cultural literacy, and level of understanding. One version of this author/reader relationship is "writing down," in which the text becomes didactic in its effort to explain to children not only the necessary information for following the plot but also the broader social and institutional values that influence and/or are modeled in the plot, with the intention that children internalize those values and learn to apply the story's lessons in their own daily lives. (This is not the model of writing for children that Wall endorses, but her identification of the mode of writing down for children is useful in understanding the project Black takes on.)

by a consuming interest in instructing Victorian girls of their proper place in society—a place that is demure, obedient, dignified, humble, and utterly wholesome.

Judith's trajectory within the novel, combined with the narrative interventions, makes this judgment abundantly clear. From the opening lines, Judith is characterized as willful and independent, fully responsible for her own decisions. The novel begins: "It was a fair, clear, and shining morning, in the sweet May-time of the year, when a young English damsel went forth from the town of Stratford-upon-Avon to walk in the fields" (Black 1). Judith "goes forth" of her own volition and without constraint; the choice to "walk in the fields" and the real purpose of that trip—a meeting with a "Wizard" that gives rise to the central conflict of the novel—is open to her; she is able to do and scheme as she pleases without oversight or restraint. Judith is "no longer in the first sensitive dawn of maidenhood—having, in fact, but recently passed her five-and-twentieth-birthday," and yet has been allowed to remain unmarried, despite the clear intentions of multiple suitors and against the wishes of her mother and sister, because she does not wish to commit (Black 1). She is in almost every respect independent and in control of her own actions, in both the short- and long-terms.

As the story progresses, Judith's independence is confirmed. She chooses how to spend her time and with whom; she chooses to remain at home in spite of many serious suitors; her chaperone is frequently a much younger cousin, Willie Hart, whom she has no trouble deceiving and sending away when she wishes for privacy. Though such free reign in a young woman, given the context of setting and publication, would seem extremely unusual at least, and certainly anachronistic, as the novel unfolds it becomes apparent that Judith's agency and independence are allowed only so that they might be checked, her willfulness cured and overcome. The plot functions as an instrument for teaching Judith, through extreme emotional and physical pain, that

she (and girl readers who identify with her) must submit; Judith's independence, rather than a model for young girls to follow, becomes instead a cautionary tale, as her choices lead her further and further towards danger, caught up in a minor conspiracy that results in the theft of her father's latest play (*The Tempest*). Her submission to marriage becomes more and more desirable as a salvation from herself—and one she is ultimately shown to welcome and laud.<sup>13</sup> Passively but with great effect, Black's narrative offers up a justification for female subordination, in which patriarchy is chosen by girls and women out of regard for their own best interest, because they cannot survive without constant check and care.

This function of literature for social indoctrination was not only an implicit but an explicit element of writing for children in the Victorian period—especially of writing for girls. As Judith Rowbotham writes in *Good Girls Make Good Wives: Guidance for Girls in Victorian Fiction* (1989),

it was presumed by adults that carefully written and chosen didactic fiction could be used as a means of social control for children. It was thought that stories could have the effect of painlessly leading the youthful readers to the paths that adult society wished them to follow to ensure that the next generation would maintain the values and traditions of its parents and teachers (3).

This assumption was based on the well-established “notion of using works of fiction as guides to adult behavior” (Adburgham qtd. Rowbotham 3). As Alison Adburgham writes, silver-fork novels “were handbooks to the language of the beau monde, to the etiquette of chaperonage, to permissible and impermissible flirtations, to extra-marital affairs, to all modish attitudes and

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<sup>13</sup> By choosing not to confide in parents or sister or suitors but instead to make her own choices, Judith is deceived into friendship with a failed actor on the run from his creditors, who steals and sells her father's latest play (*The Tempest*) to pay off his debts; when discovered, Judith is wracked with guilt and falls gravely ill, only saved by her future husband's intervention and willingness to go to any lengths to save her.

affectations” for the *nouveau riche* readers who enjoyed them (qtd Rowbotham 3).<sup>14</sup> Girls’ literature was understood to be at best a practical guide from which girls might understand, and with which parents and educators might help modify girls’ behaviors. To call it indoctrination is not to criticize, but to recognize its intentional goal.

That goal is challenged and upended by Woolf in “A Room of One’s Own” (1929). Each sentence of her Judith Shakespeare narrative, each detail she supplies, directly addresses some element of Black’s novel in a way that exposes not only its didacticism but the underlying social agenda of that didactic voice—and in the closeness of this rejection, we find evidence of an intentional invocation.<sup>15</sup> Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare has the same independence and agency as does Black’s—she “was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world” as her brother William—but how that manifests in character, choices, and outcomes is diametrically opposed (*A Room* 50). Where Black characterizes Judith as illiterate by choice, believing that it “was the most wise and natural thing in the world” for a girl to refuse scholarly education and that “she should do very well without book-learning so long as those pink roses shone in her cheeks” [Black 10]), Woolf shows a young woman who is “extraordinarily gifted” but not allowed to attend school. Where Black’s Judith is constantly at her leisure, Woolf’s version is constrained by constant oversight and obligations: “She picked up a book now and then, one of her brother’s perhaps, and read a few pages. But then her parents came in and told her to mend the stockings or mind the stew and not moon about with books and papers” (*A Room* 50).

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<sup>14</sup> Silver fork novels, also called fashionable novels, were popular reading in the 19<sup>th</sup> century depicting the lives of the upper classes—those who ate with silver forks.

<sup>15</sup> This is the same approach to reading “A Room” that is becoming more and more recognized as necessary, as the depth and breadth of Woolf’s allusions and source texts becomes better and better recognized through scholarly intervention. (See again Marcus’ introduction to *Three Guineas*, and Froula’s *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant-Garde*.)

The revisions become more pronounced as the narrative unfolds. In Black's novel, Judith is allowed to choose if and when she will marry, and allowed to choose her own partner for love rather than family benefit. In Woolf's version, she is betrothed against her will, "severely beaten by her father" when she expresses her opinion on the matter and then "begged... not to hurt him, not to shame him" and bribed with "a chain of beads or a fine petticoat" to submit to the marriage (*A Room* 51). Black's Judith's engagement with the theater is unfortunate but yet innocent: she is deceived but not harmed, protected and respected even while the manipulation and theft goes on. Woolf's Judith, by contrast, is mocked, abused, pitied, impregnated, and left to her death. These differences are not merely incidental but closely, directly crafted: those same beads and petticoat with which Woolf's Judith are bribed are given in Black's novel as gifts. The desire "not to hurt" or "shame" her father that is enforced on Woolf's Judith through manipulation and abuse are feelings Black's Judith repeats constantly. The difference is, while those feelings are in both cases tied to physical suffering and violence, in Woolf's case it is enforced actively by her father, while in Black's it is enforced instead by the writer/narrative structure, through an accident caused by an abandon of care for herself brought on by (excessive and unnecessary) guilt. (We might imagine those inflicting the violence in both cases, father and author, to claim that Judith brought it on herself.)

All taken together, the concluding words to Woolf's Judith account take on new meaning: "That, more or less, is how the story would run, I think, if a woman in Shakespeare's day had had Shakespeare's genius"—*that*, we can almost hear her insisting, not the saccharine whitewashing that has been circulating of late, not the myth that women choose their submission out of necessity and that men in all cases protect and serve. *That* is the story we should tell, if we are going to tell a story of Judith Shakespeare.

Woolf's choice to revise and retell speaks to her anger as a woman caught up in the oppressive system of Victorian patriarchy. And yet, we know that anger already through "A Room of One's Own," through "Three Guineas," through (to perhaps a lesser extent) the narrative slips in novels like *The Voyage Out* and *Jacob's Room*. We know from decades now of powerful feminist criticism that the central thesis of "A Room" is that women readers must be taught to question and engage intellectually, must become independent scholars. What we gain by understanding the relationship between Woolf and Black is a better sense of the widespread focus and depth of that attack—and, in that, a better understanding of how deep was Woolf's understanding of the relationship between cultural texts and social and political institutions, between stories (perhaps especially stories for children) and ideologies. For Woolf, literary texts not only reflect but actively create and shape ideology, by shaping the moral and social and political understandings of their readers—particularly their female readers, who were especially taught to read for moral lessons rather than poetry.<sup>16</sup> The conscious ideological challenges made through revisions to the details of Black's novel reveal explicitly Woolf's understanding of Black's novel as an ideology-building, myth-supporting, memory-as-political-instrument text; the vehemence of her revisions, the unchecked anger simmering behind the choice to make her Judith not only oppressed but miserable and tragic, clearly show Woolf's belief that Black's version is not only wrong but exploitive, an intellectual version of the violence done to women through patriarchal oppression that is so clearly and deliberately enacted on Woolf's Judith. To say that "*that* is, more or less, how the story would run," that *that* is the story we should tell if we are to tell a story of Judith Shakespeare, is to challenge other stories told. In making that

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<sup>16</sup> This follows the tradition set by Hannah More, teaching girls to read for social instruction "rather than... literary discourse" (Marsden 51).



challenge, it is also to highlight the power dynamics operating behind the choice to tell a story at all.

#### Tales from Shakespeare *and the Shakespeare Consumer Culture*

Black's *Judith Shakespeare* is merely one example—and a fairly late one at that—of two prevailing cultural trends by the end of the nineteenth century: first, of writing didactically for girls; and second, of using both the persona and the plays of Shakespeare to add cultural heft to children's stories. Both traditions, to a lesser and greater extent, have roots in *Tales from Shakespeare*. *Tales from Shakespeare* was first published in 1807 and was the first of its kind in adapting Shakespeare's plays for a child audience. This section aims to contextualize the *Tales* within the broader landscape of writing for girls, to provide close analysis of the *Tales* to illumine the version of Shakespeare being packaged for girls in Woolf's time, and finally to claim the significance of the *Tales* in inciting the bowdlerized Shakespeare consumer culture against which I will later show Woolf to react.

*Tales from Shakespeare* was written collaboratively by siblings Charles and Mary Lamb, and it was first published by William Godwin in 1807. 1807 was the same year that Thomas and Henrietta Bowdler's *The Family Shakespeare* was published; the Lambs' *Tales* and the Bowdler's *Family Shakespeare* were part of a growing movement to re-package, “excise and abridge Shakespeare, or at least frame him properly for a female audience” in reaction to the increasingly easy access to Shakespeare by “even the lower classes” and women (Schierenbeck, 2006, 18). The *Tales* were wildly popular in their moment, and have become a fixture of the British children's canon. They have remained in print since their original publication, including

translations into French and German in 1842, into Spanish in 1847, and into Russian in 1865 (Sokolava, 2006, 168).

According to Mary Lamb's preface, *Tales from Shakespeare* is "meant to be submitted to the young reader as an introduction to the study of Shakespeare... [to] make these Tales easy reading for very young children" ("Preface"). The *Tales* were written under the then-emerging conventions of children's literature, as didactic texts meant to provide both "easy reading" and social/cultural instruction. As such, the "introduction" the Lambs provide is one not only to the stories in themselves, but more so to the acceptable social values and behaviors of the time, as represented in—and at times imposed on—the plays.<sup>17</sup> As much is clear even from just the Preface: the writers intend to offer to children versions of Shakespeare's plays that are "enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity" in the hopes that "the true Plays of Shakespeare may prove to them in older years" to do the same ("Preface"). Not only are the stories simplified for the sake of the child audience, but the simplified morals and values are designed to grow up with child readers, narrowing the set of interpretive possibilities, of questions and complications, meant to be considered later in life.

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<sup>17</sup> The *Tales* are not alone in their expression of patriarchal, imperial values. Thomas Hughes' massively popular *Tom Brown's School Days* (1857)—which we know from the "Hyde Park Gate News" was read aloud by Leslie Stephen to his children—is a prime example of the way boyhood life was made into a model for nationalist and imperialist values<sup>17</sup>. As Jonathan Rutherford argues in *Forever England: Reflections on Masculinity and Empire* (1997), boys were educated through literature, sport, and the Public School system in the masculine values necessary for a functioning imperial system, as "The public schoolboy ran the British Empire as soldier and administrator, teacher and missionary, and he became a virtual archetype of the Victorian world view: 'the pluck, the energy, the perseverance, the good temper, the self-control, the discipline, the co-operation, the *esprit de corps*, which merit success in cricket or football, are the very qualities which win the day in peace or war'" (17). Marjorie Hourihan takes a similar point of view in *Deconstructing the Hero* (1997), arguing that the Western hero stories taught to children in their early years almost universally privilege white male achievement, creating cultural scripts designed to reinforce patriarchy; Hourihan adds to Rutherford's observation an understanding of the extent to which the education of the British public in masculine values requires casting women as subservient (or at the very least of secondary importance) even in stories written for girls, and often frames ideas of good and evil in racially loaded and/or politically charged frameworks

Though the *Tales* were popular among both boys and girls throughout the nineteenth century, the didacticism in the stories is primarily focused on instructing and socializing girls in both proper behavior and proper understanding of Shakespeare and literature. The Preface continues:

For young ladies too, it has been the intention chiefly to write; because boys being generally permitted the use of their fathers' libraries at a much earlier age than girls are, they frequently have the best scenes of Shakespeare by heart, before their sisters are permitted to look into this manly book; and, therefore, instead of recommending these Tales to the perusal of young gentlemen who can read them so much better in the originals, their kind assistance is rather requested in explaining to their sisters such parts as are hardest for them to understand...  
("Preface").

Boys did not need the *Tales* to interpret for them—because boys had access to education, but perhaps also because boys' reading practices would not pose a threat to social order, as boys became men and men held power.<sup>18</sup> Women, on the other hand, if offered models out of keeping with present values and social order, could present a problem, and so a limited and filtered account, explaining away problems and complexities in light of the requirements of patriarchy, was necessary.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> This recalls again Woolf's comment in her letter to Thoby that misunderstanding *Cymbeline* would be the result of "feminine weakness in the upper region": it was only the female interpretation that could be wrong or dangerous, resulting from "weakness" that risked misunderstanding the true nature of the text.

<sup>19</sup> Though this may seem ironic given the role of women in nineteenth century patriarchy as upholders of moral values and social order, as Rowbotham writes, "There was an inherent contradiction in this 'traditional' view of women, that while they were natural upholders of moral standards for society, they could, if not properly guarded by men and protected from the contaminations of the public sphere, also be the frailer sex morally as well as physically. Women were both angels and prostitutes, and any temptation to fall from grace must be prevented" (6).

The Lambs were by no means alone in taking such an approach. Rather, they quite self-consciously participate in the project of “explain[ing] and justify[ing] the feminine position in society, both in gender and class terms, as well as making an appeal to the emotional nature of the feminine psyche that would convince [a young woman] of the need to conform to conventional expectations of her sphere” (Rowbotham 8). (It is the same project in which Black participates with *Judith Shakespeare*.) The “courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity” expected of young women are emphasized, at times even imposed, in the *Tales* in such a way as to use the canon to bolster social institution.

In the *Tales*, female subordination and dependence upon men are heavily emphasized. In “The Merchant of Venice,” Portia is said to marry Bassanio “to give him a legal right to her money”; the narrative emphasizes the importance of a woman’s surrender of self and property to the husband upon marriage. In that same play, Portia goes to Venice “notwithstanding when she wished to honour her Bassanio, she had said to him with such a meek and wifelike grace, that she would submit in all things to be governed by his superior wisdom,” because she sees an opportunity to serve him by saving the life of his friend. The trip is thus made into an act of deference and service, rather than the “trick” that proves her equal value that we perceive it to be in the play.<sup>20</sup> “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” begins, “There was a law in the city of Athens which gave to its citizens the power of compelling their daughters to marry whomsoever they pleased.” Though Shakespeare’s original play gives us the law and the basic plotline, the

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<sup>20</sup> As Jonathan Hall writes in *Anxious Pleasures: Shakespearean Comedy and the Nation State* (1995), the central conflict of *The Merchant of Venice* is the “crisis of the decentered state, and its real loss of direct patriarchal power” (53). Although Portia ultimately falls in line as an obedient wife, her willingness to trick Bassanio—and the audience’s desire to laugh at the joke—highlights the way laughter in Shakespeare’s plays functions as a kind of social praxis, “produced from within a dominant discourse” while often figuring as “the displaced expression of the rebellious ‘discontents’ of that discourse with its implicit and exclusive claim to be the bearer of ‘civilization’” (18). Portia, in tricking Bassanio, forces an awareness of the potential failures and the real limitations of patriarchy, with her choice to obey patriarchal strictures shown to be just that—a choice.

Lambs' language suggests a belief in the rightness and justice of such a law: not only are all citizens men, but all gender-neutral pronouns refer exclusively to men, creating a linguistic framework in which only men are agents. Women exist as merely "daughters"—relations, extensions, subjects and products of men, rather than individuals themselves.<sup>21</sup>

The *Tales* also emphasize the immorality of women who step outside of their prescribed role of 'angel in the house.' The Lambs' "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark" begins not as does the play, with the ghost appearing before the soldiers standing watch, but instead with "Gertrude, queen of Denmark, becoming a widow by the sudden death of King Hamlet." The change is a major departure from the structure of the play, changing the context from one of external military threat, emphasized by the soldiers' need to stand watch and the threat of Fortinbras' ships in the distance, to one of domestic dispute. By beginning with Gertrude and with condemnation of her "highly improper and unlawful marriage," the *Tales* implicitly cast blame for the events of the story on the queen. A story of revenge becomes instead a story in which a woman's failing (to be faithful to her husband and to choose wisely in her romantic attachments) is remedied by her son's heroic sacrifice. The lesson of the play is that girls must obey their fathers, brothers, husbands, and even sons, lest society fall apart.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> John Stephens, in *Language and Ideology in Children's Fiction*, argues that ideology in fiction for children appears in three forms: "as an overt or explicit element in the text, disclosing the writer's social, political, or moral beliefs" through didactic narrative interventions and explanation (9); as a passive element of the narrative, evident in "the implicit presence in the text of the writer's unexamined assumptions" as they shape approach to plot, tone, and characterization; and as a byproduct of language that transmits implicit ideological assumptions prominent in the culture of the time. Choices in pronouns and linguistic frameworks (like the one noted in "A Midsummer Night's Dream") are essential points of inquiry as regards the latter.

<sup>22</sup> Darlene Schierenbeck and Daniel Ciraulo offer a parallel reading highlighting the importance of male-female familial relations in the Lambs' "Hamlet," looking at changes in the relationship between Laertes and Ophelia. She writes, "In his retelling of Hamlet... Charles omits a critical brother-sister scene from act 1, scene 3 of the play. In this section, Laertes warns Ophelia of Hamlet's show of love: 'For Hamlet, and the trifling of his favor, / Hold it a fashion and toy in blood' (Shakespeare 1997, 1.3.5-6). The excision of Laertes's advice serves to spotlight a fundamental philosophy of the *Tales*: brothers are requested to supervise Shakespeare and counsel prudently. Because the management of sisters requires discriminating coaching, a narrative that relates the plot of a brother who misleads a sister would be grounds for censorship" (18).

The power of the woman in romantic attachments is also highlighted, emphasizing the woman's sphere as being matrimonial and domestic, and the woman's primary occupations as courting and marriage. All of the comedies are presented as romances; though the marriage plot is always central in Shakespearean comedy, what is key is that in the Lambs' retellings, *only* the marriage plot is kept, and both the privilege of the woman to be courted, and her subordination within the relationship, is heavily emphasized. Even the tragedies are adapted to emphasize romantic attachments. Hamlet's letter to Ophelia (in the play an abusive note intended to be passed along to her father as cover) is described as being written "in extravagant terms, such as agreed with his supposed madness, but mixed with some gentle touches of affection, which could not but show to this honoured lady that a deep love for her yet lay at the bottom of his heart." Rather than giving us the original letter, the Lambs provide an interpretation for the reader, collapsing the ambiguity and conflict in the original scene into a tidy (traditional, patriarchal) moral. We are taught to see Hamlet's treatment of Ophelia as loving and gentle, rather than emotional manipulation and abuse, and to his excuse his madness because it derives at least in part from his love for her. In this, the Lambs present Ophelia, the epitome of the helpless and victimized woman, as having the power in the relationship, and suggest that she should excuse Hamlet's abuses in light of the love "at the bottom of his heart"—however deep it may be buried.

The Lambs' models and judgments on the proper role of women are normalized within a distinctly Christian framework. Going back to "The Merchant of Venice," Shylock is described as hating Antonio "because he used to lend money to people in distress, and would never take any interest for the money he lent; therefore there was great enmity between this covetous Jew and the generous merchant Antonio." Though those details are accurate to the play, the Lambs' account leaves out an essential piece of the picture: Shylock's account of the abuses he has

suffered at Antonio's hands. In the play, Shylock justifies his hatred of Antonio as well earned, saying "you spit on me on Wednesday last;/ You spurn'd me such a day; another time/ You call'd me dog." By omitting Shylock's justification, blame for the conflict is located exclusively with Shylock. Shylock's "Hath not a Jew eyes" speech is omitted to the same effect, again glossing over the Christian men's culpability and abuses, which we at least have the option of questioning in the original play. Rather than presenting a religious conflict in which both sides are called into question,<sup>23</sup> the Lambs create a world in which Christian men are universally heroic and good, legitimating women's dependence and subservience by making all (Caucasian, Christian) men worthy of being served.<sup>24</sup>

These changes and additions—and there are many more, these are merely a few brief examples—allow the "Tales" to live up to the set of goals Mary Lamb expresses in the Preface: to make the plays uniformly into "enrichers of the fancy, strengtheners of virtue, a withdrawing from all selfish and mercenary thoughts, a lesson of all sweet and honourable thoughts and actions, to teach courtesy, benignity, generosity, humanity" that prime children—especially girls—to approach the "true plays of Shakespeare" later in life through the same limited interpretive grid ("Preface"). Rather than being given access to Shakespeare's plays, young

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<sup>23</sup> Critical analysis of the racial dynamics in *Merchant of Venice* highlight Antonio's complicity in the racial mixing that gives rise to the play's central conflict; even if we are not meant to recognize Shylock's humanity (though I think we are), we are at least asked by the text to recognize Antonio's complicity and culpability. As Arthur L. Little writes in *Shakespeare Jungle Fever* (2000), "*The Merchant of Venice* proves a rather mythic example, with Venice playing out the colonial/imperial nightmare of hybridization, showing itself to be a society contractually trapped by its own global aspirations. If the presence of Shylock, the outsider, signifies the danger looming on the Venetian horizon, then Antonio's claim to a place at the center of Venice's economy, its main hold, hints how such cultural mixing has come about" (70).

