

Gender Performativity in Woolf's *Orlando*

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Orlando has often been regarded as little more than a playful interlude in Woolf's oeuvre, and has suffered considerable critical neglect as a result. The responsibility for the dismissive mode adopted by many critics partly lies with Woolf herself, who disparagingly described the novel as "a joke," "farce," "a writer's holiday," "an escapade" (qtd. in Minow-Pinkney 117). When *Orlando* is not simply omitted from critical discussion altogether, it tends to be read as a fictionalized biography of Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West. Matching the novel's characters and events with their counterparts in the real world becomes the sole objective of critical inquiry.¹ What this type of critical response hides from view, however, are the very serious, non-biographical concerns motivating the text's apparently frivolous play. These issues have only come to be appreciated in the last few years, which have seen a marked increase in scholarly work on the novel.² Taking my cue from some of these writings, I will argue that *Orlando*, far from being an insignificant *jeu d'esprit*, is in fact a radical text, whose subversion of deep-seated and taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered behaviour and the functioning of language is suppressed by its reduction to an escapade or a mere tribute to Vita Sackville-West.

In what follows, I will first analyse the representation of gender and sexuality in *Orlando*. My reading of these issues will be informed primarily by the theory of gender performativity as developed in the work of the American philosopher Judith Butler, which I will briefly outline. Next, I will examine what the text has to say about literature and language, and, taking my lead from Paul de Man, venture some conclusions about the distinctive value of literature inside culture.

Preliminaries

The dominant conception of gender in Western societies presupposes a causal relation between sex, gender, and desire. The presumption is that there is first a sex that is expressed through a gender and then through a sexuality. All human beings belong to one of two discrete gender categories (either "masculine" or "feminine") permanently determined on the basis of biological—i.e. naturally given—sex characteristics (either "male" or "female"). Congruence is expected not only within and between a person's sex and

¹ For a brief overview of dismissive and biographical accounts of the novel, see Cervetti 171–72.

² See, for example, Burns, Cervetti, Hovey, Knopp, Lawrence, Minow-Pinkney, Parkes, Schaffer, and Watkins.

gender—meaning that one is either neatly male/masculine or neatly female/feminine—but also between the areas of sex and gender on the one hand and a person's sexuality on the other, with the default option being that this will be heterosexual.

Though this system may seem obvious or natural, and the outline I have given of it a generalized description of "the way things are," it has been argued that it is in fact an artificial conjunction of cultural constructs which has naturalized itself in order to conceal and hence perpetuate the power relations of which it is a product. According to Butler, the causal lines between sex, gender, and desire can be exposed as retrospectively and performatively produced fabrications:

It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced and maintained in the *effects* of this compulsory performance [of heterosexuality], effects which are disingenuously renamed as causes, origins, disingenuously lined up within a causal or expressive sequence that the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex. ("Imitation" 29)

The presumed continuities between sex, gender, and desire are an illusion set up by a power/knowledge regime which serves the interests of heterosexuality and—by casting male/masculine and female/feminine as a hierarchical opposition—masculine hegemony.

"Intelligible" identities—intelligible within the terms of the dominant sexual regime—are those which institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, and desire. As Butler points out, such "coherent" subjects are constituted by a dynamic of repudiation and exclusion. Indeed, the formation of viable subjects requires the simultaneous production of a domain of unviable (un)subjects—"abjects"—who form the "constitutive outside" to the domain of the subject:

The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (*Bodies* 3)

For Butler, the domain of abjection—that which the subject must exclude in order to constitute itself—offers a vantage point from which the heteropatriarchal symbolic can be challenged: "These excluded sites come to bound the 'human' as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation" (*Bodies* 8). She goes on to make a case for this threat and disruption to be considered as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility. In her view, the persistence and proliferation of gender identities that fail to conform to norms of cultural intelligibility "provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of

intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder" (*Gender* 17). By denaturalizing reified notions of gender, the domain of abject, delegitimated bodies can be instrumental in dismantling the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. The loss of gender norms would result in the meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world being vastly expanded.

If, as Butler claims, the domain of abjected alterity is populated by "those [identities] in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender" (*Gender* 17), then Orlando, the sex-changing, cross-dressing, and bisexual protagonist of Woolf's novel, has all the right credentials to be considered one of its inhabitants. As an "incoherent" or "discontinuous" gendered being who fails to conform to the norms of cultural intelligibility, s/he can be seen to subvert and displace those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power.

Gender

A first glimpse of *Orlando's* revolutionary conception of gender is afforded by the novel's opening sentence, which begins: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it [. . .]" (13), thus calling the reader's attention immediately to gender. However, the narrator seems to protest too much, creating the very doubt that his words would deny.³ Indeed, the interruptive qualification comically dismantles the male subject announced by the narrative's first word. In its disrupting of the expectations of reading, the sly introduction is representative of the novel as a whole, which forces us to reconsider virtually everything we thought we knew about gender and sexuality. The novel's protagonist, who lives through centuries, undergoes a sex change halfway through the narrative, and loves both men and women, is a transgressive figure who recognizes no borders or rules of time, gender, or sexuality and fails to conform to any pre-established pattern.

