

HOLDING HANDS WITH VIRGINIA WOOLF:
A MAP OF ORLANDO'S FUNCTIONAL SUBVERSION

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ABSTRACT

As hard as we might try, Virginia Woolf's Orlando: A Biography proves difficult to peg: is the eponymous character a man or a woman? Is she thirty or three hundred years old? And in terms of style, is the work a biography, a love letter, or a novel? Is it possible to determine where its fiction stops and its non-fiction starts? Furthermore, it is even desirable to draw this kind of distinct border around the text? Instead of trying to find yet another way to categorize Orlando and Orlando, this essay uses reader-response theory to examine Woolf's writing style as one that walks a middle ground between polarizing and assuring, and the confusing tension wrought therein that makes Orlando a *functionally* radical text. For as discomfiting as the reading of Orlando might be, the work was Woolf's biggest commercial success to date: some 8,000 copies of the book sold within the first six months. This thesis offers a map of how the text creates a location wherein challenges to the urge to draw boundaries is acceptable – even enticing – rather than off-putting. Woolf's use of strategically-placed, sophisticated rhetorical techniques help readers scale the text's sex and gender nomadism as they move toward a space of acceptance and knowability.

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Sandra Day O'Connor said, "We don't accomplish anything in this world alone ... and whatever happens is the result of the whole tapestry of one's life and all the weavings of individual threads from one to another that creates something." Although there are many people to whom I owe my thanks and gratitude, none deserve it more than my mom, dad, and brother, who continually encourage and support me no matter where I go. Without their support, this project could not have happened. I would also like to thank Dr. Katherine Montwieler, whose scrupulous eye and ever-ready pen have made me a better writer; thank you. My gratitude also extends to Dr. Mark Boren, whose assistance in the brainstorming stages of my thesis was invaluable, and Dr. Joyce Hollingsworth, whose attention to detail helped polish my thesis in a way that couldn't have been done without her.

HOLDING HANDS WITH VIRGINIA WOOLF: A MAP OF ORLANDO'S FUNCTIONAL SUBVERSION

INTRODUCTION

Reading Virginia Woolf's Orlando: A Biography can be an uncomfortable experience. The text, which portrays the life of an aristocratic nobleman who lives through four centuries and changes sex at thirty years of age, blurs the boundaries of gender, time, history, and genre in such a way that it makes manifest our deep-seated desire to categorize as the text simultaneously mocks that tendency. Although alluding to one of the few genres that Orlando does not explicitly address, Anne Williams attests to the compelling allure of categorizing in her Art of Darkness: "A desire to 'draw the line' (or to trace one's line of descent) appears to be a very basic human impulse – or at least a deeply ingrained cultural habit: the 'natural' first step toward knowing" (12). Yet hard as we might try, Orlando proves difficult to peg: is the eponymous character a man or a woman? Is she thirty or three hundred years old? And in terms of style, is the work a biography, a love letter, or a novel? Is it possible to determine where its fiction stops and its non-fiction starts? Furthermore, it is even desirable to draw distinct borders around the text?

Instead of trying to find yet another way to categorize Orlando the character and Orlando the literary text, this essay will examine Woolf's writing style as one that walks a middle ground between polarizing and assuring, and the effects of the confusing tension wrought therein that make Orlando a functionally radical text. Nancy Cervetti states that Woolf's text "subversively repeats and ridicules convention and suggests the possibility of refusing an essentialist and binary mode of thinking [and] creates another location

from which to evaluate and participate in the social construction of gender, the body, and our lives” (175). This thesis offers a map of how that other location is created, beginning with Woolf’s false veracity: her use of rhetorical devices to persuade the reader of the truth of elements in the novel that are manifestly false. Next, I will address the text’s development of the Exotic, and the role that strategic play – hyperbole, fantasy, and the carnivalesque – has within it. I will also examine how the text employs models and suggestions that serve to placate the easily offended reader, and I will end my argument with an assessment of how Orlando’s and the biographer’s¹ use of performance mitigates potential objections to the text’s radical possibilities. As I will demonstrate, these rhetorical techniques are strategically placed to help the readers scale the text’s sex and gender nomadism as we move toward a space of acceptance and knowability.

One of the elements that is so intriguing about Orlando is that Woolf’s text challenges the urge to draw boundaries, but does so in a manner that is acceptable – even enticing – rather than off-putting. For as discomfiting as the reading of Orlando might be, the work was Woolf’s biggest commercial success to date: some 8,000 copies of the book sold within the first six months, and its success ended any financial worries Woolf might have had (Cervetti 165). But while drafting Orlando, Woolf was immersed in a culture that was buzzing with interest over relatively new ideas on “the forms and determinations of sexuality and sexual identities” (Bowlby 170), and Woolf evidently wanted to contribute to the discussion. Still, she was aware that her readership was only so open to unconventional notions of sexuality. We can thus recognize that Woolf had to walk a

¹ For the sake of simplicity, I will refer to the narrator as “the biographer” for most of the essay, though as I explain in the latter part of this argument the narrator is only performing the role of biographer.

very fine line between writing a text radical enough to challenge herself and her audience but acceptable enough not to be dismissed or censored.

In light of these concessions to potential censorship, then, I posit that the text is not as radical as some critics have argued.² I do not mean to dismiss Orlando's subversive qualities, but instead would like to suggest that the text is radical in a *functional* way – that is, in a way not automatically dismissed by the general reader in 1920s Britain. In order to keep the reader's attention and acceptance, and to maintain a veil over her own sexuality (albeit a very thin veil, at least for the knowing reader who would recognize the work as explicitly written for Woolf's lover, Vita Sackville-West), Woolf, in her structuring of the text, made some concessions to conventional gender constructs of the time, and in so doing evinces an understanding of what her readers might categorically dismiss. It is reasonable to surmise that Woolf gained such an understanding (or deepened the subtle understanding she already had) through her involvement in the obscenity trial of Radclyffe Halls's The Well of Loneliness.³ This ordeal gave Woolf an intimate awareness of the fate of literary works judged as risqué, and allowed her to create a different reception for Orlando by masking its potentially "unseemly" elements. Frederick Kellerman points out that the "potentially scandalous biographical details of Orlando have been carefully disguised by the use of fantasy and burlesque as well as by

² See Cervetti, who classifies Orlando's depiction of gender, identity, and the body as "revolutionary" (165), and Bardi, who argues that Woolf's text "flies in the face of her Victorian forebears" (40).

