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# Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions Between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

CHRISTY L. BURNS

Discussing the source of the self is never an easy task. Autobiographical desires get displaced into biographical sketches, which are then readily transformed into broad historical portraits. Ultimately, the task of re-narrating all these simultaneous strands slips into the genre of fiction, as in Virginia Woolf's parodic biography, *Orlando*. If *Orlando* can be characterized as Woolf's exploration of her own theory of sexuality (Holtby), it is also a fictionalized biography of Woolf's friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West, and still again it functions as a broadly sketched history of English literature and politics. One can imagine how to write a biography of one's lover would be to undergo the process of a powerfully mute identification and realization, one that calls up denials and displacements as well.<sup>1</sup>

As desire for identification draws Woolf toward the genre of biographical fiction, the need for differentiation following upon such a mimetic project propels her back into parody.<sup>2</sup> If the text is "true to" Sackville-West's personal history, the novel is still quite unfaithful to the genre of biography. How can one be both faithful to facts and unfaithful and tell more of the truth without exactly telling it the same? While the book's incompetent narrator may issue misleading imperatives to find "the single thread" that ties together personal identity, the effects of *Orlando*'s transformation through the ages—marked espe-

cially by his/her changes in clothing—execute a parodic deconstruction of essentialist claims tentatively offered in the text. The tension of these issues centers on the breakdown of inner and outer spaces in Woolf's writing. Woolf plays on a twentieth-century conception of truth, derived from the Greek notion of *alethea*, unveiling. In her novel truth is destabilized and turns into parody through an emphasis on period fashions, cross-dressing, and undressing of “essential” bodies.

Because of the nature of parody—to implement the very concept that is being distorted and undone—confusion prevails in the current criticism as to Woolf's position on subjectivity and essentialism in *Orlando*. Critics tend toward one of two extreme positions with regard to Woolf's theory of subjectivity in *Orlando*, with Fredric Jameson, on the one hand, using *Orlando* as an example of a novel that portrays an unchanging, constant personality passing through the centuries, bearing the marks of only *external* re-shapings;<sup>3</sup> Makiko Minow-Pinkney, on the other hand, argues that “social and historical factors are . . . fully admitted as constitutive for the human subject in the novel” (135). This question of whether some innate human essence can surmount historical effects or whether the only “essence” we know as personality is fully shaped by the world around one—this problem is comically re-figured by Woolf as the question of whether the clothes “make the (wo)man.” At one point *Orlando*'s narrator suggests that “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” (189). While one must remain persistently wary of the narrator's authority in this text, this claim at least points to the importance of such a possibility.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, advocates of gender studies will recognize an early formulation of contemporary questions about the extent to which society—and not biology—delineates distinction between “men” and “women.”<sup>5</sup>

As Bette London has pointed out, Woolf has become the American feminist's favorite cultural icon, the mother to whom we turn in hope of finding a mirror of ourselves.<sup>6</sup> It begins to look, on London's review of often contrary receptions, as if Woolf's figure admits of so many identities that Woolf is merely a mirror to her reader—another bad cliché of the woman who can mutate to become whatever society demands of her. My point here is that Woolf is hardly so obliging, and that contemporary feminist debates do violence to Woolf's texts whenever they try to create her as icon of their cause, as they struggle to fix her identity as *one* identity alone. Woolf's style is a persistent if subtle

playing out of tensions, a negotiation of Victorian mores and modernist experimentation that results in a double mirror, a parodic displacement of any essential and “true” position. I am returning to *Orlando* (1928) as a preferred site of analysis, for that text carries within it the initial map of concerns that extend into *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), the “literary feminist bible,” as Jane Marcus has called it (5).<sup>7</sup> I do not aim to treat *Orlando* as a mirror to any single vision of contemporary feminism, so much as to mark it as a historically significant text that informatively examines the tensions between notions of *essential* personal identity and *contextually re-defined* subjectivity, tensions that are replicated in contemporary debates between essentialist and post-structuralist feminists.

In the process of writing her novel, Woolf weaves together two competing approaches to biography: the attempt to define an essential self and the modern project of retracing the construction of a changing subjectivity, which stems most recognizably from Freud’s influence. One need always remember that *Orlando* is a *parodic* biography,<sup>8</sup> and several strands of biographical beliefs prevalent in the Victorian era are being parodied throughout the novel. Influential to Woolf’s re-thinking of the factual exploration of a fixed identity was the work of her close friend Lytton Strachey, who emphasized psychology in his own work on biography. Strachey met with great success in the 1920s, inspiring others to introduce Freudian notions of constructed subjectivity into biography. In “Women and Fiction” Woolf refers to “our psycho-analytic age” in which thinkers are increasingly aware of the “immense effect of environment and suggestion upon the mind” (45). If Strachey’s work began to move Woolf toward a more contextual understanding of identity, she was still turning half toward that and half away from the earlier influence of her father’s essentialist notions.