Orlando's biographer, whose vision is that of hegemony, vainly tries to get a firm hold on his elusive subject. He casts himself as an objective reporter engaged in the factual exploration of a fixed identity:

the first duty of a biographer [. . .] is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write

³ Throughout this article, I will designate the narrator as a male, though—as will become apparent later—there can be as much doubt about his sex as about Orlando's. Early on in the narrative, however, the narrator identifies himself as a male person (14), and for a long time this assertion goes unchallenged.

finis on the tombstone above our heads. [. . .] Our simple duty is to state the facts. (63)⁴

The biographer naively believes that he will only have to follow a heroic figure going "[f]rom deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office" (14). Little time elapses, however, before he "must fly as fast as he can" (44) in pursuit of his historically and sexually mobile target, and all too often he completely loses track of Orlando: "we seem now to catch sight of her and then again to lose it" (211). Eventually, Orlando's biographer professes his irritation at seeing his subject "slipping out of [his] grasp altogether" (255). "Truth" and "facts" prove elusive after all. Orlando escapes the understanding of the biographer and thus overcomes the authority which he represents.

The text marks subjectivity as multiple and shifting, and clearly implies that the biographer's attempt to find the "single thread" (75) of personal identity is quite useless. In the words of Christy Burns, "the notion of an essential self [is] comically reduced to a belief that Woolf's less than competent narrator struggles to defend, while the parody of that narrator's attempt results in the realization of the modern, constructive figuration of subjectivity" (346). Exasperated at his failure to pin Orlando down, the biographer exclaims that, "when we write of a woman, everything is out of place—culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man" (297–98). The assertion that the elusiveness of identity is typically feminine chimes in well with Luce Irigaray's view of woman as being outside representation and always "elsewhere" ("Powers" 317). To the dismay of the biographer, who wants everything to be predictable and in its place, woman refuses to be contained and tied down by his masculinist narrative paradigm.

That determining the truth of womanhood is anything but a simple matter also becomes apparent in the scene describing Orlando's sex change from male to female. In this scene, Woolf parodies those literary, philosophical, and psychoanalytic discourses that represent woman as a veiled mystery which the male imagination seeks to penetrate. During his stay in Turkey as ambassador to King Charles, Orlando falls into a seven-day trance. The narrator insists that he would love to "spare the reader" the outcome of this crisis, but spurred on by the trumpeted demands of "Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer" (129), he observes the way in which the figures of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty struggle to veil the "truth" of Orlando's sex. These veiling figures are banished from the scene by trumpets that blast "Truth! Truth! Truth!" (132). Orlando awakes wholly naked and unclothed on his/her bed: "He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman" (132).

⁴ For a discussion of the problems attendant on the project of pursuing the truth "unenticed by flowers"—in particular, flowers of speech or rhetoric—, see below.

As Mary Ann Doane points out, the representation of woman as veiled maps onto sexual difference the dialectic of truth and appearance. In the discourse of metaphysics, "the function of the veil is to make truth profound, to ensure there is a depth that lurks behind the surface of things" (qtd. in Lawrence 267n22). The theatrical unveiling of the female body in *Orlando* exposes as a metaphysical illusion the notion that gender identity is an intractable depth or inner substance. No bare, naked, essential truths are revealed in this passage; obscurity still functions. That the truth of femininity is anything but plain is evidenced by the pronoun slippage in the sentences announcing Orlando's transformation: "we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman" (132; emphasis added); "Orlando remained precisely as *he* had been. The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity" (133; emphasis added). Human subjectivity is not unified and coherent but shifting and fluid. Orlando is composed of a multiplicity of selves none of which can lay claim to being more authentic or essential than the rest. Indeed, the narrator makes it clear that labelling Orlando either "he" or "she" signals nothing more than compliance with the social compulsion to tie human beings down to one of two genders: "in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his', and 'she' for 'he'" (133).⁵ What is revealed in the moment of unveiling, then, is the arbitrariness and instability of the binary system of gender differentiation.

The feminization process which Orlando undergoes after her sex change reinforces the case against an essentialist view of gender. Orlando's physical change does not of itself entail a change of gender identity: "in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex [. . .] did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (133).⁶ In fact, Orlando remains uninterested in her sex until she decides to sail from Turkey to England and so must dress as a "lady." She has been living with the gypsies and wearing Turkish trousers, and gypsy women, "except in one or two important particu-

⁵ Compare Kate Bornstein on gender fluidity: "I have this idea that there are only people who are fluidly-gendered, and that the norm is that most of these people continually struggle to maintain the illusion that they are one gender or another" (65).

⁶ On this point *Orlando* contrasts sharply with autobiographical accounts by male-to-female transsexuals published in the '50s, '60s, and '70s, which, according to Sandy Stone, often reinforce a binary mode of gender identification:

They go from being unambiguous men, albeit unhappy men, to unambiguous women. There is no territory between. Further, each constructs a specific narrative moment when their personal sexual identification changes from male to female. This moment is the moment of neocolporrhaply—that is, of gender reassignment or 'sex change surgery.' (286)

Stone believes that the fact that these transsexuals lived in "an historical period of enormous sexual repression" accounts for the reassuring emphasis on "pure" gender identity and the denial of the potentialities of mixture that recur in their autobiographies (288). Interestingly, Woolf, writing at a time when transsexualism still belonged to the realm of the fantastic, apparently felt free to articulate a much more disquieting—and, as it has turned out, more truthful—vision.

lars, differ very little from the gipsy men" (147). The narrator comments that "It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought" (147). Orlando finds herself abruptly faced with the task of coming to terms with her new sex. Her feminine clothing now pressurizes her to conform to social expectations of gendered behaviour, and slowly but surely she becomes feminized.

