

Consistent Inconsistencies

Virginia Woolf on Jane Austen

by

Rebecca D. Soares

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To my harshest critic and my biggest fan.

Thank you, Dad.

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When I look back to where I was a year ago, before the pages of *Night and Day* became as ingrained in my mind as the lines of my favorite song and my every waking hour was devoted to deciphering the nearly illegible scribbles that crisscross the pages of Woolf's reading notebooks, I am astonished by how far I have come. Over the past six months my intellect has been stretched taut, my nerves have been pushed to the breaking point, my sleep pattern has been irrevocably distorted, my passion has been incited, and my writing has soared to levels of achievement that I had never imagined possible. I have loved every moment.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the legacy of the character and works of Jane Austen in the artistic development of Virginia Woolf. Much of the scholarship concerning the relationship between Woolf and her literary predecessor is dominated by a single question: Why is Woolf so ambivalent in her treatment of Austen? This trend in scholarship was initiated by Janet Todd in her seminal text “Who’s Afraid of the Janeites” and further developed by Judith Lee in her essay “‘Without Hate, Without Bitterness, Without Protest, Without Preaching’: Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen.” While Todd, Lee, and other critics have looked to Woolf’s connection to the larger Janeite movement for an explanation for her consistent ambiguity, such an attempt at clarification only results in another question: How could Woolf possibly condemn the popular and fanatical movement of Austen-worship while she herself appears to fall into the same interpretive traps that the Janeites so often find themselves in? My thesis offers a two-fold answer to this seeming contradiction. I move beyond simply pointing out the alleged inconsistencies that color Woolf’s criticism of Austen in an attempt to distinguish Woolf’s unique motivations for appropriating the figure of Austen as not only one aspect of her larger project to establish an independent feminine literary canon, but also as a necessary step in the development of the radically modern voice that would eventually become her trademark.

Chapter One examines Woolf’s published criticism on Austen, focusing specifically on her essays “Jane Austen” (1925), “Jane Austen Practising” (1922), and *A Room of One’s Own* (1928). The first intention of this section is to determine how Woolf imagines Austen came to be the iconic female author that history has figured her to be. First I delineate Woolf’s views on Austen’s growth as an author, views that appear to be inherently conflicting, and attempt to reconcile them for the purpose of constructing a coherent theory concerning Woolf’s perception of authorship and the literary canon. I then turn to the fantastical baptism myth that Woolf creates for Austen in both “Jane Austen” and “Jane Austen Practising” to examine whether this recourse to mythology necessarily renders Woolf’s ultimate project of demystifying the figure of Jane Austen a failure. By comparing the critical and somewhat oppositional readings of Katie Trumpener and Beth Carole Rosenberg, in their pieces “The Virago Jane Austen” and “Virginia Woolf’s Postmodern Literary History” respectively, I am able to determine the “most successful” reading of Woolf’s origin myth, an interpretation that reconstructs Jane Austen as both Woolf’s literary mother and literary nemesis.

Chapter Two discusses Woolf’s relationship to the larger Janeite phenomenon, using her diaries, correspondence, and personal reading notebooks as key texts for analysis. By engaging in a close reading of her unpublished materials, specifically those diary entries and letters that capture her response to the appropriation and “misuse” of Jane Austen at the hands of her colleagues, friends, and the common reader in general, I formulate two possible explanations for Woolf’s simultaneous disdain for and participation in the Janeite movement. First, by examining both Woolf’s criticism of the Janeites and her own recreations of Jane Austen, I contend that all of Woolf’s sources for her predictions or assumptions about her predecessor are textually based. The second distinction between Woolf and the common reader of Austen is that she sees her motives for appropriating Austen as more honorable than their self-interested aims. Woolf not only sees Austen as a key figure in her quest to reclaim the feminine literary tradition, but she also needs to figure herself as a direct successor of Austen in order to legitimize the modern narrative style that she would eventually develop. By drawing parallels between Austen’s later

works and the tenets of those writers who would become known as the Moderns, Woolf provides the bridge between the genre of the novel of manners that Austen arguably perfected and the Modern literary movement that is required to make the latter legitimate.

Chapter Three builds upon the argument of the second chapter, engaging in a close reading of Woolf's second and arguably most traditional novel *Night and Day* (1919) in order to demonstrate Woolf's direct appropriation of Austen to further her literary project. Starting with the contemporary reviews of *Night and Day* that led Leonard Woolf to declare his wife's second attempt at fiction "a deliberate exercise in classicism," this section discusses Woolf's understanding of Austen as a writer who was timeless, representing simultaneously the classic novel, and thus the predecessor to the Victorian work, and the clear superior to its successor. To this end, I explore Woolf's unpublished reading notebooks as well as several of her published essays that feature close readings of Austen's novels. Next I turn to Woolf's response to critical comparisons between herself and Austen, interpreting her despair over such acknowledgement as an indication that she desired to both emulate and supplant her literary predecessor. Finally I turn to the text of *Night and Day* itself in order to trace the legacy of Austen in its prose style, structure, and thematic focus, concentrating on the novel's attempt to manipulate the Austenian marriage plot to fit a more modern social climate.

Short Titles

“Postmodern Lit Hist”: Rosenberg, Beth Carole. “Virginia Woolf’s Postmodern Literary History.” *MLN*. Vol. 115, No. 5, Comparative Literature Issue. Dec, 2000. 1112-1130.

“Who’s Afraid of J.A.”: Todd, Janet. “Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen?” *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*. Women & Literature, New Series, Vol. 3. Ed. Janet Todd. New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1983.

“The Virago J.A.”: Trumpener, Katie. “The Virago Jane Austen.” *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*. Ed. Deidre Lynch. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000. 140-165.

ARO: Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One’s Own*. 1929. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 1989.

DVW: - - - .The *Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1915-1919*. Ed. Anne Olivier Bell. New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1977.

“J.A.”: - - - .“Jane Austen.” 1925. *Women and Writing*. Ed. Michèle Barrett. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1979. 109-120.

“J.A. Practising”: - - - .“Jane Austen Practising.” 1922. *Women and Writing*. Ed. Michèle Barrett. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1979.
104-108.

LWW: - - - . The *Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*. Ed. Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1976.

N&D: - - - .*Night and Day*. 1919. Ed. Suzanne Raitt. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999.

Introduction

*The people whom we admire most as writers, then, have something elusive, enigmatic,
impersonal about them.*¹

(Virginia Woolf, "Personalities")

In the mind of Virginia Woolf, Jane Austen was just that, a faint enigma captured within the sharp black lines of the shadowy and half-finished pencil sketch that serves as the only remaining portrait of the iconic authoress. Perhaps it is this elusiveness, this mystery, coupled with Austen's seemingly omnipresent and strikingly penetrating narrative voice that initially drew Woolf to her literary predecessor. Throughout Woolf's critical essays, fiction, and unpublished materials, the figure of Jane Austen looms large, casting a shadow over her literary endeavors that both inspires greatness and incites anxiety. Janet Todd, in her seminal study "Who's Afraid of Jane Austen," suggests that for Woolf, Austen served as a "kind of talisman...standing for reality, comedy, and perfection against the flawed moderns,"² yet such a conclusion does not begin to explain the consistent ambivalence with which Woolf responds to the early authoress. Woolf, an author whose own work and authorial identity have become somewhat overshadowed in recent years by sensationalized dramatizations of her personal life and lifelong battle with mental illness, is herself clothed in mystery, adding yet another level of abstraction to the already nebulous relationship between herself and Austen. Although Woolf left behind countless unpublished critical essays, collections of correspondence, and diaries, as

1. Virginia Woolf, "Personalities," 1957, in *The Moment and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1975), 175.

2. Janet Todd, "Who's Afraid of Jane Austen," in *Jane Austen: New Perspectives, Women and Literature*, New Series, Vol. 3, Ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1983), 5.

opposed to Austen's single portrait, a handful of incomplete letters, a single collection of juvenilia, and the fragment of a novel, both women remain "elusive" to the reader. Just as Woolf was drawn to the inscrutable figure in Cassandra Austen's watercolor sketch, this study was born out of a desire to demystify the relationship between Woolf and Austen, a connection that has eluded scholarly understanding since it first came to the attention of academia.

In the first major work written on this topic, Janet Todd constructs a tenuous explanation for Woolf's consistently ambivalent perception of Austen. Focusing on Woolf's essays "Jane Austen" (1925) and "Jane Austen Practising" (1922), Todd attempts to connect Woolf's pieces on Austen to her other attempts at biography. Drawing upon Woolf's theories of biography as presented in her short work "The New Biography" (1927), Todd argues that Woolf's allegedly biographical essays in fact describe the personality of the author, not necessarily of the subject, a technique that renders the subject of the text a character that is at once real and imaginary (108). According to Todd, "[Austen] is made to submit to the Woolfian personality and sit in silence for her portrait while the author sketches herself" (113). While this contention sheds some light upon Woolf's often conflicting treatment of Austen and has been taken up by many scholars after Todd, notably Beth Carole Rosenberg whose study will figure prominently in the first chapter of this thesis, Todd's work is regarded more as a study of influence than as an attempt to explain the tension that riddles Woolf's characterizations of Austen.

Judith Lee allegedly endeavors to further Todd's analysis in her essay "'Without Hate, Without Bitterness, Without Fear, Without Protest, Without Preaching': Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen,"³ yet here too all conclusions fall short of accounting for Woolf's consistent ambiguity. Claiming that she wishes to build upon Todd's study by examining how Woolf

3. Judith Lee, "'Without Hate, Without Bitterness, Without Protest, Without Preaching': Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen," in *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, Issue 12, 1990, 111-116.

“read” the character of Jane Austen, Lee relies heavily on the theories of narrative and character that Woolf purports in her essays “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (1924) and “Phases of Fiction” (1929). Here Austen becomes an “invention” of Woolf and the resulting inconsistency merely the residual effect of trying to imagine “a woman writer who is ‘real’” (111). Such an argument seems to be an echo of Todd’s interpretation rather than the extension that it alleges to be. In the end, Lee’s analysis only further complicates the inconclusiveness of Todd’s study. Lee, like many of the scholars after her, looks to the connection between Woolf and the larger Janeite movement in an effort to explain the modern author’s ostensibly conflicting representations of Austen. Yet this attempt at clarification only results in another seemingly unanswerable question: How could Woolf possibly condemn the popular and fanatical movement of Austen-worship while she herself appears to fall into the same interpretive traps that the Janeites so often find themselves in?

My study offers a two-fold answer to this seeming contradiction. I move beyond simply pointing out the alleged inconsistencies that color Woolf’s criticism of Austen in an attempt to distinguish Woolf’s unique motivations for appropriating the figure of Austen as not only one aspect of her larger project to establish an independent feminine literary canon, but also as a necessary step in the development of the radically modern voice that would eventually become her trademark. By examining Woolf’s critical essays and unpublished materials, as well as her second and arguably most traditional novel *Night and Day* (1919), I am able to construct a more coherent theory concerning the role of Austen in the artistic development of Woolf than those that rely solely on Woolf’s critical pieces. After all, Woolf is primarily remembered as a novelist; to ignore the realm of her fiction is to ignore some of the most significant literary contributions of her career. While Woolf’s critical essays and unpublished writings alone provide

plentiful fodder for a discussion of her motivations for and attempts at rewriting the character of Jane Austen, it is only through a close reading of *Night and Day* that the refrain of Austen's influence can be heard clearly, the text serving as the final step in Woolf's struggle to negotiate her position in the female literary canon relative to that of her formidable predecessor. Only in the fictional arena is Woolf able to completely appropriate Austen, first emulating and later manipulating the early authoress' prose style, narrative structure, and thematic focus. The result of this simultaneous imitation and deviation is a novel that bridges the gap between the past and the present, the classical and the modern novel, locating the foundations of Woolf's unique narrative voice within the genre of the novel of manners that was perfected by Austen and anticipating the more radical literary experiments that would establish Woolf as one of the quintessential modernist authors.

Chapter I – “The Divine Miss Jane”: Virginia Woolf and the Character of Jane Austen

In this chapter I will examine Woolf's published criticism on Austen, focusing specifically on how Woolf imagines Austen came to possess the subtly sarcastic and sophisticated voice that would become her legacy. Through her essays “Jane Austen” (1925), “Jane Austen Practising” (1922), and *A Room of One's Own* (1929), I will first delineate Woolf's views on Austen's growth as an author, some of which are ostensibly conflicting, and attempt to reconcile these views with the intention of constructing a coherent theory concerning Woolf's perception of authorship and the feminist literary canon. The ultimate question of this section is whether Woolf's alleged project of demystifying the figure of Jane Austen and concretizing her position within the female literary trajectory is accomplished or rather fails due to each text's inability to overcome its inherent analytical flaws, particularly Woolf's deeply divided stance toward her literary predecessor. Through my analysis, I will also establish what I have determined to be the correct method with which to read Woolf's portrait of Austen, examining first a more literal and natural view with some aid from Katie Trumpener's article “The Virago Jane Austen” and later turning to the psychological, narratological, and self-reflexive reading of Beth Carole Rosenberg in “Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History.” In the end, the reader will find that the only reading that succeeds despite Woolf's ambivalence is that of Rosenberg, which focuses on the role of Austen as a symbolic figure for Woolf herself.

For Woolf, an author whose work has arguably been eclipsed by sensationalized renderings of her personal life and lifelong struggle with mental illness, the relationship between individual identity and authorship is not only nebulous but also wrought with intense anxiety. Throughout her career as a literary critic, Woolf attempted to create a foundation for her own

identity as a female author, looking in texts for the actual women hidden within each turn of phrase or character sketch. Such an ambitious project, while mirroring the work of her father Leslie Stephen in his seminal work *Hours in a Library* (1874)⁴, reveals Woolf's lingering ambivalence concerning the figure of the author in relation to her published work, a source of concern that compels her to establish a position for her female predecessors in the aesthetic trajectory not simply as artists but as individuals as well.

In her essay "The Virago Jane Austen,"⁵ Katie Trumpener reflects upon this ambition of Woolf's, comparing her determination to establish a distinct female canon to that of the Virago Press in its Modern Classics reprint series. For Trumpener, Virago's attempt to "'demonstrate a female tradition in fiction'" emphasizes Woolf's implicit influence as "path-breaking both in the stylistic innovations of her novels and in the cumulative attempt of her essays and fiction to rethink the place of earlier women writers" ("The Virago J.A." 146). Woolf confronts such issues in her larger work *A Room of One's Own* (1929)⁶. In order to answer the question of the connection between "'women and fiction,'" Woolf initially "rehears[es] and [later] discard[s]" what Trumpener terms the most "obvious response" ("The Virago J.A." 146). Woolf parodies the traditional summary of the feminist literary tradition, writing that

4. Beth Carole Rosenberg and Katherine Hill, in their essays "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History" and "Virginia Woolf and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution" respectively, examine the connection between Virginia Woolf's biographical essays and those of her father Leslie Stephen. Rosenberg argues that Stephen "trained [his daughter] as a literary historian and hoped she would follow in her footsteps," a desire that was arguably fulfilled when Woolf published an essay under the same name as Stephen's seminal work in 1916 (1114). Like Woolf's *The Common Reader*, Stephen's *Hours in a Library* is a collection of critical essays on those authors whom he deems to be integral to the traditional literary canon, in particular the eighteenth century novelists De Foe, Richardson, Hawthorne, and Balzac.

5. Katie Trumpener, "The Virago Jane Austen," *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, Ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 140-165.