³ Radclyffe Hall's The Well of Loneliness was successfully tried in 1928 on charges of obscenity. The novel traces the life of a lesbian woman in sympathetic terms, a portrayal many members of the British government were not only strongly opposed to, but were actually disgusted by. Parkes explains, "A proposal to extend to women the 1885 Labouchere Amendment, which outlawed 'acts of gross indecency' between men, ran aground in the House of Commons in 1921 because, Samuel Hynes speculates, 'men found it [lesbianism] too gross to deal with'" (434). Woolf was slated to testify as to the literary merit of Hall's novel just days before the publication of Orlando, though her services were not needed because the judge ruled that "only he, and not the defense's array of 'expert witnesses,' could rule whether or not Well [sic] was obscene" (434-5).

topsy-turvy chronology” (145). Woolf was acutely cognizant of the fact that her British readership was not going to accept overtly lesbian love affairs.

As if hiding Orlando’s radical potential, Woolf herself referred to the book as a “joke” and a “freak,” and considered it one of her less important works (Diary 122-4). But her dismissal of Orlando as a serious literary text may have helped it gain wider acceptance. Kelly Tetterton notes that the text was generally thought to be “a gossipy portrait of Vita Sackville-West...And if it was not taken as straight Bloomsbury dish, it was taken as the delightful joke that Woolf herself claimed it to be” (par. 2). Woolf’s original audience seems to have largely overlooked its subversiveness,⁴ which, given the fate of The Well of Loneliness, is an attitude that probably helped the book on its way to commercial success. Indeed, it is much easier to accept or overlook the Sapphic undertones if one approaches the text as nothing more than gossipy nonsense.

Yet those Sapphic undertones are there, and only lightly hidden. Despite her descriptions of the text as a lark or a fluke, Woolf’s attitude towards the book was probably much less flippant than these descriptors might portray. She wrote to Sackville-West in October of 1927 that she had conceived of a text that would revolutionize biography overnight (Letters 429), and later states that while she began Orlando as a joke, she went on with it quite seriously (Diary 185). It is worth bearing in mind that Woolf composed Orlando at the same time that she was working on A Room of One’s Own. Nicola Thompson explains, “A Room of One’s Own is a theoretical investigation, while Orlando functions as a practical example that parodies the patriarchal literary establishment’s attempts at coming up with a precise and definitive theory of the novel” (306). I would argue that Orlando also functions as a practical example of the

⁴ This dismissal is often chalked up to the text’s comedic tone; see Parkes, for example.

androgynous mind Woolf describes in A Room of One's Own.⁵ As Rachel Bowlby points out, Orlando is not propaganda, but it is certainly more than the farce or lark Woolf sometimes claimed it to be. She argues that the text is a “love letter *and* a serious work of criticism, not one at the expense of the other, or the second superior to the first” (172) and then quotes Woolf to exemplify her idea:

Well but Orlando was the result of a perfectly definite, indeed overmastering impulse. I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (& this was serious) to give things their caricature value. And still the mood hangs about me. I want to write a history, say of Newnham or the womans [sic] movement, in the same vein (Diary 3: 175).

(Bowlby 172)

Woolf, evidently, was “serious” about her exaggerations and playful elements. Although she viewed Orlando as fun and fantasy, her interest in the issues it addresses – gender and definitions of the novel, for instance – continued to inspire her through the writing of A Room of One's Own, a decidedly serious social critique. This diary entry demonstrates that Woolf intended Orlando to comment upon the permeability of categorical boundaries, her disdain for political literature notwithstanding.

In the following pages I will show how Woolf's text addresses some of the more challenging and controversial topics of her day in a subtle way that did not alienate readers. Her text strives to push her readers to the edges of our understanding and acceptability, but at the same time employs what I call “hand-holds” – or, concessions to

⁵ Woolf postulates in A Room of One's Own that the ideal mind is one that combines both the male and female parts of the brain (both of which everyone has elements, regardless of sex). She states, “the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; [...] it transmits emotion without impediment; [...] it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” (98).

the British boundaries of acceptability. This thesis will provide a map of the hand-holds Woolf seems to have built in to keep the reader engaged with the text, stimulated by its revolutionary potential, but not be put off by it. For instance, the knowledge that Orlando is biologically male, which we are given in the first sentence (“He – for there could be no doubt of his sex...” [13]), tempers the rather feminine descriptions we are later given of the male Orlando. As Jean Kennard has noted, Orlando’s cheeks are downy but his⁶ eyes are like violets, and he is ready to fight a duel but displays the shyness of a little girl (162). Drastic and fantastic gender deviations such as these are made acceptable because the text teaches us how to read Orlando and Orlando; in doing so, a space is created in which androgyny, sex changes, and four-hundred year lives are not automatically dismissed. I theorize that Woolf’s writing method lessens resistance because the text works as a tutor of sorts, a tool to open the reader’s mind to a way of looking at gender that eschews preconceived notions. Instead of focusing on fitting Orlando into a prescribed model, this thesis will draw on reader response theory to help us understand how the text’s undecidability affects and influences the reader’s attitude towards Woolf’s radical suggestions regarding gender, sexuality, and the form of the novel itself.

Wolfgang Iser’s theories of reader-text interaction offer an initial way to understand how Woolf’s method of alternating challenges and assurances maneuvers the reader through the ideas presented in the text. Iser theorizes that as readers move through a text, their subject position shifts in relation to the text, creating a ball-chain movement of meaning-making: as we read, we shift to adopt the subject position offered by the text, then read more, and make meaning out of the new section through the lens of the previous one(s). This movement of the reader often creates “negations” as a result of the

⁶ For the sake of clarity, I will follow the pattern of the text in referring to Orlando as either “he” or “she.”

invocation of “familiar and determinant elements or knowledge” that are later cancelled out. Iser explains, “What is cancelled, however, remains in view, and thus brings about modifications in the reader’s attitude toward what is familiar or determinant – in other words, he is guided to adopt a position in *relation* to the text” (1677, italics original). Reading, then, is anything but passive.

Orlando is particularly adept at invoking familiar elements and subsequently toppling them. The aforementioned example of Orlando’s gender confusion offers a good illustration of negation; the reader’s expectations of Orlando as male are negated by the feminine characteristics with which we are later presented. Yet recall that what is cancelled does not entirely disappear. Therefore, the idea of Orlando as male hangs in the air even as images of a rather feminine Orlando move in. Thus, male and female attributes come to share space in the same character in a rather gentle, gradual way for the reader. The series of negations in Orlando combine to create a space wherein the reader is taught to negotiate a landscape that is gendered everywhere and every way.