She finds that her women's clothes have strange effects on the men on board the ship that brings her back to England. First, the Captain treats her with chivalrous condescension, offering to have an awning spread for her on deck, helping her to a slice of meat at dinner, and inviting her to go ashore with him in the long-boat. Next, the sight of her leg nearly causes a sailor on the mast to drop to his death with excitement. Orlando soon realizes what a woman is supposed to do in these situations, and acts out the required responses. She learns to flirt with the Captain, and resolves to keep her legs covered from now on. She discovers that many attributes and behaviours which are often thought to belong to women by nature are in fact the result of hard work: "women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline" (150). Such discipline is just what Orlando needs to further improve her gender performance. She learns to let her tears flow freely, as "it is becoming in a woman to weep" (158), and to be shocked when men do the same: "That men cry as frequently and as unreasonably as women, Orlando knew from her own experience as a man, but she was beginning to be aware that women should be shocked when men display emotion in their presence, and so, shocked she was" (172-73). In her (heterosexual) relationship with Shelmerdine, Orlando arrives at last at a conviction of "rare and unexpected delight": "'I am a woman,' she thought, 'a real woman, at last'" (241). What finally convinces Orlando of the success of her gender performance is a feeling of maternal protectiveness incited by the odd vision of Shelmerdine as a "boy [. . .] sucking peppermints" during his passionate struggle against the waves (241).

Orlando's efforts to achieve "normal" gender status involve her in what, in the literature on transsexualism, is generally referred to as "passing." It is often argued that, in the process of passing, transsexuals capitulate to the traditional sex/gender system that forbids transgressive violations. In their attempt to fade into the "normal" population as a member of either gender, transsexuals can be seen to sustain the "natural" attitude with respect to gender, which is made up of the assumptions that there are only two genders, that one's gender is invariant and permanent, that genitals are essential signs of gender, that there are no exceptions, and that gender dichotomy and gender membership are "natural." At the same time, however, transsexuals reveal the ways in which such a natural attitude is socially and culturally achieved. As Marjorie Garber points out, "The phenomenon of *transsexualism* is both a

confirmation of the constructedness of gender and a secondary recourse to essentialism—or, to put it a slightly different way, transsexualism demonstrates that essentialism *is* cultural construction" (109).

Transsexuality, then, is a position from which dominant discourses may be criticized. In her influential essay "The *Empire* Strikes Back: A Posttranssexual Manifesto," Sandy Stone asserts that the transsexual body has the potential to disrupt taken-for-granted assumptions about what constitutes legitimate gendered subjectivity, and to open up a space for other gender configurations:

In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries. (296)

Woolf's novel, by making it abundantly clear that Orlando has to work hard at passing in her new gender status, reveals the extent to which the "normally" sexed person is in fact a contingent practical accomplishment. Because Orlando has to work at establishing her credentials as a woman in a relatively self-conscious way, whereas "normal" women—or men, for that matter—are under the illusion that they are just doing what comes naturally, she brings to the surface many of the tacit understandings that guide the creation and maintenance of our binary gender system. Briefly, she makes us realize that we are all passing. All of us have to work hard at being men or women, at achieving culturally recognized identities, and in that sense we are all transsexuals.⁷

This performative theory of gender is advanced in the novel itself in a lengthy aside in which the narrator meditates on the significance of clothes in relation to gender identity. Noting the changes in Orlando's behaviour and manners, the narrator remarks:

What was said a short time ago about there being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman was ceasing to be altogether true. [. . .] The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. (179)

Orlando's femininity is created, brought into being, through performance: by putting on the clothes of a woman and acting like one, Orlando effectively *becomes* a woman. The narrator goes on in the same vein: "there is much to

⁷ Compare Jean Baudrillard's use of the term *transsexuality* as a metaphor for the transfiguration of sexual nature into artifice:

the sexual body has now been assigned an artificial fate. This fate is transsexuality—transsexual not in any anatomical sense but rather in the more general sense of transvestism, of playing with the commutability of the signs of sex [. . .] we are all transsexuals. (qtd. in Felski 337)

support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (180). Rather than being a mere expression of an essential gender identity, clothes actively create the identity they are purported to reflect. Or, to speak with Butler, "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (*Gender* 25).

This theory of gender identity is also borne out by the scene in which Orlando, cross-dressed as a nobleman, meets a young woman sitting beneath a tree in Leicester Square. The passage contains many references to artifice and play-acting. In her black velvet suit, Orlando is described as "the *very figure* of a noble Lord" (206; emphasis added); the young woman—called Nell—sits posed, equally theatrically, like "the *very figure* of grace, simplicity, and desolation" (207; emphasis added). Orlando greets her in the manner of "a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public place" (207). Nell looks up at Orlando (whom she holds to be a man), her eyes shining with a "lustre" like "teapots" or a "silver glaze" (207), which indicates tawdry imitation: what Orlando gets to see, the text seems to suggest, is an artificial surface rather than "the real thing." We are then told explicitly that this woman is a prostitute who "nightly burnishes [her] wares" or deliberately polishes, rubs a surface gloss onto, her image in order to "wait the highest bidder" (207).