<sup>24</sup> Compellingly, even in *Othello* this pattern holds: Iago's villainy against Othello is presented in the text as justified by Othello's unnatural seduction of Desdemona, and because Othello has failed to give the respect that should be afforded to Iago based on age and experience in passing him over for the lieutenant position. Where in Shakespeare's original play Iago's motivation is famously missing, in the Lambs' *Tale*, it is not only explicit—but explicitly sanctioned by the narrative voice.

readers were given access to an interpretation of Shakespeare conforming to contemporary values. As Jean I. Marsden writes in her wonderful “Shakespeare for Girls” (1989):

Mary Lamb reached her goal of giving girls the access to Shakespeare that they might otherwise never have had. But the “Shakespeare” they were to read was not the literature their brothers knew. Rather, it represented the nineteenth-century ideal of what young ladies should learn from England’s greatest poet; they were not to read his actual poetry for fear of moral contamination. (60)

These *Tales* offer, in other words, a version of Shakespeare that recalls Jacob Flanders’ assessment in *Jacob’s Room* (1922): something to “praise, even quote” and understand in keeping with British heritage, but without wrestling with any of the depth—of language, of conflict, of philosophy—that is offered by the original plays.<sup>25</sup> In theoretical terms, they render Shakespeare’s plays as a crystalized cultural memory, with specific, institutionally sanctioned meaning that supports the status quo. The Lambs and their contemporaries worked in the mode of memory-as-political instrument, and Shakespeare’s plays were the sites instrumentalized.

Though Marsden is primarily interested in highlighting “the cost to Shakespeare’s texts” paid to “the requirements of proper ladies’ reading material,” she yet calls attention to another important aspect of the *Tales*: unlike, for example, *Mrs. Leicester’s School* (1809), another of the Lamb’s collaborative volumes of stories for girls, *Tales from Shakespeare* received a special status in culture and in girls’ education because it was an adaptation—because it taught “what young ladies should learn from England’s greatest poet,” under the premise that that “greatest

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<sup>25</sup> Such is in keeping with the way the *Tales* were understood by Woolf’s time. In his preface to a new set of *Tales from Shakespeare* in 1894, H.S. Morris writes that “In their sincere and simple preface the brother and sister, now grown so famous, said that their chief aim was to provide an introduction to the study of Shakespeare for the young reader; but this purpose was carried out by them with such delicate art and critical insight that the group of plays intended for children have become the treasured resource of students, as well as the elevated pleasure for readers to whom books are an enjoyment pure and simple” (v).



poet” and his plays and ideas should be preeminent in all aspects of society. The iconic status of Shakespeare in English culture both justified providing the *Tales* to girls, and reinforced the value of the lessons taught by the *Tales*—regardless of the divergence of those lessons from the original plays. The bowdlerizations highlight the importance of Shakespeare as a cultural memory: it was essential that everyone read his plays, but it was equally essential that the plays be read as part of a cultural tradition and with specific explication in keeping with that tradition, lest they become a threat.<sup>26</sup>

Here is where understanding girls’ Shakespeare becomes essential for understanding Shakespeare culture in Woolf’s fiction and essays: what was first for girls, and what must be first understood as a self-consciously crafted bulwark of patriarchy, a way of helping society reproduce its own values and beliefs, quickly and dramatically took on a life of its own. The newly objectivized memory continued to grow in prominence and dominance as the nineteenth century continued. Instead of a way of teaching social belief, the *Tales* and the institutionalized Shakespeare narratives came to stand for values and beliefs in themselves. As Janet Bottoms writes in “Familiar Shakespeare” in the edited collection *Where Texts and Children Meet* (2000), following the publication of the Lambs’ *Tales* there grew up “a major industry... to feed Shakespeare to the nursery and schoolroom” (11):

‘Children’s Shakespeare’... was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when publishers for the new juvenile and educational markets discovered his commercial value. Since then—as a corpus of ‘works’ fronted by the vaguely monumental figure of the ‘author’, rather than any single text—he has been regarded as a resource to be drawn upon by moralists and writers for children, in

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<sup>26</sup> The term “bowdlerization” was coined specifically to describe the feminized Shakespeare adaptations, referring to Thomas and Henrietta Bowdler’s *Family Shakespeare*, published shortly after the Lamb’s *Tales*, also in 1807.

much the same way as they have drawn upon classical and popular myth and story. (12)

Shakespeare was, with the Lambs' *Tales* and the many alternate versions that followed, made into an essential component of early British children's education, and in being rendered "appropriate" was essentially made into a mouthpiece for the prevailing views and values of the time.<sup>27</sup>

Mary Lamb's intention of priming and thereby controlling children's understandings later in life—of telling children what the plays should and would "prove to be" when revisited as adults—was thus fulfilled. Those carefully controlled meanings attributed to the plays, the interpretations and interventions and characterizations layered on by children's and "family" authors, were then and continue to be, Bottoms argues, the essential "foundation" on which "the superstructure of much of our knowledge" of Shakespeare was built (11). The aggregate of values-building, culture-reinforcing childhood renderings of Shakespeare, including but not limited to the Lambs' *Tales*, quickly became the starting point for a considerable majority of cultural engagements with the plays, and at times, came to stand in place of real engagement at all. Such was Lois Hufford's insight when she commented in 1902 that "Although in naming the best books of the world, Shakespeare is usually mentioned after the Bible, comparatively few of the great reading public are familiarly acquainted with Shakespeare's plays" (qtd. Bottoms in

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<sup>27</sup> As Schierenbeck and Ciraulo write, "Despite this atmosphere of censorship, Shakespeare was not entirely absent from the early nineteenth-century canon of children's literature. Indeed, the second part of John Newberry's *Mother Goose's Melody; or Sonnets for the Cradle* consisted of songs from Shakespeare, 'that sweet Songster and Nurse of Wit and Humour' (Newberry 1975, title page)... Similarly, in her anthology, *The Female Reader* (1789; Wollstonecraft 1989a), Wollstonecraft provides selections from Shakespeare, but she carefully frames these passages to emphasize aesthetic and moral values, and her objective lies in fortifying and sharpening a young woman's reason and judgment... In essence, even though Shakespeare in the late eighteenth century was presented in anthologies, he was contained: the anthology itself acted as a censor" (18). That Shakespeare was included even when other "fanciful" literary works were being omitted speaks to his importance in the cultural parlance; that his works were so consistently edited, captioned, elided, contextualized, reframed, speaks to the importance for society of making instrumental use of Shakespeare and his cultural weight to protect the status quo.

Bearne/Watson 11). As a result of the bowdlerization trend, general familiarity with the plays increased, but only familiarity up to a point; “feminized” versions came to replace the “true plays,” at least to a certain extent, in popular culture.

*The Many Marys: Shakespeare's Other Sister*

Before moving on to the way the *Tales* and other bowdlerizations of Shakespeare appear in Woolf's fiction and essays, I would like to return for a moment to “A Room of One's Own.” As many before me have noted, and as my reading of the essay against Black's novel suggests, “A Room of One's Own” positions itself in direct opposition to the traditions of didactic girls' education, fostering a dialectic in which readers are tasked with identifying, researching, and engaging with Woolf's allusions. The essay is Woolf's polemic against antiquated social ideologies that misrepresent artistic and intellectual conditions for women; her argument is with those who teach that women are inherently less, when she sees all the ways in which they have been (historically and continually) oppressed. Woolf, writing against the instrumental mode of memory and opening up a dialectical space, uses Judith to highlight the differences in opportunities between brother and sister, between male and female genius in British society; she draws on Black to deepen and expand her criticism. Woolf critiques with Judith the lived conditions of women artists, and the intellectual limitations and manipulations imposed on them.

That is not all she does. Though the combination of Woolf's feminism and Black's novel as urtext illumine many of the choices in specific detail included in Woolf's account of Judith Shakespeare, they do not obviously account for one major change—a change that departs not only from Black's novel but also from the real biography of Judith Shakespeare, the historical figure. That is the deliberate choice to make Judith a sister rather than a daughter. In Black's

novel, and in historical record, Judith Shakespeare was the second daughter of William Shakespeare and Anne Hathaway, sister to Susannah and twin sister to Hamnet. And yet, in Woolf's narrative Judith is a sister. Close reading Woolf's passage, either on its own or against Black's novel, cannot provide an explanation; though some scholars have proposed that the answer might lie in Woolf's biography, the choice seems too palpable to be so easily dismissed. As part of an essay made up of a myriad of other small but hugely significant choices in detail—choices that we are challenged to identify by the interactive nature of the text, choices that we are meant to understand to be part of the dialectic process of constructing meaning for ourselves—I am hesitant to accept that Woolf would have made so clear and obvious a change simply to sidestep her own complicated familial relations—especially when a change so obvious cannot but emphasize the very thing we might imagine her to want to hide.

I believe that resounding in the choice to make Judith a sister rather than a daughter to the great English writer is the echo of another sister of another great English writer, and another of the many Marys haunting "A Room of One's Own": Mary Lamb. If Shakespeare in the public life of Woolf's time had been—again, at least to a certain extent—usurped by the *Tales from Shakespeare* and *Family Shakespeare* culture, then it is reasonable to consider the possibility that when Woolf refers to Shakespeare she refers not only to the man but also to the cultural symbol and icon. That symbol and icon at that time was composed not only of William Shakespeare, but also of his effective voice. Charles Lamb, first made famous by the *Tales from Shakespeare*, often given sole authorial credit for that work, to whom Woolf refers by name eleven times in "A Room," was that voice, and his sister has a great deal in common with Woolf's Judith. Mary Lamb demonstrated "equal talent" to her brother, and yet remained largely unrecognized; Mary Lamb was constantly called back to her work and her household needs from her books; Mary

Lamb was made responsible for her family's survival, at the expense of her own health and happiness.<sup>28</sup> Mary Lamb lived her life in her brother's shadow, as both Shakespeare's potential equal, and his mad sister. She makes a compelling template for Judith Shakespeare, and to the extent that the parallel is productive, it is worth considering seriously.

Though we have already met Mary Lamb through her *Tales* for children—*Tales* which offer a useful model for understanding the kinds of uses of Shakespeare I will show Woolf deconstructing in later chapters—it is her notoriety that is most important if we are to consider her as Judith.<sup>29</sup> In spite of what we can now understand to be profound literary and intellectual contributions made by Mary Lamb to her brother's career, what she was and remains best known for is her madness, epitomized by her “murder” of their mother.<sup>30</sup> Writes *The Dictionary of National Biography* (vol. XXXI, 1892) of the event:

The family were poor, Charles's salary, and what his sister could earn by needlework, in addition to the interest on Salt's legacies, forming their sole means of subsistence, for John Lamb the younger, a fairly prosperous gentleman, was living an independent life elsewhere. John Lamb the elder was old and sinking into dotage. The mother was an invalid, with apparently a strain of insanity.

Mary Lamb was over-worked, and the continued strain and anxiety began to tell upon her mind. On 22 Sept. 1796 a terrible blow fell upon the family. Mary

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<sup>28</sup> Her loosely autobiographical story “Margaret Green” in *Mrs. Leicester's School* tells us as much.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Lamb receives no independent entry in the original edition of *The Dictionary of National Biography*, but her presence looms large in the entry for her brother. Mary Ann Lamb, “better known as Mary,” was born in 1764, the second child of John and Elizabeth Lamb (DNB 423). Her older brother John was born in 1763, and her younger brother Charles in 1775. Mary was educated “at a humble day-school” in her early years and later supported her family as a seamstress (DNB 423). After her parents' death, Mary kept house for Charles and was his constant companion until his death in 1834; she was buried next to him after her death thirteen years later (DNB 428). She was Charles's collaborator and correspondent, and inspired the “Bridget Elia” of his famous essays (Morris v).

<sup>30</sup> There is dispute among scholars and within historical record as to the specific details of the events, but in any case “manslaughter” is probably the most accurate term—Elizabeth Lamb was killed after intervening in a dispute between Mary and a servant, making it likely that her death was accidental (ed. Burwick 761).

Lamb, irritated with a little apprentice-girl who was working in the family sitting-room, snatched a knife from the table, pursued the child round the room, and finally stabbed her mother, who had interposed in the girl's behalf. The wound was instantly fatal, Charles being at hand only in time to wrest the knife from his sister and prevent further mischief. An inquest was held and a verdict found of temporary insanity. Mary Lamb would have been in the ordinary course transferred to a public lunatic asylum, but interest was made with the authorities, and she was given into the custody of her brother, then only just of age, who undertook to be her guardian, an office which he discharged under the gravest difficulties and discouragements for the remainder of his life. (DNB 424).

Mary spent the next three years “under suitable care” in a facility near her brother in Hackney, where he “could visit her frequently” (DNB 424); following their father's death in 1799 “Mary Lamb returned to live with her brother, from whom she was never again parted, except during occasional returns of her malady” (DNB 425).

This struggle with “malady,” paired with literary skill and a high intellectual family life, would almost certainly have caught the attention of Woolf, who suffered not dissimilarly throughout her life.<sup>31</sup> It would also make Mary Lamb a compelling basis for the story of Shakespeare's sister. The differences in trajectory, in access to resources, and in public

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<sup>31</sup> As Hermione Lee writes in her biography of Woolf (1997), “Virginia Woolf was a sane woman who had an illness.... Her illness is attributable to genetic, environmental, and biological factors. It was periodic, and recurrent. It was precipitated, but not indubitably caused, by things which happened to her. It affected her body as much as her mind and raised the insoluble and fundamental question, which she spent a great deal of time considering, of the relation between the two.... Five times in her life (four of them between the ages of thirteen and thirty-three) she suffered from major onslaughts of the illness and in almost all (possibly all) of these attacks she attempted to kill herself. She frequently used the word ‘apprehensive’ to describe her states of mind—saying that her mother's death and the subsequent events ‘had formed my mind and made it apprehensive’” (171). That Lee feels the need to clarify that “She was often a patient, but she was not a victim. She was not weak, or hysterical, or self-deluding, or guilty, or oppressed” speaks to the ways Woolf has been understood, in her own time and in critical consideration, and the continued stigma against mental health challenges even in our time (171). Woolf is often retroactively diagnosed with manic-depression, the same condition from which Mary Lamb is believed to have suffered.

recognition between the two younger Lamb siblings is a compelling testament to the condition of intellectually gifted women during early nineteenth century British patriarchy; Charles was sent to school to develop his talent, while Mary was made to deny her own and to do the menial work that made her brothers' educations possible. The violence Woolf enforces on Judith at the end of her narrative mirrors the violence that dominated Mary Lamb's life—or at least, accounts of her life.<sup>32</sup> To say Woolf is thinking about Judith Shakespeare as Mary Lamb is to say Woolf is asking us to complicate our understanding of both women—the fictional heroine she invents, and the real-life example from the (in her own lifetime) not-too-distant past.

In one sense, if Judith is Mary, Woolf's portrait vindicates Mary Lamb by acknowledging the great difficulty of her life conditions—showing Lamb to be not a helpless, fragile, pathetic woman but a woman whose challenge was the world around her. We can think about the “murder” of Mary Lamb's mother—which, again, the DNB entry suggests may have been accidental, at the very least unpremeditated—in the context of Lamb's frustration with her obligation to support the family by sewing. Mary Lamb's story is precisely that of what happens when the “heat and passion of the poet's heart is caught and tangled in a woman's body,” when the literary genius is forced into what the family circumstances suggest to have been grueling and never-ending domestic labor.

And yet, in another sense Woolf's invocation of Lamb challenges the very “myth” she invokes, because the central challenge of her long essay is a challenge precisely to the ideologies Lamb espoused, to Mary Lamb's explicitly articulated and acknowledged approach to writing literature for children. Lamb might be known best for “the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body,” but that led her not to suicide, as in the case of

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Susan Tyler Hitchcock's *Mad Mary Lamb: Lunacy and Murder in Literary London*, Norton 2005.

Judith Shakespeare, but to use her “poet’s heart” to help restrain “heat and violence” in others (Woolf 593). She did not die for her art, but instead compromised it (and herself) in deference to the needs of men around her, particularly her brother, by becoming a voice for the Angel in the House myth. Woolf’s Judith’s suicide becomes both a punishment to Mary Lamb—violence inflicted on her, rather than by her, as she might be understood to have inflicted violence on other women by perpetuating the conditions of their oppression—as well as a censure for her unwillingness to become a martyr for women after her.

Both readings are available—and both, I think, are important to understand, to better understand Mary Lamb and to better understand the nature and scope of Woolf’s social and political criticisms, in “A Room” and throughout her fiction and essays. Mary Lamb’s ability to find creative outlet, even writing literature for children rather than high art of the kind Woolf believed Shakespeare to produce, is a testament to her perseverance and strength, overcoming not (only) “malady” but society by finding a way to develop her talent in spite of her circumstance—as Woolf tells us did Jane Austen, George Elliot, Charlotte Bronte before her. She is a foremother who “began to write,” in the only way she was allowed. And yet her writing, while part of changing the landscape of opportunities for women, while making it possible for women to consider writing and to consider claiming 500 pounds and “a room of one’s own” for themselves, also did the good nineteenth century/Victorian work of ensuring (at least in part) “that the next generation would maintain the values and traditions of its parents and teachers” (Rowbotham 3), that girls would believe themselves requiring the “kind assistance” of their “young gentlemen” brothers to explain “such parts as are hardest for them to understand” (Lamb) due to their “feminine weakness in the upper region” (Woolf).<sup>33</sup> Mary Lamb, in the larger

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<sup>33</sup> “Yet paradoxically, it was this genre of popular fiction that also provided a medium for recognizing the growing rebellion of middle-class women against the limiting tradition of the *Angel in the Home*. Indeed the creation of a



history of women's education and women's artistic production, is both victim and victimizer at once.

More broadly, the ability to show both sides, to at once praise and condemn, defend and censure, is demonstrative of the nuance and sensitivity of Woolf's mode of critique throughout the fiction and essays. She shows always the individual in light of the social institution, as both creator of culture and as created by culture; she is attentive always not only to the problem identified, but also to its source. Is Mary Lamb to blame for her *Tales*? Is she to blame for the Shakespeare consumer culture that followed, for the buttressing of insidious social and political institutions expressed in and epitomized by her work? There is not one clear answer. Mary Lamb was failed by society; Mary Lamb failed society. It is the question, the negotiation, the nuance at stake. What if Shakespeare had a sister? What if we remembered his sister? What if we brought her back?

### *Concluding Thoughts*

The arguments developed in this chapter scaffold those that follow in two ways. First, they provide a context for understanding Woolf's use of Shakespeare throughout the fiction and essays, by laying out the feminization/objectivized memory trend that gained such sweeping prominence in nineteenth century England. Woolf challenges a society that will "praise, even quote" Shakespeare but yet throws the plays overboard, and that society is one in which *Tales*

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body of fiction concentrating specifically on the adolescent middle-class female market actually aided in the expansion of women's role in society. It gave a considerable boost to the profession of author, markedly increasing the number of women writers. Because most of this didactic fiction concentrated on generally acceptable social behavior and attitudes, the authors of such works found themselves regarded with favour, even though they received money through their writing. Numbers of single women even began to be able to earn a living by writing while still being accepted as part of established social circles—a privileged not open to working women such as governesses or even nurses until a later period. Certainly this fiction mirrors the evolution of an acceptable role for middle-class women outside marriage and the nuclear family, with the new invented 'traditions' of its own." (Rowbotham 9)

*from Shakespeare* are allowed to replace the plays—in which a memory formed for instrumental use by those with political power is accepted at face value. To understand the critique, we must first understand the *Tales* and the culture that created, and was created by, them.

They also offer an example, in the many ways of reading the Judith Shakespeare narrative (on its own, in light of Black, and in light of Lamb), of the kinds of multi-layered meanings and competing (perhaps even conflicting) subjective perspectives that define Woolf's fiction and essays. Woolf at once invokes, rejects, complicates, compels, rethinks; there is never a single didactic argument, just as there is no one "right" way of reading Judith Shakespeare. Rather, there is a conversation—about what is happening, about who is to blame, about how to move forward; about William Black, about Mary Lamb, about Jane Austen and George Eliot and the Brontes and women throughout history—that is brought to and shaped for the reader, but which the reader must locate and in which the reader must engage and decide the sound of whose voice to follow. Woolf offers not a crystalized memory, but a memory she asks us to work ourselves, the raw ingredients of memorial practice from which we can draw our own questions and conclusions. The individual narrative is considered from every possible vantage, and the "argument," the truth claim, the "point," can only be located through the dialectical process of consideration, through the negotiation.

## CHAPTER 2

### Thinking in Common: Memories of Shakespeare in Woolf's Early Novels

Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream.

A Sketch of the Past" 80

For 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.

*A Room of One's Own* 65

From this I reach what I might call a philosophy; at any rate it is a constant idea of mine; that behind the cotton wool is hidden a pattern; that we—I mean all human beings—are connected with this; that the whole world is a work of art; that we are parts of the work of art. *Hamlet* or a Beethoven quartet is the truth about this vast mass that we call the world. But there is no Shakespeare, there is no Beethoven; certainly and emphatically there is no God; we are the words; we are the music; we are the thing itself.

"A Sketch of the Past" 72

From her short essays to her novels, from her first word to her last, Virginia Woolf is constantly interested in not only the physical but the intellectual world around her. Her writing reflects a constant desire to understand the individual in the context of the historical—recognizing the problems with historicity and the subjective nature of historical record that were in her time undergoing such prominent debate. Among her brightest stars in the larger constellation of British intellectual history—and that most frequently invoked—was Shakespeare, and particularly Shakespeare's plays. This chapter will look holistically at the presence of Shakespeare in Woolf's fiction and essays, beginning with a broad look at the places and ways in which Shakespeare is name-dropped in Woolf's early writings and then narrowing in on more precise moments of allusion, including direct references to plays by title, attributed and

unattributed quotations, and more. I will show Woolf using Shakespeare to identify problematic modes of instrument- and opiate-memory operating in her time, and to point readers toward a dialectic-memory practice going forward.

Rather than beginning with an abstracted claim, it seems useful here to model the claim I will shortly make through close reading, to demonstrate the level of sophistication and craft I will argue Woolf employs in her use of Shakespeare. In *Jacob's Room* (1922), Woolf writes:

What's the use of trying to read Shakespeare, especially in one of those little thin paper editions whose pages get ruffled, or stuck together with sea-water?

Although the plays of Shakespeare had frequently been praised, even quoted, and placed higher than the Greek, never since they started had Jacob managed to read one through. Yet what an opportunity!" (*Jacob's Room* 34)

The passage is subtle yet profound. Jacob Flanders has gone on a boating trip with his friend, Timmy Durant, and brought along copies of Shakespeare's plays to read. The plays cannot hold his interest enough to overcome the inconvenience of the conditions, and eventually fall overboard. The plot is not changed because of this, the scene not revisited later on.