Yet why would Woolf want to create an everywhere and every way gendered landscape? As many critics have noted, Woolf’s play with boundaries makes apparent how slippery lines of demarcation between categories are, while they also demonstrate our deep-seated desire to abide by them. Boundaries, according to Williams, are:

the literal and figurative processes by which society organizes itself, “draw[ing] the line,” declaring this “legitimate,” that not; this “proper,” that not; this “sane,” that not, [or the] rules and divisions that structure all dimensions of human life. Such “lines” and “boundaries” may be real – the cold, hard stone of the castle and cathedral – or the almost equally

adamant principles of the elaborate cultural system Lacan called “the Law of the Father.” (12)

So discomfort is created in the reading experience by the gyrations and contortions to which we have to resort in trying to categorize this text. Woolf reveals our urge to categorize in her complete disavowal of the usual category boundaries.

GENRE CONFUSION: WHAT IS ORLANDO?

The critical discussion of Orlando is rife with evidence of the desire to categorize. As I will later show, the prevalence of essays written on Orlando's boundary-blurring and the seemingly requisite attempts to categorize it anyway are representative of the typical reading experience. Woolf, however, anticipates and answers even her most critical readers.

Perhaps the most conspicuous way Woolf uses her text to push category boundaries is in its blurring of genres: the text is neither a novel nor a biography in the way that readers in Woolf's day would have conceived of either. The reader is lulled into thinking that the text will fit the typical novel form as a love story about Orlando, but Woolf turns the tables on the reader when Orlando falls in love with an androgynous woman who quickly leaves him to brood his loss alone, revealing this text as anything but a conventional love story. Of course, Orlando does not fit the mold of traditional biography either, in that it is written about a fictional person. The fact that Orlando is written in a way that conforms to the notion of “novel” at times and “biography” at others challenges and disturbs us because it also so often fits neither mold. By unexpectedly unsettling us, Woolf purposely unmasks our urge to categorize.

Nevertheless, critics still try to determine the text's genre. Among other genres, Orlando has been classified as mock biography (see, for instance, Moore, Westman, or Winch), mock epic tale (Garvey), extended love letter (first described as such by Vita Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicholson), *roman à clef* (Kellerman), or even the intriguingly suggestive "fairy tale à clef" (Garber). Still other critics can't decide where the work fits and argue that Orlando is a conglomeration of genres: Kathryn N. Benzel maintains it is a conflation of biography and fiction (4), while D.A. Boxwell simply states that Woolf was "[u]nashamedly thieving from a multitude of genres" when she wrote Orlando (307). Susan M. Squier claims that the work is both a "love-tribute" and a novel written in attempts to reshape "English novelistic tradition" (167-8), and Victoria L. Smith warily categorizes it as love letter and "fairy tale à clef" (59). A few, like Nicola Thompson, seem to have thrown their hands up and decided that this text simply refuses to be squashed into any generic category. Cervetti not only echoes Thompson's refusal to categorize the text, she actively encourages it: "Critics usually read the novel as biography or view it as a love letter. However, lifting Orlando out of the particulars of Woolf's life – refusing to talk about it in those terms – allows other aspects of this versatile and contraband text to materialize" (165).

Yet few critics seem to agree with or adhere to Cervetti's advice. Beyond attempts to categorize Orlando's genre, much critical discussion has focused on the role of gender within the text. Complicit with the need to define the text as a particular type seems to be an equally strong desire to fit Orlando's gender- and sex-switching into an understandable, definable schema. For example, Cervetti addresses the confusion that results from Orlando's frequent cross-dressing, deducing that "Orlando codes his dress

according to practicality or sexual desire” (166). Conversely, Kennard theorizes that Orlando’s sex and gender reversals function to undermine British hegemony, arguing that critics often fail “to recognize the powerful political implications of Woolf’s use of androgyny, bisexuality, and transsexualism” (149).

Finally, critics often attempt to define whether the character Orlando is a collection of disjointed and disunified selves (see Cervetti, for example) or whether, amongst this multitude of fractured selves, Orlando has a core self that persists throughout the story (as Kennard has argued). A final testament to the tenacity of the desire to categorize can be found in some of the more intriguing ways scholars have tried to define Orlando: a modern-day Homer (Garvey), a sort of Gulliver figure (Collier), or even a progenitor of the cinematic superhero (Shail).

Given the prevalence and near-irresistibility of categorizing, it seems prudent to ask why such boundaries are inappropriate or limiting in the first place. Why should we strain against a desire that is deeply ingrained in most of us? Categories seem to be useful tools for operating in the world and interacting with the people in it. But the negative consequences outweigh their productivity. Cervetti insightfully argues:

One way to reinscribe a text into dominant culture is to rewrite it in critical conversation by reducing it to particulars, to the personal and romantic, to biography or therapy, to a certain gender ontology, for example. I argue that to contain or restrict a radical text such as Orlando is to discount its effect and prevent it from influencing and altering other texts and other discourses. (172)

The role categories can play in discounting subversive texts is certainly insidious, but their menace seems to go further than that. Boundaries, according to Donna Haraway, serve to enhance and perpetuate myths (“A Cyborg Manifesto”). Expectations, stereotypes, and affiliations form a kind of baggage that weighs down whatever subjects they encounter. We often find it difficult to function without categorizing people, and one of the most elemental of these categories is gender. The Orlando reading experience, due to its purposeful boundary-blurring, is uncomfortable because readers are challenged in their urge to categorize and asked to drop the dichotomous baggage those categories necessarily entail.

Following Haraway, I’d like to suggest that not only do boundaries perpetuate myths, they also limit understanding. Jacques Derrida discussed nearly forty years after the publication of Orlando a concept that Woolf’s text makes manifest: any attempt to put ideas and people in patterns and binaries is a metacritical template that results in loss of meaning. Just like Derrida’s example of the *pharmakon* that signifies both remedy and poison, Orlando and the work’s main character are decidedly undecidable – for Woolf, like Derrida, promotes both/and thinking, as opposed to either/or thinking. Orlando can be both male *and* female, can be part of the Victorian and Modern age, can be both a nobleman and a poet; the text can be both biography and love letter, or, to use Woolf’s terms, there can exist both granite and rainbow (Orlando 77). Of course the text goes beyond these easy binaries; Orlando takes on many more positions than just nobleman and poet, and she often inhabits the space between male and female (and so forth), revealing that even both/and thinking can be limiting.