The narrator's unmasking of Nell as a prostitute leads the reader to expect that Orlando's mask will also be stripped away at some point to reveal a hidden self. Beneath her superficial, performative self (Orlando the gallant nobleman) lies a more authentic gender identity: Orlando is "really" a woman. We then learn, however, that "to feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one" (207). What we witness here is "the literal creation, or bringing into being through performance, of Orlando's masculinity. [. . .] while Orlando performs as a man she is, to all intents and purposes, a man" (Watkins 47–48). The text sets up expectations that the mask will eventually be removed to reveal a hidden self, only to show how, on the contrary, Orlando's identity is constituted in and through performance.

Though his own account of Orlando's cross-dressing adventures and transformation after her sex change provides strong support for the performative model of gender, the narrator, in the next paragraph of his long meditation on the significance of costume, yet rejects the idea that clothes wear us, and professes a preference for another set of beliefs:

That is the view of some philosophers and wise ones, but on the whole, we incline to another. The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex. And perhaps in this she was only

expressing rather more openly than usual—openness indeed was the soul of her nature—something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (181)

In this knotty passage, the narrator perceives gender identity both as essentially related to sex, and as androgynous. The essentialist definition, which is the one he gives first, reverses the relationship of priority between gender and sex proposed by performance theory. In this view, gender reflects sex, rather than the other way around. This biological sex is something "of great profundity," "hid deep beneath" a surface gender which expresses it.

The narrator goes on, however, to suggest that Orlando's nature comprises both male and female elements, which fluctuate according to psychological shifts and may be acted out or expressed. Indeed, the "change in Orlando herself" cannot refer to her change of sex, because it "dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (emphasis added). To interpret this change as a physical one would result in the statement's becoming nonsensical, as its first and last phrases would be co-referential. Moreover, later on the change is associated with a "vacillation from one sex to the other" which is said to "[happen] to most people" and hence may be assumed to be of a psychological rather than a physical nature. On the other hand, this psychological fluctuation cannot be what was meant by the "something hid deep beneath" referred to earlier, as it allows the sexes to "intermix," which would seem to imply that the difference between them is *not* one "of great profundity." Hence my suggestion that we regard the narrator's "view" as a conflation of two distinct and conflicting constructions of gender identity rather than as one coherent theory.

The suggestion that in each individual the sexes "intermix" invokes an ancient tradition of androgyny, going back to Plato, which idealizes the psychological or spiritual union of gendered opposites. In this tradition, androgyny often comes to mean a reconciliation of neatly complementary characteristics that are stereotypically masculine and feminine; an idealized synthesis of heteropatriarchal gender constructs that leaves existing power relations essentially unchanged. However, androgyny can also be seen as a mode of resistance to established sexual norms and as a positive and liberating concept. Woolf has been associated with both positions. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter famously accuses Woolf of being the "bad mother" for betraying feminism by her "flight" into androgyny and away from the field of political contestation (264). Other critics, including Makiko Minow-Pinkney, read Orlando's androgyny as a purposeful and subversive blurring of the socially constructed boundaries between genders: "Androgyny in *Orlando* is not a resolution of oppositions, but the throwing into a

metonymic confusion of genders" (122). According to Minow-Pinkney, androgyny in Woolf does not reinscribe conventional ideas about sex and gender but functions as a disruptive, chaotic force that exposes the artifice of gender dichotomies and sexual dimorphism.⁸

Androgyny is indeed presented in *Orlando* as a dynamic and fluctuating quality of identity that liberates the self from any supposed determinism of the body. During the process of her transformation into a woman, Orlando at one point finds herself "censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither" (152). "[A]nd indeed," the narrator goes on, "for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in" (152). Identity, then, is far less implicated in physical norms than is commonly believed to be the case. The narrator also ends his long aside on the status of clothes with an acknowledgement of the elusive and indeterminate character of Orlando's gender identity: "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided" (182). The many instances of cross-dressing which the narrator records can be seen as a literal realization of the vacillation between sexes said constantly to take place in all people. In the end, even without disguise, Shelmerdine recognizes a man in Orlando, and Orlando a woman in Shelmerdine:

an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously.

'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried.

'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried. (240)

And again, later:

'Are you positive you aren't a man?' he would ask anxiously, and she would echo,

'Can it be possible you're not a woman?' and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once. (246)

⁸ Some poststructuralist theorists seem more reluctant to enlist the figure of the androgyne as a deconstructive device. Butler, for one, would appear to side with Showalter as she explicitly denies androgyny any relevance to the project of subverting gender norms which she envisages:

This is not the figure of the androgyne nor some hypothetical 'third gender', nor is it a *transcendence* of the binary. Instead, it is an internal subversion in which the binary is both presupposed and proliferated to the point where it no longer makes sense. (*Gender* 127)

Likewise, Garber insists that it is "crucial" to disarticulate her concept of the "third," which she defines as "that which questions binary thinking and introduces crisis," from androgyny (11).

Orlando and Shelmerdine "reject an apparent unitariness of sex that is only held in place by clothes as signifying systems" (Minow-Pinkney 132).