Leslie Stephen was both an author and editor of biographies. His work was influenced by the Positivists<sup>9</sup> and also by English philosophical discussions of personal identity that grew out of the works of David Hume and John Locke. For the Victorians, biography had been institutionalized in part through the “Men of Letters” series begun in 1877 by John Morley. Woolf’s father contributed five volumes to this series and established, in 1882, his own biographical project, the *Dictionary of National Biography* (Nadel 41).<sup>10</sup> Morley and Stephen saw biography as a door to history, a way for the reader to “know” a single, exemplary figure from a period, and hence to understand that period better. Conceptualized explicitly as a mode of establishing a national

identity, Stephen's biographical approach neither portrayed the individual as *created* by his age nor gave him an over-determining influence on it. Rather, the singular individual mirrored the age and exercised potentially powerful influence on future ages. Following Plutarch's advice to find, in biographies, "the signs of the soul in man," the new humanists chose a biographical subject whose life could be treated as exemplary, as a spiritual guide and historical locus for the reader (Nadel 38). This individualistic notion was, however, combined with a reading of Auguste Comte, who urged biographers to "see the subject in and of his times, related to history and conscious of the effect of social and economic forces" (Nadel 39). These "great men" were, in a sense, contextual creations, but with a firmer essentialist thread running through their characters.

Woolf would continue to experiment with biography throughout her career, treating it both as a "serious" form that could provoke reflection on the lives of women, as in *The Second Common Reader*,<sup>11</sup> and as a genre admitting of great comic potential. In 1933 she also published *Flush*, the fictitious biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog, and in the year of her death she completed a somewhat unwieldy, serious biography of her friend Roger Fry. Woolf unravels the tensions in this theory of biography as she pits questions of essential selfhood against their social constructedness. She not only spoofs the presupposed centrality of great "men" by treating a man-turned-woman, in *Orlando*, but also presses upon the ambiguous relations between social determinism and individual influence implicit in Victorian combinations of biographical theories. If Woolf was highly conscious of living in a "psycho-analytic age," at the same time she seems to have been drawn toward a more essentialist notion of identity, perhaps absorbed through early impressions derived from her father's notions. *Orlando* was the novel that allowed her to chart the tension between these two contradictory beliefs.

On the second page of *Orlando's* holograph, Woolf records a note from the novel's initial conception:

This is to tell a person's life from the year 1500 to 1928.

Changing its sex.

Taking different aspects of character in different centuries: the theory being that character goes on underground before we are born; and leaves something afterword [*sic*] also.<sup>12</sup>

Woolf here remarks the three most important elements of *Orlando*: the way in which Orlando's biography doubles as a map of four hundred years of English history; the shocking scene of Orlando's change from

male to female sex; and the tension between two notions of subject constitution. She postulates that one's character takes on "different aspects" in "different centuries," but then translates this into a theory of a continuous spirit, one that "goes on underground" before birth and which also "leaves something" after death. These two theories get sorted out as the novel progresses—the notion of an essential self being 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. This model is not, however, a model of simple determinism wherein Orlando becomes whatever society requires; Woolf's conception of Orlando's identity holds within it the possibility for participation in social and self construction. The crucial question of Woolf's novel becomes that of subjectivity, but subjectivity as it is embroiled in the problematics of historical change and sexuality.

The questioning of identity in *Orlando* raises issues that are of returning importance to feminism. How much of the self, Woolf asks, is unchangeably and essentially our own? How solid a space does one have for resistance to social demands for conformity? Does the "spirit of an age" weigh upon the sexes differently? And how does one's adaptation or resistance to society affect one's writing? If such questions are implicitly structuring the narrative drama of *Orlando*, they are explicitly posed in Woolf's feminist essays, most notably in *A Room of One's Own*.

In 1928, the year in which she published *Orlando*, Woolf delivered a series of talks, published under the title *A Room of One's Own*. Urging women to write, to give themselves a voice, Woolf is still caught up in consideration of how one can constitute an identity (of one's "own") in a world determined by economic constraints and often degrading representations of women. Woolf must implicitly inquire as to how women who have been excluded from the male literary tradition might both participate in and resist that tradition and the expectations of their unworthiness.