FALSE VERACITY

The text's subtitle proclaims that Orlando is a biography, a classification that gives the impression of truth and objectivity that isn't always present in either real biography or Woolf's mock biography. Paula Backscheider discusses at length the slipperiness of biographical objectivity in Reflections on Biography. She explains that a biographer develops a relationship, or "contract" in her words, with the reader: "As readers accept and come to trust the contract, they feel that they are in expert hands, as if they are being conducted on a tour by a superb driver who knows the landscape, its historical markers and contemporary significance" (10). Yet Backscheider later explains that biographers are not impervious to societal influences, which inevitably sway their interpretations, regardless of efforts to the contrary. She states:

Good, meticulous, intelligent biographers do know their subjects well enough to explain motives reliably. But the explanation is always to some extent coloured, perhaps even partly determined, by what the biographers' experience and culture have taught them about *human* motivation. (99, italics original)

This appearance of objectivity in biography – though not necessarily the existence of it – is an idea Woolf was intimately aware of. Her father was the editor of the stodgily traditional Dictionary of National Biography. As such, Woolf grew up around the person from whom this supposed objectivity was issuing, and knew firsthand how personal beliefs and assumptions can color interpretations. Woolf commented that in her father's writing she found "an impatient, limited mind; a conventional mind entirely accepting his own standard of what is honest, what is moral" (qtd. in Lee 71). Woolf's understanding

of the limits of objectivity is made manifest in Orlando when she mocks objectivity by pushing the reader to trust a patently unreliable biographer, one who strives to convince the reader that Orlando is a traditional biography, though this assertion is plainly not true. These efforts to make the reader believe in the biographer include the subtitle, but also the text's footnotes and the inclusion of photographs, both of which, as I will later discuss, function as hand-holds, even as they simultaneously unsettle and challenge the reader.

The subtitle is the first such assertion of truth, but Woolf uses other devices to blur the boundary between biography and fiction. The first device I would like to discuss is Woolf's use of footnotes. Orlando's two footnotes, instead of providing supplementary information, actually make readers feel quite ignorant because they imply that we should somehow know more than we do. One of these footnotes reports "researched" information: "The Captain must have been mistaken, as a reference to any textbook of literature will show; but the mistake was a kindly one, and so we let it stand" (167). As this footnote does not offer the correction to the Captain's mistake, it does not provide much new information and instead implies that the reader should either already know the correction to the error or at least have the gumption to look it up.

And while the nature of footnotes implies that the reader will be provided some further explanation of a point made in the body of the text, the second footnote in Orlando actually does the opposite. In a discussion of Mr. Pope's appearance at a London society gathering, we are told that he says three witticisms (the content of which is not provided) that throw society into "complete dismay" (202). In reference to these witticisms, we are told in a footnote, "These sayings are too well known to require

repetition, and besides, they are all to be found in his published works” (202). The reader isn’t offered anything besides the supposed ubiquity of these sayings, sayings which are made out to be highly important. We’re told, “One such saying was bad enough; but three, one after another, on the same evening! No society could survive it” (202). While the first footnote makes readers feel foolish for not catching an error on our own, the second implies that we should have knowledge we likely do not.

So these footnotes, instead of aiding the reader’s understanding, actually undermine our intelligence and unnerve us. The biographer gains credibility because we believe we “know” less. The footnotes thus grant the biographer a false veracity, an unreliable credibility, and the reader is inclined to believe this presentation of Orlando’s life. Their inclusion serves to blur genre boundaries (because they are often a device of non-fiction writing) at the same time as they work to convince the reader that the biographer is reporting the truth, strange as it might be. By thus gaining the reader’s trust, Woolf offers to the reader a conceptual stepping-stone; even if readers are incapable of categorizing Orlando and its main character (the source of most discomfort), we are inclined to believe that we can trust what the biographer says. We may be told that Orlando is a man then a woman, an aristocrat then a gypsy, or four hundred years old, and all the while accept these deviations because we believe we are in the capable hands of the biographer.

Similarly, photographs in Orlando are anything but trustworthy, and yet the reader’s most likely expectation is that they are. Helen Wussow insightfully argues that, with Orlando, Woolf mocks “the credulity of a public that reads and believes everything

it sees in illustrated papers” (2). In the following excerpt she explains how Woolf’s mocking is done and its affect on the reader:

She [Woolf] undermines the supposed faithfulness of a biography toward its subject by presenting false photographic evidence [...] Woolf asks the reader to identify Sackville-West as Orlando and accept the photograph as evidence of Orlando’s existence. Although we may recognize Sackville-West in the photograph, we must simultaneously perceive her as Orlando. The difficulty in reading the image is similar to the problems presented by Orlando’s androgyny and agelessness. The reader may wish to comply with Woolf’s captions and read the photographs as representing Orlando. There remains however, a disconcerting sensation that Woolf’s text trifles with the evidence and the reader [...] When text and image are brought together in Orlando, concepts of meaning disintegrate and new definitions of truth begin to evolve. (3)

So just like facts, photographs too can be twisted into untruths, which is exactly what has been done in Orlando. Their appearance of truth obscures Harry as Harriet, Sackville-West as Orlando, and Angelica Bell (Woolf’s niece) as Sasha, and creates a highly uncomfortable subject position for the reader because the photographs are difficult to classify. So since photographs are assumed by the reader to be factual, playing with them is highly subversive. The assumption of truth works to turn off the reader’s critical faculty because we can allow the biographer to be critical for us. Woolf, thereby, was able to manipulate “records” without being off-putting.

Yet these photographs, because of their supposed factuality, also function as hand-holds throughout the text. They lend an air of truth to a text full of absurdity, extremism, and farce. For instance, the reader is assured by a photograph (114) that Harriet, a six-foot-tall person who is rather bold and quite knowledgeable about wine, firearms, and sportsmanship, is really a woman; she must be, we're inclined to think, just look at that dress! Harriet's waist is corseted into a small shape, her chest is hoisted high, and her hips are exaggerated to an extreme proportion, especially in opposition to her unnaturally tiny waist. She wears a huge collar that stands halfway up the back of her head and a cape that extends past the width of her shoulders. Her sleeves are puffed at the upper arm and tapered at the wrists. Nearly everything on her body is embellished with jewels, lace, and ribbon. Because the reader so desires to believe the photographic "evidence," this visual record shifts the reader's subject position to accept Harriet as a woman despite what the text implies. So, rather ingeniously, because these images of Orlando, Sasha, and Harriet seem to be solid ground amidst an earthquake of instability, photographs provide the reader a mental grip as they simultaneously challenge the reader's ability to classify and categorize.

THE EXOTIC

Although Woolf's genre blurring is certainly challenging in its own right, Orlando couples it with the much more unnerving challenge to the reader's ability to discern gender. Because gender is one of the most basic categories we use to understand people (and because the topic was so highly controversial in Woolf's day), the novel's gender-blurring is understandably wrapped in language that serves as a hand-hold on multiple

levels. One such device is Woolf's development of the Exotic throughout the text. This rhetorical tool allows the reader to dismiss Woolf's positive portrayals of androgyny and gender-swapping. Throughout this text, though particularly in the characters of Orlando, Sasha, and Harriet/Harry, androgyny is aligned with the Exotic and the Other,⁷ a portrayal that allows Woolf's British readership to distance itself from potentially troubling events in the text. Foreignness allows androgyny to be seen as not British, as not us.