6. *A Room of One's Own* is based upon two papers that Woolf read to the Arts Society at Newnham and the Odtas at Girton in October 1928. The papers, being too long to be read in full, were later altered and expanded before being published as a single essay in October 1929. The topic that Woolf was asked to address in her talk was that of the connection between women and fiction.

a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs. Gaskell and one would have done.⁷

Instead of adhering to this meager outline, Woolf turns her attention to the “material conditions and economic autonomy necessary for the development of women’s writing,” while maintaining her original purpose of “tracing lines of filiation from early modern women diarists, playwrights, and poets, through nineteenth-century female novelists” (“The Virago J.A.” 146). When she reaches the nineteenth century novelists, Woolf singles out “the four famous names,” Austen, the Brontës, and Eliot, as key to the development of the modern authoress, yet she never wavers in her insistence on the literary foundation that paved the way for their pivotal texts (*ARO* 69). As Trumpener emphasizes in her essay, Woolf never forgets that “without their female forerunners,” the founders of what could arguably be labeled the traditional feminist canon

could no more have written than Shakespeare without Marlowe, or Marlowe without Chaucer...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. (*ARO* 69)

This passage is significant not only in its insistence on the influence of the female predecessor on

7. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, 1929, (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Inc., 1989), 69.

modern women writers, but also in its comparison of the feminine literary tradition to that of the classical canon. Here, instead of attempting to link the rise of the female novelists to the traditional and arguably “male” literary canon, Woolf appears to suggest that, while female writers are somewhat indebted to their male forefathers, they are directly influenced only by their literary mothers. Although she draws a parallel between the development of the classical canon and the rise of the female novelist, Woolf ultimately establishes wholly separate genealogies for such disparate figures as Shakespeare, Fanny Burney, and Eliza Carter, implying that these parallel traditions can never completely intersect.

Yet for Woolf, as Trumpener discerns, Austen “stands both in the midst and outside of an extended (if fragmentary) tradition of women’s literature” (“The Virago J.A.” 147). Stating that “Austen hovers as a central – perhaps *the* central – figure in Woolf’s account,” Trumpener recognizes an inconsistency in Woolf’s “tenets about literary history” (“The Virago J.A.” 146). According to Trumpener, Woolf sees Austen as “a paradoxical yet pivotal figure for a female tradition” (“The Virago J.A.” 147). While Austen is “clearly indebted” to the efforts of the female novelists before her, she will herself “become a standard by which the twentieth century women writers measure themselves” (“The Virago J.A.” 147). However, Trumpener also argues that “Austen’s most important legacy to the writers of posterity is her sense of artistic autonomy, her ability to turn to advantage the underdeveloped state of the women’s literary tradition, her triumph in shaping a distinctive style” (“The Virago J.A.” 147). In this way Austen is both a part of the classical feminine literary tradition Woolf wishes to establish and also the mother of a new age of female novelists. She simultaneously builds upon the tradition of her predecessors and tears it apart to serve her purpose of establishing a tradition of her own. Woolf writes that, while other nineteenth century female novelists attempted to adopt a more masculine prose style, some

even going as far as to adapt their own identities through the use of a pseudonym, Austen “laughed at it and devised a perfectly natural, shapely sentence proper for her own use and never departed from it” (*ARO* 77). Here Woolf attempts to establish Austen as one of the true female novelists, one who was not afraid to indulge her distinctly feminine voice. In a similar fashion, Woolf and many women writers of her era “who were inspired by Austen’s example ‘broke’ her sentence and style to find their own means of expression, and found their own forms of modernism” (“The Virago J.A.” 147). Austen’s liminal position within the literary trajectory, appearing neither completely classical nor inherently modern, may in some way account for Woolf’s ambivalence toward her in her critical essays.

Woolf’s intense interest in the literary figure of Austen goes even further than her stated desire of crowning a queen-mother for the female literary tradition. For Woolf and many of her contemporaries, as well as the majority of modern literary scholars, the figure of Jane Austen the individual woman, as opposed to the author, is largely illusory, clothed in a mystery that can only be stripped away piecemeal through the meager clues she left hidden in her texts. As Mary Ann O’ Farrell asserts in her essay “Jane Austen’s Friendship,” and as Woolf would presumably agree, “If Austen is knowable only through her effects, those effects...have been most often understood as her novels, her letters, her juvenilia.”⁸

Virginia Woolf begins her 1925 essay “Jane Austen” with the statement “It is probable that if Miss Cassandra Austen had had her way we should have had nothing of Jane Austen except her writing.”⁹ The figure of the protective elder sibling who, “when the growth of her sister’s fame made her suspect that a time might come when strangers would pry and scholars

8. Mary Ann O’ Farrell, “Jane Austen’s Friendship,” in *Janeites: Austen’s Disciples and Devotees*, Ed. Deidre Lynch (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45-59, 47.

9. Virginia Woolf, “Jane Austen,” 1925, in *Women and Writing*, Ed. Michèle Barrett (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1979), 109-120, 109.

speculate,” systematically destroyed her sister’s private letters and writings, “spar[ing] only what she judged too trivial to be of interest,” is for Woolf not a symbol of familial loyalty and love, but rather a perpetrator of a great crime (“J.A.” 109). Just as Jane Austen’s volumes of correspondence slowly blackened into indecipherable ash in the heat of the hearth, the reality of Austen the individual vanished into dust with the destruction of her personal writings, leaving behind only a half-finished pencil sketch and, as Woolf laments in her criticism, “a little gossip, a few letters, and her books” (“J.A.” 109).

From Austen’s cousin Philadelphia, the reader learns that the adolescent Jane was ““not at all pretty and very prim, unlike a girl of twelve...whimsical and affected,”” and from her close acquaintance Mrs. Mitford, that she was ““the prettiest, silliest, most affected husband-hunting butterfly’ that she ever remembered” (“J.A.” 109). An anonymous visitor at the Mitford’s later remarked that ““until *Pride and Prejudice* showed what a precious gem was hidden in that unbending case, she was no more regarded in society than a poker or firescreen,”” adding that with the advent of fame, although Austen remained the “perpendicular poker” of her past, she became “a poker of whom everyone [was] afraid. A wit, a delineator of character, who does not talk is terrific indeed” (“J.A.” 110). Yet even such seemingly personal anecdotes cannot bring substance to the shadowy and roughly etched face in Cassandra’s drawing.

Woolf’s anxiety over this loss of authorial identity is clear throughout her essay “Jane Austen” as she struggles to reconstruct the image of Austen, attempting to uncover the actual woman behind the bitingly ironic and “inscrutable” narrative voice that dominates and colors the miniature world of her novels. Writing that “Charming but perpendicular, loved at home but feared by strangers, biting of tongue but tender of heart---these contrasts are by no means incompatible, and when we turn to the novels we shall find ourselves stumbling there too over

the same complexities in the writer,” Woolf acknowledges the troubling and potentially misleading ambivalence that characterizes the remaining memories and contemporary accounts of Austen, an ambivalence that is significant in Austen’s personal and literary identity (“J.A.” 110). This passage is also significant because in it Woolf adopts the very language of Austen’s contemporaries in an attempt to give “historical” substance to her contention.

Woolf’s quest for the woman behind the words begins with Austen’s Juvenilia. Under the auspices of examining Austen’s early and largely unfinished work *The Watsons*, Woolf attempts to reconcile the highly satirical, comedic, and often violent writing of the seventeen-year-old Austen with the polished and mature prose that is a trademark of the adult authoress. For Woolf, Austen’s early writing cannot simply be interpreted as the idle musings of Philadelphia’s “whimsical and affected” young cousin, but rather the astonishingly “un-childlike” creations of a woman of the world (“J.A.” 110). Replacing the traditional vision of the adolescent writer huddling over a writing desk with the intention of producing amusement in the parsonage’s schoolroom, Woolf states that “nothing is more obvious than that this girl of fifteen, sitting in her private corner of the common parlour, was writing not to draw a laugh from brothers and sisters, and not for home consumption...She was writing for everybody, for nobody, for our age, for her own; in other words, even at that early age Jane Austen was writing” (“J.A.” 111).

It is in this early writing that Woolf detects the traces of genius: “but what is this note which never merges in the rest, which sounds distinctly and penetratingly all through the volume? It is the sound of laughter. The girl of fifteen is laughing, in her corner, at the world” (“J.A.” 111). Even at fifteen “one hears it in the rhythm and shapeliness and severity of the sentences,” her deftness of description, her attention to detail yet maintenance of an impersonal and detached while simultaneously ironic tone (“J.A.” 111). In response to Austen’s narrative

maturity, a level of sophistication that is incongruous with her childhood history as the sheltered daughter of a rural middleclass clergyman, Woolf creates a fantastic image of Austen's childhood, insisting that her astonishingly perceptive understanding of the human mind and heart could not have been cultivated within the bounds of a quiet and isolated life. Woolf declares that "One of those fairies who perch upon cradles must have taken her on a flight through the world directly she was born," and "when she was laid down in the cradle again she knew not only what the world looked like, but had already chosen her kingdom" ("J.A." 112). Austen is given an almost superhuman infancy in the imagination of Woolf. This scenario not only places Woolf in the position of the myth-maker but also curiously complicates her understanding of authorship and the attainment of literary genius. Through the image of the "chosen" infant, Woolf paints authorship as an unattainable and ephemeral goal; art is no longer the end result of an arduous process but is simply created in its purest form. The ability to produce such art is thus portrayed as an inherent, almost divinely ordained characteristic as opposed to an acquired talent.

By giving Austen such a fantastic baptism into the literary world, Woolf complicates her project of delineating the development of the female literary tradition. With this pseudo-creation story, Woolf almost parodies her desire to trace Austen to a historical and literary context. The tone of the fairytale appears to be self-consciously unreal and to some extent unravels Woolf's earlier claims concerning the influence of previous women writers on Austen. This origin myth raises several curious questions about Woolf's perception of her own position in the feminist canon as well. Perhaps by giving Austen a mythological origin Woolf, as a female author, inherits a measure of her genius, as if such talents can be transferred magically through a literary blood-line.

Katie Trumpener suggests that Woolf's origin myth may in fact be a reaction to what the modernist author referred to as the "accumulation" of "quilts and blankets" over the years ("The Virago J.A." 141). In the opening passages of "Jane Austen Practising" (1922), Woolf "evokes Austen's 'accumulating' reputation over 'the past ten or twenty years' as 'stifling' layers of 'quilts and blankets' that need throwing off" ("The Virago J.A." 141). Woolf goes on to accuse "the voices of the elderly and distinguished, of the clergy and the squirearchy" for "hav[ing] droned in unison praising and petting, capping quotations, telling little anecdotes, raking up little facts" about her predecessor.¹⁰ Trumpener reflects upon Woolf's sentiment, echoing Woolf's assertion that by "turning the novelist into 'the great Jane Austen of mythology,' the Janeites¹¹ have piled 'up the quilts and counterpanes until the comfort becomes oppressive'" ("The Virago J.A." 141). Trumpener paints Woolf as antagonistic to the myth-making project surrounding the figure of Jane Austen; however, since she writes in the fairytale idiom, Woolf appears to participate in this project, at least in part, in an attempt to give mental birth to her literary mother.

Trumpener's assertion raises the significant question of how Woolf's examination of Austen's authorial identity is any different from the inquiries and generalizations that she ridicules in "Jane Austen Practising." With the catalogue listing of

one of her cousins had his head cut off in the French Revolution.

Did she ever go fox hunting? No, but she nursed Miss Gibson

through the measles. Her knowledge of the upperclass was unrivalled.

10. Virginia Woolf, "Jane Austen Practising," 1922, in *Women and Writing*, Ed. Michèle Barrett (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1979), 104-108, 104.

11. The term "Janeite," as defined in Deidre Lynch's anthology *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, is a designation used to distinguish "the Other Reader in his or her multiple guises, or rather, and more precisely, whenever [one] need[s] to personify and distance [oneself] from particular ways of reading" (12). As used in this thesis, it will refer to "the reader as hobbyist – someone at once overzealous and [arguably] undersophisticated" in his or her devotion to the works of Austen. While I do not suggest that this type of reading is inferior to a more academically inclined interpretation, since I myself may be rightfully dubbed a Janeite, for the purposes of Trumpener's criticism, the more derogatory connotation can be aptly applied.

One of her ancestors entertained King Charles. Macaulay, of course,
compared her with Shakespeare,

Woolf, according to Trumpener, is only satirizing the popular Janeite impulse (“J.A. Practising” 104-105). Yet such seemingly irrelevant anecdotes and assumptions are not completely different from Woolf’s own creative intervention in her attempt to recreate Austen’s literary birth.

Despite Woolf’s initial rejection of the myth-making project, she is still forced to participate in it, recognizing that the use of myth is necessary to explain the origin of Austen’s literary prowess just as the ancient scientists and philosophers resorted to theories of the divine first cause when faced with insufficient evidence to explain the origin of natural phenomena. Although Woolf’s use of a myth can be viewed as a failure in light of her original intention to flesh out the “true” identity of Austen, her supernatural origin myth is distinct from the Janeites’ suffocating pile of comforters. To explain this apparent paradox, I will adopt a new analogy, replacing Woolf’s afghans with corrective lenses.

Pieces of praise, criticism, and scholarly interpretation irrevocably change a reader’s perception of an author or a literary work as soon as they are read. As each new anecdote and review accumulates around a specific work, fresh and often competing lenses are placed upon the original text and, although each individually was created with the intention of making the picture clearer, together the various lenses can skew the view so out of focus that the original image is impossible for the human eye to discern clearly. According to Woolf, this blurred and distorted image is what necessarily results from the mythologizing of Jane Austen. However, while other critics and devotees place their lenses of interpretation directly on top of the already towering pile, Woolf attempts to sift through the heap in order to fit her lens as closely to the original image as possible. Woolf’s mythologizing project is distinct and, in her view superior,

because she is examining Austen pre-myth, looking at the writer in embryo. Instead of searching for Austen's identity within her most popular works, where the number of lenses and thus the distortion is greatest, Woolf turns to Austen's more obscure texts where the vision is still clear. This method is clearly demonstrated when Woolf sets up her review of Austen's early juvenile work *Love and Friendship* as an examination of "a little book written by Jane Austen long before she was the great Jane Austen of mythology," implying that it is in her Juvenilia that the purest voice of the author can be heard ("J.A. Practising" 105).

Woolf's fairytale of Austen's birth into the literary world is also significant because it reflects the relationship between the author and her subject. According to this hyperbolic description, Austen was not inherently limited by her isolated and somewhat modest environment, but rather she was given a glance at the whole world only to consciously choose the domestic domain for the setting of her literary endeavors. Woolf furthers this theory stating that Austen "had agreed that if she might rule over that territory [the domestic domain of Regency Era England], she would covet no other" ("J.A." 113). However, it is not simply the reader who is a part of or even identifies with this isolated territory that Austen claims as her audience. As Woolf writes "whatever she writes is finished and turned and set in its relation, not to the parsonage, but to the universe" ("J.A." 112). Here Woolf suggests that Austen simultaneously chose to entrench her writing within her modest immediate surroundings and intended her work for a universal readership, actions that initially appear to be somewhat irreconcilable.