Through the concept of androgyny, the text opens up a space of heterogeneity within unitary being. Gender is shown to be fluid and multiple, irreducible to binary oppositions, which are exposed as unduly regulatory and exclusionary. Butler confirms that the subject, as it is constituted in contemporary hegemonic discourses, "produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity, the crossings of identifications of which it is itself composed" (*Bodies* 115). With Woolf, she celebrates the *incoherence* of identity, envisaging

an economy of difference [. . .] in which the matrices, the crossroads at which various identifications are formed and displaced, force a reworking of that logic of non-contradiction by which one identification is always and only purchased at the expense of another. (*Bodies* 118)

It should be noted, however, that Woolf's idea that "costume creates identity" is not fully consonant with Butler's position insofar as it suggests that performativity is a matter of choice, rather than a necessity if one is to have an intelligible identity in terms of the current gender system. According to Butler, there is no subject which decides on its gender; rather, gender is part of what decides the subject:

there is no 'one' who takes on a gender norm. On the contrary, this citation of the gender norm is necessary in order to qualify as a 'one,' to become viable as a 'one,' where subject-formation is dependent on the prior operation of legitimating gender norms. (*Bodies* 232)

In *Orlando's* fantasy world, however, no such restrictions obtain, and gender identities can be put on and taken off like masks or, indeed, clothes.⁹ The reason for this divergence, then, is that Butler's inquiry is firmly grounded in the very social and political realities which Woolf's novel makes it its business to look beyond.

Orlando does not altogether disregard the pervasive influence of existing gender ideologies, though. While it celebrates an ideal state of gender fluidity, the text also acknowledges the social consequences of sedimented collective conceptualizations of gender. As soon as Orlando returns to England after her sex change, her sexual identity comes under legal deliberation. The English

⁹ Compare also the following quote from Bornstein, who seems to live in a kind of world similar to Orlando's, where identities can be chosen and discarded at whim:

I love the idea of being without an identity, it gives me a lot of room to play around; but it makes me dizzy, having nowhere to hang my hat. When I get too tired of not having an identity, I take one on: it doesn't really matter what identity I take on, as long as it's recognizable. (39)

In fact, as a male-to-female transsexual and lesbian-identified feminist, Bornstein is a real-life counterpart of Orlando in more ways than one. Her book *Gender Outlaw* makes compelling reading in conjunction with Woolf's novel, with which it shares a certain utopian quality.

courts take it upon themselves to resolve her "highly ambiguous condition" and decide "whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity" (161). Orlando finds that there is a heavy price to pay for deviance from culturally canonical narratives of the self. It is literally vital to have a culturally recognized gender identity: if you are not unequivocally male or female, you cannot be accorded the other attributes of a person, starting with life itself, and extending to aspects of status. Indeed, "legally unknown" (170), Orlando has to give up her titles, house, and estate. The lawsuits against her are finally settled after some hundred years' deliberation, when her sex is pronounced "indisputably, and beyond the shadow of a doubt [. . .] female" (243). Only when Orlando has perfected her gender performance and feels like "a real woman, at last" (241) is she legally pronounced a woman and are her status, home, and land restored.

The full extent of the pressure society brings to bear on individuals to make them conform to culturally sanctioned narratives of identity is revealed in the chapter dealing with the Victorian period. In the description of what was, for Woolf, the most socially coercive of eras, social and historical factors are shown to be constitutive for the human subject. Despite Orlando's hostility to it, the Victorian period reshapes her as its product. In earlier ages, Orlando had always been well aware that she was the one who chose her clothes—even if, the minute she put them on, *they* began to control *her*. Now, however, clothes are imposed on her from without. "The spirit of the age" makes her wear heavy crinolines which impede her movements and weaken her resolve for independence. Eventually she will utter words like "Whom [. . .] can I lean upon?," at which point the narrator observes: "Her words formed themselves, her hands clasped themselves, involuntarily, just as her pen had written of its own accord. It was not Orlando who spoke, but the spirit of the age" (235). Orlando no longer appears as the author of her own speech and no longer has the power to determine her own identity. Her subjectivity is shown instead to be constituted in the discourses of the social. When the narrator later on declares that, after her engagement with and marriage to Shelmerdine, Orlando "was certainly feeling more herself" (252), it is clear to the reader that the heterosexual "self" invoked here represents a discursive construction rather than an identity which Orlando has voluntarily assumed.

Sexuality

These reflections lead us to consider another major area of subversion in *Orlando* besides the dissolution of gender dichotomies: the contestation of the regime of compulsory heterosexuality. The novel recounts how heterosexuality gets established as one of the norms that qualify a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility, only to contest this naturalization and open up a space for alternative configurations of sexuality. Indeed, *Orlando* has been read as a kind of lesbian-feminist manifesto by critics such as Sherron

Knopp and Elizabeth Meese. The text not only disrupts gender boundaries but also shakes the foundations of the entire edifice of heteronormativity.

Orlando enters the nineteenth century as a bemused observer of the apparent necessity for heterosexual coupling. To Orlando, "the great discovery of marriage," by which people "were somehow stuck together, couple after couple," "did not seem to be Nature": "there was no indissoluble alliance among the brutes that she could see" (231). The novel historicizes the institution of marriage by treating it as a curiosity of nineteenth-century society—a curiosity, moreover, which it goes on to condemn as indecent. Orlando opines that "It was strange—it was distasteful; indeed, there was something in this indissolubility of bodies which was repugnant to her sense of decency and sanitation" (231–32). Orlando herself proves susceptible to this heterosexual contagion, and ends up submitting to "the new discovery [. . .] that each man and each woman has another allotted to it for life, whom it supports, by whom it is supported, till death them do part" (234). Her longing for a husband is cast as unhealthy, as the cause of neurasthenic bouts of mania and lethargy. By thus presenting heterosexuality—rather than homosexuality—as deviant and pathological sexual behaviour, *Orlando* undermines the dominant sexuality's claim to naturalness and normativity.