The first significant appearance of this rhetorical device comes in the form of Orlando's main love interest, Sasha. Descriptions of Sasha's foreignness are woven in with descriptions of her seductive androgyny, a blending that facilitates the reader's acceptance of her androgyny, as I will later show. Sasha's gender is very much in question when we are first introduced to her, in a possibly disconcerting manner. The biographer, channeling Orlando's thoughts, describes his first impression of Sasha:

The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in [Orlando's] mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds; he did not know whether he had heard her, tasted her, seen her, or all three together...When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be –

⁷ See Edward Said's [Orientalism](#) or Graham Huggan's [The Postcolonial Exotic](#) for discussions of the mythification of the Other and (de)valuation of the Exotic.

no woman could skate with such speed and vigour – swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was out of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question. But the skater came closer. Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had those eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea...She was not a handsbreadth off. She was a woman. (38)

Notice that the biographer first calls Sasha “her,” then “the boy,” finally resting at “she” again. Sasha’s gender is repeatedly created and negated, producing a space in the reader’s mind that is uncomfortable because it is indeterminate. The text temporarily prohibits readers from categorizing Sasha, which means that we are disallowed one of the principle ways to “know” a person. But at the same time as readers are challenged by Sasha’s indeterminate gender, we are mollified by the knowledge that Sasha is Other; the text exaggerates Sasha’s “foreignness” to such an extent that Woolf’s British audience couldn’t help but see her as such. We are told in the above passage that her green fur is “unfamiliar” and that she resembles fruit, stones, and animals simultaneously. We also learn that Sasha, whose name is actually the fantastically elaborate “Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch” (38), is kin to people about whom “very little was known” except that they “sat almost silent; drinking some black liquid which they spat out now and then upon the ice” (39). “Exotic” suddenly seems like a rather tame descriptive for this person. It is worth mentioning that although Woolf’s use of stereotypes certainly appears ignorant or racist, I believe that her use of them in this instance serves a distinct rhetorical purpose and cannot be dismissed simply as an

expression of racist beliefs. Stereotypes generally evince a lack of understanding of another person or culture, and in the case of Sasha, these stereotypes encourage the view of her as unintelligible. The opposite – making Sasha understandable, knowable, or familiar – discourages the conception of Sasha as Other. This perception of Sasha as Other is important because it allows the reader to dismiss Sasha’s character and the androgyny as what is disturbing. So Woolf, in this scene, is using Sasha’s stereotypical foreignness as a conceptual comfort to the reader that “explains” or trumps the character’s androgyny.

Woolf once again utilizes the Exotic to make Harriet/Harry’s character less disconcerting. As mentioned before, the text introduces us to an enormous and rather bold person whose interests lie in traditionally masculine domains, and yet this person is called a lady (113-5). This negation of gender creates a tension in the reading experience because Harriet fits neither the traditional female nor male schema. But Woolf soon offers a hand-hold: Harriet, too, is a foreigner. Just like Sasha’s, Harriet’s full name is absurd. She is actually the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn and Scandop-Boom in the Roumanian territory (114). Harriet’s gender-swapping is less disconcerting because it is not an immediate threat to the reader’s world and definition of what is familiar and “normal.” Harriet’s absurd, foreign name also helps the reader accept her because one can dismiss her “threat” as not serious. And finally, foreign threats are often historically and culturally emasculated in language as a way to belittle them.⁸ With this multifaceted hand-hold in place, Woolf can make the reader endure numerous negations of Harriet/Harry’s gender. The idea of Harriet as a lady is soon negated by her

⁸ One only has to open a current newspaper in the United States to see this at work. Take, for instance, the ubiquitous political cartoon depicting Muslim radicals in what, at least to the West, appears to be feminine dress.

physical size and knowledge of “male” subjects, which is negated by the photograph of Harriet in elaborate, womanly dress, which is later negated by the revelation that “Harriet” was just a ruse to get to know Orlando. Through this series of negations, neither the idea of Harriet/Harry as a woman nor as a man entirely disappears. Harriet/Harry comes to occupy a space in the reader’s mind that is a mixture of male and female. Thus the reader is subtly encouraged to discard a strictly binary system of gender without becoming alienated from the text because of its challenge to the status quo.

For much the same reasons that Sasha’s and Harriet/Harry’s indeterminate genders are easier to accept because they are foreign, Orlando’s sex change is made acceptable because it occurs in Turkey. Within one page of learning that Orlando has become an ambassador to Constantinople, the biographer presents a stereotypically exotic picture of the city at early morning:

Soon, the whole town would be astir with the cracking of whips, the beating of gongs, cryings to prayer, lashing of mules, and rattle of brass-bound wheels, while sour odours, made from bread fermenting and incense, and spice, rose even to the heights of Pera itself and seemed the very breath of the strident and multicoloured and barbaric population...Nothing, [Orlando] reflected, gazing at the view which was now sparkling in the sun, could well be less like the counties of Surrey and Kent or the towns of London and Turnbridge Wells. (121)

The first sentence of this excerpt, besides giving evocative sensory evidence of the difference between the two countries, contains a litany of details strung together to give the impression of everything happening in rapid succession; Constantinople seems like a

place of commotion, confusion, and overstimulation. Woolf takes the comparison further by stating directly that this place is the polar opposite from that with which her typical, British reader is familiar. In effect, Woolf makes it easy to see Constantinople as Other. As before, this device allows the reader to see Orlando's sex change from a physically and emotionally safe distance. We can now understand that Woolf's subsequent use of gypsies as a rhetorical device is particularly apt. Gypsies, beyond being exotic, are nomadic; they observe no country or city boundaries and traverse the geographical topography of Turkey as Orlando traverses gender topography. Critic Ellen Carol Jones argues that "Orlando's textual body corresponds to Orlando's sexual body: textual body and sexual body are mutually constituting as well as self-reflecting in the hall of mirrors that is Orlando" (156). Certainly the sexual and textual bodies are here well in sync. And, as this study shows, Orlando's textual nomadism is rhetorically extremely sophisticated.