Woolf appears to directly contradict the aforementioned image of the fully realized juvenile authoress in an earlier review of Austen's short juvenile work *Love and Friendship*, a review which was a preliminary version of her piece "Jane Austen." The essay's title "Jane

Austen Practising” itself suggests the gradual process of becoming an author, a process that contrasts sharply with the fantastical vision of the divinely ordained artist. This image of authorship is further emphasized through Woolf’s application of a musical metaphor in the final paragraph of the piece. Although Woolf claims that the early works of Austen reveal her to be “a limited, tart, rather conventional woman for all her genius,” she also admits that in the Juvenilia one can “hear a snatch of music...She is only humming a tune beneath her breath, trying over a few bars of the music for *Pride and Prejudice* and *Emma*” (“J.A. Practising” 108). Austen is “practising” for her future role as what Woolf later deems in the second version of the essay “the most perfect artist among women, the writer whose books are immortal” (“J.A.” 120). Yet at the same time Woolf states that “there is no one else who can sing like that,” asserting that “Every syllable comes quite distinctly through the gates of time” (“J.A. Practising” 108). Although Austen has yet to reach her full literary potential, even at this young age the seeds of her future endeavors lie in wait in the words of her Juvenilia and, as Woolf concludes, “whatever they may say about her genius and her cousins and *Mansfield Park* we are content to listen all day long to Jane Austen practising” (“J.A. Practising” 108).

Woolf begins the essay “Jane Austen Practising” with a heavily detailed narrative scene of the seventeen-year-old Austen writing. This scene not only situates Austen’s Juvenilia within the creative confines of the country parsonage, but also represents another decidedly banal attempt by Woolf to reconstruct the life of Austen, which is a manifest departure from her allegedly divine birth as an author. Stating that “as the Austens were a large family, and Mrs. Austen stitched and darned and lay invalid on the sofa, her daughters, while still very young, were well aware that life in a country parsonage has little in common with life in Mrs. Radcliffe’s novels,” Woolf presents Austen’s home environment as the binary opposite of the

settings the young writer creates in her early stories (“J.A. Practicing” 106). Curiously, even while Woolf confines Austen’s personal identity within the bounds of the domestic realm, she recognizes the young author’s efforts to detach herself from her physical environment, both as a devout reader of Radcliffe and as a satirist of the gothic style in her own *Juvenilia*.

Woolf even creates a dialogue between Austen and her siblings: “But now and then, as the writing of *Love and Friendship* proceeded, a brother or a sister must have asked her what she was laughing at. And then Jane Austen read aloud, ‘I die a martyr to my grief for the loss of Augustus...One fatal swoon has cost me my life. Beware of Swoons, Dear Laura’ (“J.A. Practising” 106). Here Woolf presents Austen as not merely the cloistered adolescent daughter of a clergyman, but rather as the bitingly sarcastic narrator she would eventually become. Austen, despite her relative inexperience and geographical isolation, is shown parodying the Gothic tradition in its entirety. In Woolf’s mind, Austen followed this speech before the limited audience of her young siblings in the common sitting room by “taking up her pen” and writing “as fast as she could write, and faster than she could spell, for the incredible adventures of Laura and Sophia popped into her head as quick as lightning” (“J.A. Practising” 106). What is remarkable about Austen’s *Juvenilia* is that without formal education and at the tender age of seventeen she is able to grasp the difficult genre of the gothic novel so fully that she goes beyond simple imitation and uses the style to parody itself¹².

Woolf further distances Austen from her humble environment by distinguishing her adolescent knowledge from that of the ordinary teenage girl. Describing the typical seventeen-year-old girl Woolf writes “They have no fixed point from which they see that there is something externally laughable in human nature” (“J.A. Practising” 106). She further elaborates this train of

12. This is the same literary achievement that Cervantes is rightfully lauded for performing on a larger scale in *Don Quixote*.

reasoning and links it directly back to the context of *Love and Friendship* by stating that “They do not know that wherever they go and however long they live they will always find Lady Grevilles snubbing poor Marias at a dance” (“J.A. Practising” 107). According to Woolf, the young Austen deviates from the norm in that she is not only aware of such realities but is also able to remain impersonal and inscrutable in her representations of them. It is at this point in the essay that Woolf digresses into a truncated version of the fantastical nativity myth that she would expand in her later publication. Unable to reconcile Austen’s astute and unfalteringly honest depiction of human nature with her limited experience of the world, Woolf turns to a legend of her own creation, a supernatural tale that could potentially shed some light on how at seventeen the daughter of a rural clergyman could have “few illusions about other people and none about herself” (“J.A. Practising” 107).

Yet in contrast to her later draft titled “Jane Austen,” here Woolf quickly glances over the alleged origin of Austen’s genius, focusing instead on the indications of such world knowledge in the author’s juvenile writings. Once more contextualizing her remarks within *Love and Friendship*, Woolf writes that “When Jane Austen, the writer, wrote down, in the most remarkable sketch in the book, a little of Lady Greville’s conversation, there is no trace of anger in the snub which Jane Austen, the clergyman’s daughter, no doubt once received” (“J.A. Practising” 107). With this statement Woolf essentially cleaves the identity of Austen in two. Although she is at once an author and an adolescent girl, Woolf presents each aspect of Austen’s person as independent from the other, suggesting that such detachment may be a necessary prerequisite for the achievement of narrative objectivity. Because “her gaze passes straight to the mark,” unhindered by any personal experiences or subjective interpretations, the reader “know[s] precisely where, upon the map of human nature, that mark is” (“J.A. Practising” 107).

According to Woolf, Austen “never trespassed beyond her boundaries. Never, even at the emotional age of seventeen, did she round upon herself in shame, and obliterate a sarcasm in a spasm of compassion, or blur an outline in a mist of rhapsody” (“J.A. Practising” 107-108). Woolf views the separation of Austen’s two selves as permanent and immutable stating that “the boundary line is perfectly distinct,” yet she acknowledges that this rift in character may not have been complete at the tender age of seventeen (“J.A. Practising” 108). While she admits that the young Austen “does not deny that moons and mountains and castles exist on the other side,” briefly mentioning the author’s childhood “romance” with the Queen of Scots who was, in the words of the young Austen, a “bewitching Princess whose only friend was then the Duke of Normandy, and whose only ones now Mr. Whitaker, Mrs. Lefroy, Mrs. Knight and myself,” this romanticism never intrudes into her actual writing unless to serve as a parody (“J.A.” 109). This “hard-headed realist” image of Austen is closely in line with how Trumpener characterizes Woolf’s opinions of her literary predecessor. The figure of the unromantic and deeply practical Austen calls into question even further Woolf’s use of a fantastic origin myth. There is a definite tension created when Woolf offers such a highly romantic tale to explain the presence of Austen’s literary genius, since Austen’s virtuosity lies in her ability to craft an objective and decidedly unromantic narrative voice. Despite her attempt to locate Austen within the mystical realm, Woolf acknowledges that even at a young age Austen went through great lengths to edit such flights of fancy out of her own writing.

At the end of Woolf’s analysis, Austen’s identity is still cleaved in two, which is problematic in itself. Furthermore, despite Woolf’s stated goal of demystifying the figure of Jane Austen, the explanation given for the source of this cleavage is simply a stereotypical nativity myth. By using such a fairytale story as the origin for Austen’s literary talents, Woolf appears to

contradict the materialistic concern of *A Room of One's Own*, an essay which asserts that all women need in order to be successful artists are financial resources and a solitary space in which to create. These pragmatic prerequisites are completely absent from Austen's mythology, an absence that necessarily renders a tear in Woolf's theory of female authorship. Since giving Woolf's criticism a natural or literal reading does not provide the reader with any satisfactory conclusions as to Austen's authorial identity, another interpretation must be found.

One such alternative reading is provided by Beth Carole Rosenberg in her article "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History."¹³ Instead of analyzing Woolf's criticism as an attempt to explore the true lives and achievements of her literary predecessors, Rosenberg argues that each portrait should be approached as a piece of narrative, yet highly subjective, historiography. According to Rosenberg, Woolf's essays on Jane Austen are especially indicative of this approach: "[Woolf's] talent for writing history that is really about the present is most acutely seen in her essay, 'Jane Austen'" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1115). Rosenberg theorizes that, through her writings on Austen, Woolf is not only attempting to recreate and "revise" her literary mother, a task that she feels compelled to complete in a way that is almost reminiscent of Freud's discussion of the Electra complex, but she is also "mold[ing] her own textual identity within the history in which she wishes to place herself" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1115). Thus Austen is both Woolf's "textual nemesis" and a mirror image of herself.

Rosenberg's discussion of Woolf's use of myth-making in *A Room of One's Own* may also be helpful when attempting to comprehend her creation of Austen's fantastic literary baptism in "Jane Austen" and "Jane Austen Practising." Focusing on the fictional character of Judith Shakespeare, Shakespeare's tragic sister whom Woolf claims could have started the

13. Beth Carole Rosenberg, "Virginia Woolf's Postmodern Literary History," *MLN*. Vol. 115, No. 5, Comparative Literature Issue. (Dec., 2000), 1112-1130.

feminine literary tradition if she had been provided the necessary financial and environmental means, Rosenberg links Woolf's project with that of Freud's in his "History of Infantile Neurosis"¹⁴. Although in his case study Freud "writes of the Wolf-Man, whose identity at the time of analysis is seen as the product of witnessing his parents' copulation when he was one and a half years old," Rosenberg contends that Woolf's Judith serves a nearly identical narratological function ("Postmodern Lit His" 1121). When asked whether the Wolf-Man's memory is "merely a product of imagination," Freud concludes that "it hardly matters whether it is a fantasy or not," adding that "The process of construction occurs through deferred action, where meaning is placed onto the event after it has happened" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1122). Rosenberg draws a connection between Freud's Wolf-Man and Woolf herself, stating that

Woolf...uses a fictional construction, Judith Shakespeare, to explain, define, and understand the present moment. By creating Judith Shakespeare Woolf is creating a point of reference for herself; it is a perspective grounded in fiction, and by doing so Woolf begins to construct her own historical moment. (1122)

This analysis can easily be extended to Woolf's fantastic origin myth for Austen. Like Judith Shakespeare, the figure of Jane Austen becomes for Woolf almost a symbol for the foundation of the female literary tradition, and the actual authoress is decidedly fictionalized during this process. Under this view, the obscurity of Austen's individual identity as a woman, as opposed to an author, is favorable for Woolf, allowing her the freedom to recreate her predecessor at will and according to her own terms.

14. Rosenberg refers to the following edition of Freud's "History of Infantile Neurosis": Freud, Sigmund, "The Case of the Wolf-Man," in *The Wolf-Man by the Wolf-Man*, trans. and ed. Muriel Gardner (NY: Basic Books, 1971), 194.

The parallel between Judith Shakespeare and Austen is most clear at the end of “Jane Austen” when Woolf laments that Austen died at the “height of her powers,” a declaration that she follows with a brief speculation as to what the great authoress’ life would have been like had she survived longer (“Postmodern Lit His” 1125). As Rosenberg astutely recognizes, “the tone of this final part is reminiscent of her meditation on Judith Shakespeare, William’s ‘wonderfully gifted’ sister” (1125). With each “literary figure” she writes of, Woolf creates the image of a “genius” who tragically “never fulfilled her potential” (“Postmodern Lit His” 1125). However, as Rosenberg concludes, “Woolf’s words are hypothetical and mythic. She is both in this essay and *A Room of One’s Own*, constructing a literary history that does not exist” (1125).

Rosenberg further claims that Woolf’s critical essays on historical figures, including those portraying the trajectory of female authorship, are in reality self-reflexive examples of how one should read Woolf herself. Stating that “It is though her narrative of literary history is really an autobiography, the writing of her own writing life,” Rosenberg turns her analysis to what she terms Woolf’s creation of “her own subjective historical moment,” texts that hide within their prose clues to what Woolf’s “literary values and goals are as an early twentieth-century writer” (“Postmodern Lit His” 1122). Specifically in her essays on Austen, Rosenberg believes that the reader can see “how Woolf’s role as a reader of Austen becomes expressed in her writing of Austen, how the former’s subjectivity creates the latter, and how this creation allows Woolf to articulate her own position in literary history” (“Postmodern Lit His” 1122-1123).

Drawing upon her reading of Janet Todd’s “Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen”¹⁵, which was the first study published concerning the relationship between Woolf and Austen, Rosenberg emphasizes the ambivalent and somewhat competitive stance that Woolf takes toward her

11. Rosenberg refers to the following text: Janet Todd, “Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen,” in *Women and Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers UP, 1983), 108.

literary mother. Although she contends that Todd's work is more a study of influence than an attempt to explain the tension that riddles Woolf's characterizations of Austen, Rosenberg lends credence to Todd's claim that in Woolf's essays "fact is manipulated to expose personality of a particular kind," revealing the author's extreme subjectivity in her allegedly biographical portraits ("Postmodern Lit His" 1123). Todd further argues, and Rosenberg further agrees, that in each critical piece, particularly those concerning Jane Austen, the subjects "become what Virginia Woolf needs them to be" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1123). Yet Austen's case appears to be a privileged one in the eyes of Woolf, as both theorists contend that "Woolf had to struggle to come to terms with the 'mother of writers' – Jane Austen – in order to write. She had to 'revise' Austen and felt a greater sense of anxiety and competition with her than with any other female writer" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1123). Perhaps it is this competition and desire to rewrite her literary predecessor that motivates Woolf to create such a fantastic origin myth for Austen. By writing the birth of Austen, her literary mother, Woolf in a way supplants her position as the ultimate creator and places herself in the position of the founding mother of the female literary tradition. This scenario is reminiscent of Freud's Electra Complex, as Woolf struggles with her internal desire to replace her "mother" in the figure of Austen.

However, despite her efforts to "revise" or replace Austen, Woolf simultaneously tries to emulate her predecessor in her critical essays. Rosenberg highlights this issue by looking to Woolf's essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,"¹⁶ the text in which Woolf makes the distinction between "spiritual" and "material" characters ("Postmodern Lit His" 1123). According to Woolf, a "spiritual" character is one which "deals with internal qualities rather than the physical description of outward [or] 'material' detail" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1123). In a later essay

16. Rosenberg refers to the following edition of the above stated text: Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," in *The Captain's Death Bed* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1950), 105.

“Modern Fiction”¹⁷ (1925), Woolf links her theory of spiritual characters to those authors who are engrossed in the internal workings of character. Woolf states that for such authors “The point of interest lies very likely in the dark places of psychology,” a description that is very similar to that of the spiritual character (“Postmodern Lit His” 1123). To illustrate her theory, Woolf turns to Jane Austen, dubbing her as a “spiritual” novelist who was “interested in things in themselves; in character, in itself; in the book itself” (“Postmodern Lit His” 1123). Writing that for Austen “everything was inside, nothing outside,” Woolf, according to Rosenberg, sets up Austen as a model for herself, “who taught her how to create an internal, spiritual world in her fiction” (“Postmodern Lit His” 1123).

This impulse is made even clearer when Woolf speculates as to what Austen’s writing would have been like had she lived longer and produced more novels. Woolf hypothesizes that, had Austen written six more novels, she would have “trusted less...to dialogue and more to reflection,” while her views on human nature would have become more complicated (“Postmodern Lit His” 1127). According to Woolf, Austen

would have devised a method, clear and composed as ever, but
deeper and more suggestive, for conveying not only what people
say, but what they leave unsaid; not what they are, but what life is.¹⁸

It is hard to ignore the fact that such a description could easily be applied to Woolf’s own narrative method and voice. Here Woolf clearly paints herself as the direct successor of Austen’s literary genius, or rather the potential that she was never able to fully realize. By writing in the same essay that Austen would have been a “forerunner of Henry James and Proust,” Woolf, as

17. Rosenberg refers to the following edition of the above stated text: Virginia Woolf, “Modern Fiction,” in *The Common Reader* (NY: Harcourt Brace, 1984), 135.