Furthermore, it is strongly suggested in the novel—and this serves to modify the rather deterministic picture painted above—that Orlando's capitulation to compulsory heterosexuality is not complete: "She was married, true; but [. . .] [i]f one liked other people, was it marriage? [. . .] She had her doubts" (252). Orlando finds that by marrying Shelmerdine, she has conformed just enough to slip by unnoticed in the age: "she was extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine. She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth" (253). Orlando's respectable marriage allows her to write overtly sapphic hymns to the charms of "Egyptian girls" without censure (252). When the voice of the age interrogates her about her writing ("Are girls necessary?"), the narrator implies that Orlando's heterosexual commitment to Shelmerdine allows her to elude moral surveillance of her lesbian poetry:

Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that'll do.

And so the spirit passed on. (253)

Allusions to homosexuality are not always so veiled, though. Earlier on in the narrative, cross-dressing is used to introduce homosexual possibilities. The narrator explicitly states that Orlando, changing "frequently from one set of clothes to another" and living both sexes, "reaped a twofold harvest [. . .]; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied" (211). Cross-dressing enables Orlando to "[enjoy] the love of both sexes equally" (211). By the time we get this declaration, lesbianism has already been made somewhat palatable in the text by the (then) fantastic device of Orlando's sex

change. Even after Orlando has become a woman, it remains women that she loves, "through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention" (154). Despite her change of sex, Orlando's former love for Sasha has not changed. The Russian princess haunts the memory of Orlando the woman as powerfully and pervasively as she dominated the passions of Orlando the man; indeed, "if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man" (154). Through the device of Orlando's sex change, then, the novel "exculpates" the then shocking issue of lesbianism, achieving a "cunning naturalisation" of it (Minow-Pinkney 134).

The narrator's insistence on the reality and profundity of a woman's love for a woman gives the lie to men's belief that love between women is impossible. This opinion finds expression in a passage which deserves quoting in full, not only for the way in which it exposes the patriarchal repression of lesbian eroticism, but also for the destabilization of the narrator's gender it enacts:

it cannot be denied that when women get together—but hist—they are always careful to see that the doors are shut and that not a word of it gets into print. All they desire is—but hist again—is that not a man's step on the stair? All they desire, we were about to say when the gentleman took the very words out of our mouths. Women have no desires, says this gentleman, coming into Nell's parlour; only affectations. [. . .] 'It is well known', says Mr S. W., 'that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other [. . .]. And since [. . .] it is well known (Mr T. R. has proved it) 'that women are incapable of any feeling of affection for their own sex and hold each other in the greatest aversion', what can we suppose that women do when they seek out each other's society?

As that is not a question that can engage the attention of a sensible man, let us, who enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever, pass it over, and merely state that Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex, and leave it to the gentlemen to prove, as they are very fond of doing, that this is impossible. (209–10)

Women, according to the male authors cited by the narrator, can only exist in relation to men. They have nothing to say to other members of their own sex, whose company they dislike. The question as to "what women do when they seek out each other's society" is left hanging as the narrator diverts attention to himself. Then he lets it be known that, contrary to what Mr S.W. and Mr T.R. think possible, "Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex." What exactly we are supposed to understand here by "enjoyment" is not further specified, but it would seem to pick up on the hanging question of the previous paragraph and thus may be read as a subtle hint at lesbian eroticism. Perhaps, then, lesbian love-making is what women most desire.

The upholders of heteropatriarchal power, however, prevent women's desire from getting into the order of representation.¹⁰ No sooner do Orlando and her women friends try to speak of what they desire than their words are snatched away, repressed and denied by a man bursting in on the scene to declare with the full force of his masculine authority that there is no such thing as female desire. As a result, the sentence beginning, "All they desire is [. . .]," is suspended in midair and left unfinished.

Besides validating homosexual desire and denouncing its silencing, this passage also calls into question the stability of the narrator's sex. Like Orlando, the narrator, who up till then has always seemed male, is revealed here to be "a figure of perpetual oscillation" (Parkes 453). Indeed, it is extremely difficult to pin the narrator down to one particular sex in this passage. Having access to the women's quarters, he first appears to be a female observer, but then shifts to another realm where the voice is implicitly detached from the women ("they" as opposed to "we"), yet not necessarily associated with the man whose step is heard on the stair. The narrator assumes an ironic distance from Mr S.W. and his appeal to the supposedly "objective" authority of common knowledge and the quasi-scientific "proof" of Mr T.R. A few lines later he claims sexual neutrality for himself, but this may be a male pose designed to give the air of impartial authority—the very strategy adopted by Mr S.W., in fact. It is indeed rather ironic to find the narrator dissociating himself from "gentlemen" who are "very fond" of proving things when, throughout the novel, the narrator's own anxieties betray an immense concern for "facts" and "truth." The indeterminacy of the narrator's gender—which modulates from male to female to neutral in the space of just a few sentences—contributes to the text's overall project of dissolving reified gender categories.