STRATEGIC PLAY: HYPERBOLE, FANTASY, AND THE CARNIVALESQUE

Orlando is nothing if not a playful text. Hyperbole and fantasy lace the plot and the biographer's language. Woolf uses hyperbole and humor, two hallmarks of the carnivalesque, to maintain the reader's acceptance while she highlights the desire to categorize by challenging efforts to do so. Some of the most controversial topics in the text – a positive portrayal of androgyny and Orlando's sex change – are cloaked in playful, carnivalesque language. The text addresses "the nature of sexuality and the constructedness of gender" as it reveals "the essential instability of essence... the reversibility of sex" (Burns 350), topics that were immensely controversial in 1920s England (especially in the wake of The Well of Loneliness trial). Boxwell, in a discussion

of Orlando as “camp,” maintains that Woolf did indeed intend Orlando to be cultural critique. He argues that if the text is “blithely offhand about its cultural impotence, it is also equally motivated by a desire to function in some kind of culturally transformative way, one with utopian impulses, impulses rooted in camp’s carnivalesque origins” (307). Following Boxwell, we can understand that the text’s carnivalesque atmosphere works to mitigate objections as it also attempts to be subversive. In this way, Woolf’s “play” holds the reader’s hand through some of the most unusual, challenging, and potentially disturbing elements of the text: androgyny and sex changes. Woolf, a publisher of Freud’s English language works and friend of translator James Strachey, was availing herself of humor to allow expression of socially repressed material in much the same way that Freud argued that dreams work. In Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Freud notes that jokes are often a way of allowing expression of what would otherwise be objectionable (repressed) material. Jokes work like dream thoughts in their providing a vehicle (veiled in humor) to articulate unconscious thoughts.

Woolf’s strategic play, which serves to facilitate the reader’s acceptance of gender nomadism, is reinforced by the dreamlike, fantastical world in which Sasha makes her appearance. The Great Frost’s rapidity and depth had transformed London into an unfamiliar territory. This icy atmosphere forced upon London a sort of carnival atmosphere in which society had gone topsy-turvy: we are introduced to a town suspended on top of a river on which royalty dance and ships are frozen in space and time. We are then told of the nursing mother, the coupling lovers, and praying noblemen who are caught perilously between freeze and thaw, floating down a yellow river on moving sheets of “fantastically twisted” ice in the remains of bedrooms, libraries,

kitchens, and bars (62-3). Boats are frozen below the water “overladen with apples” from last fall’s harvest (36), and herds of pigs are commonly seen “frozen immovable upon the road” (34). In this dreamlike atmosphere, where the rules are already broken and the unusual has become the everyday, a depiction of an ambiguously gendered figure does not seem terribly disconcerting. We can thereby understand that the absurdity of Woolf’s fantastic winter carnival allows her to address even perverse androgyny in a positive light.

Orlando’s glossed-over, heavily veiled sex change is thus “normalized” in the logic of this surreal context. The physical change in Orlando is described in broad terms; we are told that “he” is now a “she,” but the anatomical details are never mentioned. Moreover, the biographer offers no ready explanation for why or how Orlando becomes a woman after thirty years of life, only that she awakes from a death-like slumber after seven days to find a new body. Orlando experienced a similar slumber earlier in life, though it did not result in this sort of physical change. The reader is left wondering what was different this time? what caused the change? what caused the slumbers? We are made understandably uncomfortable by the tension created by these unanswered questions, but as the scene is exaggerated, we go beyond confusion into fantasy, wherein the peripherals of this exaggerated and absurd scene deflect attention away from the sex change and the questions it provokes. For instance, the “virtues” Modesty, Chastity, and Purity are caricatured to near-mythical proportions, appearing in white dresses and icicle diadems, with lightning flashing in their flowing hair and trumpets punctuating their speech (134). These mythical creatures are presented alongside the narrative action, making the distinction between what is happening and what is hyperbolic all the more

unclear. The biographer's language even changes: there are twenty-seven explanation points on the six pages covering the change, and we are given phrases such as "holiest zephyr" (134), and "Purity Avaunt!" (135), and are told that "[n]o human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing" (138). These over-the-top descriptions allow the reader to see the change – presumably the most controversial event in the text – through the dual lenses of fantasy (Freudian dream thoughts) and mockery (jokes). Just as androgyny could be seen as "not us," Orlando's sex change is allowed to be "not real" (Hovey 396) and "just kidding."

Boxwell explains that "Orlando's exaggerated artificiality, stylization, and glamour all seem – successfully and self-mockingly – to disavow any pretensions to asserting cultural power" (307). In this light, Woolf's exaggerated scene allows her to address the permeability of gender boundaries without alienating potential readers. It is worth noting that while Orlando's gender is often changing or ambiguous, her sex changes only once. The relative stability of Orlando's sex is a conceptual comfort because it allows the reader to always fall back on the knowledge that Orlando *is* biologically male for half the text and biologically female for the other half, although of course this condition is fantasy as well.

SUGGESTIONS AND MODELS

Instead of allowing the reader to see Orlando in neatly defined gender roles after the sex change – male one moment and female the next – the reader is forced to perceive the character as an unusual androgyne when she runs away with a company of gypsies that barely distinguishes between the sexes. Nevertheless, the text contains hand-holds

that make Orlando's androgyny more comfortable by modeling and suggesting how the reader should react to the tale he is being told; in other words, instead of navigating the text's uncertainty and ambiguity alone, the reader is provided guides for how to react to uncomfortable situations.

First, Orlando's comportment after the change subtly modifies readers' subject positions because Orlando is a model for how we might react to the change. The biographer states, "Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath" (138), and later, "[t]he change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it" (139). Orlando is the most obvious model that the reader might follow at this point in the novel. The only other characters present during the change are the personified virtues, Chastity, Purity, and Modesty, who are lampooned and made to look outdated; we are told that the only people who honor these virtues are "virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding" (137). We are thus given to understand that only the reader who wishes to be aligned with "those who praise without understanding" would be offended by Orlando's change. And so because there is only Orlando in this scene besides the personified virtues, readers are encouraged to model reactions on the title character's calm acceptance.

As a further shift in directing the reader's viewpoint, Woolf's word choice in describing Orlando's first act after the change suggests renewal. The biographer states that Orlando, "without showing any signs of discomposure, went, presumably, to his

bath” (138). The word “bath” functions as the hand-hold here. Instead of “toilet,” “powder room,” or “latrine,” for instance, Woolf chose a word that implies an act – a natural act – of cleansing, refreshing, and renewal. By including such an ordinary action in this extraordinary scene, Woolf suggests that Orlando’s sex change is indeed normal – quotidian even.

The word “bath” functions dually as a conceptual comfort because of the scene’s implied re-birth. Orlando’s slumber is death-like; indeed it is deep enough to fool his enemies into leaving him alone: “The rioters broke into Orlando’s room, but seeing him stretched to all appearance dead they left him untouched” (133). So Orlando’s awakening appears to be a literal *re*-birth, an impression that is encouraged by Orlando’s new physical state. For Woolf’s largely Christian audience, mention of a “bath” in combination with the idea of re-birth is likely to suggest baptism. Besides the obvious watery similarity, baptism and bath (in this scene, at least) both signal the beginning of a new life. The baptized individual emerges re-born as a Christian, whereas Orlando emerges a biological female. The reader can thereby understand Orlando not as a weird blend of some sort but as a person who has been re-born a woman, which allows Orlando’s sex (if not gender) to be neatly defined. The reader’s subject position thus subtly shifts to incorporate a symbolic, understandable starting over. Because “bath,” by way of “baptism,” has Christian connotations, Woolf’s archetypal reader is given something familiar and understandable in a scene full of the unfamiliar (the exotic location and perverse change).