18. Virginia Woolf, “Jane Austen,” 1925, in *Women and Writing*, ed. Michèle Barrett (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1979, 109-120, 120.

Rosenberg implies in her essay, necessarily includes her own works in this genealogy ("Postmodern Lit His" 1127). Austen becomes almost a prototype of Woolf, a writer whose efforts served as integral steps in the ultimate development of the "modern" authoress. Rosenberg takes this claim even further by insisting that "Woolf's ambivalent relationship with Austen claims itself in her declaration that Austen would have accomplished what her work has actually accomplished," thus "giv[ing] herself the privilege to write the novels Austen never had the chance to" ("Postmodern Lit His" 1127).

Because a more natural and literal reading of Woolf's critical essays leaves the reader with a deeply divided and ambivalent portrait of Austen, a result that is distinctly antithetical to her stated purpose of stripping the afghans from the image of her literary predecessor, it is necessary to find an interpretation that will not only reconcile such ambiguities but also shed some light on Woolf's motivations for creating such a conflicted depiction. Although Rosenberg's theory focusing on the self-reflexive nature of Woolf's essays and the author's intense identification with the figure of Austen do not completely explain away all of the questions that necessarily enter one's mind when confronted with Woolf's bizarre nativity myth or at times unflinchingly critical tone toward the myth-making project in general, it does provide a significant insight into the legacy of Austen in the artistic development of Woolf, an insight that cannot be provided by a simple close reading of her critical pieces.

Chapter II – The Uncommon Reader: Virginia Woolf v. The Janeites

In her introduction to *Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks*, Brenda Silver writes that

Reader and writer, audience and singer – Woolf was all of these, and if she used her notes to communicate privately with her sources, she used them in addition as a workshop in which to practice her art. Here the critic, the biographer, the feminist, and the novelist gathered together the details that allowed her to ‘look up from the page & arrange them... into one of those makings up which seem so much truer done thus’.¹⁹ (Silver 18)

While Silver’s sentiment directly refers to her project of cataloguing and annotating the numerous reading notebooks collected by Woolf throughout her life, it is not only in such volumes that the many voices of Virginia Woolf can be heard distinctly. After her death in 1941, Woolf, an author for whom writing was not only a career and a passion but also a means of escape from bouts of debilitating depression, left behind countless avenues into the interior workings of her mind. Hidden within diary entries, collections of correspondence, and rough notes and manuscripts are the seeds that would eventually flower into her most highly lauded texts. It is in these unedited and perhaps unfiltered writings that a more intimate and vulnerable Woolf comes through. Here the unwavering and authoritative voice of the critic is supplanted by the often random musings of an active mind attempting to chronicle and digest the countless observations and conversations that occupy it daily.

It is also in these sources that Woolf adds yet another layer of complication to her already ambivalent reception of Jane Austen. While Woolf’s published essays on Austen present a

19. This quote from Woolf can be found in Silver’s volume under the citation (D, III, August 8, 1928).

simultaneously reverential and critical view of her literary predecessor, references to the regency era authoress in Woolf's private writings adopt a decidedly more negative tone. Because such references exist outside of Woolf's literary agenda, her sustained effort to establish a female literary tradition, perhaps these fleeting comments hidden within accounts of daily life and conversations with various friends and acquaintances contain more truth than the published essays examined in the previous chapter.

However, although one would naturally assume that Woolf's unpublished writings would shed a more personal light on her opinion of Austen, by the very nature of their being unedited, in reality the vast majority of Woolf's letters and diary entries present not her own responses to Austen, but rather those of her acquaintances and close colleagues. Each letter and diary entry creates a triangulated discourse with Woolf positioned at the apex, connecting her own views on Austen, her audience's view of Austen, and, somewhat less significantly, her personal opinion of her audience. These passages, instead of illuminating Woolf's most immediate and intimate responses to Austen, depict Woolf as detached from the author whom she rewrites as both her literary mother and literary nemesis in her critical essays; each passing comment or reflection does not come to the reader directly from Woolf, but rather is mitigated through Woolf's opinion of someone else, be it a close friend or a critic of one of her own works. Yet, despite the more social focus of Woolf's letters and diary entries, these sources provide insight into another distinct facet of Woolf's complicated view of Austen by shifting the focus away from simply Woolf's reaction to Austen, to Woolf's reaction to the use of Austen by the general reading public. By examining and often criticizing the reception of Austen's work, as well as the popular interpretation of the "character"²⁰ of Jane Austen in general, Woolf strives to establish her own

20. Austen's transformation from simply a writer into a somewhat fictionalized character is discussed in Judith Lee's "'Without Hate, Without Bitterness, Without Fear, Without Protest, Without Preaching': Virginia Woolf

knowledge of Austen as privileged, adopting the voice of the educated critic in order to speak over the fanatical declarations of the Janeites. However, at times this carefully constructed façade of the critic cracks under the weight of tradition, revealing a glimpse of the devoted reader who struggles to forge a connection with the author whose works have played a significant role in her understanding of literature and perhaps even human nature in general.

In Woolf's unpublished materials, references to the person and works of Jane Austen can be organized into three distinct categories: those which are essentially passing comments concerning Woolf's reading, writing in progress, and discussions with friends and colleagues; those which respond to comparisons between Austen and Woolf made by contemporary literary critics or Woolf herself; and finally those contained in Woolf's reading notebooks. Because Woolf's reading notebooks approach Austen's works in such depth and detail, focusing among other topics on her use of dialogue to present character as well as her use of satire in specific works, with *Northanger Abbey* serving as a principle text for her analysis, these volumes, which could arguably be characterized as Woolf's writing laboratory, will constitute a category of their own. In this chapter, I will focus on the first category of Woolf's unpublished criticism, returning to her response to critical comparisons between herself and Austen and several passages from her reading notebooks in my analysis of the legacy of Austen in Woolf's own fiction in the following chapter.

What is consistent across each category is Woolf's conflicted perception of Austen. While she is quick to recognize the importance of Austen's works in the development of the female author and the evolution of the novel as a literary genre in general, with each passing

Reads Jane Austen" (*Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 12 (1990), 111-116. Lee maintains that the Austen who figures in both the discourse of the Janeites and, to a large extent, in the nonfiction of Woolf is a somewhat mythological creation that stems from the difficulty of "'expressing' a character who is both a woman and a writer, in making 'real' a figure who existed only in a disembodied voice" (113).

phrase and seemingly inconsequential comment Woolf appears to diminish the literary value of Austen's works, ridiculing those she labels as Janeites and undercutting her colleagues' interest in her predecessor as a product of amateurish devotion rather than academic inquiry. In a fashion similar to her critical essays, which suggest that Woolf reconstructs the figure of Austen as both a literary mother and a literary nemesis, Woolf's unpublished materials present a deeply divided opinion of Austen, revealing her desire to simultaneously emulate and manipulate the literary tradition that she has inherited and establish her understanding and imitation of Austen as the result of a privileged connection.

A letter written on Tuesday, April 18, 1913 to her husband Leonard serves as Woolf's first reference to Austen²¹. In this brief entry, Woolf simply catalogues the events of her day, mentioning that she had a visit from "M," a.k.a. Marjorie Strachey, the youngest of Lytton Strachey's²² five sisters. Only a few weeks after adding the postscript "Have you got a beautiful old edition of Jane Austen which you would like to lend me" to a letter written to Violet Dickinson, Woolf's interest in reading and discussing Austen continues to intrude into her daily routine. While Woolf "spent the morning writing, the afternoon putting tulips in the pots," Strachey was busy "making a genealogical table of the Austen family," occasionally drawing Woolf into her project: "At intervals we have wild discussions – she [Strachey] spits and I become vague as a wooly sheep" (*LWV* 21). Although this excerpt initially appears to be merely a glimpse into the everyday life of Woolf, it is significant that literary scholars within Woolf's circle were also intrigued by the figure of Austen, demonstrating that interest in Austen's

21. All excerpts from Woolf's letter are taken from Nigel Nicolson and Joanne Trautmann's collection *The Letters of Virginia Woolf – Volume II: 1912-1922*.

22. Lytton Strachey, the author of *Eminent Victorians*, was a close friend and colleague of Leonard and Virginia Woolf.

authorial identity was not unique to Woolf in the years prior to and during her publication of “Jane Austen” and “Jane Austen Practising” but rather was a fertile area for literary inquiry.

In a letter dated only a few weeks later, Woolf writes to Margeret Llewelyn Davies to discuss the critical reception of “Jane Austen,”²³ stating that “‘Jane Austen’ was received with pleasure by some, hatred by others” (*LWV* 28). Woolf swiftly glosses over this admission of negative critical responses by adding with considerable humor that “It [the essay] has won for me the friendship of a tawny bitch in South Kensington, Edith Sichel, who is black to the third finger joint in ink” (*LWV* 28). Here, more information detailing the reception of Woolf’s critical essays would be beneficial for this study, helping to complete our understanding of the popular perception of Austen’s life and work at the time of Woolf’s writing. However, perhaps the omission of such details is what is most revealing about Woolf’s own authorial identity. By circumventing an actual discussion of her works with a humorous anecdote, Woolf inadvertently displays her anxiety over the reception of her critical works, pieces that, although on the surface appear to be simply historical lives of the major figures in the female literary canon, in reality serve as a sort of manifesto for Woolf’s understanding of authorship and her own position within both the classical and female literary trajectory.

Not only Woolf’s correspondences, but also several entries in her personal diaries, shed light upon her ambivalent stance concerning the role of Austen in her own literary development and that of all female and male authors alike. In an entry dated Monday, March 18, 1918, Woolf writes of a Sunday afternoon during which “the burden of visitors was oppressive,”²⁴ highlighting the general topics discussed by the congregation of literary and social figures who

23. “Jane Austen” was published on May 8, 1913 in *TLS* (the Times Literary Supplement).

24. All diary excerpts are taken from *The Diaries of Virginia Woolf – Volume I: 1915-1919*, Ed. Anne Oliver Bell, (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt Brace & Company), 1977.

crowded her parlor (*DVW* 129). When chronicling her conversation with Middleton Murray, Woolf compares his knowledge of literature, and thus the scholarly value of his comments, with those of her frequent companion Nicholas Bagenal, stating that “I had a good deal of talk about books with him, such as one couldn’t have with Nick – though he’s read Jane Austen, & can keep his end up by natural good sense & taste” (*DVW* 129). By implying that, despite his knowledge of Austen, Bagenal is still relatively unversed in the art of true literary criticism and debate, Woolf sets up the works of Austen as foundational yet somewhat banal, texts that could be, and often are, read and enjoyed by those who are completely outside of the elite literary circle to which she belongs.

Woolf continues this train of reasoning in a later entry written on Sunday, September 21, 1919, over a year later. Criticizing Nick’s behavior during his visit Woolf writes

This is I think much his real character, but superimposed is a dab
of culture, taking the safe direction of 18th century literature and
art. ‘Thomas Gray knew how to write letters from the country –
very witty interesting letters – Have you ever read Thomas Gray[sic]?’
Then Jane Austen appears. She is his great fan. (*DVW* 299)

The obvious reversal in the final sentence leaves the reader unsure of who is a “fan” of whom. Austen could presumably have read and enjoyed the poetry of Thomas Grey,²⁵ yet the interpretation that is more consistent with Woolf’s gently mocking tone is that Austen herself was a fan of Nick Bagenal. Curiously, Austen herself records a similar episode of literary

25. Curiously, in *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf returns to Grey, rewriting a line of his poem “Elegy in a Country Churchyard” to include Austen. Lamenting the countless silent and anonymous women who came before her and who paved the way for her own work as an author, Woolf writes that whenever one reads of “a wise woman selling herbs, or even of a remarkable man who had a mother, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet, of some mute and inglorious Jane Austen” [emphasis mine] (49).

insensitivity involving Grey's poetry in her novel *Emma* (1816). While speaking with the heroine Emma Woodhouse about the latest addition to Highbury's social scene, the newly arrived Mrs. Elton alludes to Grey's "Elegy on a Country Churchyard" in an attempt to describe the musical talents of Jane Fairfax, reciting and misquoting the oft-quoted line "Full many a flower is born to blush unseen, / And waste its sweetness on the desert air."²⁶ By replacing "sweetness" with "fragrance" and having her introduce such famous lines by inquiring whether any members of her audience have heard "those charming lines of the poet," Austen highlights not only Mrs. Elton's ostentatious manner but also her lack of literary sophistication (*Emma* 221). The close similarities between Austen's fictitious scene and Woolf's presumably true-to-life diary entry suggest that Woolf may have deliberately fashioned her account of Nick's literary failings to follow the pattern set forth by Austen's Mrs. Elton. Woolf, like Austen, adopts a satirical tone in order to display the faults of her "character," portraying Nick as a somewhat pompous individual striving to insert himself into the elevated literary discourse of his companions. Yet what is even more significant in this particular entry is that Woolf's principle object of derision is not Nick but Austen; in essence she embraces Austen's narrative voice for the sole purpose of criticizing her predecessor's works as cliché due to their accessibility.

While the ironic syntactical inversion emphasizes Bagenal's literary "ignorance," it also reveals Woolf's scorn for the larger Janeite movement in general. Such a self-consciously ridiculous statement is reminiscent of Woolf's criticism of the Janeites in her essay "Jane Austen at Sixty" (1924)²⁷. There Woolf imagines Austen's devotees as "twenty-five elderly gentlemen

26. This excerpt from Grey's poem is taken from p. 399, 221n. in the Oxford World Classics' edition of *Emma*, with introduction and notes by Adela Pinch (2003).

27. "Jane Austen at Sixty" was originally published in *Nation*, December 15, p.433 and was reprinted in *The Common Reader* (London: Hogarth Press, 1925).

living in the neighborhood of London who resent any slight upon [Austen's] genius as if it were an insult offered to the chastity of their Aunt."²⁸ According to Woolf, Nick, through his discussion of Austen, has appropriated the figure of the author for himself, creating an image of the writer that conforms to his own experiences and personal needs. This action is not only an appropriation but also an act of subjugation; Austen is placed in the subordinate position of the "fan" while Nick adopts the role of the object of admiration. By writing such an ironic and "tongue-in-cheek" reversal, Woolf may have been commenting on the traditional gender dynamics that originally incited her desire to claim a feminine literary canon of her own, wishing to "take back" the authoress whom she believes to be emblematic of the female writer in general.

Although Woolf satirizes her companion's impulse to personify Austen, she arguably makes the same interpretative leap in her own critical essays. Like Bagenal, Woolf in "Jane Austen" and "Jane Austen Practising," rewrites the figure of Austen; however, instead of molding the author into a close friend or acquaintance, she manipulates Austen to fit within her own literary project. Austen becomes both a necessary step in the development of Woolf's own authorial identity and a representation of the artist that Woolf simultaneously wishes to embrace and supplant. In a letter written to R.W. Chapman in 1936, Woolf expresses what some critics have labeled her "opposition to idealizing"²⁹ Austen: "I have often thought of writing an article on the coarseness of Jane Austen. The people who talk of her as if she were a niminy piminy

28. This excerpt was quoted in Laura Fairchild Brodie's "Jane Austen and the Common Reader: 'Opinions of Mansfield Park,' 'Opinions of Emma,' and the Janeite Phenomenon," which was published in *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 37:1 (1995: Spring), 54.