Literature

As we have seen, transgender phenomena reveal that the signifier "gender" does not reference a signified "sex" in any direct manner. Their subversive power lies precisely in their suggestion that the dissociation of signs from their purportedly "natural" referents which they perform may not be accidental or anomalous, but essential and structural, inscribed in the very functioning of the sign. Perhaps there never was such a thing as a "proper" meaning of gender in the first place; perhaps all along the notion of an interior sex or true identity was a mere illusion created by the signifier.

Interestingly, *Orlando* calls attention to the similarity between gender and language as systems of signs. It questions not only conventional assumptions about gender, but also conventional assumptions about language itself, challenging the reference theory of meaning. In this final section, I will investigate the way in which the text performs this subversion, and consider its

¹⁰ It would appear that they are assisted in this endeavour by the women themselves, who, according to the narrator, are unwilling that their conversations should be recorded.

bearing on the question of literature's distinctive value and standing inside culture.

Orlando, as a poet, subscribes to a theory of representation directed towards meaning as presence and plenitude. S/he regards language as an instrument for the conveyance of an autonomous meaning that would exist outside the realm of language. Yet his/her attempts to pin down the truth in language are continually frustrated. To give but one example:

He was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more. Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces. (16)

Orlando finds it impossible to match his words to the real thing, to make signs coincide with what they signify.

Yet he does not lose faith in language's capacity to stand in for its subject. Attributing his own failure to realize this ideal to his inexperience as a poet, he remains convinced that it can actually be achieved. It falls on the poet to manipulate language in such a way that it no longer blocks access to meaning but permits it to speak in its own voice: "No time, no devotion, can be too great [. . .] which makes the vehicle of our message less distorting. We must shape our words till they are the thinnest integument for our thoughts. Thoughts are divine, etc." (166). Orlando believes that it is possible to ensure a perfect fit between intention and utterance. She conceives language as a barrier blocking access to an inner truth fully present to itself. Through self-erasure, however, language can become a transparent medium of thought, an obedient vehicle which allows the truth to speak directly.

Yet, try as she may, Orlando will never succeed in making signs and meaning coincide. That her attempts at mimesis are doomed to fail becomes apparent once more when, towards the end of the narrative, she wants to bury a copy of her poem "The Oak Tree" under the tree near her house which gave the text its name. "No luck ever attends these symbolical celebrations," however, and Orlando, finding the earth to be too "shallow over the roots," has to abandon her intention to pay tribute to the tree (309). She cannot return her poem to the earth, for nature refuses to accept it. This act of burial could not but be unsuccessful, because, as "a literal enactment of metaphorical depth," it would have meant "a 'reconciliation' of language and Nature" (Minnow-Pinkney 151). The abortive act of burial thus functions as a powerful reminder of the "natural antipathy" said to exist between nature and literature (16).

Orlando famously ends with a wild goose chase, which allegorizes the main character's endlessly futile quest for stable referential meaning. Orlando recalls how she has always been

Haunted! ever since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. [. . .] Up I jumped [. . .] and stretched after it. But the goose flies too fast. [. . .] Always it flies fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets [. . .] which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel drawn on deck with only sea-weed in them; and sometimes there's an inch of silver—six words—in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves. (299)

Orlando, as a poet, imagines her perpetual effort of trying to capture a wild goose in a net of words. Such an appropriative gesture will never be fulfilled: the goose (or fish)—truth—will never be caught. Nor in a sense will it ever be lost, for there will always be silver dregs at the bottom of the net, figured as the residue of language. However hard one tries to pin down truth in language, all one ends up with is more language, more signs, more traces; never truth as plenitude.

What makes language such an unreliable instrument for the statement of the truth appears to be its rhetoricity. Orlando is trapped by the figural nature of language:

'Another metaphor by Jupiter!' he would exclaim [. . .]. 'And what's the point of it?' he would ask himself. 'Why not say simply in so many words—[. . .] A figure like that is manifestly untruthful,' he argued, [. . .] And if literature is not the Bride and Bedfellow of Truth, what is she? Confound it all,' he cried, 'why say Bedfellow when one's already said Bride? Why not simply say what one means and leave it?' (97–98)

Orlando rejects the dangerously seductive pleasures of alliteration—"Bride and Bedfellow"—for the rigours of ideal meaning. What he finds in trying to renounce figurality, however, is that simple, "literal" statements get no closer to the truth:

So then he tried saying the grass is green and the sky is blue [. . .]. Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs from enchanted woods. 'Upon my word,' he said [. . .], 'I don't see that one's more true than another. Both are utterly false.' (98)

A built-in discrepancy between sign and meaning prevails in everyday language in the same manner as in literature. In neither form of language does the signifier appear as a transcendental key that will unlock the way to truth. There is simply no "pure" language, free from metaphor, in which meaning would be "at home."

Baffled by these findings, Orlando "despaired of being able to solve the problem of what poetry is and what truth is and fell into a deep dejection" (98). A possible solution to his problem is provided by Paul de Man, who defines literature precisely as "the place where this negative knowledge about reliability of linguistic utterance is made available" ("Resistance" 362). Literature, according to de Man, may well be the Bride of Truth, but she is definitely not its Bedfellow, for the marriage between literature and Truth is never

consummated. De Man calls "'literary,' in the full sense of the term, any text that implicitly or explicitly signifies its own rhetorical mode and prefigures its own misunderstanding as the correlative of its rhetorical nature; that is, of its 'rhetoricity'" ("Rhetoric" 136).

