of the way he was used as a national icon in war-time propaganda (14; see also Gordon Williams 243).

Nevertheless, when Septimus later thinks of the lines from Cymbeline – “Fear no more the heat o’ th’ sun” – he seems to regain a sense of joy in the beauty of the bard’s words; he is lying on his sofa, resting and watching the play of light on the wall-paper in the sitting-room, and for a brief moment “not afraid” (153); despite everything, Septimus suddenly believes in recovery: “He would not go mad” (155). For once, Septimus proceeds from vision to action: He joins Lucrezia, who sits at the table and is working on a hat, and while they are employed in common labor Septimus even makes a few jokes, leading Lucrezia to exclaim that they “were perfectly happy now” (160; see Hawthorn 95). However, recovery lasts only for the briefest of moments, for when Dr. Holmes suddenly interrupts the scene, Septimus panics and throws himself out of the living-room window (163–164). While, in short, a few lines from Shakespeare may help Clarissa to reestablish a sense of home, beautiful words alone are not enough for Septimus to recover – which, incidentally, is a sobering reminder that the power of literature to make us feel at home in the world may not be as great as literary critics, in particular, would perhaps like to believe.

The Home of Civilization: Shakespeare, Britain, and the Empire

In addition to putting in relief the many contrasts between Clarissa and Septimus, the Shakespearean intertext of Woolf’s novel allows us to address one final issue that is crucial to Mrs. Dalloway’s exploration of home: imperial conquest and colonial domination. Cymbeline is, among other things, a play about a war between a subject people – the Britons – and the Roman Empire, written at a time when the English were actively colonizing Scotland and Ireland, and beginning to venture further abroad (Innes 16; Floyd-Wilson 102). This, in turn, renders it significant that the other two Shakespearean texts referred to in Mrs. Dalloway are Othello (37–38 and 202) and Antony and Cleopatra (93 and 100): two other plays that are clearly related to questions of ethnic difference, imperial power, and colonization.

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32 For a general overview of the importance of anti-imperialism in Woolf’s novels, see Helen Carr’s article on “Virginia Woolf, Empire and Race,” as well as the chapters on Woolf in Rebecca Walcottiz’s Cosmopolitan Style: Modernism beyond the Nation (2006) and Paul Stasi’s Modernism, Imperialism, and the Historical Sense (2012).

33 Woolf’s novel also refers to Shakespeare’s sonnets, which Richard Dalloway dislikes because reading the sonnets “was like listening at keyholes” (82). In contrast to the plays, then, which relate to the novel’s concern with ethnicity and empire, the sonnets are related to the text’s examination of gender and ‘deviant’ sexuality.
In addition to noting the imperial implications of Shakespearean texts in *Mrs. Dalloway*, we need to consider Peter Walsh’s position as an agent of colonialism. Focusing on Peter’s role in the opening paragraphs of *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance, we find that these passages not only revolve around an uneasy opposition between a ‘rural’ past and an urban present; rather, the novel’s opening also suggests that colonialism is omnipresent even at home. We have already seen that Clarissa is immediately reminded of her youth at Bourton when, at the beginning of the novel, she steps out on Bond Street to buy flowers for her party in the evening. Significantly, her reminiscences end with the image of her old friend Peter, a man “from a respectable Anglo-Indian family which for at least three generations had administered the affairs of a continent” (60), and whom Clarissa expects to “be back from India” one of these days (3). Clarissa’s thoughts thus return to present-day London from recollections of a country-house past via a colonialist ‘detour’: a man returning from India, that ‘jewel in the imperial crown’ which was so central to Britain’s geopolitical strategy of domination (e.g. Hobsbawm, *Age of Empire* 68–69).³⁴

The opening of Woolf’s novel thus implicitly confirms Edward Said’s claim that, partly because of colonialism and its effects, the national home always already includes the foreign, colonial Other (*Culture and Imperialism* xxv). In an analysis of Jane Austen’s *Mansfield Park*, Said focuses specifically on the English country house as a site that may appear isolated from the wider world, but which in fact depends for its existence on “overseas sustenance” (89). Franco Moretti has questioned Said’s idea that the colonies were, in actual fact, economically indispensable for the English ruling classes (*Atlas of the European Novel* 24–27). However, as Ian Baucom points out, Said focuses not only on the notion of economic interdependence between empire and ‘motherland,’ but also “relates the ordered moral economy which the country house represents to the apt administration of colonial property” (166). Similarly, Susan Strehle insists that idealizations of Empire use a particular kind of home for their symbolic representation of national values (21), with the ideology of ‘true Englishness’ depending on the image of the very country-house Arcadias we have already dis-
cussed, and whose ordered stability is envisioned not only as a remedy for the city’s social ills, but also as a cure for the ‘barbarism’ of the colonies.  