29. In her piece "'Without Hate, Without Fear, Without Protest, Without Preaching,': Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen," Judith Lee argues that one can interpret Woolf's writings on Austen as a "dialogue" in which she negotiates her own authorial identity while also attempting to depict a female writer who is a "real" as opposed to a "life-like" figure. According to Lee, Woolf's rejection of critics who are preoccupied with biographical anecdotes concerning the life of Austen is integral to her project, forcing her to try to "'express' a character through whom we can understand experience instead of describing a figure we merely observe" (112).

spinster always annoy me.” Here Woolf claims a privileged knowledge of her predecessor, rejecting the highly domestic image of Austen that is promulgated by the general and “less informed” readership.

However, just as soon as Woolf separates Austen from the domestic sphere, she “is eager to find [her] at tea” (“Who’s Afraid of J.A.” 114).³⁰ Janet Todd examines this paradox in great detail in her essay “Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen.” Citing Henry James’ portrait of Austen as “the brown thrush who tells his story from the garden bough” as a framework, Todd analyzes Woolf’s manipulation of her contemporary’s characterization into a “twittering image” of domesticity (114). While James’ Austen is a simple songbird relating nature to the random listener, Woolf’s Austen “Humbly and gaily...collected the twigs and straws out of which the nest was to be made and placed them neatly together. The twigs and straws were a little dry and dusty in themselves... Vice, adventure, passion were left outside”³¹ (“Who’s Afraid of J.A.” 114). Here Woolf presents Austen not as the “coarse” and elusive individual that she earlier declared her predecessor to be, but rather paints a picture of the authoress that mirrors the Janeites’ “niminy piminy spinster.” Instead of singing her song triumphantly as James’ Austen does, Woolf’s creation shifts idly through her observations and experiences, leaving behind the allure of “adventure” and “passion” for the “dry and dusty” materials of everyday life. Yet Woolf does not adhere to this domestic image of Austen for long. As Todd eloquently observes, “The motherly domestic image fades before Medea in Hampshire” when Woolf remarks that

30. Janet Todd explores Woolf’s desire to simultaneously entrench Austen within and resurrect her from the realm of the parlor in her essay “Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen” (*Jane Austen: New Perspectives, Women & Literature New Series*, Vol. 3).

31. All of Todd’s direct quotations from Woolf’s essay come from the collection *Virginia Woolf’s Collected Essays* (London: Hogarth Press), 1966. This particular quote is from Volume I, 148-149.

“Sometimes it seems as if her creatures were born merely to give Jane Austen the supreme delight of slicing their heads off”³²(“Who’s Afraid of J.A.” 115).

This characterization is in direct opposition to Woolf’s earlier rendering of Austen; however, its significance does not rest merely in the paradox that it furthers. Although Woolf’s violent recreation of her literary predecessor arguably carries as little merit as the creative musing of the Janeites, it is distinct from the movement she condemns because it is grounded in what is perhaps the most accurate representation of Austen that is available to her readers, her actual novels. Because Woolf’s remark refers to Austen’s bitingly satirical treatment of many of her literary characters, it has at its foundation not the accumulation of questionable and often fictitious assumptions that have clouded the popular perception of Austen since her first appearance in literary discourse, but rather the narrative voice of Austen as it can be heard in her texts. In Woolf’s mind, this direct connection to an actual text may legitimize her revision of Austen, locating her opinions within the realm of literary analysis as opposed to folklore.

Woolf once more walks the thin line between idolizing misappropriation and textually-based analysis in “Jane Austen.” Here Woolf goes as far as to create a contemporary scenario for Austen, imagining the eighteenth century writer into another and distinctly more modern life:

Had she lived a few more years only, all that [her personal obscurity] would have been altered. She would have stayed in London, dined out, lunched out, met famous people, made new friends, read, traveled, and carried back to the quiet country cottage a hoard of observations to feast upon at leisure. (“J.A.” 120)

32. As quoted in Todd’s “Who’s Afraid of Jane Austen.” This exact quotation can be found in Volume I of *Virginia Woolf’s Collected Essays*, 149.

Here Woolf falls prey to the very trap that she is so quick to ridicule in her colleagues; she looks beyond Austen's texts, which are arguably the only true representations of Austen that remain, to the "character" of the early writer and, when faced with numerous narrative gaps, attempts to reconstruct her predecessor to mirror her own personal experiences and contemporary desires. This tendency is highlighted even further by Mary Ann O'Farrell's analysis in her essay "Jane Austen's Friendship."³³ According to O'Farrell, the above quotation portrays an existence that is remarkably similar to that of Woolf's. Comparing the cycle of country and urban leisure that marks the passage of time in the "virtual" Austen's world with Woolf's similarly structured daily life, O'Farrell concludes that "it seems possible to imagine that, ... Woolf's virtual Austen might not have wandered unaccompanied, and would perhaps have counted Woolf among her new fit friends" (45). Like the "elderly gentlemen" she likens Nick to in her diary entry, Woolf herself occasionally resembles the Janeites she so vehemently denigrates.

There are several possible explanations for this clear contradiction. Woolf may genuinely believe that she is not being contradictory. In her eyes, her vision of Austen holds more truth than the amateurish musings of the Janeites. Arguably there could be both a theoretical and an empirical justification for such a belief. It could be that, according to Woolf, the itinerary of traveling, meeting famous people, and "dining out" is simply a necessary precondition for any modern author. Therefore, Woolf's life parallels the counterfactual Austen's due to each woman's role as a writer and not due to a desire on Woolf's end for a connection with the literary past. Yet this justification is unlikely because it is dubious that Woolf would hold such an untenable generalization about authorship, namely that *every* successful modern author would adhere to such a lifestyle. Woolf could also contrive an empirical justification for

33. O'Farrell's essay can be found in the collection *Janeites: Austen's Disciples and Devotees*, Ed. Deidre Lynch, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), 45-59.

her prediction, citing not a general principle, but rather facts from Austen's actual life that would precipitate such actions in the future. It would then be merely a matter of coincidence that Woolf's life mirrors Austen's. However, such a claim cannot be correct either. The very reason that Woolf is forced to participate in the myth-making project that she ridicules is the fact that not enough historical data exists concerning the life of Austen. What little evidence she actually has, e.g. Austen's habit of writing within the confines of a country parsonage, clearly does not lend credence to the counterfactual future she creates for Austen.

Again, the real issue for Woolf is the source of the prediction about Austen. Woolf removes all the lenses and looks to the image created by the actual text. In her essay "Jane Austen and the Geese" (1920), which doubles as a review of Mary Augusta Leigh's *Personal Aspects of Jane Austen*, Woolf explicitly calls upon all fellow critics and readers alike to adopt her "more accurate" interpretive stance:

Ever since Jane Austen became famous they [critics] have been hissing inanities in chorus... [D]ebating whether she was a lady, whether she told the truth, whether she could read, and whether she had personal experience of hunting a fox is positively upsetting. We remember that Jane Austen wrote novels. It might be worth while for her critics to read them.³⁴

The Janeites, according to Woolf, have read the texts incorrectly, if they have in reality "read" the texts at all, and are thus unable to construct an accurate depiction of Austen. Because the

34. This quotation is taken from Judith Lee's "'Without Hate, Without Fear, Without Protest, Without Preaching,'": Virginia Woolf Reads Jane Austen," *Persuasions: Journal of the Jane Austen Society of North America*, 12 (1990), 111-116.

picture on which they base their assumptions is incorrect, their assumptions are necessarily incorrect as well.

Woolf advocates a similar return to the text as the primary source of information about an author's identity in her essay "Personalities" (1958).³⁵ In this examination of the elusive nature of authorial identity, Woolf inevitably turns to the figure of Jane Austen, writing that "There is Jane Austen, thumbbed, scored, annotated, magnified, living almost within the memory of man, and yet as inscrutable in her small way as Shakespeare in his vast one"³⁶("Personalities" 170). Claiming that Austen "flatters and cajoles you with the promise of intimacy and then, at the last moment, there is the same blankness. Are those Jane Austen's eyes or is it a glass, a mirror, a silver spoon held up to the sun," Woolf suggests that one should abandon the pursuit of trivial anecdotes concerning the life of an artist in favor of analyzing the texts which will remain long after her death ("Personalities" 170-171). According to Woolf,

In ransacking their little drawers we shall find out little about them.

All this has been distilled into their books. The life is thin, modest, colourless, like blue skimmed milk at the bottom of the jar. It is the imperfect artists who never manage to say the whole thing in their books who wield the power of personality over us. ("Personalities" 171)

Thus Austen's very inscrutability is a sign of her literary genius, remaining perpetually elusive to her readers as a result of having put all of herself into her written words. Woolf even creates a negative and somewhat hostile image of Austen almost as a justification for her alleged reluctance to investigate the "true" character of Austen:

35. Virginia Woolf, "Personalities," in *Granite and Rainbow* (London: Hogarth Press, 1958).

36. "Personalities" can be found in the collection *The Moment and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Company [1957] 1975).

Here is Jane Austen, a great writer as we all agree, but, for my own part, I would rather not find myself alone in the room with her. A sense of meaning withheld, a smile at something unseen, an atmosphere of perfect control and courtesy mixed with something finely satirical, which, were it not directed against the things in general rather than against individuals, would be almost malicious, would, so I feel, make it alarming to find her at home. ("Personalities" 171)

What is significant here is that Woolf uses a fictional rendering of Austen in order to dissuade other readers, especially those who participate in the Janeite phenomenon, from doing the very same thing. However, Woolf's imaginative leap is distinct from those she condemns because her characterization of Austen is based not upon simple conjecture or wishful thinking on the part of a fan, but rather is grounded within the terms established by Austen's own narrative voice. Like the subtly ironic voice that narrates each of Austen's novels, Woolf's Austen has a penetrating stare that pierces through outward appearances and conventions to the realm of the "unseen," hiding her tendency toward satire behind a careful façade of cordiality and social decorum.

As we have seen thus far, one major question has dominated much of the scholarship that has been produced concerning the relationship between Woolf and her literary predecessor. Why Woolf is so ambivalent in her treatment of Austen is an issue that many critics have tried to reconcile, leading some scholars, like Todd, Trumpener, and Rosenberg among others, to look to Woolf's connection to the larger Janeite movement in general for an explanation for her consistent ambiguity. Yet this attempt at clarification only results in another question: how could Woolf possibly condemn the popular and somewhat fanatical movement while she herself appears to fall into the very same imaginative traps that the Janeites so often find themselves in? There are two possible explanations for this seeming contradiction. First, as I have stated earlier

in this chapter, Woolf's sources for her predictions and assumptions about Austen are all "textual"; each Woolfian reconstruction of Austen is grounded firmly in evidence provided by the early authoress' narrative voice or the subject matter of her novels. This interpretation, I hope, has been amply justified in this chapter as well as the previous one which sought to distinguish Woolf's participation in the myth-making project from that of those readers and literary critics she disparages.

The second distinction between Woolf and the Janeites is that Woolf sees her motives as more honorable than the self-interested and somewhat egotistical aims of the common readers of Austen. She rewrites Austen in order to establish an origin for the feminist literary canon. The first chapter of this thesis clearly establishes Woolf's reading of Austen as both her literary mother and literary nemesis, a dual role that is crucial to Woolf's understanding of Austen's position in the trajectory of female literary history, as well as her own connection to the literary past. Another motive for her appropriation of Austen is that Woolf also needs to figure herself as the direct successor of Austen in order to legitimize her narrative style, which is drastically unlike any that had come before her. By drawing parallels between Austen's later works and the tenets of those authors who would become known as the Moderns, Woolf provides the bridge between the genre of the novel of manners that Austen arguably perfected and the Modern literary movement that is required to make the latter legitimate. This justification, which uses Austen's works and prose style as a crutch with which Woolf can support her more radical literary experiments, can easily be demonstrated through a textual analysis of Woolf's second, and arguably most traditional novel, *Night and Day*. It is to this work and its remarkable similarities to Austen's later novels that I now turn my attention.

Chapter III – A Woolf in Jane’s Clothing: The Legacy of Jane Austen in the Fiction of Virginia Woolf

In response to critics who labeled his wife’s second work a mere imitation of the traditional English novel, Leonard Woolf explained that *Night and Day* was, exactly as E.M. Forester had suggested, a ““deliberate exercise in classicism””³⁷ (*N&D* xiv). A novel whose “most pressing questions [are] questions of romance, and marriage, and the writing of biographies,” *Night and Day* (1919) appeared to be distinctly out of place when it was first published during the tumultuous years immediately following the end of World War I (*N&D* xvi). Katherine Mansfield, who literary scholar Suzanne Raitt labels “the only writer that Virginia Woolf ever regarded as a rival,” summarized the dissatisfaction of numerous contemporary readers and critics when she “suggested that *Night and Day* was some kind of freak whose serene traditionalism seemed to deny the traumatic changes of the war years during which it was written”³⁸:

We had thought this world vanished for ever [sic], that it was impossible to find on the great ocean of literature a ship that was unaware of what has been happening. Yet here is *Night and Day* fresh, new, and exquisite, a novel in the tradition of the English novel. In the midst of our admiration it makes us

37. As seen in Raitt’s introduction to the Oxford University Press 1992 edition of Woolf’s *Night and Day*, xiv, and originally published in E.M. Forester’s “The Early Novels of Virginia Woolf” in *Abinger Harvest* (London: Edward Arnold, 1936), 104-112, 106.

38. Raitt p. xiv.

feel old and chill: we had never thought to look upon its likes again!³⁹ (*N&D* xvi)

Although Mansfield may have had personal reasons for rejecting Woolf's foray into the past, her own beloved brother "Chummie" having died in the war, rendering those years "irrevocably damaging" to her psyche⁴⁰, she was not alone in her criticism, with distinguished writers such as W.L. George and Ford Maddox Ford echoing her sentiments in their own reviews of Woolf's controversial novel⁴¹.

While it was clear to all contemporary readers and reviewers that Woolf had self-consciously endeavored to imitate those classical authors who had occupied the mind and writing of her father Leslie Stephen, there was no such consensus as to why she would intentionally alienate her work from the momentous events that were rocking the very foundations of civilization at the time of her writing. In her introduction to the Oxford World's Classics 1992 edition of *Night and Day*, Suzanne Raitt offers two possible explanations for such a marked digression in an artistic career that was previously and would subsequently continue to be so firmly grounded in radical modernist experiment. First, Raitt turns to Woolf's emotional state at the time of writing in order to decipher her exact intentions behind the novel's traditional

39. As seen in Suzanne Raitt's introduction to the Oxford University Press 1992 edition of Woolf's *Night and Day*, xiv. Raitt's source is *Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murray, 1913-1922*, ed. John Middleton Murray (London: Constable, 1951), 388; 13 November 1919.

40. In a letter to her husband John Middleton Murray, Mansfield stated that, as a result of the war and the loss of her brother in combat, "I'd say we have died and live again" (*Katherine Mansfield's Letters to John Middleton Murray*, 393, 16 Nov. 1919).