The linguistic model on which de Man's theory is based is the classical *trivium*, which divides language into the three spheres of grammar, logic, and rhetoric. The grammatical and the logical function of language allow for continuity between language and the phenomenal world. Their alliance ensures the passage from language to knowledge of the non-verbal world. Rhetoric, however, intervenes as an unsettling element which disrupts the inner balance of the model and its outward extension to empirical reality: "Rhetoric, by its actively negative relationship to grammar and to logic, certainly undoes the claims of the *trivium* (and by extension, of language) to be an epistemologically stable construct" ("Resistance" 368). It is its rhetorical component, then, which makes language such an unreliable medium for stating truths about the world.¹¹

Literature, which flaunts its rhetoricity, avoids the bad faith of other discourses which try to repress or deny their rhetorical status. In acknowledging and exploiting the ineluctable divergence between sign and meaning, literary language is "the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression" ("Criticism" 17).¹² In an oft-quoted passage of his essay "The Resistance to Theory," de Man insists on the political significance of this insight. Literature, for him, holds the key to the subversion of metaphysical assumptions and the structures of political authority which they underpin. Indeed, if ideology is "the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism," it follows that "the linguistics of literariness is a powerful and indispensable tool in the unmasking of ideological aberrations, as well as a determining factor in accounting for their occurrence" (363). Literature dismantles the logic by which a particular system of thought and, behind that, a whole system of political structures and social institutions maintains its force. It exposes the purported coincidence of sign and meaning as an ideological effect produced to give the air of naturalness and inevitability to contingent historical constructions.

¹¹ It should be noted, however, that the relatively straightforward model set up in "The Resistance to Theory" is complicated in other texts by de Man, where he renounces rhetoric's monopoly on subversion, conferring the same disruptive potential on grammar. See, in particular, "Anthropomorphism" and "Semiology."

¹² Along the same lines, Jacques Derrida argues that "poetry and literature have as a common feature that they suspend the 'thetic' naivety of the transcendent reading" ("Institution" 45). *Transcend* here means "going beyond interest for the signifier, the form, the language (note that I do not say 'text') in the direction of the meaning or referent (this is Sartre's rather simple but convenient definition of prose)" ("Institution" 44). Literature, for Derrida, problematizes the naive belief in meaning or referent on which the transcendent reading is based.

By unsettling deeply held assumptions of transparency and direct referentiality, literature opens a space for the apprehension of the other which those assumptions have silently excluded. Literature may be understood, then, as issuing an ethical demand, as a call to respect otherness. It rejects the closure of rigid conceptual systems and creates openings within which the other can appear to transform what we know or think we know. It divests any existing system of its claim to finality, exposing it to correction and revision in the light of the claim laid upon it by alterity, that is, by what is beyond that code, by what is silenced or excluded by that code.

It seems to me that *Orlando* lends some credence to these claims, not least by its attempts to prevent the closure of the gender system. The novel relentlessly pushes at the boundaries of what it is possible to think in the areas of gender and sexuality. By making gender trouble, *Orlando* hopes to effect a rearticulation of the terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility which would result in gender configurations being proliferated outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. Without meaning to downplay *Orlando's* humorous quality or diminish the importance of Vita Sackville-West in Woolf's life and writing, I would like to say in conclusion that by reducing *Orlando* to biography or gratuitous play, we risk rendering these subversive motives well-nigh invisible and preventing them from influencing and altering other texts and discourses.

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Why Write an Autobiography That Isn't? Generic Considerations of James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*

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As William Howarth has written, "critics of autobiography still preside over an unfederated domain, so each feels compelled to begin with a new definition" (363). The truth of this is borne out by a comparison of some of the commonly accepted definitions of autobiography, which makes clear that no consensus has yet been reached and that due to the many different ways of appreciating the genre, the placement of autobiographies in the literary tradition remains a real conundrum for the critical establishment. Far from intending to superimpose new restrictions and limitations on already existing definitions of the genre, this analysis will attempt to single out in the first place some of the most salient features of traditional autobiographies and examine to what extent and to what ends they are represented in James Weldon Johnson's pseudo-autobiographical text. Subsequently, biographical details and life story apart, the non-autobiographical ingredients of Johnson's narrative will be brought into focus to illustrate how the author manipulates the genre to fit it to his own didactic purpose. Confronting the manifold generic peculiarities of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man*, the last section of this analysis will attempt to circumscribe the generic composition of the text and establish its place in, as well as its contribution to, the history of Afro-American belles-lettres.

In its broader sense, autobiography is defined as "the story of a person's life written by that person" (Gray 37). It is obvious however that this definition blurs the distinctions that differentiate autobiography from related genres, such as the diary, the journal or the memoir. In *Le Pacte autobiographique*, Philippe Lejeune defines autobiography as a "retrospective prose narrative of the life of a real person, written by that person, and stressing an individual's life, and more particularly, the story of his or her life" (qtd. in Oster 482, my translation). If the first definition is arguably too broad, however, Lejeune's seems excessively restrictive: as Daniel Oster argues in his article on autobiographies, the emphasis is not always placed on the life of one individual, the narrative is not systematically retrospective and autobiographies are not necessarily written in prose (ibid.). Yet another postulate, which suggests that autobiographies are characterized by an identity between the author, the narrator and the main character, is negated by texts like Haley's *Autobiography of Malcolm X* and by fictional autobiographies. Written in the