And yet. Set in context of the larger narrative structure and the network of references to Shakespeare as cultural icon in *Jacob's Room* and in Woolf's fiction more broadly, the passage is a devastating comment on the shallowness of the protagonist, and a keystone for the social criticism levied by the novel. It tells us that Jacob Flanders, who will die as an English soldier in World War I (symbolically on McCrea's Flanders Field), has never read the English canon. He has "praised, even quoted" Shakespeare's plays frequently in his discussions with Timmy Durant, placed them "higher than the Greek" and so affirmed their importance as part of English high culture—and his own insider-status in the cultural elite—, but he cannot find the use of

actually *reading* the plays. So, he doesn't. He fights, then—he dies, then—, for an England of which he has only a passing understanding, for an England symbolized by an author he cannot be bothered to read because of the nuisance of ruffled, sticky pages. Woolf invites the reader to question: what would Jacob have found if he had “read” the plays “through”? What would have happened if he and those around him thought of more than just to “praise, even quote” the plays (note the irony in that order), and instead looked to their content and themes and values? Would he still be sent to die? Would he still go?

Jane Marcus compellingly argues that *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and *Three Guineas* (1938) are interactive texts, texts that demand that readers fill in ellipses and track down names and dates and allusions to fully understand what it is Woolf is saying. My project pushes forward along the same lines, arguing that not only are the essays interactive, but the fiction as well; the same demands on the reader made by, say, the footnotes in *Three Guineas* are present throughout all of Woolf's writing, particularly (though not exclusively) in the treatment of Shakespeare's person and plays. In the fiction and essays, Woolf uses Shakespeare both to represent and to criticize English cultural values. Shakespeare figures as shorthand, a mechanism for invoking past beliefs and a way of criticizing the traditions that have grown out of those beliefs. The continual references and allusions to Shakespeare by name and to his plays by title serve as a challenge to the reader, to piece together a conversation that goes far beyond the immediate text. Put in the theoretical terms framing this project, Woolf uses Shakespeare to invoke the English cultural memory of her moment, including the ways that memory had become stale instrument and opiate, and the possibilities there for the reader willing to join with her in engaging dialectically.

To wit, as an outgrowth of her criticism of uninformed (opiate) uses of Shakespeare, I will argue that Woolf uses these references to intentionally invite readers to a new dialectic practice. By situating references and allusions in dialogue and interior monologue, Woolf creates a mechanism for criticizing society by criticizing the way society has come to (and often failed to) think. Her signature aesthetic of free indirect discourse, zooming in and out of her characters' minds, is in this light not merely an aesthetic choice affected to serve an interest in ontology, but a political gesture that allows her to show individuals' thoughts in their larger cultural contexts, and to empathize with the individuals while exposing and condemning the society that has produced them. That is to say, she uses her characters' interior thoughts to highlight the way in which the opiate-memory of Shakespeare works as a political instrument, protecting the interests of the ruling class and, particularly, the ruling men. Woolf does this by challenging readers to revisit the questions and tensions developed in and through Shakespeare's plays in the contemporary context, foregrounding the use-value of the plays as cultural capital that has been missed by her characters. She further challenges her readers to learn—as her characters have not done—from the plays and the past.

A key component of my reading will consider questions and conflicts developed within these plays, and the variable interpretations of the lines, scenes, and images Woolf invokes, as a way of exploring the variable worldviews of her characters and “ways of thinking” in and through Shakespeare's plays. I will begin with a broad survey of the invocation of Shakespeare in Woolf's early fiction, and then deep-dive into *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), her fourth novel, in which she perfects the technique to the point that it is not merely a technique, but I will argue *the* technique, used to levy the novel's political critique.

### *Modernism and Ontology*

Michael Bell writes in his chapter “The Metaphysics of Modernism” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (1999) that “The Modernist generation, both critically and creatively, was centrally concerned with the relations between literary form and modes of knowledge or understanding” (11). Because knowledge is, on a metaphysical level, always individually experienced and processed, the aesthetic focus necessarily narrows and turns inward. My interest is to join an increasing number of critics who argue that such inward focus is done in the interest of an outward political critique. Ways of thinking and knowing, because they are created and perpetuated by society at large, reflect not only the knowledge of the individual but the horizon of knowable and interpretable possibilities of the society in which the individual exists.

Here I am heavily indebted to Michael Tratner’s wonderfully insightful *Modernism and Mass Politics* (1995). Where modernist literature has frequently been understood as primarily interested in interiority and the individual consciousness, Tratner compellingly argues that the interior life of the individual is represented in modernist literature as a way of articulating that of the mass. He writes:

...many modernist literary forms emerged out of efforts to write in the idiom of the crowd mind. Modernism was not, then, a rejection of mass culture, but rather an effort to produce a mass culture, perhaps for the first time, to produce a culture distinctive to the twentieth century, which Le Bon called ‘The Era of the Crowd.’ The contest between modernist and realist literary forms was thus not a contest between literature for a coterie and literature for the masses, but rather a contest

between different ways of speaking to and from the mass mind, a contest based on different conceptions of how the masses think. (12-13)

We might hear in Tratner's description Woolf's own words on great literature, as capturing "the experience of the mass" behind "the single voice" (*A Room* 75). The individual focus in modernism is in this light not a way of moving away from the other/the crowd/the mass, but a recognition that the other/crowd/mass exists as a collection of individuals, and that to connect with a common experience requires articulating that experience through the individual perspective that is the way each of us experiences the world. The mass mind exists as a collection of individual minds, and by writing the individual mind, modernism sought to connect with—and shape!—the mass.

Towards this end, Tratner goes on to argue that this effort to speak for the mass mind was not only an artistic endeavor but a political one as well. He continues:

...modernism was an effort to escape the limitations of nineteenth-century individualist conventions and write about distinctly 'collectivist' phenomena. To define the transition from the Victorians to the modernist in this way brings literary history into line with political histories.... Collectivist political theories, theories of the mass mind, and modernist literature all were intertwined as part of a general change in discourse, based on the 'modern' premise that individuals cannot control their own lives or even understand their own experiences, that vast collective entities such as classes, genders, and nationalities shape the individual mind and can, at times, even act independently of any individual. (13-14)

Interior life is crafted as a magnifying mirror, intended to not only reflect but amplify the presence of the social and political worlds operating on the individual—to create a narrative that



might help shape individuals' understanding of their place in the world going forward.

Amplifying the social and political forces operating on the individual, calling attention to their roles in peoples' lives, opened the possibility of reform.

I argue that Woolf takes this method a step further: the social and political worlds she invites us to examine are not only in the present, but in the intellectual and social history as well. Put another way, she grounds her exploration of ontology in an understanding that what is known depends upon what was known before—that ways of thinking are transmitted from one generation to the next, through the inherited cultural texts and practices that make up the cultural memory. Philosophical consideration of ontology must include consideration of memory, and of the way memory crystalizes and is transmitted over time. As Juliet Dusinberre writes in *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance* (1997), “Woolf was extraordinarily daring and unusual for her time in making her assumptions about culture explicit. She stated that she used the past for a purpose, as an empowering model for herself as woman writer, and particularly as a writer not of fiction but of criticism and literary history” (1). She believed that “great writers emerge from webs of culture created by readers, writers, education, patrons,” and sought to highlight her own influences pro-actively in her fiction and essays—in services of the “criticism and literary history” born out in and through her fiction (1). For Woolf, fiction itself is a form of criticism and literary history—the most profound form of each. Literature is a mode of memory that is active, of which instrumental use can be made, and that is (at best) essentially dialectic, resisting static readings and calling on readers in the present and in the future to reconstruct meaning with each reading. Literature is a way of capturing the experience of the mass in the moment and for the future—an experience that can and does change each time it is reconstructed. It is from this perspective that I approach her fiction and essays.

*"What's the Use of Trying to Read Shakespeare?": Standard English/Standard Memory*

From her first novel, invoking Shakespeare as a means of levying critique is a go-to tool in Woolf's literary arsenal. Over the course of her first three major works, Woolf strengthens and hones this tool, until it emerges in full force in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925). To do full justice to Woolf's use of Shakespeare, it is useful to follow her through this development, beginning by looking holistically at Shakespeare in *The Voyage Out* (1915), following him through *Night and Day* (1919), and into *Jacob's Room* (1922), before turning our attention more fully to Woolf's piece de resistance (at least as regards use of allusion), *Mrs. Dalloway*. What these first three novels have in common is an almost accidental use of Shakespeare that seems to emerge organically out of Woolf's own way of thinking—her way of seeing Shakespeare as the cultural and literary equivalent to the grammatical standard English, a core language and vocabulary with which to communicate. Shakespeare haunts these works because Shakespeare was such an influential figure in the life of the author that his presence trickles into her novels in the same way it so regularly punctuates her letters and diaries. We see Woolf coming back to Shakespeare again and again for very particular purposes, purposes which become more pronounced and more pointed as her literary skill increases, and which culminate in the great intention with which she wields Shakespeare as sword in *Mrs. Dalloway*.

In discussing Woolf's use of Shakespeare in the early novels, I am going to borrow from a discourse that is admittedly far outside of the norm for modernist scholarship. That is, I would like to think about the way Woolf uses Shakespeare in her first three novels through the lens of the debate in the United States and England over "Standard English." The Standard English debate provides a useful proxy for debate over girls' and working class education in Woolf's

time, exploring ways in which level of education is coded as a supposedly objective marker of value, while access to education remains markedly unequal across class, gender, and race. While this might seem a strange move, what I hope to show is that in the same way language can be understood as working instrumentally in the classroom to create and perpetuate an institutionalized racism/classism, Shakespeare's cultural memory is shown by Woolf to be an instrument used to perpetuate class privilege by a ruling class that never critically questions whether the interpretations that have been scripted for them are correct. Woolf's close attention to the limitations of her own education, and to the ways in which her auto-didacticism differentiated her thinking (for better and for worse) in many ways anticipate the later discourse. At the same time, the tension between the need for a common and recognizable vocabulary, and the need to validate the multiplicity of lived experiences and systems of self-expression, offers a useful parallel for thinking about the tension in Woolf's writing between the desire for a common memory—an articulation of shared experience of life behind the cotton wool that is the core of her literary philosophy—and the need to work against that memory's becoming a static relic of institutional inertia, coopted by those in power and unreflective of the nation it ostensibly represents.

Without moving too far off topic, it is useful to briefly recap what I mean by Standard English, and what is the debate. While there is robust critical debate over even how to define Standard English, at core what is meant by the term is the vernacular of English spoken in the academy and (often) in white-collar professions, a vernacular that some children learn in their homes and others learn through formal education.<sup>34</sup> Standard English is often taken for granted as the “default” against which to differentiate non-standard Englishes, for example African

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<sup>34</sup> This is consistent with discussion of English in the composition classroom begin with Mike Rose's powerful article “Languages of Exclusion” published in *College English* in 1985.

American Vernacular (AAV), a dialect of English that is learned by some students in the home and in the home community and that has equal linguistic complexity as Standard English, but a somewhat-separate set of rules. Beginning in the mid-1980s, critical attention has been given to the ways in which categories of language, on the surface neutral, become politically charged and, in many cases, instruments of class and racial discrimination. As Adrian Holliday writes in “Standards of English and Politics of Inclusion” (2008), “hidden results of native-speakerism reveal things that we don’t like to think about – sometimes known, but sometimes unspoken” about cultural, racial, gendered and class prejudices at work in our society (121).<sup>35</sup> Adherence to Standard English is taken by (some) faculty in the classroom, and by (some) professionals in the workplace, as a marker of intelligence—and, when it comes to hiring decisions, even value, through monetary offers of employment (121).

For many, Standard English is the first and only dialect they learn; it is not wielded intentionally or consciously as a privilege, but it produces privileges nonetheless. Arguments for opening up and validating non-standard Englishes stem from the desire to level the playing field and eradicate as much as possible the lasting sites of (linguistic) oppression in our society.<sup>36</sup> Arguments for maintaining the ideal of a single, Standard English stem from the recognition that any system of communication must, in some ways, have clearly defined rules and parameters to be useful; and from the recognition that so long as prejudice around language exists, we do our students a disservice by exempting them from learning to speak the language of power.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> Although Holliday writes particularly of native and non-native speakers of English broadly speaking, her criticisms are apt considering native- and non-native speakers of Standard English, whether a foreign or non-Standard English vernacular is the “first” language.

<sup>36</sup> See, for example, A. Suresh Canagarajah’s “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued” (in *College Composition and Communication*, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> See Vivian Zamel’s “Strangers in Academia: The Experiences of Faculty and ESL Students across the Curriculum” for a discussion of the tensions between seeking to create a welcoming space and seeking to support

When it comes to Woolf's novels, we might draw from the Standard English debate a useful set of analogues for considering how Woolf understands and treats Shakespeare. As we saw in Chapter 1, the opiate-memory of Shakespeare in Woolf's time was a standardized set of talking points that could be accessed readily only by those in the English upper class, particularly and especially men in the English upper class, learned through cultural osmosis of versions like the Lambs' as much as (if not more than) individual, careful study. Perpetuation of a sanitized Shakespeare served an instrumental purpose for those in power, in maintaining control over society by maintaining control over systems of interpretations and meaning. In theoretical terms, we might understand the consumer Shakespeare culture to have developed as a memory-analogue to Standard English – the Standard Memory, which Woolf will show working in both the instrumental and the opiate modes. The Standard Memory is elite, in Woolf's view effete, and unquestioned. References to Shakespeare in Woolf's early novels are used to expose the presence and the failure of that Standard Memory.

To wit, in *The Voyage Out*, Woolf uses Shakespeare as a signifier of her characters' levels of class and education, and as a way to emphasize the Englishness of her characters when they are traveling abroad. In so doing, she opens the possibility of satirizing and criticizing English Edwardian life, by reconstituting it under the bell jar of foreign travel so that it can be fully examined and, as appropriate, scorned. Woolf's characters come together around, and are implicitly hierarchized by, their understanding and valuation of Shakespeare. For example, Shakespeare first appears in a conversation between Clarissa Dalloway and Mr. Grice on the ship from England. Listening to Mr. Grice tell stories about "the treasures which the great ocean had bestowed upon him," Clarissa muses, "They have swum about among bones," alluding to Ariel's

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students after they have left the protected space of the classroom (in *College Composition and Communication*, 1995).

song in *The Tempest*. To Clarissa's great surprise, Mr. Grice recognizes the allusion and says, "You're thinking of Shakespeare," pulling out his copy of the plays and reciting. This reading, and Mr. Grice's valuation of "a grand fellow, Shakespeare," absolutely delight Clarissa, and they go on to compare favorite plays (both *Henry V*). Woolf writes:

Hamlet was what you might call too introspective for Mr. Grice, the sonnets too passionate; Henry the Fifth was to him the model of an English gentleman. But his favourite reading was Huxley, Herbert Spencer, and Henry George; while Emerson and Thomas Hardy he read for relaxation. He was giving Mrs.

Dalloway his views upon the present state of England when the breakfast bell run so imperiously that she had to tear herself away, promising to come back and be shown his sea-weeds. (*Voyage* 55)

They continue to breakfast, where Clarissa performs for the other travelers her revelation that Mr. Grice reads Shakespeare, and holds him up on display.

While in some ways we might read Woolf as asking us to share in Clarissa Dalloway's surprise that a man who lives and works on a ship might read Emerson and Thomas Hardy "for relaxation" and have his own hierarchy of preference to classify Shakespeare's plays, it is precisely Clarissa's surprise that she holds up against Mr. Grice's intentional—if, perhaps, not altogether sophisticated—readings. Mr. Grice knows the plays and reads the canon, and looks to Shakespeare to learn "the model of an English gentleman" (55). In other words, he looks to access the Standard Memory, the standard language, as a way of moving between classes and asserting his equal intelligence and value with his passengers. Yet, it is a language he must learn. Clarissa Dalloway, on the other hand, invokes the plays almost subconsciously, entertaining herself with the reference in the face of Mr. Grice's fish and slime in jars, but

without, perhaps, thinking through the connection. (If she thought of it, she might realize she invoked a song about shipwreck while sailing.) Clarissa is led by Shakespeare almost as Ferdinand is led by Ariel through the song—unthinkingly. We might credit her culture and sophistication in the allusion, recognizing that it is merely the language at the tip of her tongue, not a performance like Mr. Grice’s recitation. And yet, upon placing the allusion, we begin to question her understanding of what she speaks; she has access to the privilege, to the model of English gentle(wo)man, but has not mastered the fully mastered the substance.

Shakespeare appears again in a conversation between Rachel Vinrace and St. John Hirst. St. John asks Rachel what she’s read: “Just Shakespeare and the Bible?” to which Rachel admits, “I haven’t read many classics” (whether Shakespeare and the Bible are included in classics is unclear). St. John begins to chastise Rachel for her ignorance, exclaiming, “D’you mean to tell me you’ve reached the age of twenty-four without reading Gibbon?” (171-172). Rachel is both embarrassed and angered, feeling “surrounded, like a child at a party, by the faces of strangers all hostile to her, with hooked noses and sneering, indifferent eyes” (172). Her failure to know “the classics”—a failure not exclusively or even primarily her own but rather of her education—leaves St. John to announce he’d like to lend her books, and then to leave her, bored. The ease with which St. John recommends Shakespeare and Gibbon (*History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*) emphasizes both his intelligence and his access to information. It also highlights the reality that a man of his time and social status would never be able to reach “the age of twenty-four without reading Gibbon”—it is taken for granted that he will learn the cultural memory by learning the canon, and do his part in maintaining the memory/canon as an educated man of the ruling class (172). Both Rachel and St. John seek to do their parts, and in so doing reveal what those parts are: for Rachel, to listen and accept guidance from a man; for St.

John, to be educator and memory-keeper. Rachel is meant to accept the opiate; St. John, to offer it.

We know from Woolf's letters that St. John Hirst was meant as something between an homage to and a send-up of Lytton Strachey, and from her letters, diaries and memoirs we can imagine this very exchange happening during one of the early Friday club meetings. We might imagine Rachel Vinrace to stand in for Woolf herself, denied access to formal education and left to choose for herself what she would or would not read.<sup>38</sup> As the conversation continues, Shakespeare and the Standard Memory of English upper-class education continues to be posited as something Rachel should know, but was never forced to learn; and as something St. John takes for granted as universal. In a conversation about "you Christians," it is Shakespeare and not Christ whom Rachel believes will be "born again... up among the Downs," Shakespeare she imagines as savior even while acknowledging she does not read the classics (227). In a later scene, Hewet feels "he must speak," and muses that nature is "where the Elizabethans got their style" (313). Mrs. Flushing quickly responds, "Shakespeare? I hate Shakespeare!" and her husband returns, "I believe you're the only person who dares to say that" (313). Even—or perhaps, especially—abroad, Shakespeare is what unites the group. It is what St. John and Hewet take for granted, what they say when they "must speak," the common language on the tips of their tongues. It is how Clarissa Dalloway marks her class, what Rachel Vinrace should know better, and what only Mrs. Flushing dare admit she hates. The Standard Memory of Shakespeare is part of the fabric with which Woolf weaves her story, with greater mastery signifying greater privilege, greater access to structures of education and social power.

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<sup>38</sup> Woolf, of course, did read the classics, but was hyper-conscious that reading was her choice, and that her understanding was limited by the absence of a classroom in which to discuss and debate.



This weaving is also present in *Night and Day*, with a somewhat more defined form. In *Night and Day*, Shakespeare figures prominently in two major arcs: as a subject oft discussed between Katharine Hilbery and her suitor, William Rodney, who writes papers about Shakespeare and presents them at group readings; and as part of Katharine's mother's conspiracy theory that it was really Shakespeare's wife Anne Hathaway who wrote his sonnets. The former use seems to grow directly out of the kinds of uses to which Shakespeare is put in *The Voyage Out*: the repeated conversation is a marker of the class background Katharine and Rodney share, and a way Rodney marks his social place—a place Woolf exposes and lambasts. Rodney says, for instance, “I could spend three hours every day reading Shakespeare” (*Night and Day* 59). Rodney wields his knowledge of Shakespeare as a way to make an impression at parties and present himself as the aristocratic intellectual he sees himself as being; he self-consciously displays his ability to speak the Standard Memory as a way to mark himself worthy. Woolf wields Shakespeare as a way to call our attention to the absurdity of Rodney's use, and of his self-perception; she begins not only to expose, but to lambast, the language Rodney speaks and the Standard Memory he performs.

Rodney's figuration of himself as Shakespeare's inheritor, writing plays that are “really rather nice” and “only waiting for a holiday to finish,” exposes the extent to which his understanding of Shakespeare exists at the surface level only (59). Rodney's proprietorship over Shakespeare is effortless in conversation—he knows the words and tropes others will expect to hear, knows what is Standard. At the same time, his implied valuation of his own three-quarters finished play as being in the same category as Shakespeare is offered by Woolf as a way of exposing his true ignorance, which is astounding. Rodney loves Shakespeare because Shakespeare offers him a way to show off at parties. Rodney writes plays so that people will

think of him as a person who writes plays, not because he has anything to say. Katharine resigns herself to marrying Rodney with the questions, “How could one avoid it? How could one find fault with it?” because he exists in a category where there “are only five men in England whose opinion of [his] work matters a straw” (115). There is no “expression of love” or understanding of substance—either of marriage, or of Shakespeare’s plays—but rather a figuration of Shakespeare as part of the way the world works, a marker for Katharine of what needed to be marked in the social discourse. And yet, Woolf shows us that while Rodney speaks the language of power, and so is socially privileged within the novel, he cannot engage substantively with the language he speaks. We are so led to begin questioning the structures of power that create and support Rodney and men like him—structures like the instrument-memory, opiate-memory, Standard Memory of Shakespeare.

The other recurring use of Shakespeare in *Night and Day* is in Mrs. Hilbery’s belief that Shakespeare’s works were truly authored by his wife, Anne Hathaway. Woolf writes:

Even Katharine was slightly affected against her better judgment by her mother’s enthusiasm. Not that her judgment could altogether acquiesce in the necessity for a study of Shakespeare’s sonnets as a preliminary to the fifth chapter of her grandfather’s biography. Beginning with a perfectly frivolous jest, Mrs. Hilbery had evolved a theory that Anne Hathaway had a way, among other things, of writing Shakespeare’s sonnets; the idea, struck out to enliven a party of professors, who forwarded a number of privately printed manuals within the next few days for her instruction, had submerged her in a flood of Elizabethan literature; she had come half to believe in her joke, which was, she said, at least as

good as other people's facts, and all her fancy for the time being centered upon Stratford-on-Avon. (258)

That Mrs. Hilbery's joke is "at least as good as other people's facts" highlights her lack of education, to be sure, but it also calls explicitly into question the value of the facts being passed around at parties—facts like, say, those contained in William Rodney's paper. It also exposes failures in the education and socialization of upper middle class British women. Mrs. Hilbery is of the class allowed to read Shakespeare. At the same time, she finds her best means of participating in the dinner party of professors to be through "perfectly frivolous jest," which she adopts as her own in the absence of any better alternative (258). She owns Shakespeare as "MY William" and finds it "odd... that for all one can see, that dear old thing in the blue bonnet, crossing the road with her basket on her arm, has never heard that there was such a person?" (259). Yet, the reader is left wondering who is the Shakespeare Mrs. Hilbery knows and claims as her own.