The parallelism between textual body and sexual body continues as Orlando boards the *Enamoured Lady*. The ship’s passage serves an important rhetorical function

as a bridge between the gender indeterminism of the gypsies and the hyper-determinism of the British empire. The ship's passage allows Orlando to learn to perform as a "female," but just as importantly it allows the reader time to "learn" Orlando as a woman. As she puzzles out her new role as a lady we are invited to follow along: "Nobody, indeed, ever accused [Orlando] of being one of those quick wits, who run to the end of things in a minute. It took her the entire length of the voyage to moralise out the meaning of her start, and so, at her own pace, we will follow her" (154). These lines grant readers forgiveness if we don't "run to the end of" (i.e., understand the full implications of) Orlando's change immediately, and they portend a chapter in which many of the reader's questions as to how this gender change has affected Orlando will be answered by "watching" her puzzle her way through her newly adopted femininity. While Orlando ponders whether or not she objects to "the protection of a blue-jacket" (154), her new-found ability to comprehend Sasha (155), or the physical pleasure of a man's company (159), the reader's subject position is moved into a space that is comparatively more comfortable than the previous ambiguity; the reader can now more easily accept Orlando as a woman because her femininity aligns with her sex and because Woolf has aided our understanding of it. Readers are comforted because we are better able to classify Orlando; this character is finally playing by the rules, dressing and acting in accordance with her biological sex.

The ship is synecdochic of the need for clearly defined gender roles in a British society that had an imperialistic control over its citizens' very bodies. The name of the ship is a rather opaque foreshadowing of what Orlando will be forced to become in this society, a role she embraces (if only in appearances at first) even before she steps foot on

the ship: “Orlando had bought herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank that she now sat on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*” (153). In this text, the imperialism and sexism of early eighteenth-century Britain become present as soon as Orlando moves toward the country. Orlando will, on this voyage, become both *Enamoured* and a *Lady*, though in a characteristically challenging way. In some respects, Orlando becomes enamoured of Captain Bartolus – the venture ashore with him implies a sexual affair (159) – but it is probably more accurate to argue that Orlando becomes enamoured of acting womanly. As she puzzles out her new status, Orlando realizes that acting the part of a woman can be quite pleasurable. For instance, upon being offered by the Captain a slice of corned beef, Orlando wonders:

Which is the greater ecstasy? The man’s or the woman’s? And are they perhaps the same? No, she thought, this is the most delicious (thanking the Captain but refusing) to refuse, and see him frown. Well she would, if he wished it, have the very thinnest, smallest shiver in the world. This was the most delicious, to yield and see him smile. ‘For nothing,’ she thought, regaining her couch on deck, and continuing the argument, ‘is more heavenly than to resist and to yield, to yield and to resist. Surely it throws the spirit into such rapture that nothing else can. So that I’m not sure,’ she continued, ‘that I won’t throw myself overboard, for the mere pleasure of being rescued by a blue-jacket after all.’ (155)

That Orlando finds physical pleasure in a man is a hand-hold because the character’s heterosexuality is affirmed (once again, she is easily definable, playing by the rules).

However, in keeping with Woolf's pattern of assurances and challenges, it is not actually Captain Bartolus who throws Orlando's soul into rapture, but rather her own actions. Orlando seems to be more in love with the performance than the man. Moreover, her autoeroticism would surely prove disturbing to a readership recently out of the grips of Victorian mores. So while Orlando does come to doubt her initial delight in femininity (156), it nevertheless cannot be denied that in this section Orlando learns to act womanly, and learns to enjoy it to boot.

Orlando's performance, it must be noted, carries with it significant class connotations. Orlando becomes a lady, "a young Englishwoman of rank" (153), aboard the ship. The text sets up the gypsy company as a foil to English society, in which neither gender nor class boundaries are taken lightly. Gender and class are inextricably linked in this opposition. While living with the gypsies, Orlando was nomadic and androgynous: she was able to cross gender lines as easily as she crossed country lines. The company's nomadism demands a minimalist lifestyle, something they and Orlando do quite happily, but which implies poverty (at least by stereotypical, British standards) by the lack of material possessions to demonstrate wealth. Yet the text makes it clear that in English society, disregarding gender and class lines with such flippancy is impermissible. Upon her return to England, Orlando faces lawsuits that legally pressure her to be one gender or the other. As Bowlby remarks, "the lawsuit stresses that, in the absence of any obvious classification, [gender] has to be fixed, by fiat, in a way that implicitly has no particular reference to any reality [...]. In order for Orlando to continue with her life, she has to be granted an agreed identity" (166-7). The accepted androgyny of the gypsies stands in stark contrast to this British pressure to conform to socially prescribed gender roles. It

seems inevitable then, since class and gender are so closely allied in this gypsy/British opposition, that Orlando's desire to return to her four-hundred and seventy-six bedrooms and privileged lineage (148-9) would force her renunciation of androgyny as well (albeit a temporary renunciation). One comes at the price of the other: with the gypsies Orlando could be androgynous, but she could not be upper class. In England, Orlando's familial pride is rewarded, but her androgyny is punished.

PERFORMANCE

Performance as a trope in Orlando extends far beyond the eponymous character's learned enjoyment of the theatricality of gender. Just as Orlando seems to view life as a theatrical performance, her biographer seems to be putting on a performance for the reader. Moreover, Orlando's clothing is the key to her performances of gender. Orlando's and the biographer's performances function as further hand-holds in the reader's attempts to scale this text and urge the reader's acceptance of Orlando and Orlando. The main character's views on life as theater and her usurpation of the performative nature of gender similarly console readers because they encourage us to see her deviations as a theatrical performance rather than social critique. Finally, the biographer's performances of the roles of biographer and of friend to the reader are simultaneously comforting and challenging in the way they foster a kinship between the reader and the text, a closeness that then makes the text's challenges all the more powerful because the reader is hooked. I will address each instance of performance individually, beginning with Orlando's views on life.