41. In *English Review* (March 1920), W.L. George stated that in *Night and Day* "excessive prominence is given to minor emotions, while no space at all is accorded to social stirrings," while in *Piccadilly Review* (23 October 1919) Ford Maddox Ford wrote that Woolf's second novel was a "moral-less but very entertaining ... ado about nothing." Both of these quotations can be found in Raitt's introduction to Oxford University Press 1992 edition of Woolf's *Night and Day*, xv. Raitt's sources are: 1. W.L. George, "A Painter's Literature," *English Review* (Mar. 1920), reprinted in Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (eds.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 82-84, 84; 2. Ford Maddox Ford, *Piccadilly Review* (23 Oct. 1919), reprinted in *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage*, 72-75, 75.

structure and subject matter. She reasons that perhaps Woolf's own emotional instability, which was punctuated by a severe mental breakdown in 1913 and an acute relapse in 1915, was responsible for *Night and Day's* "failure to address the disastrous international events of the years during which she was working on it" (*N&D* xv). Raitt further contends that "the writing of *Night and Day* was a kind of occupational therapy, undertaken cautiously as a part of her slow convalescence from 1916 to 1919" (*N&D* xv). Under this line of reasoning,

Virginia was simply too fragile mentally to allow herself to document the destruction of the pre-War world towards which she had such intense and complex feelings. Instead, she explored private dramas, the conflicts and resolutions of personal emotions. (*N&D* xv-xvi)

While Raitt's first justification offers a simple and somewhat convenient explanation for Woolf's avoidance of the timely and traumatic subject matter of the war, the topics of Woolf's later novels would appear to contradict such a tendency toward denial⁴².

Raitt also suggests that Woolf's return to the classical English novel could have been a direct result of her experience of writing her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915). According to Raitt, while writing her first work Woolf "had become conscious of a dissatisfaction with the traditional form of the novel" and "Feeling that she was insufficiently experienced as yet to begin experimenting, she set herself the task of mastering the conventions before she went on to surpass them in later novels" (*N&D* xvi). While Raitt's second assumption appears to be much

42. In *To the Lighthouse* Woolf openly embraces the traumatic memories of her mother and father, Julia and Leslie Stephen, admitting in her memoir *Moments of Being* that it was only through writing that she could ever put to rest the ghosts of her tragic past. In her biography *Virginia Woolf*, Hermione Lee emphasizes Woolf's tendency to come to terms with the tragedies of life through her writing, citing the inspiration for *To the Lighthouse*, the death of Woolf's mother Julia Stephen, and the resulting destruction of her childhood, when the author was only thirteen years old: "[Woolf] was haunted by it [her mother's death] all her life; she wanted to call *To the Lighthouse* an 'elegy.' In her writing and re-writing of this death she did two startlingly incompatible things at once. She ruthlessly subverted the conventions of the Victorian death-bed scene, thereby killing off her mother again and everything she stood for. And she engaged with courage and painful honesty in the extremely difficult work of understanding the meaning of her childhood" (126).

more in line with the analysis offered in this thesis thus far, it is still slightly deficient for the purpose of explaining Woolf's motivations for adhering to the classical template⁴³ when writing *Night and Day*. It is not so much that Woolf *could not* deviate from convention, but rather that she *would not*. Raitt reflects this subtlety when she states that "*Night and Day* was...a deliberate attempt, by a natural rebel, to conform" (*N&D* xvi). What Raitt fails to recognize is that Woolf "deliberately conforms" not with the intention of eventually surpassing tradition in her later works but with the aim of manipulating such conventions within the very text that initially appears to conform. *Night and Day* is not simply a "deliberate exercise in classicism," but also represents an attempt by Woolf to initiate a gradual break from the literary past. Although much critical attention has been given to the absence of the war and its drastic repercussions in the drama of the text, what is significant about *Night and Day*, and consequently what is pertinent to this study, is not simply Woolf's recognition that the traditional literary forms of the past would fail to accurately communicate the horror and disillusionment that remained in the wake of World War I, but rather the novel's role as a transitional piece that attempts to bridge the gap between the past and the present, the pre- and post-war worlds, the classical and the modern novel.

While *Night and Day* initially appears to be a direct imitation of the traditional novel, its focus on love, marriage, and the affairs of only a handful of aristocratic families leading to numerous critical comparisons between Woolf and her ultimate literary predecessor and nemesis Jane Austen, the novel's structure, characters, and subject matter become more "Woolfian," and hence more modern, with each turn of the page, culminating in a sort of compromise in which

43. For the purposes of this study the term "classical" refers to the novel form that rose to prominence in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, which is best exemplified in the genre of the novel of manners that was perfected by Austen. Throughout this thesis, the terms "classical" and "traditional" are employed interchangeably and can be understood to designate the same class of literature.

the tenets of Modernism and the conventions of the Victorians merge to form an uncomfortable and temporary hybrid. Katharine Hilbery, the novel's heroine whose day-to-day existence closely mirrors that of the young Woolf due to the intense anxiety she experiences in connection to her late grandfather Richard Alardyce's literary genius and her mother's determination to recapture the identity of her long-dead poet father, in a way personifies the transition that the novel as a whole aspires to catalyze. Katharine is trapped between the past and the present, spending her days indulging her mother's desire to produce the perfect biography, and her evenings struggling to forge her own way in the world while not completely disowning the conventions of the previous generation⁴⁴. This struggle is exemplified through Katharine's indecision over whether to remain faithful to her engagement to the overly romantic and sentimental poet William Rodney, a character who can easily be interpreted as a caricature of the Romantics and perhaps even the Victorians, or turn to the iconoclastic and "modern" workingman Ralph Denham, a figure whose impoverished background and artistic ambitions closely parallel those of Joyce's Stephen Daedalus. In the end Katharine both succeeds in her desire to break from the past and fails to abandon the stifling conventions of the previous era; although she finally accepts her love for Ralph, after an abrupt and somewhat unexplained epiphany, she recants her former conclusion to never marry and succumbs to the societal pressure to participate in the sacrament of marriage.⁴⁵ With regards to her "love triangle" as well

44. In the ninth chapter of the novel, Katharine imagines herself as literally wedged between the past and the present during a discussion of the controversial family affair of her second cousin Cyril. While listening to her mother reminisce about her father's generation, one which allegedly did not create such improper social stirrings, "Katharine could not forbear to turn over the pages of the album in which the old photographs were stored. The faces of these men and women shone forth wonderfully after the hubbub of living faces, and seemed, as her mother had said, to wear a marvelous dignity and calm, as if they had ruled their kingdoms justly and deserved great love... Once more Katharine felt the serene air all round her, and seemed far off to hear the solemn beating of the sea upon the shore. *But she knew that she must join the present on to this past*" [emphasis mine] (118).

45. The novel ends before any ceremony is actually performed, however it is strongly implied in the final scene of Katharine and Ralph walking the streets of London at dusk that she has reneged her initial declaration that "being

as her pseudo-career as her grandfather's biographer, Katharine is cemented within the transitional period that is similar to Woolf's own position in the literary trajectory. However, instead of admitting her "inexperience" and surrendering to the conventions of classicism as Raitt contends, through the writing of *Night and Day*, Woolf demonstrates her abilities as an author by adopting and manipulating the classical conventions of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century English novel in order to pave the way for the signature modern style that she would develop and perfect in her later works.

At this point in the chapter, the reader may justifiably ask what Woolf's recourse to a more traditional literary template could possibly have to do with her complex and markedly ambivalent relationship with Jane Austen. The above analysis of *Night and Day* is crucial to our understanding of the second prong of Woolf's justification for her interest, or arguably her fascination, with Austen as distinct from the misappropriating tendencies of the Janeites. As stated in the conclusion of the previous chapter, Woolf desires to portray herself as the direct successor of Austen, a figure whom she rewrites as both the origin of the female literary canon and the quintessential classical novelist. This desire is directly linked to Woolf's need to legitimize her narrative style, a radical deviation from convention that in many ways anticipates and initiates the Modernist movement. In a letter written to Gerald Brennan on Christmas Day 1922,⁴⁶ Woolf elaborates upon this project. In response to Brennan's earlier assertion that contemporary writers must "renounce" character in novels, Woolf initially agrees that "This

engaged is very bad for the character" (181). Earlier in the novel, Katharine had also imagined "a perfectly loveless marriage, as the thing one did actually in real life, for possibly the people who dream thus are those who do the most prosaic thing" (108). Such a statement is clearly dismissed as Katharine embraces her newly acknowledged love for Ralph.

46. Although this letter post-dates the publication of *Night and Day*, it is still significant in that it expresses Woolf's continued desire to gradually break from the literary traditions of the past. While she acknowledges that the old forms must eventually be abandoned, she advocates a slow transition that utilizes the allegedly "outdated" conventions as a legitimizing force for the Moderns' more radical innovations.

generation must break its neck in order that the next may have smooth going,” but quickly qualifies her previous statement, writing “But I agree that one must (we, our generation must) renounce finally the achievement of the greater beauty: the beauty which comes from completeness, in such books as *War and Peace*, and *Stendhal* I suppose, and some of Jane Austen” (598-599).⁴⁷ This excerpt appears to support Woolf’s larger intention to both embrace and manipulate the techniques and themes of Austen in *Night and Day*. Unlike Brennan, Woolf does not desire to completely abandon the literary traditions of the past, but rather seeks to use them to legitimize her literary deviations. What is crucial to this distinction is her use of the word “finally” in the above quotation; she does not advocate renouncing character and other traditional literary conventions immediately. Instead, Woolf sees the evolution of Modernism as a process which necessarily starts with the templates provided by her predecessors. Thus the classical format of the novel of manners and more specifically Austen’s own prose style and techniques of satire become a crutch for Woolf, one that she can discard as soon as her distinct voice is accepted into literary discourse.

The clearest site of Woolf’s emulation and subsequent abandonment of Austen is her early novel *Night and Day*. It has already been established that the subject matter and style of *Night and Day* are reminiscent of the classical English novel, but what the rest of this chapter aims to demonstrate is that it is not simply the classical genre in general that Woolf wishes to establish as the foundation of her own artistic endeavors, but more specifically the works and narrative techniques of Austen. Not only does Woolf’s second novel imitate Austen’s body of work in its narrative structure and prose style, but it also addresses thematically many of the same issues that plagued Woolf’s conception of her relationship to Austen throughout her career.

47. All excerpts from Woolf’s letter are taken from *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*, Ed., Nigel Nicolson & Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1976).

Just as Woolf struggled to reconstruct the figure of Austen, while simultaneously negotiating her position as an artist in relation to her great literary predecessor, Woolf's heroine Katharine, along with her mother Emily, are in a constant state of anxiety over how best to preserve the memory of the fictional poet Richard Alardyce. Their struggle is even more complicated than Woolf's because Alardyce is the father of Emily and hence the grandfather of Katharine. Although the Hilbery women look back to a patriarch as opposed to a "literary mother," their experience is a more literal and true-to-life rendering of Woolf's struggle to adequately rewrite Austen. Their story lends a sense of reality to Woolf's own desire to demystify the image of her literary matriarch. Katharine echoes Woolf's own anxiety over Austen's looming authorial identity when she states that "perhaps the conclusiveness of a great ancestor is a little discouraging to those who run the risk of comparison with him" (*N&D* 35). Thematically, stylistically, and structurally, *Night and Day* serves as a valuable insight into Woolf's complex perception of Austen, one that serves to both distinguish her appropriation of Austen from that of the Janeites and the general reading public, and illuminate her understanding of her literary predecessor's position in the classical as well as the feminine literary canon.

Before embarking on a textual analysis of *Night and Day*, it would be beneficial to address the most obvious objection to the argument of this chapter, that being the question of why Woolf would look to Austen and the classical tradition as opposed to the works of the Victorian era, the period that directly precedes the war and thus the advent of modernity. Arguably if Woolf wanted to bridge the gap between the past and the present, she would look to connect her own time with the immediate past instead of reaching back decades to an age that was so far removed socially, politically, and temporally from her own. However, there are two clear justifications for Woolf's dismissal of the Victorians as an adequate foundation on which to

ground her more radical literary experiments. First, and perhaps most obviously, the Victorian novel, which arguably evolved out of the novel of manners, the literary genre that was perfected by Austen, carried with it too much emotional baggage in the mind of Woolf; in her eyes, it was inextricably linked to the legacy of her father Leslie Stephen and the personal tragedies of her childhood and adolescence.

Beyond her personal aversion to the works of the Victorians, Woolf saw the principle “masterpieces” of this era as more limited than those of the classical period; according to Woolf, the Victorians were hindered and somewhat tainted by the political, social, and gender reforms that characterized their generation. As a result of these limitations, the Victorian novel was viewed as more naïve than the objective and “inscrutable” works of Austen, maintaining some of the conventions of the gothic and sentimental novels which necessarily rendered it more fictitious than the “anti-romantic” works of Woolf’s “literary mother.”

Woolf’s disdain for the Victorian sensibility can be discerned in her essay “Phases of Fiction”⁴⁸ (1929), a piece in which she attempts to categorize the great works of literature under thematic and stylistic headings. Although Woolf initially labels Austen a “Character-Monger,” a title which she also gives to Dickens and Tolstoy, she is quick to distinguish Austen’s literary achievements from the other realist authors she lists. Focusing on the use of dialogue as a major point for comparison, Woolf separates Austen from the quintessential Victorian Charles Dickens, an author whom she believes to have excelled at portraying intricate and believable scenes, but who failed to convey the interaction between characters without employing “dialogue that is vapid in the extreme or sentimental beyond belief” (“Phases of Fiction” 114). In an extended

48. Virginia Woolf, “Phases of Fiction,” 1929, in *The Moment and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1975).

analysis of Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), Woolf emphasizes her predecessor's ability to give "the whole of a character" through dialogue"⁴⁹:

At once, when we open *Pride and Prejudice*, we are aware that the sentence has taken on a different character...The sentence here runs like a knife, in and out, cutting a shape clear...It is done by the use of dialogue. ("Phases of Fiction" 114)

Choosing the scene in which the Bingleys, Mr. Darcy, and Elizabeth Bennet gather in the drawing room of Netherfield and discuss the merits and techniques of letter writing, Woolf performs a close reading of Austen's celebrated text, emphasizing the early authoress' tendency to "define and distinguish" her creations through seemingly inconsequential encounters:

Half a dozen people come together after dinner and begin, as they so well might, to discuss letter writing. Mr. Darcy writes slowly and 'studies too much for words of four syllables.' Mr. Bingley, on the other hand, (for it is necessary that we should get to know them both and they can be quickest shown if they are opposed) 'leaves out half his words and blots out the rest.' But such is only the first rough shaping that gives the outline of the face... So by means of a perfectly natural question and answer, everyone is defined and, as they talk, they become not only more clearly seen, but each stroke of dialogue brings them together or moves them apart, so that the group is no longer casual but interlocked. ("Phases of Fiction" 115)

49. Virginia Woolf's Reading Notebooks: Notebook XIV, entry #4 ("Notes on *Northanger Abbey*"), Holograph RN1.14., courtesy of The Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library.

Unlike Dickens, and arguably, at least according to Woolf, the majority of the Victorians, who crafted dialogue that leaves the reader dissatisfied with its sentimentality and exaggeration, Austen's perfectly rounded dialogue "is not mere talk, it has an emotional intensity which gives it more than brilliance"⁵⁰ ("Phases of Fiction" 115). For Woolf, Austen's writing is almost timeless, appearing as if it were an improvement upon the more naïve efforts of the Victorians as opposed to the abandoned and "superior" predecessor that it is in reality⁵¹.