Mrs. Hilbery's proclamation "People, read Shakespeare!" might indeed be read as Woolf's own—an invitation not only to the "lawyers hurrying to their work, cabmen squabbling for their fares, little boys rolling their hoops, little girls throwing bread to the gulls," but to Woolf's readers as well, to read better than the absurd woman to whom is given the words (259). If the Standard Memory that St. John teaches, that Rodney recites, that Mrs. Hilbery parrots and that Clarissa Dalloway takes for granted, is one that is both opiate and instrument, freeing the characters from thinking critically about Shakespeare for themselves and instead substituting prescribed scripts and meanings, then behind the proclamation "People, read Shakespeare!" we might imagine the same anger simmering beneath the surface of the author's lamentation of "what an opportunity!" in *Jacob's Room*. The Standard Memory is one that Woolf's characters

learn without even knowing it, without thinking critically about what they are taught to read, and what they are taught to value. In constantly calling our attention back to the ways in which the characters do not really read, do not really understand what they recite, Woolf challenges us to separate out the script from the text, the Standard Memory from the possibilities contained within a Shakespeare play (and the canon it represents) for an astute, engaged reader. In language terms, Woolf asks her readers to think of Shakespeare not just as a cultural language they speak by default, but as one they actively choose to learn, recognize themselves to be speaking, and speak thoughtfully and on purpose—an early twentieth century version of the “Check your privilege” mantra now so oft repeated on college campuses. Rather than taking for granted that the Standard Memory is the only valid memory that exists, she invites them to choose a memory for themselves, by going back themselves to the primary source, and putting in the work to earn the inheritance that so many (like Mr. Grice) would covet, and so many others (like St. John and Rodney) so easily take for granted.

This call to “People, read Shakespeare!” is echoed again in *Jacob’s Room*, not only in the bemoaned missed opportunity. About 10 pages before Jacob Flanders asks the use of trying to read Shakespeare, he answers the question for himself. After a lunch with Prof. and Mrs. Plumer, wherein Mrs. Plumer decrees that she doesn't "feel I know the truth about anything" without reading all versions in the "serious six-penny weeklies," Jacob rants to Timmy Durrant, "Had they never read Homer, Shakespeare, the Elizabethans?" (*Jacob’s Room* 24). Through free indirect discourse, in Jacob's voice, Woolf describes the weeklies as "written by pale men in muddy boots—the weekly creak and screech of brains rinsed in cold water and wrung dry—melancholy papers" (24). She continues that the

extent to which he was disturbed proves that he was already agog. Insolent he was and inexperienced, but sure enough the cities which the elderly of the race have built upon the skyline showed like brick suburbs, barracks, and places of discipline against a red and yellow flame. He was impressionable; but the word is contradicted by the composure with which he hollowed his hand to screen a match. He was a young man of substance. (24-25)

Jacob's indignation at the notion of guiding beliefs and perspectives by "sixpenny weeklies" without thinking of Shakespeare and Homer heightens the irony only pages later, when Woolf holds up Jacob's own ignorance on display. The same anger we hear in her voice and the bitterness with which she bemoans "What an opportunity!" is marshaled forward by Jacob himself in his criticism of the Plumer's, of the social institution (the academy) that he will be inheriting. Those "cities which the elderly of the race have built upon the skyline" include both the "creek and screech of brains rinsed in cold water and wrung dry" and "Shakespeare, Homer, the Elizabethans"—and while Jacob here holds himself "a young man of substance," he almost immediately fails to live up to his own ideals, because he does not have to (24-25). He keeps his composure by reassuring himself that he is not like the Plumers, that he recognizes their folly. And yet, when given the choice of "cities" to enter into in "the skyline" of English intellectual life, he repeats their mistake.

Woolf's anger, heard in her condemnation of the Plumers through Jacob and found in her own exposure of Jacob himself, helps us better understand the stakes of Shakespeare in Woolf's writing, confirming what we have traced through *The Voyage Out* and *Night and Day*. Shakespeare signifies a Standard Memory in English culture and cultural inheritance, a memory that has come to work in the opiate mode, taken for granted as fact and largely misunderstanding

(or ignoring entirely) its own original source. Woolf's characters speak Shakespeare without understanding, or even seeking to understand, Shakespeare. Like Standard English in the classroom, it is a language that marks distinctions of class, gender, and race, and yet (as almost any composition teacher might attest), even those who at first blush seem to speak the language perfectly may not fully understand its rules; they merely perform what they have seen modeled. Though the performance of a Standard Memory, an opiate memory, of Shakespeare, Woolf exposes the tenuous means by which class privilege and social control are maintained, and her anger at the characters' failings helps us understand the failure of patriarchy she sees as having reached a crisis point.

How the crisis has emerged, and how society might recover, she uses Shakespeare to reveal in her next novel. Without changing the cultural/political/social stakes attached to Shakespeare's invocation, in *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf takes her critique, and her craft, to the next level. Rather than breaking into her characters' thoughts with her own anger, in *Mrs. Dalloway* Woolf instead crafts those thoughts to evoke anger, frustration, empathy in her readers. She moves past exposing the failures of the Standard Memory, of the society willing to accept opiate, to offering a new form of Dialectic Memory to take the Standard Memory's place. Rather than criticizing her characters from her own subject position, she channels and mobilizes her anger—that "poison" Forster bemoans—into a higher level of craft.<sup>39</sup> We turn now to that craft, and to the critique it illumines.

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<sup>39</sup> We think here of Forster, who bemoans Woolf's anger in her writing as poison.

*The Imperial Shakespeare: Wars in/of Allusion in Mrs. Dalloway*

In *Mrs. Dalloway*, references to Shakespeare appear thirty-seven times, including twenty references to Shakespeare by name, five quotations from *Cymbeline*, four allusions to *Othello*, four references to *Antony and Cleopatra*, two allusions to *Hamlet*, one allusion to *King Lear* and one to *Richard II*. Each of these plays has its own deep literary and cultural significance, but when taken together a common element emerges: each play deals with a central conflict in which the public and private spheres have been collapsed to the detriment of both, and in which that collapse is in some way precipitated by military or imperial culture. By invoking these plays, Woolf positions *Mrs. Dalloway* as an extension and 20th century retelling of this same central conflict. Woolf uses these plays to frame a call to values, to her characters and to the archetypal social identities they represent, to separate public and private duties within English society of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, from the local level of the family to the furthest reaches of the British Empire into the Commonwealth.

My argument here will be framed through the Shakespeare allusions, but it takes into account a great many other elements of the novel, such as its anti-imperialism (Peter's failure as a colonial administrator, Aunt Helena's flower imperialism, Clarissa's confusion about international relations) and its interest in larger social structures (tying buying flowers to a party in which the whole government attends, e.g.). The reading is convincing only as it is consistent with other strategies for reading *Mrs. Dalloway*. I also argue that Woolf is opening a conversation, but will be describing primarily conclusions, not questions. That's not accidental, nor do I believe it to be inconsistent: it seems to me Woolf is opening a conversation in which she has a very clear and specific reading, and that her project is to develop that reading in the novel. But that's not to say her reading is offered as conclusive or absolute; rather, she uses the

novel as a way of dramatizing a set of relationships and readings that she asks us, in going back and unpacking the allusions and themes, to accept, challenge, or complicate—in the same way she is at once accepting, challenging, and complicating the plays of which she makes use. Her novel is, like Shakespeare's plays, one way of seeing the world that raises with it the challenge to see further, to continually rethink. She offers one form of (what it means to be) English, and invites us to ask for ourselves whether it is the form we would like to learn to speak.

Perhaps the clearest example of the point I want to make is found in the novel's use of *Cymbeline* and the alliance of that play with Clarissa Dalloway and, to a lesser extent, Septimus Warren Smith. *Cymbeline* is first introduced into the novel through a book Mrs. Dalloway sees in a shop window on her way to buy the flowers:

But what was she dreaming as she looked into Hatchards' shop window? What was she trying to recover? What image of white dawn in the country, as she read in the book spread open:

*Fear no more the heat o' the sun*

*Nor the furious winter's rages* (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 9).

What she reads are the first two lines from one of the play's most famous, and most beautiful, passages: the funeral hymn. In a novel that returns again and again to the experience of middle age and to Clarissa's coping with her own mortality, the allusion (when it's recognized at all) is usually taken as a kind of aesthetic mourning borrowed by the atheist Woolf in substitute for prayer. Shakespeare's hymn offers consolation by offering an image of death as comfort, an escape from the pain—both physical and emotional—of everyday experience (Monte 613). Death is a time when we must "fear no more."



And yet, when we go back to the original context of the play, greater complexity emerges. Though the line does come from a funeral hymn and does in some ways serve the purpose of aesthetic mourning, that mourning is tinged with deep irony. The body being mourned by the hymn—Imogen, daughter of King Cymbeline of Britain—is at the time of her supposed death not dead but merely sleeping; moreover, she is heavily disguised, such that the mourning taking place is not for her but for her alter-ego, her inverse in almost every way, the male peasant Fidele. The audience hearing the hymn is fully aware of both Imogen's true identity and her sleeping state, undermining the emotional impact of the words with recognition that they are unnecessary and misdirected. On a very surface level, the mourning taking place is not tied to death but to disguise.

From a literary perspective, the hymn is also more complex than it at first appears. Within *Cymbeline* the "fear no more" hymn functions as a turning point in the play, mourning Imogen's supposed death but also anticipating her resurrection and return to grace at the play's end. Each prayer offered by the hymn—that Imogen/Fidele "Fear no more the heat o' the sun," "Fear no more the frown o' the great," "Fear no more the tyrant's stroke," "Fear not slander censure rash"—seeks to overcome a specific obstacle Imogen has faced and that has contributed in leading her to the "death" scene; each also turns out to be fulfilled in the second half of the play. Imogen is restored to the king/her father's good will, removing the frown of the great; the queen's plotting against her is exposed, freeing her from physical vulnerability and the tyrant's stroke that would usurp her place in royal succession; and the "slander" and "censure rash" that made her husband believe her unfaithful is also exposed and repented. In context, as part of a larger literary text, the hymn does not mourn Imogen's death but rather anticipates her life out of "the heat o' the sun," out of the line of royal succession, after her long-lost brothers are found

and restored to their rightful place as inheritors of Britain. (Notably, it is those long-lost brothers who are the ones singing the prayer, unaware of their own true identities or their sister's, heightening the irony and the sense of double-meaning attached to the hymn). In that sense, as a metaphor for freedom from the fears and obligations tied to maintaining a specific social and political identity, the hymn becomes not mourning but prayer.

It is this prayer for social freedom, not the consolation of death as physical release, that I believe is being invoked by Woolf. Clarissa's reflection after reading the lines in the shop window, which when the hymn is taken as mourning seems a non-sequitor, continues:

This late age of the world's experience had bred in them all, all men and women, a well of tears. Tears and sorrows; courage and endurance; a perfectly upright and stoical bearing. Think, for example, of the woman she admired most, Lady Bexborough, opening the bazaar (9-10).

The discussion is not about mortality, nor is it anything to do with getting older; to think of “Lady Bexborough, opening the bazaar” (10) rather than grieving the death of her favorite son is to think of the privileging of social function over personal reality, the “well of tears” “bred in them all” by participation in public life (9). The contrast to the “image of white dawn in the country” (9) that comes to Clarissa as she first reads the lines—an image of Bourton, of “burst[ing] open the French windows and plung[ing]” into the “open air” of the “early morning”—further emphasizes the point: the problem of the “late age” is its obligation to “open bazaars,” to subordinate the security of private life to the larger public—military, imperialist—interests (3). It is the public death, not the physical death, that occupies Mrs. Dalloway's thoughts—and through that public death, a release back to private life.

That trade of public for private continues throughout the novel. The association of the “Fear no more” chant with Septimus' suicide, both in his own thoughts and in Clarissa's reaction to it during the long epiphany scene at the party, can be read productively as a severing with the public self. Septimus thinks of the hymn just before he jumps out the window:

Every power poured its treasures on his head, and his hand lay there on the back of the sofa, as he had seen his hand lie when he was bathing, floating, on the top of the waves, while far away on shore he heard dogs barking and barking far away. Fear no more, says the heart in the body; fear no more.

He was not afraid. At every moment Nature signified by some laughing hint like that gold spot which went round the wall—there, there, there—her determination to show, by brandishing her plumes, shaking her tresses, flinging her mantle this way and that, beautifully, always beautifully, and standing close up to breathe through her hollowed hands Shakespeare's words, her meaning (139-140).

For the shell-shocked soldier, the man whose private life has been sacrificed to the public agenda of World War, the physical death functions as a private release. It is “the heart in the body” that seeks to “fear no more” with Septimus' suicide—not the body conscripted by the government and sent to war, not the body expected to produce sons to be sent to the next war, but the heart, the private, relational self (139). Septimus kills the body to save the heart, resisting the demands of society by destroying the vehicle on which social demands fall. It is “Nature” to which he returns, a natural order in which there is more to life than the responsibility and burden of fulfilling a geopolitical, imperial agenda.

In that sense, the “thing” that Clarissa discovers to “matter” upon hearing of the suicide is no more and no less than the private self, the existence of which is “obscured in her own life, let drop every day in [the] corruption, lies, chatter” of being a conformist society wife (184). The death is “her disaster—her disgrace” because she has willfully been a part of upholding the institution, having admired “Lady Bexborough” and the sacrifice of self to the state without wholly understanding the stakes involved, and having had an alternative to this world in her youth—“once she had walked on a terrace at Bourton” (185). Thus, when Clarissa realizes that she must “Fear no more the heat of the sun” (of the sun, not 'o, suggesting an internalization of the meaning of the lines rather than a memory of the written form) and realizes that “She must go back to them... She must find Sally and Peter,” what she is realizing is a way to reclaim her private self by going back to the world she inhabited before she became a society wife (186). “Mrs. Dalloway,” whose social roles had been outgrown anyway, with Septimus’ suicide ceases to exist; the person who comes in “from the little room” is not “Mrs. Dalloway” the hostess, but “Clarissa” the woman (186). A close reading shows that she who has been Clarissa, Clarissa Dalloway, and Mrs. Dalloway consistently throughout the novel is only Clarissa at its end. “Fear no more” marks not death, not acceptance of death, but rather life reclaimed—just as it does with Imogen.

The references to *Othello* in *Mrs. Dalloway* operate in much the same way. Though a straightforward reading of the quoted “If it were now to die” is possible using only the context in *Mrs. Dalloway*, going back to the play reveals much more. Beyond simply being quoted, *Othello* is made a motif throughout the novel, with allusions that would not register without having considered the quotation in context (35). In context, the line is this:

It gives me wonder great as my content

To see you here before me. O my soul's joy!  
If after every tempest come such calms,  
May the winds blow till they have wakened death!  
And let the laboring bark climb hills of seas  
Olympus-high, and duck again as low  
As all hell's from heaven! If it were now to die,  
'Twere now to be most happy, for I fear  
My soul hath her content so absolute  
That not another comfort like to this  
Succeeds in unknown fate (*Othello* II.1.181-198).

The "it" that "were now to die" is in its original context not a person but a soul, Othello's soul, which he separates and distinguishes from his self in its passion for Desdemona (II.1.189).<sup>40</sup> Othello has merely "wonder great as my content" (II.1.181), but his *soul* has "joy" (II.1.182), and it is "too much of joy" (II.1.196) for the person Othello to bear or claim.

Then, Clarissa's feeling "Othello's feeling... as strongly as Shakespeare meant Othello to feel it" becomes edged with irony—Othello as a person has no feeling but rather dissociates from joy and love by dissociating from his soul (Woolf *Mrs. Dalloway* 35). There must then be something dissociative in Clarissa's love for, obsession with, Sally Seton: if Clarissa really feels Othello's feeling then it is her "soul" that loves Sally and not Clarissa herself. When Peter Walsh wakes from his dream saying "The death of the soul," he is waking up from not only his own but also Clarissa's memory, remembering the moment when Clarissa's love of Sally died—

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<sup>40</sup> Steven Monte in his article "Ancients and Moderns in Mrs. Dalloway" (2000) notes the distinction, but without pushing it any further than that—he writes, "Shakespeare's phrase takes on extra meaning here, because the "it" that refers to Othello's soul in the original context now seems like a replacement for "I," as if losing the fear of death and losing self-consciousness were equivalent" (613).

when the soul's love came in conflict with the woman's pride and the society's expectations (58). The Sally-Clarissa-Peter love triangle is then made even more complicated: yes, Clarissa loves Sally and yes, Peter loves Clarissa, but Peter and Clarissa, beyond simply remembering each other and harboring nostalgia, actually think the same thoughts, understand one another so perfectly that Peter can pinpoint the moment when Clarissa's "love" ended, when her "soul" died. Clarissa's love of Sally is not displaced on or by Peter, nor the other way around. Rather, her love of Sally is somehow wrapped up in Peter, such that Sally's slight is part of the courtship between Peter and Clarissa, the moment she chooses society over herself. The triangulation we get in Woolf's prose is heightened even further in the triangulation and dissociation introduced in and through *Othello's* words.

That same choice between the individual and the personal is written as well in terms of *Hamlet*. Though much less overt than the references to *Cymbeline* and *Othello*, there is yet embedded in the description of Lady Bradshaw the ghost of Ophelia, and more particularly of her drowning. Woolf writes,

For example, Lady Bradshaw. Fifteen years ago she had gone under. It was nothing you could put your finger on; there had been no scene, no snap; only the slow sinking, water-logged, of her will into his. Sweet was her smile, swift her submission; dinner in Harley Street, numbering eight or nine courses, feeding ten or fifteen guests of the professional classes, was smooth and urbane (100).

Lady Bradshaw "sinks" into the same weeping brook in which Ophelia drowns. Though the circumstances by which she arrives are different—"there had been no scene, no snap" (100), no "envious sliver" (*Hamlet* IV.7.171) breaking off and sending her (witting or not) to her death—, she yet sinks "water-logged" (*Mrs. Dalloway* 100) into the world of "feeding ten or fifteen guests

of the professional classes” (100), “smooth and urbane” (100), presumably “incapable of her own distress” (*Hamlet* IV.7.176).<sup>41</sup> The role of the society wife is written as a surrender of self, a “sinking... of her will into his”—a suicide, actively intended or not (*Mrs. Dalloway* 100).

In the context of Woolf’s politics (her criticism of patriarchy as being responsible for the destructions of war and empire, to which we shall turn shortly), we see emerging from the trails left by these plays both a criticism of how society has developed, and a ray of hope for a way forward that might not repeat the same mistakes. Modeled in Clarissa’s trajectory from private girl to public hostess to private woman is a call for the same return to private focus by England itself, both in its internal political structure and in its external imperial reach. Clarissa, as archetypal English housewife, becomes a literary representation of England, who thinks in and through the English canon, speaking the Standard English Memory without question. If the same fundamental problem that represses women within the family is responsible for the global destruction of World War I (and the pending destruction of World War II, which we see anticipated in Peter’s observation of the young boys marching around the war memorial), and if World War is a product of the constant outward focus of power acquisition that produced Empire and the Commonwealth in the first place, then the same solution that saves the hostess applies to the state: go back.

Go back to personal focus and personal relationships, not political posturing; go back to a local, nationalist system rather than a far-reaching (but perhaps for that fragile and destructive) empire. Go back to the source of the Standard Memory, interrogate it, and build a new Dialectic

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<sup>41</sup> “There is a willow grows askant the brook,/ That shows his hoary leaves in the glassy stream./ Therewith fantastic garlands did shemake/ Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples,/ That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,/ But our cold maids do dead-men’s-fingers call them./ There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds/ clamb’ring to hang, an envious sliver broke./ When down her weedy trophies and herself/ Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,/ And mermaidlike awhile they bore her up,/ Which time she chanted snatches of old lauds,/ Or like a creature native and indued/ Unto that element. But long it could not be/ Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,/ Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay/ To muddy death” (Shakespeare *Hamlet* IV.7.164-181).

Memory in which each individual is engaged in the construction of personal identity and meaning, and in which the collective consciousness is truly a reflection of the collective experience rather than a script passed down by those in power. Do not merely check but ask society to earn the privilege of cultural inheritance. Just as with Imogen, the reclamation of private life for Clarissa and for England requires a rejection of political power, patriarchy, and empire—a rejection of the modes of thinking, modes of memory, employed as instruments of political power. Only by abandoning patriarchal values, rethinking cultural inheritance by going back to foundational narratives and finding new interpretations and lessons, can freedom—personal and national freedom from coercion and political violence—be achieved. Only by embracing dialectic and plurality can there be peace.

And yet. Woolf's Shakespeare references expose and condemn empire as needing to be revised out of English culture, calling us back to the plays to challenge our readings of the plays and what they might represent. At the same time, in levying her criticism through these specific plays, Woolf implicitly reproduces that which she condemns, recreating an empire of coopted literary representation that participates in the colonial project by rooting English cultural traditions in the aesthetic colonization of the Other. In addition to their shared interest in public/private duties, the four plays invoked in the novel have another commonality: all are canonical English texts that tell the stories of distinctly non-English peoples. *Antony and Cleopatra* is set in Egypt and focuses on a struggle within the Roman Empire. *Othello* is set in Cyprus and deals with the Venetian army defending its territory. *Hamlet* is set in Denmark, and set against an imperial threat by Young Fortinbras of Norway. Even *Cymbeline*, ostensibly the story of an early British monarchy, deals with a Britain under Roman obligation and before the Anglo-Saxon invasion, making the Britain Cymbeline leads an ethnically and politically separate



state from the England of Shakespeare's time or Woolf's.<sup>42</sup> While the plays compellingly set up the public/private conflict and allow Woolf a fertile ground for unpacking her social and political criticism, they also undermine that criticism by suggesting just how deeply her England is indebted to Empire for its wealth and status—literally and metaphorically, in its monetary and cultural inheritance.