Later, Mrs. Dalloway in fact makes explicit this link between a supposedly rational order at home – what the narrator calls “Proportion” – and Britain’s ongoing imperial project. In section eight of Woolf’s novel, the narrator introduces Sir William Bradshaw, a renowned London psychiatrist, as the most fervent believer in the idea of Proportion:

Worshipping proportion, Sir William not only prospered himself but made England prosper, secluded her lunatics, forbade childbirth, penalised despair, made it impossible for the unfit to propagate their views until they, too, shared his sense of proportion – his, if they were men, Lady Bradshaw’s if they were women (she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son) [...].

But Proportion has a sister, less smiling, more formidable, a Goddess even now engaged – in the heat and sands of India, the mud and swamp of Africa, the purlieus of London, wherever in short the climate or the devil tempts men to fall from the true belief which is her own – is even now engaged in dashing down shrines, smashing idols, and setting up in their place her own stern countenance. Conversion is her name and she feasts on the wills of the weakly, loving to impress, to impose, adoring her own features stamped on the face of the populace. (109)

Not only do Sir and Lady Bradshaw adhere strictly to a high-bourgeois model of separate spheres that, for women, revolves mainly around household duties (“she embroidered, knitted, spent four nights out of seven at home with her son”); the establishment of a supposedly disinterested and rational order turns out to be intimately related to a ‘will to power’ and domination – a fact that is, perhaps, hinted at even by Sir William Bradshaw’s first name, which is not only quintessentially English (William the Conqueror, William Shakespeare), but which can also be parsed as ‘will-I-am.’ Less speculatively, we may note that, according to the narrator, assuming the ‘white man’s burden’ (i.e. converting one’s colonial subjects to English Proportion) generally leads to acts of violence: “dashing down shrines” and “smashing idols.”

Some critics have commented on the fact that, precisely at this point in the novel, the narrator of Mrs. Dalloway seems to lose all sense of equanimity and

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35 See Raymond Williams (281) and, in particular, Peter Borsay on the enlightenment culture of improvement: “[T]he improvers [believed in] a struggle between the forces of civilization and enlightenment, and those of barbarity and heathenism. It cannot be denied that some of this spirit was to infuse the class conflict that gained increasing strength in the early years of the nineteenth century and the spread of empire later in the century” (210).
moral proportion (e.g. Blanchard 299), seemingly contradicting Woolf’s own belief, stated in her essay “Women and Fiction,” that authors should never let bitterness or anger seep into their work (135).⁶⁶ Avrom Fleishman even suggests that the moral outrage expressed in this passage constitutes a stylistic ‘lapse’ that can be explained by Woolf’s own experience of mental illness and her consequent dislike of psychiatrists (69; see also Jouve 251). Importantly, however, in her essay Woolf is careful to distinguish between, on the one hand, the “distortion” that partisanship may introduce into a literary text and, on the other, artistic weakness; for Woolf, distortion only “frequently” – and thus not necessarily – results in artistic weakness (135). Moreover, even if we were to assume that Woolf was indeed fundamentally opposed to authors expressing any strong convictions in works of fiction, we would still be faced with a paradox that haunts all forms of ‘dogmatic relativism.’ As Christopher Herbert puts it: “In a world where all nonrelativistic truth has been abolished, the relativity principle itself is proclaimed as a universal verity” (118). The assumption that everything is relative, and that art should therefore refrain from expressing strong partisanship, is itself an absolutist creed – and thus inherently contradictory. Accordingly, the narrator’s ‘lapse’ from equanimity when faced with the ‘ideal’ of English Proportion is best understood as a novelistic counterpoint to an absolutist moral relativism that would render political critique entirely impossible.

It is therefore fitting that the very language the narrator uses to describe the twin-sisters of Proportion and Conversion is suffused with a sense of ‘unproportional,’ excessive enjoyment (“feasts on the will of the weakly”; emphasis added). If domination can be associated with such boundless pleasure, then this belies any idea that Empire is truly based on order and proportion. Rather, the narrator envisages the imperial project as a profoundly narcissistic endeavor, concerned not with higher ideals but with admiring its “own features stamped on the face of the populace” (i.e. with remaking the world in its own image). Reversing the colonialisit stereotype that ‘natives’ are child-like and in need of guidance (Loomba 181), in this passage the imperialists themselves appear as overly powerful and unpredictable children who throw tantrums whenever ‘their’ colonial subjects dare to frustrate the self-serving needs of the imperial masters.