Orlando regularly watches figures behind blinds in coffee houses and imagines the witty things they say to each other; she makes them actors in her own imagined play. On one evening, she watches three figures for more than thirty minutes and is tempted to applaud: “Never was any play so absorbing. She wanted to cry out, Bravo! Bravo! For, to be sure, what a fine drama it was – what a page torn from the thickest volume of human life!” (222). Orlando’s vision of life as performance gently pushes the reader’s subject position to one in which he views all the lives within the text as performance (including Orlando’s). The emergence of this idea of life as performance is a hand-hold because, if Orlando’s life (and importantly, her gender-switching) is performance, it can also be perceived as not real, and therefore easily dismissed by conservative readers. However, this performative view of life – especially in regards to Orlando – necessarily entails a view of gender as performance, which is a rather subversive way to get the reader to adopt a controversial and unorthodox subject position in relation to gender.

Since Orlando views life as a performance, we should not be surprised that she changes clothes and gender to suit her situation like actors change for each scene, each character, and each play. Indeed, clothing is the lynchpin in her performance of gender. Anticipating Judith Butler’s description of gender as “a kind of persistent impersonation that passes as the real” (viii), Orlando presents a character for whom impersonating female or male is as easy as changing clothes. In Orlando, clothes have a transformative power in and of themselves. The biographer repeatedly gives us examples of how the feel of a skirt, petticoat, or crinoline dictates Orlando’s thoughts of herself. It is when Orlando puts on a skirt and interacts with Englishmen that she begins to think, feel, and act “womanly” (153). Woolf makes the point that within any given person resides multiple

selves – two thousand and fifty-two, to use her number (308). So the way Orlando chooses to dress herself on any given day represents a single character in her personality, only one of her many selves. A day's dress allows expression of only the tiniest fraction of a multi-faceted being, an idea that was new and controversial in Woolf's day (the text even predates Joan Riviere's groundbreaking idea of femininity as masquerade).

So since Woolf makes one of her most potent critiques with clothing, we can understand that giving the reader some kind of conceptual comfort was imperative. Kennard notes that “[c]ross-dressing in itself has the effect of carnivalizing political and cultural power and thus of undermining it. But ambivalence, the apparent crossing over that crosses back, is even more destabilizing” (152). The ease with which Orlando switches gender during her later days in London is created via Orlando's usurpation of the “persistent impersonation” that is gender. But because readers are encouraged to view this crossing over that crosses back through the lens of theater or performance, we are disarmed by the implied fiction – the unreality – of her gender changes. Moreover, because neither the conception of Orlando as male nor the conception of this character as female entirely disappears as a result of its negation at various times in the text, readers are primed for Orlando's cross-dressing because our mental image of Orlando is already a blend of genders.

Just as Orlando views lives within the text as performances, the biographer's theatrics encourage the reader to see performances outside the confines of the text. The narrator performs the role of both biographer and friend to the reader in such a way that the reader is encouraged to see gender as performance but isn't turned off by this challenging viewpoint. Orlando's biographer directly addresses and includes the reader in

the dialogue of the narrative, often stating phrases such as “we can scarcely refrain from asking” (67), “let us get on with the story” (68), or “here again, we come to a dilemma” (189). The biographer refers to the process of writing a biography nearly as frequently. At the start of Orlando’s ambassadorial service, the biographer states, “It is, indeed, highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted that at this stage of Orlando’s career, when he played a most important part in the public life of his country, we have least information to go upon” (119). Similarly, when approaching Orlando’s sex change, the biographer is equally forthcoming with the difficulties in writing Orlando’s life:

Would that we might here take the pen and write Finis to our work! Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried. But here, alas, Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! (134)

These references to “us,” “you,” and “the reader,” and the descriptions of the writing process, give the feeling that the narrator, in overtly acting the part of biographer, is bringing the reader along for a journey. The emotional closeness fostered by the text is in direct conflict with the events of the novel that confound expectations. Readers are unsettled by the intermittent fantastic elements precisely because they are intermingled with the text’s knowability and the personal connection we are urged to make with it. Unlike, say, The Waves, which is written in a much less familiar (i.e., less traditional) form, it is much more difficult to leave ourselves while reading Orlando because the text treads the line between reality and fantasy. The Waves allows and indeed encourages

flights of fancy into another world; the reader is pushed to leave what is familiar in favor of the machinations of Rhoda's or Bernard's mind. Orlando, conversely, by skirting the edges of the familiar, does not allow us to leave ourselves during the reading experience. A tension exists between the flights of fancy the novel encourages us to take and its simultaneous stubborn refusal to let us leave the ground. If we want to reconcile the tension, we have to somehow assimilate the fantastic with the familiar to find a middle ground (which may or may not be comfortable). Since Orlando's view of life as performance has already shifted the reader's subject position to one that views Orlando's gender as such, the jump to viewing gender outside the confines of the text as performance, while still a mighty leap, is not quite as difficult. In this way, Woolf pushes readers to grapple with the text's gender-bending ideas in our own lives.

CONCLUSIONS

Virginia Woolf wrote Orlando for a British audience in 1928. This audience's assumptions and beliefs were inevitably colored by the British Empire's imperialism, the loosening stranglehold of Victorian mores, and, of particular importance to the reception of Orlando, the wake of The Well of Loneliness trial. Since this situation was necessarily unique to the time and place, a look at the need for and reception of the text's alternating challenges and assurances at different times and in different societies is particularly useful for illuminating Orlando. Furthermore, the concept of hand-holds might elucidate storyline changes in Sally Potter's film version of Orlando, particularly since it was created for an American audience at the turn of the twenty-first century. The rhetorical devices Woolf employs to placate her audience – false veracity, the Exotic, play,

modeling, and performance – worked in the sense that Orlando was a commercial success when it was first published. The text is not, however, one of Woolf’s most widely studied works. Possibly the rhetorical strategies worked too well; they might cause modern scholars to dismiss Orlando as the gossipy fantasy Woolf herself professed it to be.

Woolf’s awareness of propriety and her capitulations to it are palpable in Orlando. But while “capitulations” sometimes takes on a negative connotation of cowardliness, I propose that, in the case of this text, the term should simply signify Woolf’s awareness of the situational realities of her British audience. Criticism can only be fruitful if it is heard. Yelling into deaf ears is certain failure; this Freudian-educated woman knew that whispered suggestions to half-awakened minds were far more successful. The series of challenges and assurances in Orlando move the reader into a space and a subject position that allows recognition of the permeability of boundaries, and encourages the concession that the difference between male and female is not as great as is sometimes assumed. We can see that although this text evinces an acceptance of the differences that come about due to biological sex (we are told, for instance, “the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men” [153]), it nevertheless strongly rejects any further separation wrought by gender as necessary or inevitable. After all, a change of clothes allows a change of gender. So while Woolf’s text is certainly challenging and subversive in its presentation of nomadic gender, her use of highly sophisticated rhetorical strategies allow Orlando to be a functionally radical text.

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