As argued in the first chapter of this study, Austen is an appropriate "role model" for Woolf because her works, particularly her later novels, in many aspects directly anticipate the literary methods that Woolf and her Modernist colleagues would cultivate more than a century later. In his text *The Language of Jane Austen*, Norman Page examines this very connection, exploring the "modern" aspects of Austen's final work *Persuasion* (1817). According to Page, the heroine of *Persuasion*, Anne Eliot, is unlike any other of Austen's female protagonists; not only is she "somewhat older than the other heroines," but "most importantly, she has undergone a major emotional experience long before the action of the novel begins" (*The Language of Jane Austen* 48). Unlike Austen's previous heroine Emma Woodhouse, "who is confident, optimistic and gregarious, her impulses finding ready expression in speech and action, Anne is withdrawn,

50. Woolf once more comments upon the stylistic genius of Austen in her 1919 essay "The Anatomy of Fiction." Here she focuses on Austen's *Emma*, writing "Still, if you have a natural taste for books it is probable that after reading *Emma*, to take an instance, some reflections upon the art of Jane Austen may occur to you – how exquisitely one incident relieves another; how definitely, by not saying something she says it; how surprisingly, therefore, her expressive phrases when they come. Between the sentences, apart from the story, a little shape of some kind builds itself up" (54). This essay can be found in the collection *Granite and Rainbow: Essays*, (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1958).

51. In her unpublished reading notebooks, specifically those entries listed under the loose title "Lord Chesterfield's Letters," Woolf writes that Austen, in her novels, conveys a greater sense of "real life" and creates characters that are more "life like" than nearly every other author to date. In the same passage Woolf states that "It may be an amazing study to try to find a better author of character," adding that "each phrase in [Austen's] dialogue cut[s] more and more" away at the identities of her protagonists. These excerpts were taken from Woolf's "Notes on Various Books, Starting with 'Lord Chesterfield's Letters'" as catalogued in RN XLVI, Holograph MH/B2.n and used by arrangement with the University Library, University of Sussex, Brighton, BN19QL courtesy of The Berg Collection of English and American Literature at the New York Public Library.

taciturn and often solitary, so that her most powerful feelings generally go unexpressed” (*The Language of Jane Austen* 48). Page contends that such a new and “modern” heroine necessarily requires a new method of writing:

Such a heroine demands in her presentation a technique which will make her thoughts and emotions, as well as her words and actions, accessible to the reader. It needs also to be a technique capable of recording with considerable sensitivity the delicate fluctuations of mood and emotional response. (48)

Where Austen once relied on dialogue and dramatic interaction to define her characters, she now delves into the inner workings of her creations’ minds, a tendency that leads Woolf to proclaim that “Jane Austen went in and out of her people’s minds like the blood in their veins.”⁵²

What is significant about Page’s analysis is that he detects within Austen’s prose a touch of the Woolfian narrative voice; “like Virginia Woolf more than a century later, Jane Austen in this final novel is aware of the overwhelming importance of the ‘moment’ of intense experience or insight” (*The Language of Jane Austen* 48-49). Page even highlights a specific phrase in the original and “cancelled” concluding chapter of *Persuasion* as having a “distinctly Woolfian flavor,” citing the narrator’s (Austen’s) assertion that ““the evening seemed to have been made up of exquisite moments”” as particularly modernist in sentiment⁵³ (*The Language of Jane Austen* 261). Page also traces hints of what would one day become Woolf’s trademark syntactical style in the sentence structure of Austen. While he recognizes the distinctiveness of Austen’s unfalteringly mature and scrutinizing prose, Page argues that her sentence structure and

52. Virginia Woolf, “Phases of Fiction,” 1929, in *The Moment and Other Essays* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1975), 119.

53. The deleted final chapter of *Persuasion* can be found in Appendix A of the 2004 Oxford World’s Classics edition of the novel, which was edited by James Kinsley and annotated by Deidre Lynch.

word choice “can also seem to look forward to Virginia Woolf” (*The Language of Jane Austen* 91). According to Page, “Jane Austen commands a variety of sentence-patterns, the loose as well as the highly-structured, the ‘modern’ kind of sentence which traces in its construction the outline of a mental or emotional experience as well as the symmetrical and harmonious classical sentence” (*The Language of Jane Austen* 91). Like Woolf before him, Page presents Austen’s work as timeless, representing both the quintessential classical novel as well as anticipating the modernist movement that Woolf would arguable spearhead over a century later.

Emily Rohrbach provides a similar reading of Austen as a proto-modernist in her study “Austen’s Later Subjects.”⁵⁴ Following in the interpretive footsteps of Page, Rohrbach focuses on Austen’s *Persuasion*, emphasizing how the early authoress’ final novel marks a drastic shift in her literary style as well as structure. While the majority of her past works, such as *Emma* and *Pride and Prejudice*, revolve around what A. Walton Litz eloquently terms “the drama of self-deception and self-recognition,”⁵⁵ Austen’s final novel replaces this principle of growth and change, which Woolf labeled “surface animation,”⁵⁶ with a subtle commentary “on the abstract stuff of her art, the very medium of narrative in its spatial and temporal capacities to represent mental life” (“Austen’s Later Subjects” 738). At the foundation of Rohrbach’s quasi-modernist reading of Austen is Woolf’s statement in “Jane Austen” that her literary predecessor’s narrative style forces the reader to divide her attention “half upon the present moment, half upon the future,” a disjointed narrative method that could easily describe Woolf’s own writing (“Austen’s Later Subjects” 191).

54. Emily Rohrbach, “Austen’s Later Subjects,” *Studies in English Literature, 1500-1900* (Baltimore: Autumn 2004) Vol. 44, Issue 4, 737-754.

55. As quoted in Rohrbach’s essay and originally published in A. Walton Litz’s *Jane Austen: A Study of Her Artistic Development* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965), 129, 155.

56. Virginia Woolf. “Jane Austen,” 1925, in the *Common Reader*, First and Second Series Combined in One Volume (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1948), 191.

It is not only modern literary scholars who have detected the close connection between the works of Jane Austen and those of Virginia Woolf. At the time of its first publication in 1919, many contemporary critics were quick to recognize the legacy of Jane Austen in *Night and Day*. However, what is significant about such reviews is not simply that they contained this comparison, but rather that they elicited a uniformly intense and embittered response from Woolf herself. Since the argument of this chapter is that Woolf intentionally emulated Austen in her second work, one would naturally assume that she would be ambivalent or even pleased by critical recognition of her methods. Yet Woolf's private letters and diary entries prove otherwise.

In a letter to Margaret Llewelyn Davies dated Sunday, November 16, 1919, Woolf writes "there's a man who says I'm Jane Austen (but I'd much rather write about tea parties and snails than be Jane Austen)."⁵⁷ The distinction that Woolf draws between the works of Austen and writing of "tea parties and snails" is one that is extremely suspect based upon Woolf's criticism of Austen's chosen subject matter. As Janet Todd emphasizes in her study, Woolf frequently condemns the early authoress for focusing on the very topics that she asserts separate her from "tea parties and snails":

Class limits [Austen's] subjects and confines her plots: 'There was the big house and the little house; a tea party, a dinner party, and an occasional picnic; life hedged in by valuable connections and adequate incomes; by muddy roads, wet feet, and a tendency on the part of the ladies to get tired.'⁵⁸

57. *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, Volume II: 1912-1922*, Eds., Nigel Nicolson & Joanne Trautmann (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1976), 400.

58. As quoted in Janet Todd's "Who's Afraid of Jane Austen," *Jane Austen: New Perspectives*, Women & Literature, New Series, Vol. 3, Ed. Janet Todd (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, Inc., 1983), 119.

This particular letter is also significant in that it expresses Woolf's desire to separate herself from Austen, regardless of whether such a departure from the guiding influence of her literary mother would be beneficial or detrimental to her art. It is not clear whether Woolf views writing of "tea parties and snails" as a more legitimate and honorable literary endeavor than simple imitation.

A diary entry written a little over a week later expresses similar dissatisfaction over a review written by Katherine Mansfield. Here Woolf writes:

K.M. wrote a review which irritated me – I thought I saw spite in it. A decorous elderly dullard she describes me; Jane Austen up to date. Leonard supposes that she let her wish for my failure have its way with her pen. He could see her looking about for a loophole of escape. 'I'm not going to call this a success – or if I must, I'll call it the wrong kind of success.'⁵⁹

This particular passage is curious because it is not clear to the reader whether Mansfield directly compared Woolf to Austen or if Woolf simply connects Austen and her works to the label of "a decorous elderly dullard." Since Woolf has been shown earlier in this study to admire and in some ways revere Austen's literary style, it is questionable whether she would maintain such a negative view of her predecessor; yet such a seeming contradiction would not be too surprising in light of Woolf's tendency toward ambivalence in her characterizations of Austen.

Woolf echoes this sentiment in a Friday, December 5, 1919 diary entry in which she writes "Last week I had a cutting paragraph to myself in *Wayfarer*; this week Olive Heseltine applies balm. But I had rather write in my own way of 'Four Passionate Snails' than be, as K.M.

59. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1915-1919*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1977), 313.

maintains, Jane Austen over again.”⁶⁰ This excerpt refers to two specific reviews, one published in *Nation* on November 29, 1919 by H.W. Massingham and a second piece in the next edition of the same publication written by Olive Heseltine.⁶¹ In his column *Wayfarers Diary*, Massingham, using a suggested comparison between Woolf and Jane Austen, pokes fun at *Night and Day*’s preoccupation with tea drinking and taxis, and calls her main characters “Four Impassioned Snails.” In the next issue of *Nation*, critic Olive Heseltine responds to Massingham’s caricature, simultaneously supporting his comparison and charging the “Wayfarer” with “obtuseness and superficiality.”

Woolf’s irritation with such critical comparisons between herself and Austen reveals once more the doubled and divided motivations that lie at the foundation of *Night and Day*. Although she intentionally adhered to the classical literary template provided by Austen, she also strove to manipulate that very model and, in doing so, introduce the basic framework for the more modern works that she would write in the years to come. Thus Woolf is angered by reviews of the novel that present it as merely an imitation of Austen. It is not the comparison by itself that causes her anxiety, but rather the failure of her colleagues to recognize her efforts to subvert this influence.

Twenty years after the first publication of *Night and Day*, Woolf reflects upon its critical reception in her piece “A Sketch of the Past.” Written sometime between 1939 and 1940, when Woolf was nearly sixty, this autobiographical essay explores the author’s most formative childhood memories and examines those characters who figured most prominently in her artistic

60. *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1915-1919*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1977), 316.

61. Information about these reviews comes from *The Diary of Virginia Woolf, Volume I: 1915-1919*, Ed. Anne Olivier Bell (New York: A Harvest Book, Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1977), 316, 2n.

development. In the midst of a recollection of time spent at the seaside during her childhood and early adolescence, Woolf refers to the works of Austen in order to provide a concrete example for her theory of moments of “non-being,”⁶² or those remarkable moments of life that are not memorable or distinctly and obviously formative in our lives.⁶³ Here Woolf writes:

The real novelist can somehow convey both sorts of the being.
I think Jane Austen can; and Trollope; perhaps Thackeray and
Dickens and Tolstoy. I have never been able to do both. I tried –
in *Night and Day*; and in *The Years*. (70)

This retrospective examination of her earlier work provides a glimpse into Woolf's exact motivation for her “exercise in classicism” in *Night and Day*, while also shedding some light on why her immediate response to criticism was so decidedly negative. Although immediately after publishing her second novel she was appalled by comparisons between her work and Austen's, now, from the distance of twenty years and after publishing numerous other novels, Woolf is able to acknowledge her self-conscious imitation and even point out the most fertile ground for comparison. As Raitt states and Woolf implies in the passage above, “In its attempts to invoke these apparently insignificant events and feelings [moments of “non-being”], [*Night and Day*] comes close to being a classic realist text.”⁶⁴ The real question here is what exactly constitutes Woolf's failure, at least in her eyes, to adequately depict such moments of “non-being.” One would assume that since several contemporary critics recognized the similarities between *Night*

62. Virginia Woolf, “A Sketch of the Past,” in *Moments of Being: Unpublished Autobiographical Writings*, Ed. Jeanne Schulkind (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1976), 70.

63. Woolf describes such moments of “non-being” as providing a cushioning for those moments that are truly memorable; moments of non-being become the afterthoughts of daily experience: “These separate moments of being were however embedded in many more moments of non-being...although it was a good day the goodness was embedded in a kind of nondescript cotton wool” (70). See above for complete citation.

64. Virginia Woolf, *Night and Day*, 1919, Ed. Suzanne Raitt (London: Oxford University Press, 1999), xiii.

and Day and the works of Austen and other classical realists that Woolf had achieved at least one part of her two-pronged goal. However, because Woolf desired to both emulate and surpass the model perfected by Austen, her effort fails in that it is only the connection and not the deviation that is foremost in the reader's and critic's mind.

Now that the motivations behind Woolf's recourse to the classical English novel, as well as the grounds for a comparison between her work and that of Austen, have been firmly established, it is time to turn our attention to the text of *Night and Day* itself. The remainder of this chapter, and arguably the rest of this study in general, will focus on the thematic, stylistic, and structural similarities that exist between Woolf's second novel and the works of Jane Austen. It is my hope that through this comparison the reader will not only be able to trace the distinct thread of Austen's influence running through the text, but also hear the echoes of Woolf's own anxiety and frustrations over her connection to her literary predecessor in the words and deeds of her heroine Katharine Hilbery.

In his book *Virginia Woolf A to Z: A Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers, and Common Readers to Her Life, Work, and Critical Reception*⁶⁵, Mark Hussey attempts to chronicle every reference to Jane Austen and her works that occurs within Woolf's fiction. After a brief "definition" of Austen and a simplistic synopsis of her most celebrated novels, Hussey catalogues each passing comment or plot twist that alludes to the early authoress. Although in each entry he is careful to provide the context behind each allusion, creating a tangled web of cross-references and textual citations that both infuriates and delights the careful reader, Hussey never ventures a guess as to the purpose of such intimations; he simply points out a curious

65. Mark Hussey, *Virginia Woolf A to Z: A Comprehensive Reference for Students, Teachers, and Common Readers to Her Life, Work, and Critical Reception* (New York: Facts on File, Inc.), 1995.

pattern without providing a possible explanation for its existence.⁶⁶ The final section of this study will pick up where Hussey left off; it will attempt to locate each reference to Austen within Woolf's larger literary project, her desire to legitimize her more radical modernist works by establishing the conventions of the classical novel at their foundation.

Perhaps what is most obviously classical about *Night and Day*, and thus most clearly connected to Austen, is its adherence to the traditional marriage plot. No other work of Woolf's ends with a prospective marriage and, as Raitt emphasizes in her study, at the conclusion of the novel "The five main characters are sorted neatly into couples..., with the remaining woman, Mary, happily settled into a life of political activism."⁶⁷ Although Woolf does deviate from the traditional schema by allowing one of her female characters to choose an occupation, particularly one that was at the time seen as distinctly masculine in nature, over the domestic prospects of marriage and motherhood, simply by ending her novel with the engagement of her female protagonist, Woolf participates in the genre of the classical English novel and, more specifically, in the novel of manners that was perfected by Austen.