On the one hand, we might fault Woolf for this as inconsistent. To criticize empire while at the same time making use of it smacks of the same kind of hypocrisy we might accuse her of in *A Room of One's Own*, in calling for equality for women but at the same time highlighting the figure of the “very fine negress” with whom she is seemingly unwilling to share the spoils of her struggle. On the other hand, we might also see the critique of Empire made with Empire as intentional, a recognition by the author (as Christine Froula reads the “very fine negress passage” in *Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury Avant Garde*) of a moment when Woolf's own social, political and historical context limits her, and in which she wants readers to recognize that limitation and push the reader forward in a way Woolf herself cannot go.<sup>43</sup> Woolf can recognize the limitations and the baggage of the cultural memory-language she speaks, but she must still use language to speak, and she cannot build a new language all on her own. If Clarissa Dalloway's path in the novel models for us the example Woolf wants to see Britain follow, then we must recognize it to be a model in which “past” is, in Shakespearean terms, not only “merely” but also necessarily “prologue”: it must always be a part of the story being told. Clarissa cannot re-write the past, nor does she; she returns older and changed to a Peter and Sally

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Willy Maley's postcolonial reading of *Cymbeline* in *Nation, State and Empire in English Renaissance Literature*.

<sup>43</sup> Froula engages with Marcus' critique, but calls our attention back to the interactive nature of the text, beginning with “But” as a possible way of getting out of the trap. Froula argues that Woolf is falling into the trap Marcus identifies—but self-consciously and productively, as another invitation to discourse.

who are older and changed themselves. Likewise, England cannot escape its own history of imperialism—the foundations of culture, in capital and in the canon, depend upon it—but that does not preclude England and the British Empire from changing course moving forward. A Commonwealth has been created, and the question and challenge is not to destroy it, but to (perhaps) rethink the terms through which it operates and is managed, so that it might become truly “common wealth” (in Woolf’s own socialist terms) in the future.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

In his article “The Place of World Englishes in Composition: Pluralization Continued” (2006), Suresh Canagarajah writes,

Having criticized the field of composition and other progressive scholars for their limitations in accepting WE in academic writing, I must confess that I have myself held such positions in the past. The extent to which my radicalism extended previously was to argue for alternative tone, styles, organization, and genre conventions in formal academic writing. I have steered clear of validating nativized varieties at the intrasentential level. In retrospect, it occurs to me that I was playing it safe in my argument. I didn’t want to jeopardize my case for pluralizing academic writing by extending it to the controversial terrain of grammar. But a combination of development in theoretical discourses, social changes, communication advances, and pedagogical rethinking... tell me that now is the time to take my position to its logical conclusion. The moment is ripe to extend my argument of pluralizing English and academic writing into the ‘deep structure’ of grammar. (613)

Recognizing the plurality of Englishes spoken around the world, and faced with the social and global justice question of whether and how to set one above the others, Canagarajah calls on his peers to break down the Standard in the academy and to allow all students to speak in the languages that are natural to them. He concedes that he is “unsure how to practice what I preach,” but offers in his article “a statement of intent” that “aims to make some space for pedagogical rethinking and textual experimentation” (613). He seeks to make his classroom an inclusive space for all students, from all language backgrounds, and asks his audience to work with him to rethink the boundaries of their discipline.

In her own way, Woolf’s invitation in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the same. Over her first three novels, Woolf’s use of Shakespeare calls reader attention to the presence, constraints, and deep flaws inherent in the Standard Memory of her time—in the way Shakespeare was made into political instrument through memorial practice, and in the way even English intellectuals accepted the Standard Memory they were handed as opiate. Shakespeare in *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *Jacob’s Room* functions as a safe shorthand used by the upper class to identify one another and perpetuate their own comfortable privilege, in the same way Standard English often functions to mark and perpetuate class and educational privilege in the modern world.

Just as Canagarajah comes to recognize the linguistic harm he has inflicted on himself by seeking to “eradicate all traces of Sri Lankan English” from his own writing, Woolf helps her readers to recognize the damage done to society by accepting that Standard Memory without question, effectively eradicating from full cultural participation the experiences of anyone whose readings do not fit the Standard mold (613). What Woolf seems to ask for implicitly in *Mrs. Dalloway* is the same thing Canagarajah asks for explicitly in his essay: a collective return to

critical thinking in the face of changing world conditions, revisiting old assumptions and seeking to find an at once plural and common language—plural and common thinking, plural and common memory, plural and common cultural identity—that can be fully and justly shared by all. Woolf’s “all” may be smaller than Canagarajah’s, including only white men and women in England, but in cutting across class and gender it is at the same time radically different from the “all” that came before her, from which she was excluded. Woolf calls out her characters, and by extension her society, by showing the many ways they do not truly understand the metaphorical grammar of the cultural language they speak. She then proves herself deeply and powerfully well versed, making “some space for pedagogical rethinking and textual experimentation” (613). In so doing, she puts herself forward as the rightful inheritor and steward of the language—a mantle we will see her seeking to fill in the chapters that follow.

## CHAPTER 3

### Writing the Nation as It Is and Should Be: *The Years* as History Play

“Our country,” she will say “throughout the greater part of its history has treated me as a slave; it has denied me education or any share in its possessions. ‘Our’ country still ceases to be mine if I marry a foreigner. ‘Our’ country denies me the means of protecting myself, forces me to pay others a very large sum annually to protect me, and is so little able, even so, to protect me that Air Raid precautions are written on the wall. Therefore if you insist upon fighting to protect me, or “our” country, let it be understood, soberly and rationally between us, that you are fighting to gratify a sex instinct which I cannot share; to procure benefits which I have not shared and probably will not share; but not to gratify my instincts or to protect either myself or my country. For,” the outsider will say, “in fact, as a woman, I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.” And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child’s ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England what first she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world.”

*Three Guineas* 128-129

*The Years* has long troubled critics as a problematic departure in the otherwise increasingly sophisticated and experimental trajectory of Woolf’s writing. Indeed, the novel troubled even Woolf herself: she declared it a deliberate failure in her diary, and as Thomas S. Davis writes in “The Historical Novel at History’s End: Virginia Woolf’s *The Years*” (2014), “*The Years* remained a stray, ugly duckling, an unfortunate blemish upon an otherwise handsome career” (Davis 2). Originally conceived as a hybrid novel-essay with passages of what would become *The Years* interleaved with the essays that would become *Three Guineas*, Woolf ultimately gave up on the experiment and separated the two texts into two separate publications. She deliberately failed, then, in her effort to create a hybrid form, and in the theoretical and critical experiment that new form would have represented.

But did the novel itself really fail? In recent years, critics including Thomas S. Davis, Karen Levenback, Maren Linett, Anna Snaith, and Judy Suh have attempted to reconceive of *The*

*Years* within the context of Woolf's radical politics, looking at the ways in which the novel dramatizes many of the social and political problems against which Woolf takes arms (or, rather, pen) in her essays. Davis argues that *The Years* is best understood "as a late modernist version of the historical novel, one that seems primarily concerned with establishing a correspondence between the minutiae of the everyday lives of the Pargiter family and the world-historical processes that underwrite the novel's near fifty-year timespan" (Davis 2). In this sense, *The Years* is another attempt to capture in writing the "cotton wool" of everyday life, and to show through her rendering all the problems and dangers found therein. Davis writes,

By attending to Woolf's reworking of the formal features of the historical novel—plot, event, characterization—we can see *The Years* registering the protracted decline of a British centered world-system as a crisis of historical consciousness. In this late novel, Woolf figures the everyday as the scene where the historical crises of the 1930s attain legibility. (Davis 2).

As with all of Woolf's writing, when the political focus is restored, and when interactively seeking the political argument of the text is made the central focus of criticism, what might otherwise be seen as a "stray, ugly duckling" suddenly fits.

Davis' argument is smart and well crafted, and offers a compelling framework for reinterpreting the novel as a "portrayal of history as a destructively recursive process" (Davis 2). In this chapter, without disagreeing with his claims or conclusion, I would like to build on Davis' work to offer an argument just slightly to the side of where he ends up. That is, I will propose a different genre as keystone for Woolf's project in *The Years*, not the historical novel, but the historical play. This chapter will explore the place of the Shakespearean history play in the development of British nationalism, drawing from Early Modern scholarship tracing the roots of

the nation in Shakespeare's time—and plays. I will then use that foundation as a lens for revisiting Davis' argument, using his article as a foundation for scaffolding my own reading of the novel and its sister text, *Three Guineas*, as Woolf's attempt to create a new dialectic memory by writing a Shakespearean history play for her time.

### *Shakespearean History: Nationhood and Nation Building*

To understand *The Years* as Woolf's version of a history play, we must first understand the history plays themselves, and their distinct relationship to the impossible fiction that is the British nation. Shakespeare's history plays can be understood as intentionally crafted political commentary. As Charles Moseley writes in *Shakespeare's History Plays* (2009), the history plays "examine the way people behave politically, the way they are motivated, the way they justify their actions to themselves" (95). He continues, "No one in Shakespeare's audience would have mistaken what he saw on stage for real history; he knew that those actors at the end of the performance would cast off their robes and return from the illusion of the play. He knew he was watching not the past described, but the act of describing and interpreting it, and his own expectations and knowledge would necessarily be called into play" (97). In this sense, the form of the history plays is a discursive one, in which writer, actors, and audience all participate in an act of description and interpretation, in which the audience comes to witness an interpretation of what they already know, with which they can identify and which they can internalize—or reject—as their own. They come, in other words, to participate in the building of a common interpretation of history that will be shared by a community—to participate in the building of a nation. In the theoretical terms of this project, playwright, actors, and audience work together to build a new dialectic memory.

Richard Helgerson's *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (1992) argues that the generation of English writers born in the 1550s and 1560s were particularly historically and socially situated to take on the project of nation-building for England, and that their collective writings invent and shape many different forms of nationhood that underlie our understanding of nationalism today. He argues that writers of Shakespeare's moment sought to write England "in large, comprehensive, and foundational works" (Helgerson 4) centered around two central issues: first, the role of the monarch and monarchic power; and second, class, namely in inclusion and/or exclusion "of various social groups from privileged participation in the national community and its representation" (9). Helgerson believes this project was brought about by the unique social position of those writing—seeking to solidify their own roles in history, and to create new identities—and by the extent to which, because of the historical moment, "England itself mattered more than it had [previously] because other sources of identity and cultural authority mattered less" (3). Put another way, the dramatic social and political changes in the early modern period created an opportunity for writers to step in and give voice to the common experience, and by so doing to create a sense of national identity that could fill the vacuum left as identities based on family and local community began to shift. The disruption of the older iteration of cultural memory, of the traditional ways in which individuals in society defined themselves and their roles in the world, made it possible for Shakespeare and his contemporaries to step in and provide a new cultural memory. Not only that—but it made it almost requisite. English society (without yet being defined as "English society") was wanting identity, and the nation-building literary works that emerged sought to fill that want.

Though all Shakespeare's works can be understood to greater and lesser extents as being involved in this project, it is in the history plays that we see the most work being done to



construct the nation. Shakespeare's history plays are his most explicitly nationalist; they deal directly with structures of political power, and incorporate a double-perspective that speaks through the characters and local plots, to struggles for power and self-definition that were contemporary to Shakespeare's original audience. They are also the plays that have continued to be referenced and invoked as part of the nationalist discourse of the eighteenth, nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

The production of the plays as a coherent series is itself a strong nationalist gesture—writing a unified English history that memorializes its great kings and battle martyrs, that not only gives access to the historical facts but also creates an emotional connection to those who have come before, by giving them personality, feeling, depth. If the nation is an imagined community that exists across time, bounded (at least initially) by space, then it is the emotional connection that is most at stake in its construction, and that connection is created and sustained through memorial practice. The nation is preceded by—or rather, invented by—the nationalist feeling, the want for emotional connection and solidarity that Helgerson says had gone missing in Shakespeare's time (and, we might argue, in Woolf's—a point to which we will return shortly). As Philip Schwyzer argues in *Literature, Nationalism and Memory in Early Modern England and Wales* (2004), one of the most “distinctive features of national communities, even the most apparently exclusive or xenophobic, is their boundless inclusiveness when it comes to two sorts of ‘strangers’: the dead, and the unborn” (Schwyzer 2). Strangers are, in being imagined, readily and almost necessarily memorialized. As Alina Popa writes in her article “Discovering the Englishness in Shakespeare's Histories” (2013),

the vogue for national history and the national history play in the late sixteenth-century England appears as an important component of the new image of an

English nation. Like their historiographic sources, the plays performed the necessary function of creating and disseminating myths of origin to authorize a new national entity and to deal with the anxieties and contradictions that threatened to undermine the nation-building project. (Popa 94)

Shakespeare's history plays draw from the past memorial figures around whom the emerging British nation could rally, in whom they could vest their nationalist feelings, through whom they could connect with one another in their shared reverence. Put another way, the history plays used dramatic form to engage emotional attachments and feelings of patriotism and loyalty to fill the void left in the absence of immediate feudal obligations.<sup>44</sup>

And yet, the nation posited, and the relationship between national history and national identity effected by the plays, is not (only) simplistic, self-congratulatory propaganda; the plays self-consciously complicate and deconstruct the national myth even as they build it. As Derek Cohen writes in "History and the Nation in 'Richard II' and 'Henry IV'" (2002),

On the one hand, Shakespeare and his characters seem to be seduced by the clarity and authority of the grand narrative of history and are prone to sweeping generalizations and magisterial pronouncements about history's so-called laws. On the other, there is a deep uncertainty, evident throughout the sequence, about the undeniably attractive simplicity and lucidity that such "laws" seem to proffer. The conflicting and contending historiographies voiced with such conviction in the plays throw the whole project of historical writing and historical narration into question. (Cohen 295)

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<sup>44</sup> As Claire McEachern puts it, "Literary identifications evoke corporate intimacy. This intimacy imagines community within a group, and between that group and its political institution. In reciprocal turn, the state aptly, reflexively expresses the character of a people" (83).

The nation is built, and at the same time called into question; the need for a sense of attachment, loyalty, history is understood as human, while at the same time resisted. I propose that it is precisely this duplicity that allows the nation to exist and persist: by building in skepticism, skeptics are appropriated into the nation; the texts' resistance to simple memorialization allow them to be continually memorialized, understood and re-understood by generations as times and vantage points shift. As Claire McEachern argues in *The Poetics of English Nationhood, 1590-1612* (1996), the nation (in Shakespeare's plays and beyond them) is always a utopian ideal out of reach, which exists only in its narrative accounting of itself. Shakespeare's history plays do the work of accounting even while they resist being read as simple accounts; in so doing, they build into their own narrative accounting the impossibility of the account itself, and free themselves from failure by that metric.<sup>45</sup> They write the nation as a dialectic memory, capable of evolving and changing as needs, values, and structures of authority change over time.

### *Writing Woolf's Nation*

The search for sweeping generalizations and magisterial pronouncements, and the concomitant resistance to any such things, is the same project I wish to explore in *The Years*. If we understand the nation-building project of Shakespeare's history plays to have emerged, as Helgerson suggests, out of the social and political instability of the Early Modern period, then we must acknowledge that Woolf's own moment was one of similar instability, in which prior forms of meaning and identity had been supplanted and disrupted by changing social, political, and economic conditions. The First World War collapsed the myth of British exceptionalism, with

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<sup>45</sup> "Before Shakespeare's time there were a good number of plays dealing with the events of English history. Where Shakespeare is remarkable is not only in the quality of his writing—and some others are pretty good—but I the way in which he avoids a saloon-bar, unthinkingly patriotic approach to, for example, the victories of Henry V; *The Famous Victories of Henry V*, which he certainly knew and competed with, is about as subtle as a meat cleaver and is jingoistic centuries before the idea was invented" (Moseley 94).

the waning of the British Empire calling identity into question just as much as had the birth of empire three centuries prior. The cultural memory was once again disrupted and in need of repair.

Jed Esty's *Shrinking Island: Modernism and National Culture in England* (2004) makes an argument that, while very different from Helgerson's in its specifics, touches on almost exactly the same themes. Esty argues that "imperial contraction changed English writing through a series of symbolic mediations between social conditions and artistic production" and that "certain English intellectuals interpreted contraction as an opportunity for cultural repair" (Esty 7). Although Esty does not turn back to Helgerson in his writing, nor to the early modern moment as a model for the modern moment, in both instances, a rupture in the cultural memory took place, and literature emerged that was both implicitly and self-consciously interested in repairing the tear, and in creating a positive model of identity and community as a corrective measure. As Esty writes, "Eliot and Woolf saw the end of British imperialism as an opportunity to forestall the depredations of modernity" (9). He continues,

If the familiar crises of the thirties and the coming war made national self-representation seem politically urgent, then it was in some sense the anthropological turn that made national self-representation seem conceptually *possible*. This was especially true for English intellectuals who were inclined to believe that an insular culture, but not a baggy multinational civilization, could unify its fragments. Imperial retrenchment thus yielded aesthetic solutions to the problem of England's social unknowability and its high/low cultural schism. The crisis of European cosmopolitanism did not simply force a retreat to insular

culture; it also established the conditions for a potential transformation of that culture. (10)

In Woolf's own Marxist framework, the historical moment was one in which the base conditions had changed, creating an opportunity for a talented writer to intervene in the reformation of the superstructure. Woolf saw herself, like Shakespeare, as being up to the task, and in the relationship between *The Years* and *Three Guineas* we can locate another form of intervention.

This ground has been traveled before, albeit less directly than I will seek to do here. Sally Greene's edited collection *Virginia Woolf: Reading the Renaissance* (1999) describes itself as "primarily interested in tracing Woolf's footsteps as a reader and reinterpreter of the canon of Renaissance literature as it was conceived in her time," considering ways in which for "Woolf the creative writer... the Renaissance offered a living fund of working materials" from which to draw (Greene 2). Anne E. Fernald's chapter "The Memory Palace of Virginia Woolf," to which I am particularly indebted, considers the Reading Room of the British Library as a place that "reifies one version of literary history," modeling the way cultural memory works and creating something to work against, helping Woolf develop her own theoretical stance of leaving "a story sufficiently untold that it becomes a new creation in the listener's memory and experience" (ed. Greene 5). Fernald argues that in her visit to the Reading Room in *A Room of One's Own*, "without changing London, Virginia Woolf has succeeded in changing our memory of it. If in doing so she has replaced Milton's bogey with her own, she has also taught us how to destroy it" (110). Although neither Greene nor Fernald, nor any writer in the collection, looks at Woolf as writing from an explicitly nationalist perspective, the critical stance taken is parallel.

Juliet Dusinberre's *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance* (1997) also explores the relationship between Woolf, early modern writing, literary inheritance, and community. Dusinberre argues

that “Virginia Woolf’s Renaissance encompasses two different phenomena: her affinity on many levels with the early modern period, and her own sense of being reborn through the creation of an alternative tradition of reading and writing whose roots go back to the Elizabethans and beyond” (5). Dusinberre focuses on writers other than Shakespeare, looking at Woolf’s relationships to Pepys, Donne, Montaigne, and others. Yet, her primary insights—that Woolf sought to imagine for herself a community of writers; that her writing was discursive and interactive, using Renaissance writing as fabric to embroider with her own thread; and that Woolf understood herself as both inheritor and outsider in approaching the male-authored English canon—are the same as I wish to make in looking at Woolf, Shakespeare, and the history play. In arguing that *The Years* is Woolf’s version of a history play, what I mean to argue is that it is one way in which Woolf seeks to reconceive of the nation, and to “repair” (in Esty’s words) the fractured narrative of British identity that existed in her time. The fracture came in two forms: in the immediate and visible effects of war and empire; and in the invisible fractures and everyday exclusions created by the patriarchal structures that, in Woolf’s view, gave birth to empire and, through empire, to war. Repairing the nationalist narrative would require writing a new nation, with new, previously excluded voices recaptured. That is, it would require revisiting the Reading Room (as does Fernald), and deep diving into the alternative tradition Woolf scaffolds in the voids left in and around the canon (as does Dusinberre).

To be clear, neither *Virginia Woolf: Reading the Renaissance* nor *Virginia Woolf’s Renaissance* are particularly or explicitly interested in the nation, which will be my primary focus in this chapter. Yet, though the language of nationalism is missing, the nation is a central (if invisible) focus. Examining nationalism in Woolf’s writing has been critically taboo, which likely stems from Woolf’s own stance in *Three Guineas* that she is a woman without a country.

And yet, in the context of early modern criticism on what constitutes a nation, and how its imagined community forms, Woolf's assertion that she has no country is an inherently nationalist argument. For Woolf to have no country, she must first recognize what it is to have a country—to be part of a nation, of an imagined national community with shared identity and values. Her separation creates the opportunity to join with others without country, who are equally excluded from the definition of what it means to be English or British, who stand equally outside of and apart from what it means to be a part of the nation of her time. She writes that she “wants no country,” and then immediately emphasizes the emotional connections to the nation she was raised with, the natural human desire to belong (*Three Guineas* 129). In declaring that she is without country but instead part of the Outsiders Society, and by framing that society as defined by common experience, “educated men's daughters working in their own class—how indeed can they work in any other?—and by their own methods for liberty, equality, and peace,” Woolf implicitly and explicitly creates her own nation. The Outsiders Society meets our definition of nation: it is an imagined community, geographically bounded and defined by shared experience, to which Woolf invites her readers to connect and in which she invites them to emotionally invest (126).

If my critical scaffolding heretofore has been denser than in other chapters, it is because the argument I will seek to make here depends less on close reading of the text itself and more on reading the text in context. Looking at the critical traditions surrounding nationalism, the ways in which nation is created and expressed through literature, and (particularly) the ways in which the nation and national culture were understood by Woolf, in Woolf's time, as being part of the nationalist project, I will argue here that, when we read *The Years*, we should read it for the nation it engenders. I assert that *Three Guineas* writes into existence in explicit terms the nation

we should seek to locate as implicitly illustrated by/in *The Years*. Although the texts were ultimately separated, *Three Guineas* remains the lens through which to approach the story of the Pargiter family—it helps us understand the governing values of the nation whose history Woolf writes, and which she invites us to join.

### *Recovering the Nation: Historical Novel as History Play*

To say that Woolf writes in her novel *The Years* something more akin to history play than historical novel is, on one level, an absurd failure of generic classification. *The Years* is without question a novel: unlike some of Woolf's other texts (such as *The Waves*, to which we will turn shortly), *The Years* does not resist classification at the formal level. That said, as has been my project throughout this dissertation, my interest in considering the connection between *The Years* and Shakespeare's history plays is less a direct formal influence, and more the relationship between the work being done by each. *The Years*, like the history plays, give voice to a nation.

