

**VIRGINIA WOOLF'S AFTERLIVES: THE AUTHOR AS CHARACTER
IN CONTEMPORARY FICTION AND DRAMA**

Monica Latham
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PAULA MARTÍNEZ VEGA

Universidad de Valencia
paula.martinez-vega@uv.es

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-8297-8849>

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was one of the first authors to employ narrative devices in her fictional biographies, as seen in *Orlando* (1928), about Vita Sackville-West, and *Flush* (1933), about Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. In recent decades, however, she has transcended her role as a writer and has herself become a character in contemporary biofictional novels. Indeed, these representations of Woolf have played an essential part in the foundation and legitimisation of biofiction in the current biographical field. In this respect, Monica Latham's groundbreaking book, *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives: The Author as Character in Contemporary Fiction and Drama* (2021), provides a new theoretical approach that sheds light on the relationship between biofiction and the English writer. The title belongs to the series Routledge Auto/Biography Studies, edited by Ricia A. Chansky, a specialist in autobiographical narratives. The objective of the series is to explore the growing field of (auto)biographical studies in dialogue with disciplines such as psychology or linguistics, highlighting the interdisciplinary character of these narratives.

In this volume, Latham examines a wide range of biofictional novels centred on Virginia Woolf to explore their use of reality and fiction to approach her posthumous persona. Bringing keen insight to the relationship between Woolf and her biofictional representations, the volume is a highly engaging contribution to the study of Woolf's literary and cultural legacy in the current literary panorama for both expert and novice scholars.

The volume is organised into seven chapters divided by thematic axes and includes a foreword by Michael Lackey —a leading voice in biofiction studies— an introduction and an epilogue that serves as a recapitulation. Across the different sections, Latham closely analyses 25 biofictional novels and plays published between 1972 and 2019 and analyses the wide-ranging portrayals of Woolf by contemporary authors.

Latham begins her analysis in chapter 1, “Bioplay(giarisms)s”, where she offers a study on how Woolf’s biographical events are (re)interpreted and (re)arranged by different contemporary writers, transforming her life into dramatic material open to a variety of interpretations. The authors analysed in this section are Eileen Atkins (*Vita and Virginia*), Edna O’Brien (*Virginia: a Play*), Elizabeth Steele (*Virginia Woolf and Companions: A Feminist Document. A Play*), Maureen Duffy (*A Nightingale in Bloomsbury Square*) and Christine Orban (*Vita et Virginia*). Latham emphasises the subjective portraits that these authors fabricate while drawing on the same historical material: “[a]lthough the material they dip into is much the same, the creative processes of selection, assembling and arranging the Woolfian intertextual fragments are different; so are the writers’ imaginations and visions of their Virginia” (2021: 38). Latham contends that Woolf’s fictionalisations, which range from hostile to positive representations, are commonly used to fulfil writers’ aesthetic alliances or political agendas. This chapter provides a useful critical lens through which to examine the subsequent analyses of biofictional novels in the following chapters, as it lays the theoretical foundation for her readings.

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Woolf’s feminist ideals have been thoroughly explored both in literary studies and in broader feminist scholarship. This is precisely what chapter 2, “Detecting Woolf”, deals with through the examination of two detective novels: Ellen Hawkes and Peter Manso’s *The Shadow of the Moth: A Novel of Espionage with Virginia Woolf* (1983) and Stephanie Barron’s *The White Garden: A Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2009). In a nuanced and insightful analysis, Latham explores how Woolf —a conventional feminist and feminine voice— is embroiled in masculine and aggressive power games and how writers use traditionally hegemonic male plots and devices —i.e. wars, spy plots, investigations— to analyse her gender equality discourses.

Chapter 3, “Virginia’s Daughters”, is dedicated to how Woolf’s cultural and literary lineage is transmitted to new generations, who enhance her figure and foster the importance of her contributions. By looking at Maggie Gee’s *Virginia Woolf in Manhattan* (2014) and Clare Morgan’s *A Book for All and None* (2011), Latham raises critical questions about the truth behind the idea of the “death of the author”, postulated by Roland Barthes in the 1960s, as Woolf continues to cast a long shadow on the current literary scene and inspires a new generation of writers.