We have already seen, in the case of Ahab in Moby-Dick, that power is apt to re-enforce such narcissistic delusions of grandeur (see chapter one), and we encounter the same phenomenon in Mrs. Dalloway in the figure of Lady Bruton

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⁶⁶ See also A Room of One’s Own, where Woolf suggests that, in the case of Jane Eyre, “it is clear that anger was tempering with the integrity of Charlotte Brontë the novelist” (66).
and her colonialist “project for emigrating young people of both sexes born of respectable parents and setting them up with a fair prospect of doing well in Canada” (119). In the scene in question, Lady Bruton has just asked Hugh Whitbread, a government official, to help her write a letter to The Times in support of her project – and it is precisely at this point that Mrs. Dalloway highlights the extent to which the work of domestic servants turns Lady Bruton’s home into a cocoon that shields her from the vicissitudes of everyday life:

(The coffee was very slow in coming.)

“The address?” murmured Hugh Whitbread; and there was at once a ripple in the grey tide of service which washed round Lady Bruton day in, day out, collecting, intercepting, enveloping her in a fine tissue which broke concussions, mitigated interruptions, and spread round the house in Brook Street a fine net where things lodged and were picked out accurately, instantly, by grey-haired Perkins, who had been with Lady Bruton these thirty years and now wrote down the address; handed it to Mr. Whitbread, who took out his pocket-book, raised his eyebrows, and slipping it in among documents of the highest importance, said that he would get Evelyn to ask him to lunch.

(They were waiting to bring the coffee until Mr. Whitbread had finished.)

Hugh was very slow, Lady Bruton thought. He was getting fat, she noticed. […] She was getting impatient […]. (118–119)

An army of domestics is employed in order to spare Lady Bruton any undesired interruptions, and the phrase “tide of service” – another instance of water imagery – dehumanizes the servants by turning them into a natural phenomenon, underlining the extent to which their efforts seem natural to Lady Bruton and her class. If Lady Bruton wants the food to be served, there will immediately be “a soundless and exquisite passing to and fro” (114); she has “only to nod” for her servants to be “instructed to quicken the coffee” (117). In such an environment, the object of desire – Lady Bruton’s project of emigrating young people to Canada – “becomes inevitably prismatic, lustrous, half looking-glass, half precious stone”; it is a narcissistic mirror that reflects back only her own sense of self: “Emigration had become, in short, largely Lady Bruton” (119).

Once we recognize the profound significance of colonialism in Woolf’s novel, the virtual absence of characters that could be described as colonial subjects must appear striking. Peter Walsh, though admittedly a kind of outsider due to his Anglo-Indian background (Lamont 174), is also the scion of a family of colonial administrators and thus hardly qualifies as a colonial subject, if by that term we mean someone who is subjected to colonial rule. Indeed, even though he sees himself as “disliking India, and empire, and army,” he also experiences
“moments of pride in England” and ultimately approves of “London; the season; civilisation,” which he regards as a “splendid achievement” (60). What is striking here is that Peter thinks of London as “civilisation,” in implicit contrast to the uncivilized disorder of ‘the East.’ Moreover, this particular moment of pride occurs only a few pages after the nationalistic display, discussed earlier, of a group of boys “in uniform, carrying guns,” marching through the streets of London towards a “statue praising duty, gratitude, fidelity, love of England” (55). For all his sense of isolation and psychological complexity, then, Peter is a marginal figure only when seen from within the very narrow upper-class circle of the Dalloways, not from a broader social perspective.

Only two characters thus remain in Mrs. Dalloway whom we might plausibly describe as colonial subjects: the Irishwoman Moll Pratt, who sells flowers on the street (20), and a nameless “Colonial” who appears a little earlier in Woolf’s novel (19). Of these two, only Moll briefly becomes a focalizing agent, as if in reward for the “loyalty” she feels towards the Prince of Wales, who – supposedly – passes by in a car (“she wished the dear boy well”). Moll, we learn, would even have liked to express her loyalty more clearly by tossing a bunch of roses into St. James’s Street; however, she refrains from doing so because she finds a “discouraging constable’s eye upon her” (20). Despite the fact that Moll is a loyal subject, in other words, her freedom is very precisely delimited in Woolf’s text (as, incidentally, was that of the recently established Irish Free State; see Robbins 82–83).

It is instructive to compare the way in which the novel treats Moll with the fate of the nameless “Colonial,” who reacts to the (assumed) presence of the Prince of Wales, not with expressions of loyalty, but by insulting the royal family – “which led to words, broken beer glasses, and a general shindy” (19). Colonial dissent is thus immediately silenced within the fictional world of Mrs. Dalloway (Bradshaw xxix; Snaith 73). Moreover, the “Colonial” never becomes the focalizer or bearer of narrative perspective. In fact, we do not even learn what, precisely, the “Colonial” said, and are therefore unable to judge whether he was purposely insulting the royal family in order to pick a fight, or whether he was merely trying to make a valid political point. In either case, it is clear that neither he nor Moll Pratt can express themselves freely in Mrs. Dalloway because they are at all times monitored closely by the – official as well as unofficial – guardians of the imperial nation, who are prepared violently to suppress any oppositional point of view.