In classifying *The Years* as a historical novel, Davis begins by looking at the ways in which *The Years* disrupts that classification. Lukács defines the historical novel as “primarily a realist genre” which seeks to “disclose the migration of historical antagonisms into the most oblique regions of everyday life,” first by mediating “historical events through the everyday lives of its characters” and second by creating characters that are “typical in the sense that their narrative arcs parallel those of the general population” (Davis 3). Historical novels are written from within the history-as-progress philosophical view of history, in which history is shown to be “a rational process, one that proceeds dialectically through conflict, sublation, and resolution” (4). For Lukács, the interior focus of modernist writing “fetishizes alienation and social detachment” in a way that resist sympathy with the popular character, making modernism



antithetical to the historical novel. Davis implies that Lukács accepts too readily an easy dichotomy between modernist and realist writing, and, without subverting Lukács outright, argues that *The Years* in particular “participates in the genre of the historical novel without properly belonging to it,” borrowing from Christine Froula and Liesel Olson in viewing “Woolf’s fiction as a contestation between modernism and realism, rather than an emblem of the supposed stylistic and periodizing rupture between them” (4). (Though Davis does not, we might include Michael Tratner here as well, whose view of the relationship between modernism and mass politics we considered in the previous chapter.) For Davis, Woolf’s use of the historical novel genre is a Derridean contamination, intentionally calling our critical attention to the boundaries between genres and doing its work in the resultant deconstruction of each.

Methodologically, Davis argues that considering *The Years* as

a late modernist historical novel affords us two things: we can isolate the distinctive form of attention Woolf devotes to everyday life, one that is at a significant remove from her earlier work; and we can see Woolf’s contamination of the historical novel as a conceptual act, one that inverts the liberal progressivist philosophy of history into a philosophy of history that is recursive and destructive. (5)

That is, by considering *The Years* as an intentional engagement with the particular generic form of historical novel, and with the philosophic perspective captured therein, Davis asks us to see the ways in which Woolf intentionally disrupts our expectations. The generic markers—and corruptions—of the historical novel are its most powerful critical elements, through which “Woolf seeks a way to register the long afterlives of historical violence by attending to the seemingly unremarkable occurrences of everyday life” (6). Ultimately, Davis concludes that

“*The Years* establishes these relationships between historical events and everyday life to help attune readers to the long historical processes that move ahead with or without the knowledge of those who live through them,” so as “to train its contemporary readers to look, observe, and read everything with the same intensity before the catastrophe of an historical event, be it the march of fascism or total war, as one would do in retrospect” (19). *The Years* invites readers to be self-conscious actors in the historical narrative, to be part of an interpretive act.

In this invitation to discourse, in this act of Derridean contamination, Woolf moves herself squarely into the space occupied by the history play. To return to Moseley, history plays are not defined by their formal elements but by their underlying project. The plays are variously tragedy, comedy, and epic; what they have in common is that they tell the story of the English monarchy chronologically as a set of related sequels, and that they are meant to be discursive acts in which the audience perceives themselves to be watching “not the past described, but the act of describing it and interpreting it”—and in which the audience participates in the interpretation by either accepting or rejecting the narrative and characterizations presented, and in so accepting or rejecting, fosters an imagined community sharing the same narrative interpretations (Moseley 97). That imagined community is the nation.

From its initial conception to its final form, *The Years* invites readers into that same project. The originally envisioned hybrid novel-essay form is the clearest marker of this: Woolf conceived of the project as history presented through novelistic interludes, and then interpreted through essay. The final form of the novel, though not as immediately obvious, can be productively read as a more sophisticated version of the same. As Davis shows, the novel in many ways interprets itself—or rather, with Woolf’s typical resistance to didacticism (a resistance that we might well credit as the motivation for giving up the hybrid novel-essay form),

the novel asks readers to do their own interpretive work down a clearly signaled path. That path leads to the same conclusion made explicit in *Three Guineas*, namely to the reader understanding the many destructive and alienating forces of capitalist English patriarchy, and to identification of all the ways in which English society was marked by insiders and outsiders—and to fraternity amongst the outsiders. Everything Davis seeks to recover from *The Years* in his reading as historical novel remains accessible reading *The Years* as history play, with just another layer added on: that of the nation being described and interpreted—and therein, invented—by the text, a nation named in the companion *Three Guineas* as the Outsiders Society.

So we turn, then, to Davis' reading. He writes, "In *The Years*, Woolf freights everyday objects, and the attachments people have to them, with historical meaning" (7). Focusing on the Pargiter's decision to sell Abercorn Terrace, the family home, he calls our attention to the following passage:

Crosby was crying. The mixture of emotion was positively painful; she [Eleanor] was so glad to be quit of it all, but for Crosby it was the end of everything. She had known every cupboard, flagstone, chair and table in that large rambling house, not from five or six feet of distance as they had known it; but from her knees, as she scrubbed and polished; she had known every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin and cupboard. They and their doings had made her entire world. And now she was going off, alone, to a single room at Richmond. (qtd. Davis 216)

Of the passage, Davis writes,

Eleanor and Crosby's contrasting reactions to the sale of Abercorn Terrace multiply the perspectives on this slice of daily life, but they do so in order to draw

attention to the accumulated and continuing privilege of class that stretches from the nineteenth century into the early years of the twentieth. Although Crosby's labor keeps the house together, the Pargiters 'and their doings had made her entire world.' In other words, Crosby's labor creates nothing of her own world; it is shaped and determined entirely by the lives and whims of the Pargiter family. For Eleanor, being rid of Abercorn Terrace unburdens her from obligations of the past; her inheritance affords a future of world travel and the sort of autonomy she never enjoyed at Abercorn Terrace. Expelled from the world the Pargiters created for her, with little economic power and even less choice, Crosby recedes into further entrapment and graver limitations. Through their attachment to things and their juxtaposed perceptions of the meaning of Abercorn Terrace, Woolf represents the contrasting fates of two women as largely dependent on class. (8)

Without disagreeing, I would push Davis' analysis a step further. Not only does Woolf represent the contrasting fates, but she asks us to consider agency and responsibility, dramatizing through her characters a political point she makes in *Three Guineas*. As Davis notes, Woolf creates a typical narrative arc that draws from and mediates historical change through individual characters, with the changing economic and social priorities of the time represented in Crosby, the woman who has lived a life not her own, who has been deprived of an independent existence by the economic conditions of the time. What Davis does not note is the interactivity, and the perspective.

I'll start with the latter by way of illuminating the former. Although Crosby is the focus of the passage, it is Eleanor's voice we hear, and the emotion evoked is not pity but guilt. We follow Eleanor through her realization that she had known her home only "from five or six feet

of distance” and had allowed another to labor over “every groove, stain, fork, knife, napkin, and cupboard” (*The Years* 216). We realize with her that her family “and their doings had made [Crosby’s] entire world. And now she was going off, alone, to a single room at Richmond” (216). Woolf’s Marxism is writ large in the scene, with Eleanor coming to recognize herself as belonging to the bourgeois; and coming to understand on an immediate, personal level the impact her complicity has had on the lives of those around her. Eleanor learns to feel “ashamed,” and quickly “her own tears formed and fell” as she watches Crosby depart—despite being “so glad” herself for the sale (217). What Woolf models in the scene is not only the impact of class on the lives of the women, but, far more importantly, the opportunity for class consciousness proffered to Eleanor, by engaging with Crosby at the level of human emotion.

Set this against the call for class-consciousness among women in *Three Guineas* and we see all the more clearly what is being modeled in the interaction between the women. In *Three Guineas*, the second guinea is offered in exchange for a commitment to dismantle patriarchy.

Woolf writes:

For if you agree to these terms then you can join the professions and yet remain uncontaminated by them; you can rid them of their possessiveness, their jealousy, their pugnacity, their greed. You can use them to have a mind of your own and a will of your own. And you can use that mind of your own to abolish the inhumanity, the beastliness, the horror, the folly of war. Take this guinea then and use it, not to burn the house down, but to make its windows blaze. And let the daughters of uneducated women dance round the new house, the poor house, the house that stands in a narrow street where omnibuses pass and the street hawkers cry their wares, and let them sing, ‘We have done with war! We have

done with tyranny!’ And their mothers will laugh from their graves, ‘It was for this that we suffered obloquy and contempt! Light up the windows of the new house, daughters! Let them blaze!’ (*Three Guineas* 36).

The “daughters of uneducated women” are the same “daughters of educated men” who Woolf earlier describes as “between the devil and the deep sea,” continuing, “Behind us lies the patriarchal system; the private house, with its nullity, its immorality, its hypocrisy, its servility. Before us lies the public world, the professional system, with its possessiveness, its jealousy, its pugnacity, its greed” (74). The “nullity... immorality... hypocrisy... servility” that leads Eleanor—and with her, the reader—to feel so powerfully discomfited by Crosby’s tears and departure, are given voice and solution in *Three Guineas* (74). *The Years* allows us to experience, through the perspective of the daughter of an educated man to which Woolf has closest access, that for which *Three Guineas* pens the solution. Between the two, we find the discursive act in which the world is presented and interpreted, and in which we are invited, through shared interpretation, to join together and act.

Let’s turn to another example. Davis describes the “1917” chapter and the air raid sequence as “one of the strangest war scenes in literary modernism” (Davis 9), and an example of the way in which *The Years* functions to “encode[] the blurring” of the boundary between combat and civilian life (10). Describing the air raid, he catalogues the ways in which the characters register the events, from moving to the cellar, to charting gunfire with a pocket watch, to staring at the ceiling and monitoring “the rhythms of the air raid” through the movement of a spider-web (9). Davis observes that “The event only becomes legible through these faint impressions. *The Years* holds the direct, immediate presentation of events to the side, opting to show how they press upon daily life” (9). He concludes,

Viewed from the vantage point of the “present day” of the 1930s, in *The Years* the First World War does not appear as an aberration in the movement of history... Woolf’s retrospective view of the First World War figures it as exemplary, not interruptive, of the historical process as such. The philosophy of history that unfolds over the course of Woolf’s narrative treats conflicts and antagonisms in a notably non-dialectical manner. On the one hand, they are the generative, mobilizing force of history; on the other, such destruction and violence forecloses any possibility of historical progress.... The extensive catalogue of historical conflicts in *The Years*—imperial, national, economics, sexual—showcases the formative and ultimately deleterious effects they have on those who live through them and, often, those who live after them. (11)

Unlike, say, *To the Lighthouse*, where war figures as a literal break in the narrative, in *The Years* it is almost a foregone conclusion, naturalized into the everyday experiences of the characters, emphasizing the ways in which the war naturally emerges out of the corrupted and corrupting systems of patriarchy. After the sirens end, the distant sounds of gunfire Renny describes as “only killing other people” Nicholas is quick to pass off as “only children letting off fireworks in the back garden” (*The Years* 293). Only Eleanor’s perception changes after the raid, registering that she has been somehow “robbed by the presence of death of something personal” (*The Years* 294). That presence of death is understood, but never seen.

Davis’ reading is compelling, but not complete. Woolf, whose writing I and other critics have already shown to be interactive—particularly in *Three Guineas*, as Jane Marcus shows us in her introduction—in implying an image she does not show, calls our attention to another missing image. The picture she will not give us in *The Years*, of “guns... still firing, but far away in the

distance... only killing other people,” of the death and destruction caused by the air raids, can be productively understood as analogous to, if not the same as, the picture “of dead bodies and ruined houses” that is also withheld in *Three Guineas* (*The Years* 293).<sup>46</sup> There, in Woolf’s description, we find again a call to arms that gives voice to the discomfited feeling Eleanor experiences in the “Spacious and comfortable... warm... cheerful” drawing room to which she returns from the bomb shelter (293). Woolf writes:

Is it not possible that if we knew the truth about war, the glory of war would be scotched and crushed where it lies curled up in the rotten cabbage leaves of our prostituted fact-purveyors... In short, if newspapers were written by people whose sole object in writing was to tell the truth about politics and the truth about art we should not believe in war, and we should believe in art.

Hence there is a very clear connection between culture and intellectual liberty and those photographs of dead bodies and ruined houses. And to ask the daughters of educated men who have enough to live upon to commit adultery of the brain is to ask them to help in the most positive way now open to them—since the profession of literature is still that which stands widest open to them—to prevent war. (*Three Guineas* 115-116)

Woolf calls on her readers to look past the shock and awe of heart-wrenching photographs, photographs printed by newspapers wishing to sell copies and sent by mail in war fundraising efforts, and to focus instead on the means by which the photographs have appeared—both the financial motivations of the senders, and the broken patriarchal system on which Woolf blames

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<sup>46</sup> In the latter case, Woolf substitutes photographs of “A General,” “Heralds,” “A University Procession,” “A Judge,” and “An Archbishop” in her original printing in a self-conscious refusal that “gives words the edge over pictures in carrying the weight of shock and awe” (*Three Guineas* lxx).



war. She asks them to “commit adultery of the mind” by separating out their emotional reaction from their ability to think critically about what has happened, and why.

Returning to the drawing room after the air raid, Renny reads the paper while Eleanor and Nicholas wonder “how we can improve ourselves... live more... live more naturally... better” (*The Years* 316). That question is answered by *Three Guineas*: we can live better by joining with the Outsiders Society, by creating alliances, communities—nations—within the existing country, and by “working for our common ends—justice and equality and liberty for all men and women—outside your society, not within it” (*Three Guineas* 125). We experience through *The Years* the impact of war on the lives of characters, the desire to do better and change, and the deeply unsettling reality of wanting to change and not knowing how, being apart from and outside of the war even as it subsumes daily life and dinner parties. In *Three Guineas*, we are given the rallying cry to fill that need, once it is understood, and to move forward. We see the world described in recognizable terms, and through that are given a cause and a uniting interpretation. Through that, we are made a nation.

### *Cosmofeminism and the Nation of Women*

Matthew Beeber, in his short essay “Virginia Woolf, Victoria Ocampo, and the National/Transnational Dialectic in *Three Guineas*” (2015), argues that “*Three Guinea*’s cosmopolitanism is complicated by a tendency towards the very kind of national identification that the text warns against” (Beeber 21). Recognizing the way in which Woolf’s “critical refusal of the nation (along with other exclusionary groups), aligns roughly with the Kantian enlightenment project of cosmopolitanism,” and at the same time the much-debated “rhetorical turn” in which Woolf refuses to “attack Fascism in Spain directly, instead focusing on the

tyranny of the patriarchy in England,” Beeber, and the critical conversation in which he participates, concludes that *Three Guineas* can and should “be seen as ‘rooted’ in its Englishness and... this element of the text exists in dialectical tension with its cosmopolitanism” (21).

Without recapitulating the debate, I’d like to suggest that debating whether or not Woolf sees herself as English misunderstands the nationalist project in which she is involved. As Helgerson, McEachern, Schwyzer, and others posit, nationalist sentiment necessarily precedes the nation. Nationalism, allegiance, a sense of common cause and identity—these things are not the product of the formation of a nation-state, but the base conditions necessary for a functioning state to survive and thrive. Woolf’s Englishness, then, may be best understood as an understanding of the importance of local connectedness, of connecting through shared experience, and an invitation to a new England and Englishness for women, grounded in the shared lived experience of being a thinking, educated Outsider. The dialectical tension Beeber identifies is intentional, there not because Woolf is caught between nationalist loyalty and the desire to be outside, but because she is seeking in *Three Guineas* to rewrite the terms by which the nation will be defined going forward. What defines Woolf’s nation is anger—anger at exclusion, and anger at what has been allowed to develop in the absence of a voice for those made silent. She calls her fellow Outsiders to own their anger, to resist the opiate-memory of what it means to be English that requires sending boys to war, and to be part of an active new nation that unites around the desire to overcome and replace the catastrophes that have happened. To revisit the Standard English metaphor from the previous chapter, Woolf recognizes the importance of common language of experience, and invites her readers to join her in ushering in a new dialectic.

Woolf writes,

‘As a woman I have no country. As a woman I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world.’ And if, when reason has said its say, still some obstinate emotion remains, some love of England dropped into a child’s ears by the cawing of rooks in an elm tree, by the splash of waves on a beach, or by English voices murmuring nursery rhymes, this drop of pure, if irrational, emotion she will make serve her to give to England first what she desires of peace and freedom for the whole world (*Three Guineas* 129)

She casts aside nation, and then in the next sentence underscores the importance and effect of nationalism. Reason tells us what to work toward, and “obstinate emotion” guides us in why, and how.

What Woolf erects in *Three Guineas* through self-conscious and explicit theoretical and rhetorical posturing, she mirrors in *The Years* by allowing readers to connect with and experience the emotions leading to her rhetoric and theory. She dramatizes the “cotton wool” and lived experiences that ground her strong political stances in the common, shared, emotional lived experience of “daughters of educated men” and “uneducated women” in her time. By dismantling the fiction of a single unified England, Woolf creates the opportunity for alternate identifications and unifications. Resisting jingoistic nationalism moves Woolf into a territory where a plethora of nations work together for the same cause, in cooperation. Her own nation, the Outsiders Society, the Nation of Women, is born of the dialectic between *Three Guineas* and *The Years*.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

To say that Woolf writes in *Three Guineas* a nation, and in *The Years* a history play memorializing that nation, is to say that her fiction and essays are best understood as situated within a larger sociopolitical project, attentive to the relationship between literary memories/the canon and structures of political authority and identification. In a moment in which, as Helgerson puts it, “sources of identity and cultural authority mattered less” (Helgerson 3) in the face of failing of empire and the global upheaval of world war, Woolf understands herself to be a voice for the people—a conduit for “the experience of the mass” (*A Room* 65). It is certainly a departure from the critical consensus to say that *Three Guineas* is an explicitly nationalist text, and yet calling for a new nation is literally, explicitly what she does in calling for the formation of an English Outsider Society, a group bound by common experience and common values, working together to ensure social order and to promote peace; that she juxtaposes her new Society from the English nation she leaves only emphasizes the point, calling for a new organization and identification to replace that which has become broken. There is paradox, to be sure, and my intervention is meant to borrow theory and criticism from other literary-nationalist conversations to help frame what it means to be a nation so as to fully unpack the paradox, and to recuperate the fundamentally nationalist project in which Woolf engages.

If we understand that there is a way of seeing a nation as a byproduct of literary nationalism—as an imagined community evoked through shared identification, which requires urtexts with which adherents might identify—then it seems as well not too far a step to argue that *The Years*, with its sweeping historical vision, tracing the evolution of a family over generations, is offered by Woolf as precisely that urtext, as a dramatization of the experiences around which she asks us to connect. Where Shakespeare writes the story of the British monarchy, the Henrys

and Richards who led the nation so valiantly in war, Woolf writes the story of the Pargiter family, replacing patriarchy and political power with an inward turn towards the private family, asking her readers to find meaning, value, and solace in the everyday experiences of an everyday (if upper class) family. Jane Marcus writes in *Art and Anger: Reading Like a Woman* (1988) that “By quotations [Woolf] sought to rob history of its power over women,” using scholarly practice as “a form of possession of the truth and exorcism of evil” as “weapons” wielded by “outsider pacifists... against lies and injustice” (*Art* 75). In *Mrs. Dalloway*, Woolf uses Shakespeare to teach us her ways, working in the mode of memory as dialectic to model a form of memorial practice capable of exorcising the evils of patriarchal institutions, separating the true inheritance of the culture from the glut of inherited superstructure. In *The Years* and *Three Guineas*, she asks us to use what we have learned, extending the dialectic from past tradition into the present moment, applying the critical thinking lens not (just) to what was and has been, but to what is now and will be.

## CHAPTER 4

### An Elegy for Something Rotten: *The Waves* as *Hamlet*

Good now, sit down, and tell me, he that knows,  
Why this same strict and most observant watch  
So nightly toils the subject of the land,  
And why such daily cast of brazen cannon,  
And foreign mart for implements of war;  
Why such impress of shipwrights, whose sore task  
Does not divide the Sunday from the week;  
What might be toward that this sweaty haste  
Doth make the night joint-labourer with the day:  
Who is't that can inform me?

*Hamlet* I.i.81-90

In her seminal essay “Britannia Rules the Waves,” the late Jane Marcus wrote,

In offering a reading of a modernist classic, one is usually faced with a series of prior interpretations, a critical discourse into which one extends one’s own reading .... (*Hearts* 61).

In that essay, Marcus frees herself from the impositions of “prior interpretations” by pointing out, as only she can, that the critical discourse surrounding *The Waves* was at that moment deeply, deeply flawed, indebted to a “Leavisite legacy in which the mythical ‘Virginia Woolf’ was created to stand for an elite, effete English culture against which a democratic ‘Great Tradition’ strenuously struggled” (*Hearts* 61). She proceeds in the essay, as in her other scholarship, to deftly expose and topple that legacy and its many (many) misconceptions about Woolf’s politics and feminism, arguing for the deeply political nature of Woolf’s writing that she was among the first to espouse—and that has ever after been a bulwark of the Woolfian critical discourse.

I begin this chapter with Marcus for two reasons: first, because, as she notes herself, to take on a modernist classic one must position oneself in the critical discourse; to do justice to that discourse in the present moment requires recognizing the work of Jane Marcus. Second, I begin my final chapter with Marcus' writing as a way to recuperate her voice in this project. This dissertation began under Jane's supervision, authorized, when I finally admitted what I wanted to write about, by her clear and decisive "well then why would you write anything else?" Although Jane is no longer present to continue discussing Woolf in the study of her Upper West Side apartment over tea, this chapter in particular was conceived as a direct conversation with Jane, and so it seems only fitting that in conversation with her lasting critical legacy it will reach its final form.

Up to now, my project has been unpacking the deep and abiding influence of Shakespeare in Woolf's fiction and essays. I traced Woolf's obsession with Shakespeare through her letters and diaries; attempted to recuperate in broad strokes the outline of the cultural memory of Shakespeare in Woolf's time, and the ways in which she engages that memory directly in *A Room of One's Own*; highlighted the ways in which Shakespeare emerges from the pages of *The Voyage Out*, *Night and Day*, and *Jacob's Room* as a tool of social criticism, culminating in the masterfully intertextual use of Shakespeare in *Mrs. Dalloway*; and then offered a reading of the stylistic and formal departures of *The Years* as motivated by an attempt to recuperate the genre (or at least, project) of the Shakespearean history play in the modernist moment.

Here, I wish to move in a somewhat different direction, and to make what is likely the most radical argument I will propose as part of this project. It is a truism in Woolf studies to say that Woolf saw herself as—or at the least, aspired to be—Shakespeare's sister, the rightful

inheritor of his literary status and legacy. In this chapter, I will interrogate the lengths to which she went in making herself into the next Shakespeare, and will offer a reading of what has become one of the canonical works of high modernism, *The Waves*, as a recasting of Shakespeare's canonical *Hamlet*. To do this, I will draw on feminist and cultural critical readings of *The Waves* and of *Hamlet*. Above all, I will scaffold my own thinking around Marcus' "Britannia Rules the Waves" and the critical tradition it has inspired. Jane asked me once how I believed her essay had aged, and whether I was still convinced. This chapter is my response.