To demonstrate the importance of social pressures, Woolf sketches a hypothetical "Judith" Shakespeare, sister of William, who is as brilliant and promising as he, but who fails as a result of the "twisted and deformed" state of mind that emerges after she encounters society's restraints on women's genius (50). As Woolf writes, "All the conditions of her life, all her own instincts, were hostile to the state of mind which is needed to set free whatever is in the brain" (51). The state of mind is crucial to creation, Woolf argues, and it can only be found in a quiet

(socially permitted) moment. This essay has drawn fire recently from feminist revisionists. London, for example, criticizes feminists for creating an image of the female writer that “desires to be young, gifted, and male” (19); Judith Newton also has objected that this demonstrates how Woolf’s writing is not, as Jane Marcus has claimed, revolutionary, for Woolf holds woman to a polite code of behavior. On other counts, Elaine Showalter (17) has accused Woolf of being the “bad mother” for betraying feminism by her “flight into androgyny” in *A Room of One’s Own*.<sup>13</sup> While I am in sympathy with some of these reactions, I think it is important to recognize that Woolf’s style consistently weaves together contrary strands. At every moment that she issues an imperative, she immediately turns with a qualification or even—subtly—a contrary possibility. She is not, as London suggests, simply a mirror of our own desires, especially not if one can learn to read the ambivalences in Woolf’s writing as productive of multiple feminist positions.<sup>14</sup>

One cannot simply say that Woolf is inconsistent; in the late 1920s she is playing out the tensions of dual and seemingly opposing pressures upon identity, tensions which create a web of possibilities. In *Orlando* the “male” and “female” strands of character combine in various ways, leaving Orlando more androgynous than *essentially* one sex or the other. Likewise, one might argue that the “revolutionary” feminist does not (cannot) step completely outside of the existing (patriarchal) world—a problem explicitly addressed in Judith Butler’s recent work on “gender trouble.” In *A Room of One’s Own* these tensions between utopian desires to escape the system and an insistent drive to change that system revolve around the metaphor of being locked *in* and locked *out* of institutions. Woman must have “a room of her own” where she can lock herself in and concentrate, where she can purge herself of the “male” society that seeks to constrain her voice and control her writing. But earlier in the essay Woolf describes her anger at being locked *out* of “men’s” world—out of the library—and driven off the Beadle’s lawn by the river (6–8). Over the course of this essay Woolf is asking herself whether it is worse to be locked out or to be locked in (36). The element she implicitly calls on is a kind of reversibility, a tactic of being at once both inside and outside the tradition. Thus, “A woman writing thinks back through her mothers. Again if one is a woman one is often surprised by a sudden splitting off of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of the civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical” (97). The second half of this quotation has been too often overlooked; Woolf is aware of a heterogeneous heritage and calls on her

readers to give up the habit of suppressing the half of their inheritance that comes from women. It is Woolf's "splitting off" of consciousness that might interest contemporary feminism and that is developed elaborately in *Orlando*. If identity can be formed out of parodically identifying with a range of models (male, female, dominant culture, non-dominant, and so forth), perhaps Woolf's own problems with essentialism can be more precisely addressed.

Ironically, the one philosopher parodied the most in *Orlando* (if only with subtle implicitness) bears the name of Woolf's dilemma—John Locke's opposition between the inside and the outside is taken up by Woolf through her discussion of clothing and nature. It is coincidence perhaps that Orlando travels to Turkey under the reign of Charles the First (1625–1649), undergoes the sex change, and returns with the commencement of the rule of William and Mary, in 1689, the same year of Locke's publication of the *Essay*. Locke and Hume were not necessarily direct influences on Woolf—although I would like to claim here an explicit use of one passage in *Essay*. As to their intersection with theories of biography, Richard Congreve, an English positivist and friend of Morley's, had written on Locke. Furthermore, since both were given biographical representations of their period in the "Men of Letters" series, their general philosophy of fixed personal identity pervaded Victorian notions of biography.

In a struggle to form and reform his/herself throughout the novel, Orlando writes, revises, and eventually publishes a long autobiographical poem, "The Oak Tree." The poem's title, along with other odd plot devices integrated into *Orlando*, suggests an allusion on Woolf's part to Locke's philosophy of personal identity in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Deriving his notions of personal identity from essentialist arguments about objects, Locke articulates the belief that "The variation of great parcels of Matter alters not the identity; an Oak, growing from a Plant to a Tree, and then lopp'd, is still the same Oak" (330).<sup>15</sup> He resists the notion that any change of the body might have an effect on one's personal identity. Taking the "oak" as his operable example, he translates his scientific, essentialist paradigm into one suited for a human's identity. In both cases, the exterior's alteration (being "lopp'd," amputated, or—as figuratively in *Orlando*—castrated) does not effect any change in the person's interior self. Not only does Woolf link Locke's example of an oak tree to the project of autobiographical writing; she also parodically adapts another example from the *Essay*—his explicit dismissal of the relevance of clothing to personal



identity. In a key passage of the *Essay* Locke argues that the self “will be the same *self* as far as the same consciousness can extend to Actions past or to come; and would be by distance of Time, or change of Substance, no more two *Persons* than a Man be two Men, by wearing other Cloaths to Day than he did Yesterday, with a long or short sleep between” (336). Indeed, Orlando’s greatest alterations of personality always occur after a long trance in which s/he lies as if dead, in a seven-day sleep. Those sleeps do, in fact, leave Orlando greatly altered, and so, for that matter, does the clothing s/he wears.