66. According to Hussey, the first mention of Austen in Woolf's fiction appears in her first novel *The Voyage Out* (1911). Clarissa Dalloway, who would arguably become Woolf's most memorable female character in her later incarnation in *Mrs. Dalloway* in 1925, gives the novel's central protagonist Rachel Vinrace a copy of *Persuasion*. Richard Dalloway, Clarissa's husband, tells Rachel that "our Jane" is "incomparably the greatest female writer we possess," but falls asleep as soon as his wife begins to read aloud from *Persuasion*. Rachel later declares that she dislikes Austen, finding her "like a tight plait" (58). This depiction of Richard is clearly reminiscent of Woolf's renderings of the Janeites, those individuals who were, and to some extent still are, infatuated with the figure or "character" of Jane Austen but have never accurately "read" her novels. Rachel's dismissal of Austen as too strict or limited may also be explained within the context of Woolf's literary project. Perhaps Rachel, a heroine who is embarking on "The Voyage Out" of the past (the Victorian Era) into the future (modernity), must abandon the traditions of the classical generation before her in order to forge her own path as a "modern" woman. *The Voyage Out* is also significant in that one of its characters, Terrence Tewett, voices the same literary ambition that Woolf attaches to Jane Austen, and thus to herself as well, in the essay "Jane Austen." Woolf's speculation as to how Austen would have written had she lived longer ("She would have devised a method...for conveying not only what people say, but what they leave unsaid") is the same literary dream that Terrence harbors.

67. Raitt, xiii-xiv.

In *Literature After Feminism* (2003), Rita Felski examines the implications of the traditional marriage plot in an attempt to chronicle the development of a distinct feminist literary voice from the turn of the nineteenth century to the present. Searching for the origin of this common literary plot, Felski cites Joanna Russ' essay "What Can a Heroine Do? Or, Why Women Can't Write" (1972) in which she writes

The tone may range from grave to gay, from the tragedy of *Anna Karenina* to the comedy of *Emma*, but the myth is always the same: innumerable variants on falling in love, on courtship, on marriage, on the failure of courtship and marriage. How she got married. How she did not get married (always tragic). How she fell in love and committed adultery ... as far as literature is concerned, heroines are still restricted to one vice, one virtue, and one occupation.⁶⁸

While the heroine of *Night and Day*, Katharine Hilbery, is in some respects liberated from the feminine constraints that limited her predecessors, possessing a degree of personal freedom that is contingent upon her social status as an heiress and the direct descendant of a celebrated poet, the vast majority of her thoughts and actions are devoted to her upcoming marriage to William Rodney and, toward the end of the novel, to defining her true feelings for Ralph Denham. Such a preoccupation closely mirrors the plight of the traditional heroine as stated by Russ in the above quotation. Woolf herself recognized this connection during the writing of *Night and Day*, having Mary Datchet declare that, for Katharine, "'Marriage is her job at present'" when discussing Katharine's potential to aid her efforts in the Suffrage Movement with her male colleague Mr.

68. As seen in Rita Felski's *Literature After Feminism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 99-100.

Basnett (*N&D* 375). According to Felski, “Marriage is the fitting finale of traditional fiction, the means by which personal wish and social need can be symbolically reconciled,” yet by ending *Night and Day* with the prospect of a double marriage, Woolf does not close on a note of symbolic and social reconciliation; instead she leaves the reader dissatisfied or, as Katherine Mansfield suggested, “chill[ed]”⁶⁹ because she has “acknowledge[d] the inadequacy of old formulas without suggesting anything to put in their place.”⁷⁰

The question that remains is why Woolf would adhere to the traditional convention of the marriage plot at the end of the novel when it is clear throughout the text that she recognizes the devastating limitations of such a schema. While *Night and Day* generally adheres to the traditional narrative arch that Austen adapted, i.e. girl meets boy, personal and societal (most often economic) obstacles keep girl and boy apart, girl and boy fall in love, there are many instances in the novel in which Woolf directly parodies the very structure that she appears to adopt. Woolf even mimics Austen’s language in her attempt to deviate, even if only slightly, from the classical marriage plot. Imitating the oft quoted opening lines of Austen’s *Pride and Prejudice*, “It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune, must be in want of a wife,”⁷¹ Woolf writes

It may be said, indeed, that English society being what it is, no very great merit is required, once you bear a well-known name, to put you into a position where it is easier on the whole to be eminent than obscure. And if this is true of sons, even the daughters, even in the nineteenth century, are apt to become of importance –

69. As seen in Raitt p. xvi. Originally taken from Katherine Mansfield, “A Ship Comes into the Harbour”, in *Novels and Novelists*, Ed. John Middleton Murray (London: Constable, 1930), 107-111, p. 111.

70. Raitt, xvi.

71. Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*, 1813, Ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 1.

philanthropists and educationalists if they are spinsters, and the wives of distinguished men if they marry. (*N&D* 32-33)

In Woolf's version of Austen's phrase, it is the woman and not the man who is given prominence; yet even then that prominence is mitigated by the assertion that such daughters will only gain "importance" through three specific processes, the most favorable of which, due to the clearly negative connotation that the term "spinsters" carries, is obviously marriage to a "distinguished" man. The inevitability with which Austen treats the act of marriage is still in tact in Woolf's version. However, Woolf includes the "lesser" alternatives for women as well, suggesting, although somewhat weakly, that the marriage plot is not necessarily the only story available to the "modern" heroine.

Woolf further satirizes the traditional marriage plot through the ridiculous and often sexist speeches of William Rodney. A character that appears to be a deliberate caricature of the Romantics as well as the Victorians, Rodney is depicted with much the same biting ironic tongue that Austen frequently employs in her portraits. When asked by his soon-to-be fiancée Katharine whether marriage should be recommended to all women including herself, Rodney replies that "Certainly I should. Not for you only, but for all women. Why, you're nothing at all without it [marriage]; you're only half alive; using half of your faculties; you must feel that yourself" (*N&D* 64-65). Here Woolf uses the foolishness of Rodney's speeches as a vehicle for summarizing and satirizing the views of marriage and gender dynamics that were dominant in society at the time of her writing. After her engagement to Rodney is made official, Katharine reflects upon this misogynistic marriage myth and, after listening to her mother and elderly aunts discuss the many pleasures of married life, she muses upon the harsh truth that is hidden behind the fairytale of "happily ever after":

She took up her knitting again and listened, chiefly with a view to confirming herself in the belief that to be engaged to marry someone with whom you are not in love is an inevitable step in a world where the existence of passion is only a traveler's story brought from the heart of deep forests and told so rarely that wise people doubt whether the story can be true. (*N&D* 224)

With this quotation, Woolf manipulates the Austenian marriage plot, one which frequently culminates in the heroine finding her “true love” and happily entering into marriage, into an empty and somewhat imprisoning trial for the female protagonist; love is not easily found and once it is, the path to marriage is never quite as straight and smooth as Austen would like one to believe.

Beyond its parody of the traditional marriage plot, *Night and Day* exhibits several key thematic and structural similarities with the works of Austen. Woolf begins her second novel with a passage that clearly recalls the opening of Austen's *Emma*. Both novels begin by introducing the heroine, paying particular attention to signs of her social status. Where Austen writes that “Emma Woodhouse, handsome, clever, and rich, with a comfortable home and happy disposition, seemed to unite some of the best blessings of existence; and had lived nearly twenty-one years in the world with very little to distress or vex her,”⁷² Woolf presents a similarly serene and domestic vision of her heroine Katharine:

It was a Sunday evening in October, and in common with many other young ladies of her class, Katharine Hilbery was pouring tea... A single glance was enough to show that Mrs. Hilbery was so rich in the gifts which make tea-parties of elderly

72. Jane Austen, *Emma*, 1816, Ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 5.

distinguished people successful, that she scarcely needed any help from her daughter, provided that the tiresome business of teacups and bread and butter was discharged for her. (*N&D* 3)

Woolf later evokes the final sentence of Austen's last novel *Persuasion* when she reflects upon whether or not Katharine has a true profession. According to Woolf, through her role as a daughter, "Katharine, thus, was a member of a very great profession, which has, as yet, no title and very little recognition, although the labour of mill and factory is, perhaps, no more severe and the results of less benefit to the world. She lived at home. She did it very well, too" (*N&D* 41). This sentiment appears to be in direct dialogue with Austen's concluding remark that her unconventional heroine Ann Elliot "gloried in being a sailor's wife, but she must pay the tax of quick alarm for belonging to that profession which is, if possible, more distinguished in its domestic virtues than its national importance."⁷³ Through these phrases, Woolf and Austen explicitly manipulate the traditional gender hierarchy, Austen glorifying the figure of the wife and mother, while Woolf draws a somewhat tenuous connection between the domestic and industrial spheres. Both authoresses place their heroines within a larger social context, gently hinting at the political and economic realities that exist outside of the drawing room.⁷⁴ By drawing inspiration from Austen's final and arguably most personal and "modern" novel, Woolf suggests that the more progressive aspects of her predecessor's later work directly anticipates her own style.

73. Jane Austen, *Persuasion*, 1818, Ed. James Kinsley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 203.

74. Austen's concluding sentence is particularly interesting in that it suggests a much more impersonal and almost economic dimension to the marriage vow than is depicted in her earlier novels. Where marriage was previously almost exclusively about love and passion, here it becomes a political union with the bride paying a "tax" for her groom, a word that implies that he does not belong to her but rather to the state. This de-romanticized version of marriage seems to be more consistent with Woolf's parody of the traditional marriage plot in *Night and Day*.

Stylistically, Woolf also mirrors her predecessor by adopting a tone of comic irony and biting sarcasm when depicting those characters she wishes to satirize. This technique is reserved for the elderly *literati* that make up Emily Hilbery's elite social circle, characters who could easily be interpreted as Janeites,⁷⁵ and the overly-sentimental William Rodney, who we have already established as a caricature of the Romantics and Victorians. Woolf is particularly harsh when describing Rodney's literary endeavors. When he presents his paper concerning the Elizabethan use of metaphor in poetry before the crowd in Mary Datchet's quarters, he

managed to turn over two sheets instead of one, to choose the wrong sentence where two were written together, and to discover his own handwriting suddenly illegible.... Whether [the audience was] stirred by his enthusiasm for poetry or by the contortions which a human being was going through for their benefit, it would be hard to say. (*N&D* 50)

Woolf is even more ruthless when describing Rodney's attempts as a playwright. Before reading his latest scene to Katharine, Rodney gives a general synopsis of his piece:

'Ahem! The Princess is lost in the wood, and she hears the sound of a horn. (This would all be very pretty on the stage, but I can't get the effect here.) Anyhow, Sylvano enters, accompanied by the rest of the gentlemen of Gratian's court. I begin here where he soliloquizes.' (*N&D* 142)

75. Emily's acquaintance Mrs. Cosham resembles very closely those "common readers" and fanatics that Woolf derides in her essays and unpublished writings. After declaring that Ralph Denham must be a poet simply based upon his appearance, Mrs. Cosham "half closed her eyes, and indulged herself in a fascinating picture of a briefless [sic] barrister lodged in a garret, writing immortal novels by the light of a farthing dip. But the romance which fell upon the figures of great writers and illuminated their pages was no false radiance in her case. She carried her pocket Shakespeare about with her, and met life fortified by the words of poets. How far she saw Denham, and how far she confused him with some hero of fiction, it would be hard to say. Literature had taken possession even of her memories" (155-156). Like the Janeites, Mrs. Cosham is mesmerized by the idea of the character of an artist, paying very little heed to the actual works of literature that made such individuals famous.

Katharine's reaction to her fiancé's work can easily be interpreted as Woolf's own response to the overly sentimental and "vapid" art of the Victorians. Reflecting upon Rodney's poetic style, Katharine muses that "His theory was that every mood has its metre. His mastery of metres was very great; and, if the beauty of a drama depended upon the variety of different measures in which the personages speak, Rodney's plays must have challenged the works of Shakespeare" (*N&D* 142-143). Such a backhanded compliment is reminiscent not only of Woolf's treatment of the generation of authors who came before her, but also echoes the biting sarcasm that has become Austen's trademark.

Night and Day is significant not only in its structural, stylistic, and thematic similarities to the classical novel form that was perfected by Austen, but it also sheds some light on one of the major questions of this study, how Woolf negotiated her own position as a female writer in relation to the legacy left by Austen. Like Woolf herself, Emily and Katharine Hilbery struggle throughout the novel with how best to reconstruct the figure of Richard Alardyce, the famed poet and their father and grandfather respectively. In a discussion of Emily's lifelong attempt to write a biography of her beloved father, Raitt writes that "Mrs. Hilbery's picture of her father has many different aspects, her sense of him is so complex and all-inclusive, that the task of containing it in a coherent narrative is apparently too much for her."⁷⁶ This judgment could easily be transferred to Woolf herself in reference to her inability to present a coherent picture of her literary mother. Perhaps Woolf's response to the early authoress is consistently ambivalent because, like Emily, she is too close to see the whole picture; there is too much emotionally and intellectually invested in the figure of Austen for Woolf to portray her objectively.

For Woolf, *Night and Day* was not simply an "exercise in classicism" or a means of escape from the devastating realities of WWI, but rather served as the text that would bridge the

76. Raitt, xix.

gap between the present and the past, the pre- and post war eras, the classical and the modern literary movements. It is through her appropriation of Austen's prose style and satirical techniques that Woolf provides the crutch that she needs to lean on in order to legitimize the more radical literary experiments that would define her career in the years to come. By emulating and manipulating Austen's novel of manners, Woolf is finally able to "rewrite" her literary mother, forging a connection between her works and those of the pivotal female writers of the past, while simultaneously becoming the mother of her own literary movement.

Epilogue

In his introduction to *The Anxiety of Influence*, Harold Bloom cites a letter written by the poet Wallace Stevens to fellow poet Richard Eberhart in order to introduce the discussion of his study while simultaneously distinguishing his theory from those of the critics that came before him. Wallace, whose opinions concerning poetic imitation exemplify the critical perspective that Bloom vehemently refutes in the rest of his work, writes in a tone that Bloom characterizes as “rather violent, and oddly humored,” that

There is a kind of critic who spends his time dissecting what he
reads for echoes, imitations, influences, as if no one was ever
simply himself but is always compounded of a lot of other people⁷⁷.

While one may not agree with Wallace’s contention, it cannot be denied that it aptly describes certain studies; the works of Janet Todd and Judith Lee readily coming to mind to defend the argument that such critiques of influence do in fact exist in current scholarship. It is precisely this type of study that I have tried to resist producing here.

Unlike Todd and Lee, who present ample evidence and analysis pointing to Woolf’s consistently ambivalent perception of Austen without ever reaching a conclusion as to its origin, I hope that this study has provided at least a glimmer of clarification, shifting the lenses that obscure the figures of Austen and Woolf in a way that leaves their outlines more defined and distinct in the gaze of the reader. Although I am not naïve enough to imagine that this discussion is complete and readily acknowledge that the relationship between Austen and Woolf is far too complicated to ever be pinned down to a single comprehensive explanation, I like to think of my contribution as extending beyond those studies of influence that came before it.

77. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetics, Second Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 7.

By searching for answers within the realm of Woolf's fiction, an aspect of her corpus that has largely been neglected in previous discussions of this topic, not only the thread of Austen's influence can be distinguished in Woolf's prose style and thematic focus, but also a glimpse of the motivations behind such self-conscious imitation can be seen. It is only through her fiction and her rewriting of the quintessential Austenian novel that Woolf is finally able to overcome her ties to the past, enabling her to let go of the familiar crutch that Austen provides and walk confidently into her more modern literary experiments.

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