Woolf's complex relationship with her sister, Vanessa Bell, inspires the next chapter, titled "Vanessa and Virginia", which is grounded in the analysis of Kyo Maclear and Isabelle Arsenault's *Virginia Woolf* (2012), Priya Parmar's *Vanessa and Her Sister* (2014), Susan Sellers's *Vanessa and Virginia* (2009) and E.H. Wright's *Vanessa and Virginia: A One-Act Play* (2013). Latham discusses how these biofictions either reinforce or challenge the jealousy-love dualism traditionally linked to the two sisters. She concludes that biofiction enables writers to address questions that biography alone could not resolve, as it allows them to reconstruct the sisters in different situations to explore their personalities and relationship.

Latham focuses on Woolf's mental health and suicide in chapter 5, "Polarity, Pairs, Peers and Parallelisms", as seen in Norah Vincent's *Adeline: A Novel of Virginia Woolf* (2015), Sigrid Nunez's *Mitz: The Marmoset of Bloomsbury* (1998) and Alienora Taylor's *Riding at the Gates of Sixty: A Fictional Account of Virginia Woolf's Death and Life* (2015). These biofictions establish a direct conversation with her fragile psychological state and establish an intertextual link between Woolf's writings and her biofictional representations.

In chapter 6, "Biofictive Mirrors: Clarissa Woolf/Virginia Dalloway", Latham further explores the connection and similarities between Virginia Woolf and Clarissa Dalloway, the main character in *Mrs. Dalloway* (1915), in Michael Cunningham's *The Hours* (1998) and in Robin Lippincott's *Mr Dalloway* (1999). In a well-crafted analysis, Latham examines the postmodern, hypertextual resources used in these novels to create a hybrid character that merges the creator and the creation. As a consequence, these novels blur the boundaries of intertextual elements and merge biography and textual references to address current political, social and public issues, both from Woolf's time and from the contemporary period.

Latham concludes her analysis in chapter 7, "Bloomsberries Reimagined", which is concerned with the Bloomsbury Group. Defined as a convergence of intellectuals and artists living in London at the beginning of the 20th century, this cohort's contributions to the literary, social and artistic field were large. Through Peter Luke's *Bloomsbury: A Play in Two Acts* (1976) and Gillian Freeman's *But Nobody Lives in Bloomsbury* (2006), Latham examines how the group has been culturally perceived across 30 years. She also stresses the role that fictionalisation plays in the promulgation of biographical details, as it enables the writer to convey the truth in an efficient way.

Latham concludes the monograph with "Posthumous Lives: 'I Am Made and Remade Continually'", in which she looks into Woolf as a long-lasting figure in

the literary field at the same time that she examines how biofiction can help the Woolfian oeuvre to retain a relevant place in today's culture. Indeed, she explains how "the death of the author" promulgated by Roland Barthes in the 1960s is defied by biofiction, as writers like Woolf gain predominance. Finally, she summarises that there are as many Virginias as biofictional portrayals, her figure constantly changing through the eyes of the authors that represent her.

Altogether, *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives* is a contribution not only to biofiction studies but also to Woolf studies in general. It is one of the most complete and intrageneric studies to date on how the posthumous image of a writer can be shaped through narrative strategies of fictionalisation. Carefully crafted and organised, Latham's book provides cogent insights into the different genres that comprise biofiction and how Woolf's image is adapted to various literary and intertextual necessities. Moreover, she performs a thorough study of the different aspects of the author's life that have been fictionalised, supplying a referential theoretical framework that could enhance the reading of current Woolfian biofiction.

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Although this monograph may not be well-suited for scholars seeking in-depth information on the history and overall contributions of biofiction —as it mainly focuses on Woolf— it provides a well-rounded start to expand knowledge on the matter, both for students and experienced scholars. Taken along with monographs such as *Recycling Virginia Woolf in Contemporary Art and Literature* (2023) edited by Monica Latham, Caroline Marie and Anne-Laure Rigeade, and Monica Latham's *A Poetics of Postmodernism and Neomodernism: Rewriting Mrs Dalloway* (2017), *Virginia Woolf's Afterlives* reveals the complexity and intertextual implications of Woolf's representations in current biofiction and becomes a necessary referent within the state of this question. All in all, the text includes concepts and case studies that render it a valuable reference work from which a broader body of scholarship can be developed — one that could enrich and diversify the study of biofiction and, particularly, of Woolf's afterlives.

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