In broad strokes, Shakespeare's tragedies serve as models for what happens when social values and structures of leadership (and particularly monarchy) break down. The recurring attention to the consequences of poor leadership and the destructive, toxic nature of ambition create an implicit argument for obeying political structures and privileging the stability of the system over personal desires and/or personal gain. Recurring themes include the negotiation between public and private lives; the competing obligations to family, society, and self; the importance of good leadership and of supporting good leadership with well-intentioned and honest advisers; and the duty of individuals (particularly royal and military leaders) to challenge systems, structures, and leaders that have become corrupted. Tragedy is shown to result from the failure to restore balance, regulation, leadership, and honor before the toxic effects have gone too far.

Although "Shakespearean tragedy" is perhaps not the first classification that comes to mind when one thinks of *The Waves*, its social-critical work offers a close parallel to that of Shakespeare's tragedies, and its literary themes and motifs carefully mirror those of one tragedy in particular: *Hamlet*. At a very surface level, *Hamlet* is a play about social dysfunction—about



"something rotten in the state of Denmark," where characters "speak daggers, but use none." In arguing that *The Waves* is Woolf's version of *Hamlet*, I don't mean to argue a direct, point-for-point, character-for-character transposition. Rather, I mean to say that Woolf seeks in *The Waves* to engage in the same work Shakespeare performs in *Hamlet*, for her own time and place. She borrows the dramatic form—a more apt description than novel for a literary work crafted through a series of soliloquys—and from *Hamlet*'s characters, to write an exposé into the motivations, ideologies, and dysfunctions of a group of individuals produced by British culture as the sun was setting on the British empire. While maintaining her characteristic free indirect discourse, moving in and out of the heads of her characters, the use of the interconnected soliloquys gives Woolf access at once to greater depth, and greater distance, in shaping her characters. We see and hear their innermost thoughts, but whereas in, say, *Mrs. Dalloway*, the narrative voice becomes the characters' voice without our realizing it, such that we read and begin to think in the perspective of the characters; in *The Waves* we are constantly and intentionally looking at the characters, assessing their thoughts, struggling to identify in whose consciousness we have landed. The performance of self is intentional, a speech meant for an audience to purposefully deconstruct. Taking her cast from childhood into adulthood, Woolf highlights the ways in which the characters are mutually constitutive, the ways they shape, change, deconstruct, and support one another; and are shaped, changed, deconstructed, supported, and (in some cases) destroyed by the world around them. Thinking of *Hamlet* as Shakespeare's case study of sociopolitical relationships and the destructive roles individuals play in one another's lives, Woolf uses *The Waves* to craft her own careful case study, picking up on the themes that Shakespeare develops to show their evolution and equals in the modern world. She asks us to watch her play, and think critically about what happens.

## *One Way of Reading Hamlet*

Before moving forward with my reading of *The Waves*, it is useful to pause and unpack briefly what I mean when I say *Hamlet* can be understood as Shakespeare's case study of sociopolitical relationships. Indeed, all of Shakespeare's works can, in one way or another, be understood as sociopolitical case studies; in *Hamlet*, what I am particularly interested in—and what I believe Woolf would have been particularly interested in—is the ontological dimension of the play, as language breaks down and ways of knowing one another become corrupted. As I read it, the central problem in *Hamlet* is not Prince Hamlet's need for revenge; rather, it is the impossibility of knowing his knowing whether revenge is justified, if he can trust the information he has been given in a world in which language is not a tool of communication but a weapon of war. When Hamlet says he will “speak daggers” (*Hamlet* III.2.429), he offers a kind of keystone for reading a play in which physical violence is an outgrowth of verbal violence, in which society has become a social warzone.<sup>47</sup>

Think, for example, of Ophelia's suicide in relation to Hamlet's “To be or not to be” speech. Hamlet contemplates suicide, and a close reading opens up the possibility that it is not his own suicide he is considering, but rather Ophelia's. It is not Hamlet but Ophelia who has been made to bare “the pangs of despised love” (III.1.72) and the “insolence of office” (III.1.73), who suffers “the spurns/ That patient merit of the' unworthy takes” (III.1.73-74). It is not Hamlet but Ophelia who will suffer from “the law's delay” (III.1.72). It is not Hamlet but Ophelia who ultimately takes her own life. Ophelia has been placed on stage to entrap Hamlet, to spy on him and see what madness he will enact, and from the last lines we know that Hamlet

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<sup>47</sup> This reading is original, but indebted to Millicent Bell's 2002 *Shakespeare's Tragic Skepticism*, which looks at the ontological stakes of the tragedies; to Peter Mercer's *Hamlet and the Acting of Revenge* (1987), and to Joseph Loewenstein, Professor English and Director of the Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities, in whose course on “Skeptical Culture” the reading originated and under whose guidance it was developed as an undergraduate honors thesis.

is aware (at least in the end) of her presence, as he turns to her with “Soft you know,/ The fair Ophelia!—Nymph, in they orisons/ Be all my sins remembered” (III.1.88-90). There is perhaps not enough in the play to argue that Ophelia’s death is a form of verbal murder—staging would do much to determine this, whether we are made to believe Hamlet knows Ophelia to be there the whole time, or truly only notices her at the end. Moreover, to the extent that she has not yet suffered “the law’s delay” (III.1.72) in seeking justice for her father’s murder, the resonance between what Hamlet describes and Ophelia’s state would seem more a premonition than anything else. And yet, it seems not too far a leap to suggest that we might productively consider the play’s one speech about suicide with the suicide that ultimately takes place, and to ask what the relationship between the two might be. If we assume that Ophelia is able to hear, as the audience hears, what Hamlet says in “To be,” then her later acting out exactly what Hamlet describes becomes at least a form of manslaughter. Poison is poured in Ophelia’s ear—just as it is poured in King Hamlet’s ear, an act that I think can productively be read with “speaking daggers” as another controlling metaphor for the play. In *Hamlet*, words become weapons poured in the ear that lead to death.

In the last scene of the play, the destruction of state and the assumption of power by Fortinbras is couched in terms of speaking and hearing, as tools of communication are restored to productive purpose. It is Hamlet’s “dying voice” that he gives to Fortinbras (V.2.339), and his “ears are senseless that should give us hearing” (V.2.350-351). Horatio asks to “speak to the yet unknowing world” of what happened (V.2.362), to prevent its happening again, and Fortinbras commands that Hamlet be born “like a soldier to the stage/ ...for his passage/ The soldiers’ music and the rite of war/ Speak loudly for him” (V.2.379-383). Destruction is couched in terms of deafness, and restoration of social order in allowing those who would speak to be heard.

Does this mean that in proposing we read *The Waves* as a version of *Hamlet*, I am proposing that we should read *The Waves* as an expression of linguistic violence, and that Woolf necessarily would have read *Hamlet* in precisely the same way? No, absolutely not. By unpacking the violence of language in *Hamlet*, what I mean to do is to suggest that it is not (only) the physical violence but the decay of social relationships that is at stake in the play, and that interrogating dysfunctional social relationships through a dramatic medium is the “project” and the work I believe Woolf takes up. Whatever one makes of my reading, what should be clear under any reading is that Shakespeare shows us in *Hamlet* a society in which the instruments of social engagement have broken down, in which what should be tools to allow individuals to live cooperatively and peacefully together instead become weapons (speaking daggers and pouring poison in ears). *Hamlet* shows us what happens when relationships—of father, uncle, mother, lover, friend—are turned on their heads, when social roles cannot be trusted to operate as they are prescribed and expected (brothers are not protectors, mothers are not loyal, fathers cannot be trusted, lovers let us down). In proposing to read *The Waves* as a version of *Hamlet*, what I propose is to read it for the social relationships it identifies, and complicates, and ultimately condemns. I believe Woolf, like Horatio, asks us to identify what has been broken, and to say it out loud, so that a productive social order cognizant of its own vulnerabilities and the dangers of corruption might be restored.

### *The Big Picture*

So what is the textual case for reading *The Waves* as the modernist *Hamlet*? For me, the argument begins with the parallels between Rhoda and Ophelia. Although each point of connection between the characters is on its own somewhat tenuous, taken together, there

emerges a strong resonance between the two—both as they are represented in Shakespeare’s play and Woolf’s “playpoem,” and in the critical traditions surrounding each. To begin with, both characters are markedly silent, speaking less than those around them, ever-present but somehow always to the side of, or just behind, the other characters. That silence is in both cases related to social conditions, as both characters depend for their identities on those around them. Critics have long observed—and the author of *A Room of One’s Own* could not have missed—that Ophelia is defined almost exclusively by her court position, which is defined through her relationships; she is daughter, sister, object of affection, and in keeping with her father’s instruction, everything she says and does is in service of maintaining those identities.<sup>48</sup> Rhoda, likewise, is—and understands herself to be—primarily a social construction, and she struggles to find her place in society that is not (like Susan) mother or (like Ginny) a vessel for sexual desire. The few words she is given by Woolf all center around the search for a place, and the sense of herself as absent or empty.

Largely in consequence to their socially defined identities, both characters commit suicide—or rather, both characters die in ways that call into question agency and that suggest death by choice. Ophelia, unable to reconcile the identities of daughter to Polonius with beloved of Hamlet, goes mad and drowns. Rhoda, ultimately incapable of fitting into predefined roles or finding her own, throws herself from a cliff into the ocean. In both cases the deaths are mediated for the audience through the impressions of those left behind, and in both cases, the deaths are by drowning, and the imagery that foreshadows and describes them is of water and flowers.

Ophelia falls “in a weeping brook,” (*Hamlet* IV.7.200) “incapable of her own distress,” (*Hamlet*

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<sup>48</sup> As Sarah Gates puts it in “Assembling the Ophelia Fragments: Gender, Genre, and Revenge in *Hamlet*” (2015), “Critics have very little of Ophelia, either on stage or in the words of other characters, with which to work. In contrast to the carefully voiced and staged development of the hero, her role proceeds more in isolated fragments—receiving cautionary orders from a brother and father, giving a description of a rejected lover, being paraded as bait to ‘catch the conscience’ of the hero, singing bits of ‘old lauds,’ drowning” (229).

4.7.203) and sinks “To muddy death” (*Hamlet* IV.7.208); Rhoda “ride[s] rough waters and shall sink with no one to save me” (*The Waves* 160). Both characters’ deaths can be read as collateral damage in the social wars being acted out around them—for Ophelia, the struggle for the crown; for Rhoda, imperial patriarchy.

That Rhoda is a version of Ophelia does not necessarily suggest that *The Waves* must be a version of *Hamlet*, and yet, stepping back, other connections emerge. The form of *The Waves* is essentially dramatic; unlike every other text in Woolf’s oeuvre, *The Waves* is written as a series of soliloquys, without exposition, without dialogue even between characters. Woolf describes the form as “playpoem” in her diaries—a text written in verse, meant to be read rather than heard, crafted through dramatic soliloquy. Woolf draws heavily from Romantic poetry, creating much of the lyric feel of the writing, but she pushes further with her own language: many passages break down into almost perfect iambic pentameter (for example, Rhoda’s speech about binding flowers, to which we will return shortly). Looking at the unusual form of *The Waves* in the context of Woolf’s other writing, set against the recurring importance of Shakespeare in her other works and in her letters and diaries, it does not seem too far a leap to imagine *The Waves* as being Woolf’s attempt to more directly capture Shakespeare’s voice; and, with the resonance between Ophelia and Rhoda, that it is at least worth considering a connection between *The Waves* and *Hamlet*.

Marcus describes *The Waves* as an examination of “the role of childhood friendships and schooling in the formation of individual, group, and national identity, and the group’s production of the figures of hero and poet to consolidate cultural hegemony” (*Hearts* 67). She argues that “*The Waves* is about canon formation. Its theme is the creation of the (nationalist and imperialist) culture bearer in Bernard’s assumption of the role of poet of his generation. He

names himself ‘the inheritor’ in great exhilaration” (*Hearts* 71). It is from within this context that I write: if, as Marcus posits, *The Waves* is principally about canon formation and the inherited culture, then to consider ways in which Woolf invokes her own cultural inheritance in crafting the story, and takes for herself the role of culture bearer to which Bernard aspires, feels plausible. Marcus argues that where “*The Years* and *Three Guineas*... explore the relation of the patriarchal family and state institutions to fascism, *The Waves* investigates the origin of cultural power in the generation or group formed by the British public school and its values” (*Hearts* 64), offering an exposé on “the ideology of white British colonialism and the romantic literature that sustains it” (*Hearts* 65). Retelling a story that has already been told, going back to the “origin of cultural power” as a model for exploring the ideology of colonialism that has emerged, offers a sophisticated approach to that project—and one that not only sustains, but also complicates Marcus’ reading of the indictment of empire in *The Waves*.

That is not to say that Marcus’ reading is incorrect. Although later in her career Marcus would call her own arguments “overdetermined,” saying “Woolf gives us the text for this reading. But that is not all she gives us,” her self-correction could only be possible after those arguments had taken root and thrived (*Hearts* 13). That is to say, Marcus’ “radical reading” was essential in creating room in the critical discourse to see Woolf as a political thinker, and only after that radical stance was taken, only after the “deeply indoctrinated... Leavisite legacy” had been annihilated, could there be room for greater nuance, and less sympathy for Woolf (*Hearts* 61). Marcus’ reading has persisted because it is a true, valid, compelling reading of the novel. It is also, as Marcus writes herself, “not all” there is. Reading *The Waves* as a retelling of *Hamlet* clearly fits in with my larger project, but it also offers at least a potential intervention to recuperate and complicate Marcus’ reading, and to further our understanding of the social and

political positioning in/of Woolf's oeuvre. If we read *The Waves* through *Hamlet*, we see that Woolf does indeed worship at the very altar she seeks to topple—and that she does so knowingly, openly, and, I propose, in the hopes of being found out.

There are other connections between *Hamlet* and *The Waves* that will be worked out in the continuation of this chapter, but these are my starting points in the texts themselves and in the critical discourse. Again, my argument is not that there is a direct transposition of *Hamlet* into *The Waves*, but that there is strong influence of the former on the latter, and that we might productively interrogate that influence to help illuminate the social, political, and imperial discourse in *The Waves*. That interrogation is justified by the large scale, broad strokes connections between the characters, themes, and forms of the two works; it is productively worked out at the local level of the text.

#### *Rhoda and Ophelia: Puddles, Flowers, Death*

Malgorzata Myk's very smart article "Let Rhoda Speak Again: Identity, Uncertainty, and Authority in Virginia Woolf's *The Waves*" (2012) is a prime example of recent critical efforts to recuperate Rhoda as an important figure in *The Waves*, interrogating Rhoda's place in the "intersubjective continuum" of the novel and challenging the critical truism that Rhoda's suicide is best read as an act of cowardice (Myk 109). Myk argues that Rhoda's silence is speaking, and that Rhoda should be understood "as a complex figure of uncertainty and at the same time Woolf's vehicle for articulating a profound recognition of the necessity to challenge the dualistic thinking underlying the rigidly defined contours of the Transcendental self" (111). Myk suggests that "Rhoda's withdrawal can perhaps be seen as an act of engagement and a way of acquiring knowledge of the sources and consequences of her fear and anxiety," and of her suicide, says it



“needs to be reconsidered as an act of transgression of the confining social order that is exposed in *The Waves* through her powerful insights” (121).

Although Myk’s argument is primarily interested exploring Woolf’s take on the unitary self through Rhoda, her observations and conclusions offer an uncannily solid framework for reconsidering Rhoda as Ophelia, as they line up with many of the critical interpretations of Ophelia herself, particularly in the way Ophelia’s subjectivity is used as a way of casting light on larger failings of social order. As Richard Finkelstein writes in “Differentiating *Hamlet*: Ophelia and the Problems of Subjectivity” (1997), “Shakespeare uses Ophelia to expose an interplay between culture, epistemology, and psychology which constructs Hamlet’s heroic subjectivity, itself understood through his logic, development, and actions informed by agency” (Finkelstein 6). For Finkelstein, *Hamlet* is a play “engaged with the continual historical project of defining identity itself,” which presents through Hamlet, Ophelia and Gertrude “more than one means of defining subjectivity,” ultimately privileging Hamlet’s model of the inward, reflective, unified individual—the Romantic model Myk suggests Woolf deconstructs (17). Finkelstein’s conclusion is that “By using Ophelia to expose origins and display the erotic economies of family, gender, and politics, the play interrogates its own longings, and its participation in defining subjectivity” (18). That is, the play sets up and privileges an argument about the individual in society that it at the same time critiques, challenging “the usefulness of these formulations and their very possibility” (18).

Without falling down the theoretical or critical rabbit hole, my interest in turning to criticism is to show the ways in which both Rhoda and Ophelia have been understood in the critical discourse as being emblems of the failure of subjectivity, emblems of the ways in which identity is constructed by social, political, economic, and family circumstances, and the

casualties that are produced when the acceptable limits of social, political, economic, and family structures are tested. I also wish to show that both Rhoda and Ophelia can be seen as invested in the idea of the Transcendental self—Ophelia as a thorn in the side of the humanist model from which the Transcendental self emerged in Romantic poetry and philosophy, with Shelley and Keats both deeply influenced by Shakespeare; and Rhoda in emerging from that Transcendental tradition as Woolf’s response. If, as Marcus writes, *The Waves* interrogates “the creation of the (nationalist and imperialist) culture bearer” and is one example of Woolf’s continuing effort “to critique the system from within” (*Hearts* 71), then reading Rhoda as constructed and then destroyed by patriarchy, and as part of not only the Romantic tradition she quotes so liberally, but also a longer tradition in which the search for a male-authored unified subjectivity compels the silencing of the female voice, offers one compelling site of interrogation. The criticism and the allusion offer a deeper and more layered take on the feminist notion “that Bernard’s fluency depends on the suppression of Rhoda, that her silence is necessary for his speech” (*Hearts* 70). Rhoda is not the only, or the first, to “let[] others construct her” or to have her silence enforced (Finkelstein 6). By invoking Ophelia through Rhoda, Woolf grounds Rhoda’s suffering in the cultural inheritance, and suggests that she is the victim of much larger cultural machinations than the British public school.

Let’s turn to the text. In the passage that follows, one of Rhoda’s flights of fancy is articulated through Shelley’s poem “The Question.” Shelley’s words have long been noted, but Shelley is not the only allusion present. While the lines from Shelley are unmistakably his, I propose that that particular poem was chosen because its imagery allows Woolf to simultaneously invoke Ophelia. The image of a tree overhanging a body of water with a young

woman collecting flowers below, a woman intending to present them to others, whose “anguish” suggests madness, also sets up an image of Ophelia. Rhoda says she will

sit by the river’s trembling edge and look at the water-lilies, broad and bright,  
which lit the oak that overhung the hedge with moonlight beams of their own  
watery light. I will pick flowers; I will bind flowers in one garland and clasp  
them and present them—Oh! to whom? (*The Waves* 57)

The images of a “river’s trembling edge,” of “water-lilies, broad and bright” which “lit the oak that overhung the hedge with moonlight beams of their own watery light” are unmistakably Shelley’s. Yet, the imagery is not all Shelley: in “The Question,” Shelley’s speaker binds his flowers into “a nosegay,” a simple, fragrant bouquet; the project of binding flowers into “a garland” is Ophelia’s, her last before her death.<sup>49</sup> Rhoda continues,

There is some check in the flow of my being; a deep stream presses on some  
obstacle; it jerks; it tugs; some knot in the centre resists. Oh, this is pain, this is  
anguish! I faint, I fail. Now my body thaws; I am unsealed, I am incandescent.  
Now the stream pours in a deep tide fertilizing, opening the shut, forcing the  
tightfolded, flooding free. To whom shall I give all that now flows through me,  
from my warm, my porous body? I will gather my flowers and present them—  
Oh! to whom?

“Pain” and “anguish” appear nowhere in Shelley’s poem, which describes an Eden-like scene, the speaker “elate and gay” (Shelley l.38); there is no “deep tide fertilizing, opening the shut, forcing the tightfolded, flooding free” in “The Question” (*The Waves* 57).

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<sup>49</sup> Gertrude describes Ophelia as coming to the “weeping brook” in which she drowns “with fantastic garlands... of crow-flowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples” that she is “clambering to hang” from “pendent boughs” (*Hamlet* 4.7.192-197).

In *Hamlet*, however, there is. The mad Ophelia turns to flowers as a way to express “all that now flows through me” (*The Waves* 57), giving “fennel,” “columbines,” “herb-grace,” “rue,” and “a daisy” to members of Claudius’ court in a powerful, if obfuscated, call out to the dysfunction of the court and the hypocrisy of its courtiers (*Hamlet* IV.5.204-208).<sup>50</sup> Shelley’s question, then, of “to whom” to give the flowers, takes on a different meaning read through Ophelia: Rhoda’s garland is not one made of love and yearning, as is Shelley’s, but one born out of “pain” and “anguish” (*The Waves* 57), “thought and affliction, passion, hell itself” (*Hamlet* IV.5.211). Rhoda’s garland embodies her need to find an outlet for “all that now flows through me” but cannot be said in words (*The Waves* 57). We are left wondering what is bound in Rhoda’s garland, and invited, as is Ophelia’s audience, to do the work of unraveling what is contained, and what it is that Rhoda cannot say out loud.

In other moments, Rhoda does give glimpses of the “pain” and “anguish” that torment her, and when interrogated, we see it to be a modern parallel to that which torments Ophelia. Seeing herself in a mirror while in school, Rhoda says,

‘That is my face... in the looking-glass behind Susan’s shoulder—that face is my face. But I will duck behind her to hide it, for I am not here. I have no face. Other people have faces; Susan and Jinny have faces; they are here. Their world is the real world. The things they lift are heavy. They say Yes, they say No; whereas I shift and change and am seen through in a second. If they meet a housemaid she looks at them without laughing. But she laughs at me. They know

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<sup>50</sup> According to Katarina Eriksson’s “Ophelia’s Flowers and Their Symbolic Meanings” (2007), based on the symbolism of the time, Rosemary would signify remembrance; pansies, thought; fennel, flattery and deceit; columbine, ingratitude and infidelity; rue, sorrow or repentance; and violet, which Ophelia says has withered, faithfulness.

what to say if spoken to. They laugh really; they get angry really; while I have to look first and do what other people do when they have done it. (*The Waves* 43)

Rhoda's struggle is with identity, being unable to find her place as surely as do her peers. She understands herself to be a (flawed) social construction, who must "look first and do what other people do when they have done it," without an identity or agency of her own (43). She continues,

‘See now, with what extraordinary certainty Jinny pulls on her stockings, simply to play tennis. That I admire. But I like Susan's way better, for she is more resolute, and less ambitious of distinction than Jinny. Both despise me for copying what they do; but Susan sometimes teaches me, for instance, how to tie a bow, while Jinny has her own knowledge but keeps it to herself. They have friends to sit by. They have things to say privately in corners. (43)

In contrast to the interior voices we hear directly from Jinny and Susan, Rhoda's belief in their "certainty" and resoluteness highlights the difficulty of knowing one another. Rhoda perceives herself to be laboring to fit into the social world, but cannot recognize that her struggle is shared, albeit in different form, by the very friends she emulates. Susan and Jinny are more comfortable and "resolute" in filling the available social roles of mother and beloved, respectively, but that does not make their roles any less constructed—as Jinny ultimately learns, as her beauty fades and she recognizes she has nothing else; and as Susan learns, in her struggle between the competing sense of fulfillment and suffocation in family life.

Reading Rhoda's existential struggle through Ophelia emphasizes the point. Rhoda is not the first to have struggled, nor the first to have looked for social cues to learn how to behave. What is different for Rhoda is her radical self-awareness, as Myk calls it, which opens up "a

precarious territory that seems to her too dangerous and overwhelming” to occupy (Myk 19).

Rhoda is caught between wanting to belong, wanting to be loved and adored, and not knowing how to become what is loved and adored:

...I attach myself only to names and faces; and hoard them like amulets against disaster. I choose out across the hall some unknown face and can hardly drink my tea when she whose name I do not know sits opposite. I choke. I am rocked from side to side by the violence of my emotion. I imagine these nameless, these immaculate people, watching me from behind bushes. I leap high to excite their admiration. At night, in bed, I excite their complete wonder. I often die pierced with arrows to win their tears. If they should say, or I should see from a label on their boxes, that they were in Scarborough last holidays, the whole town runs gold, the whole pavement is illuminated. Therefore I hate looking-glasses which show me my real face. Alone, I often fall down into nothingness. I must push my foot stealthily lest I should fall off the edge of the world into nothingness. I have to bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body. (44)

Rhoda must “bang my hand against some hard door to call myself back to the body” lest she lose her hold on expectations and obligations, and cease to be able to “drink my tea when she whose name I hardly know sits opposite”—a task she tells us is already a struggle (44). The “nothingness” she risks falling into is a space determined by herself, absent prescribed relationships and social boundaries—a space much like the one Ophelia occupies in her madness, where she sings, and weaves garlands, and silently speaks. Rhoda, who Myk describes as caught between desiring “the common consciousness of the Transcendental Ego” and “testing the boundaries of identity and the limits of difference” (Myk 19), sees madness and “nothingness”

when “alone” and “stealthily” resists “falling off the edge of the [social] world” as Ophelia does. But she recognizes the threat, and the fall; and ultimately, she gives into it.

Positioning Rhoda as Ophelia does not wholly change our reading of her. Rhoda is, without Ophelia, still a tragic character, still someone who clearly cannot find her place. That said, if we locate in Rhoda an Ophelia for Woolf’s time, as I think Woolf invites us to do, then the questions of agency, culpability, sanity that Ophelia brings into *Hamlet* become available to us in *The Waves*. The eternal questions of whether Ophelia drowns accidentally or purposefully, and what role those who tell of her death have in creating it,<sup>51</sup> are brought forward into *The Waves*. We are invited to ask a more complicated version of the question of why Rhoda dies—she throws herself from the cliff because she cannot find a place, because the circumstances of 1930s England cannot accommodate her. Whose responsibility is that choice? Is her death cowardice, or liberation in the face of something “too dangerous and overwhelming to occupy” (Myk 19)? What obligation do we, the readers, have, to change the world so that Rhoda need not leap?

### *Something Rotten in the British Empire*

To answer that question, we must better understand the world of the novel and its parallels in 1930s England. Elsewhere in the text, Bernard narrates a fantasy that not only re-invokes *Hamlet* but also draws out and extends the parallel. Situating her characters (at least in Bernard’s mind) under a willow tree by a river (the willow tree, perhaps, from which we might imagine Ophelia falls), Woolf lists the references she wants us to pick up, connecting *Hamlet* with Shelley, with (presumably) the existentialist philosophy of Raskolnikov in Dostoevsky’s

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<sup>51</sup> If Gertrude watches Ophelia die and sees that she is “for a while borne up” and “incapable of her own distress,” why does she not call for help?

*Crime and Punishment*, with empire (Napoleon) and Byron. Of the tree, Bernard says that “The tree alone resisted our eternal flux. For I changed and changed; was Hamlet, was Shelley, was the hero, whose name I now forget, of a novel by Dostoevsky; was for a whole term, incredibly, Napoleon; but was Byron chiefly” (*The Waves* 249). Although it is as Byron that Bernard imagines himself, the behaviors he describe would seem more to belong most immediately to Hamlet, as he lets “fly my tremendous battery of phrases upon somebody quite inappropriate,” “a girl now married; now buried,”<sup>52</sup> knowingly manipulating her emotions, arriving “all in a lather at her house,” saying he “exchanged tokens but did not marry her, being no doubt unripe for that intensity” (*The Waves* 249). Bernard describes the behaviors Hamlet enacts in his feigned madness—Ophelia’s love is, after all, the supposed reason “clouds hang” on Hamlet, and he knowingly torments and manipulates her, sending tokens, oscillating between declarations of love and dismissal, to build cover for himself in his plot against Claudius. In Bernard’s description of himself, I propose Woolf invites us to see the Hamlet Bernard has just told us he imagines himself to be.

Casting Bernard as Hamlet allows Woolf to borrow from the play’s characterizations to cast light on the relationship between Bernard, Rhoda, and the other characters; they create a context through which we can read Bernard’s reflections on Rhoda in the pages that follow.

Bernard says,

‘Rhoda came wandering vaguely. She would take advantage of any scholar in a blowing gown, or donkey rolling the turf with slippared feet to hide behind. What fear wavered and hid itself and blew to a flame in the depths of her grey, her startled, her dreaming eyes? Cruel and vindictive as we are, we are not

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<sup>52</sup> “I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife;/ I thought thy bride-bed to have deck’d, sweet maid,/ And not have strew’d thy grave” (*Hamlet* V.1.255-257)



bad to that extent. We have our fundamental goodness surely or to talk as I talk freely to someone I hardly know would be impossible—we should cease. The willow as she saw it grew on the verge of a grey desert where no bird sang. The leaves shriveled as she looked at them, tossed in agony as she passed them. The trains and omnibuses roared hoarse in the street, ran over rocks and sped foaming away. Perhaps one pillar, sunlit, stood in her desert by a pool where wild beasts come down stealthily to drink. (*The Waves* 251)

Bernard reads the fear in Rhoda's eyes, the death and destruction she mirrors back at him through the shriveling of leaves, "tossed in agony as she passed them" (*The Waves* 251). Rhoda shows Bernard what he does not wish to see: that to be "cruel and vindictive" means to lose track of "our fundamental goodness" (*The Waves* 251). Bernard can claim goodness, can see it in himself, but Rhoda forces him also to see (even as he denies it) the "grey desert where no bird sang" and the "desert by a pool where wild beasts come down stealthily to drink" in which Rhoda has been made to live (*The Waves* 251).

If, as Marcus tells us, *The Waves* "questions the white man's anxiety about identity as universal" (*Hearts* 63) and "investigates the origin of cultural power in the generation or group formed by the British public school and its values" (64); and if, as Marcus also tells us, "*The Waves* is about the ideology of white British colonialism and the romantic literature that sustains it" (65); then Bernard's view of Rhoda speaks to one aspect of the "origin of cultural power"—that Bernard has power, and Rhoda has none; and that Bernard is discomfited in being forced to recognize Rhoda's place. Giving us Bernard's perception of Rhoda filtered through *Hamlet* creates both depth and nuance, calling on us to censure Bernard—if he must ask if he has

goodness, he cannot have been acting to represent it—and mourn Rhoda, but without making Bernard unsympathetic, and while asking us to try to access his perspective as well.

When Ophelia dies, Hamlet jumps in her grave and challenges those around him as loving less, losing less, in spite of his admittedly poor behavior; yet he claims “I loved Ophelia: forty thousand brothers/ Could not, with all their quantity of love,/ Make up my sum” (*Hamlet* 5.1.285-287). We feel his pain, we pity his loss, even while we recognize that he played the biggest role in her destruction. It is this that Woolf invokes, in casting Bernard as Hamlet and forcing him to consider his own Ophelia. When Rhoda dies, Bernard describes how he can “see far away, quivering like a gold thread, the pillar Rhoda saw, and feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt” (*The Waves* 289). Bernard calls us back to his own earlier ruminations, where Rhoda forced him to confront the “cruel and vindictive” way in which the group behaved, and in his grief, like Hamlet, comes to recognize what he has lost in such a way as at once condemns and asks us to pity him. Bernard says, “I have been talking of Bernard, Neville, Jinny, Susan, Rhoda and Lous. Am I all of them? Am I one and distinct? I do not know”; he says he can see the “pillar” that “stood in her desert by a pool where wild beasts come down stealthily to drink,” that he can “feel the rush of the wind of her flight when she leapt” (251). Rhoda, who hates the looking-glass, becomes in death the looking-glass for Bernard to see, as Rhoda feared to see, his own “real face” and the face of the civilization of which he claims himself inheritor (43).

What, then, is the pillar? What is the “real face” that is seen? There is one last connection, one last site of interrogation, between *The Waves* and *Hamlet* that I would like to unpack. This last connection is not one that jumps directly from the page, but one that, in the context of other connections, helps fill in gaps and provide a larger framework for the larger

reading of the two texts against one another. Both *Hamlet* and *The Waves* center, in very different ways, around political societies that are disrupted by death, and that seek to recover. In *Hamlet*, the death is that of the king, who is murdered by his brother and whose death exposes hidden hypocrisies and fault lines in the Danish royal family and aristocracy. In *The Waves*, the death is of Percival, the silent hero who is worshiped and adored by his friends, whose death is both made epic and soundly trivialized in stunning—and uncharacteristic—melodrama.

In a powerful sense, *The Waves* retells *Hamlet* in retelling the story of the end of a regime, of the death of a system of rule. Marcus writes, “The most powerful undertow in *The Waves* is class. The ruling-class characters define themselves as clean, free, and dominant against the dirt and ugly squalor of the masses” (*Hearts* 78). Woolf’s ruling class is Shakespeare’s monarchy and aristocracy: both the “playpoem” and the play dramatize ruling-class relationships and juxtapose the interior, personal reflections of individual actors against the downstream impacts of those actions for the larger society. Percival’s death is both a personal tragedy for his friends, and an emblem of a failing colonial system. As Marcus writes, “Percival is the last shabby chivalric imperialist whose death English culture can claim as a pretext for a coherent unified cultural and social text” (*Hearts* 79). Through him, Woolf “documents the replacement of the patriarchal family by the peer group or generation as the agent of social cohesion” (*Hearts* 79), and through his fall she traces “a primal scene of the fall, England’s fall from heroic history, her family’s fall from ethical purity, her culture’s fall into Colonialism and angst” (*Hearts* 78). Likewise, the death of King Hamlet, upon which the plot of *Hamlet* is predicated, is not only a family matter—fratricide, incest, mourning—but a national one as well, one that creates the conditions under which the threat from Norway emerges. The death of Percival, the death of Rhoda, the collapse of the ideal romantic author, makes room for a new,

democratized England in the same way the deaths of King Hamlet, Polonius, Ophelia, Gertrude, Laertes, and Prince Hamlet make way for Fortinbras' army to enter without opposition.

Looking at the novel in this way, the poetic interludes that Marcus identifies as taking the form of Hindu prayer make the dismantling of empire, with its concomitant loss of central control and precious resources, into the looming threat to the crown embodied by the Norse army in *Hamlet*. Marcus describes Woolf's "ecstasies of apostrophe" as written in "the mode of Hindu religious text" specifically to call attention to the fall of empire:

While popular sentiment might declare that the sun never sets on the British empire, *The Waves* emphatically dramatizes the very historical moment in which the sun *does* set. If we read the opening sections, the interludes, as a Western imitation of or homage to the Hindu Gayatri, or prayers of the course of the sun, we may see that Woolf surrounds the text of the decline and fall of the West (the transcendental self striving and struggling against death) with the text of the East, random natural recurrence. (*Hearts* 81).

Rhoda has drowned, and Percival has fallen, and the threat of waves breaking—of waxing and waning, of the equal and opposite reaction to empire mirroring its rise through fall—surrounds the story, looming in the background of the characters' shared experience, outside their soliloquys, the environment in which they speak.

Bernard, in his closing, possibly comic, soliloquy, says that "in me too the wave rises. It swells; it arches its back. I am aware once more of a new desire, something rising beneath me like the proud horse whose rider first spurs and then pulls him back" (*The Waves* 297). Bernard insists that the "enemy... advancing against us" is "Death," and that he will "ride with my spear couched and my hair flying back like a young man's, like Percival's, when he galloped in India.

I strike spurs into my horse. Against you I will fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding, O Death!” (*The Waves* 297). As Marcus notes, Bernard’s heroic image of himself is a false one: Percival never “galloped in India” but was rather thrown from a flea-bitten donkey in the desert; his death is not the death of a hero, but of a Sancho Panza-like figure of absurdity (*The Waves* 297).<sup>53</sup> Bernard struggles to resist the “Death” of the world he knows, the “Pillar” Rhoda sees in the distance and that causes the leaves to die as she passes, but his resistance is predicated on a glorified, patently false sense of himself and his role. In exposing the false representation in Bernard’s glorification of Percival, Woolf eviscerates the false narrative of the glory of empire it reinscribes.

And yet, there is something of a self-conscious, loving reverence. The beauty of *The Waves* cannot be dismissed; there is unquestionably anger and sense of betrayal in the way Woolf draws her characters, but there is also, and I would argue equally unquestionably, love. We are brought in and out of each characters’ consciousness, and while they are held up by the pseudo-dramatic form for us to look at and judge, they are also all (save Percival) given depth, feeling, identity. Woolf asks us to see Percival and Bernard for what they are, and for the destruction they have caused—but she asks us, too, to sympathize with them, just as *Hamlet* invites us to mourn the death of the prince even while recognizing the destruction he has left in his wake. We are not dismissing caricatures like Lady Bexborough and Hugh Whitbread; we are instead offered thinking, feeling, hurting individuals who are trapped in a society that is, in prescribing their roles and causing their pain, deeply broken. It is the society, I think, and not the individuals who are born and raised into it, that we are asked to condemn. We watch the

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<sup>53</sup> I am not unconvinced that we are meant to read Percival as well through *Don Quixote*, a would-be knight tilting at windmill-monsters of his own creation.

characters grow up, so that we can see not who they are, but what they are made and allowed to become.

Here arises a powerful difference between *The Waves* and *Hamlet*: at the end of *The Waves*, our cast of characters is not dead on the stage before us. The deaths in *Hamlet* save us from the hard question of how to transfer power, what to do and where to go next—with whom to side if Hamlet and Fortinbras are both alive with claim to the throne. No such easy out is given by Woolf. Instead, we are left with the recognition that something is rotten, and the responsibility for finding a way forward when the characters themselves—and, perhaps, the author herself—cannot.

The last words of *The Waves* are not Bernard's. Bernard, our Hamlet, our inheritor of a rotten state, will “strike spurs into my horse” and “fling myself, unvanquished and unyielding,” but his efforts will be futile. Norway will come, empire will fall, as “*The waves broke on the shore*” (*The Waves* 297). The question we are left with is how to prepare our cast for what comes next, and with whom to replace Bernard when the waves finally break.

### *Concluding Thoughts*

Little that I have shown here changes our ultimate takeaway from *The Waves*; my conclusions are ultimately very similar to those reached by Marcus in “*Britannia Rules The Waves*,” and depend upon Marcus' original reading as scaffolding. But drawing wholly new conclusions is not my purpose. My interest in wading into the well-traveled critical waters of *The Waves* and, particularly, in responding to Jane Marcus' question of whether or not her reading holds up, is to re-consider not the conclusions that are ultimately drawn in her essay, but the ways in which they might be supported. That is, my purpose in this chapter is not to say

something new about *what* Woolf says in her playpoem, but to add to our understanding of *how* she says it, and the nuance and complexity of the territory in which she operates.

What I have tried to show in this chapter is that Woolf is influenced by, and asks us to recognize that she is influenced by, *Hamlet* in the way she develops *The Waves*. *Hamlet* is at core a play about social dysfunction, and so, too, is *The Waves*. Structurally, formally, thematically, and at the level of character, there is strong resonance. In imagining Rhoda as her generation's Ophelia, Woolf shows the ways in which patriarchal society of the 1930s failed women in creating only so many socially prescribed roles into which they could fit. Rhoda dies because she cannot fit, just as Ophelia dies when her own roles of daughter, sister, and beloved become mutually exclusive. In aligning Bernard with Hamlet, Woolf reinforces the extent to which patriarchy and imperial patriarchal values are responsible for Rhoda's death. Woolf also ties those values to the empire that patriarchy has created, and opens up a space in which she can mourn the loss of empire even as she exposes its flaws. Bernard wants to believe he and the others are still fundamentally good; he is absurd, and his convictions are false, but he is so ardent that he is nonetheless somehow attractive—we are drawn in by his voice even while we know it to be wrong. Finally, in Percival Woolf creates a figurehead for her six characters to worship, her own King Hamlet, whose death forecasts the coming—mourned, but also welcome—death of the regime.

So what? One of the strongest character attacks on Woolf, an attack which lingers even after the debunking of the Leavisite legacy, is that Woolf cannot escape her own subject position. In spite of her socialism, Woolf's writing is often understood to be deeply rooted in class privilege, and even her would-be defenders must eventually concede that the Bloomsbury Group was, indeed, elite and elitist, and that incidents like the Dreadnought Hoax and the "very fine

negress” passage in “A Room of One’s Own” cannot be so easily dismissed. I do not think we are meant to. If we reconsider *The Waves* not only for the arguments it helps unfold, but also for the specific ways in which it does its work, a redeeming self-consciousness emerges that is, I think, a strong defense. In asking us to watch the characters grow up, and understand how they become who they are, how they are shaped by one another and by the world, what Woolf asks for is, at a very fundamental level, empathy. She shows us children, playing in the yard, splashing in puddles, and then she shows us those children grown up, worshipping at false idols and throwing themselves off cliffs.

To say that *The Waves* delivers a scathing critique is not to say that it is not, at the same time, an elegy. Woolf shows us that she knows empire to be failing, knows the wave to be breaking on the shore, and knows the reasons why it must be allowed to break. And yet, she also lovingly shows us characters who think, and feel, and hurt—characters we might imagine to be literary analogues to her own tight circle of friends in the Bloomsbury Groups. The world Woolf wishes to topple is also the only world she has ever known; it is not a world she has chosen, but one she has inherited, and her careful attention to the ways in which the characters develop and are shaped by the world around them (in *The Waves* and, in different ways, in all her novels) rings almost as a plea to be forgiven for at times filling a role that she can see must be abolished. If we understand *The Waves* as a text that asks us to watch characters grow up, and that asks us to understand how they become who they become, then we can also understand it as a text that asks us to separate the person from the social office being filled—that asks us to separate our public anger at the social and political institutions of empire, from private censure of individuals caught up in a broken system. It is as if Woolf is beseeching us: I will join you in calling for the end of the only world I have ever known; please understand why that is painful.



## CONCLUSION

In beginning this project, I set out the following goal: to show how Woolf's use of allusion to Shakespeare operates within the framework we now understand to be cultural memory, and mobilizes Shakespeare's memory as a form of political critique. What I now believe is that Woolf's use of memory cuts more deeply: not only is it a tool for critique, but it is equally if not more powerfully understood by Woolf to be an instrument of political change. Her use of Shakespeare is not merely, as I thought in the early days of this project, a way of criticizing the world around her and the failures of critical thinking she observed in her time. Rather, her criticism comes with the recognition of the opportunity that is there to renegotiate values and beliefs through a common memory-language. She writes in such a way as to open up possibilities within a theretofore closed canon for Other voices to be heard, to make room for Judith Shakespeare to stand beside her brother, and for the world inherited by the next generation to be one that knows itself—as Henry V comes to know himself—to have power over the story they have been born into to define the terms of the narrative for the next generation.

Just as Woolf reads Shakespeare in the hopes of using the past to find a new way forward, so too do I read Woolf. In a moment in which war rages but refugees are turned away, in which mass shootings happen almost every day,<sup>54</sup> in which a major party candidate for President of the United States has called for a blanket ban on anyone with a Muslim-sounding last name entering the country... the idea of a return to values through a collective acknowledgment of the vital role critical thinking should and must play in our society is a warm beacon of light on a dark and frightening horizon. The problems our world faces are profoundly different from those of Woolf's moment, and yet in another sense they are the same: there may

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<sup>54</sup> See "Gun Violence Archive" 2016.

not be on mustard gas, but there is yet war; there may not be empire, but there is yet imperialism. Woolf looks to her forefathers and foremothers to find hope, and to conceptualize a way forward in the face of a broken system and a great unknown; she asks us to do the same, and she offers herself as foremother for those who come after.

In a diary entry dated Tuesday, 27 August 1918, Woolf writes:

Now I confess that I have half forgotten what I meant to say about the German prisoners; Milton & life. I think it was that ? (all I can remember now (Friday, Aug. 30<sup>th</sup>) is that the existence of life in another human being is as difficult to realize as a play of Shakespeare when the book is shut. This occurred to me when I saw Adrian talking to the tall German prisoner. By rights they should have been killing each other. The reason why it is easy to kill another person must be that one's imagination is too sluggish to conceive what his life means to him—the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him, & have already been spent. However, I forget how this was to go on. The prisoner looks very lean & hopeless, seemed to like talking; I met him later & we smiled, but the sentry was not there. (*Diary* vol.1, 186)

In August 1918, World War I was still three months away from ending, and England was at war with Germany. Yet, Woolf sees her brother talking to a German prisoner, and she applauds him. She meets the same soldier later, and she smiles. Even at war, even faced with the destruction and fear and pain that war has caused (including her own breakdowns), she seeks to understand in a person who should “by rights” be her enemy “what his life means to him—the infinite possibilities of a succession of days which are furled in him, & have already been spent” (186).

She seeks, above all else, empathy and understanding. She makes an intellectual practice of compassion. Would that we all can do the same.

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