When *Orlando*’s narrator despairs that the self is “a perfect rag-bag of odds and ends within us—a piece of a policeman’s trousers lying cheek by jowl with Queen Alexandra’s wedding veil,” s/he comically postulates that this dissonant collection of various *fabrics* can be “lightly stitched together by a single thread” (78). Speculating that this thread might be memory, or at least “memory is the seamstress,” the narrator comments on how “capricious” a seamstress memory is. “Fabrication” can be unraveled as well as constructed. Orlando himself, as autobiographical author of “The Oak Tree,” loses the thread of his memory while trying to add a passage on the betrayal by his first love, Sasha. Memory is, in fact, as fickle a seamstress as Sasha was a mistress and both are tied metaphorically to “fabrication” by Woolf: memory being a “thread” and sash—the root of Sasha’s name—meaning in Arabic the turban of cloth one wraps around the head. In *Orlando* fabric, fabrication, writing, sexuality, and clothing are all interwoven. Through these metaphors Locke’s essentialist opposition between outside and inside is broken down; this opposition decays most humorously and explicitly in the scene of Orlando’s sex change.

As a much-loved ambassador to Turkey during the reign of King Charles, Orlando falls into his second seven-day trance. The narrator insists that s/he would dearly love to “spare the reader” the outcome of this particular crisis, but spurred on by the trumpeted demands of “Truth, Candour, and Honesty,” the narrator observes the way in which, on a plot parallel, the figures of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty struggle to veil the “truth” of Orlando’s sex. But just as the mock-Victorian narrator must forge ahead and detail the seemingly seamy oddities of Orlando’s sex change, so these veiling figures are banished from the scene by trumpets that blast “Truth! Truth! Truth!” Orlando awakes wholly naked and *unclothed* on his/her bed: “[Orlando] stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! we have no

choice left but confess—he was a woman” (137).<sup>16</sup> Orlando’s sex change parodies the philosophical search for bare, naked, essential truths. And it is no coincidence that a parodic text will unravel any fantasy of pure and perfect mimetic reference. Parody must always simultaneously point toward its “source”—here Victorian notions of biography—and humorously distort, debilitating the very act of pointing. A regress of possible origins inevitably unfolds, as the parody points to no single biographical text and as the biographer can fix no single identifiable self for Orlando. Parody thus teases out the impossibility of locating an immediate referent, a naked source of truth, a fact separable from fiction. The regressive play of locating a single source or origin necessarily also complicates notions of historical causality. How might biography or history determine the cause of a single event?<sup>17</sup> In this scene such classic motifs as unveiling and nakedness are re-organized around questions of sexuality, and what is “revealed” or “unveiled,” the “truth” of Orlando’s sex—that *he* is a *she*—points only to the essential instability of essence, the reversibility inscribed within the “truth.” What is essential here is to be *without* an essence. What is revealed is the reversibility of sex. This is no mere playful fancy on Woolf’s part, however; it leads her to reconsider the nature of sexuality and the constructedness of gender.

For here is the mystery of this crisis: although Orlando’s naked body is markedly changed, we eventually learn that no change in his/her identity has actually occurred: “Orlando,” we are told, “remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory . . . went back through all the events of her past life.” (138). If one might assume that sex is one of the single most essential attributes of identity, the self here is a collection of many possible sexualities. Note that the pronouns—their, his, her—are comfortably accommodated in a single “identity” determined by memory chains, a further mark of the disidentification present in identity. That is, there is a certain plurality and mark of difference always present in this identification. Notice too how initially the change in external, physical being has no impact on the self’s internal identification.

Woolf continues to have great fun with pronouns throughout the novel. When Orlando arrives home a woman, the housekeeper who last saw her as a man is overwhelmed and keeps gasping “Milord! Milady! Milady! Milord!” (169). Her social discomfort with sexual ambiguity elicits the humor of her hysteria.

If Orlando's sex is at first ambiguous, when s/he is eventually transformed, this is not effected through a *genital* change. It occurs instead as a *gender* transformation that emerges after a change of clothing.

After the sex change, Orlando goes into hiding with the gypsies in order to escape an insurrection in Turkey. Several months later, she finally sheds the androgynous Turkish pants she tossed on before escaping and begins to wear the traditional garb of an English woman. She thus finds herself abruptly faced with the task of coming to terms with her new sex. We are told that "up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought," but, buying and donning "such clothes as women then wore," she finds herself helpless and at the mercy of chivalrous condescension. "It was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck that she realized, with a start the penalties and privileges of her position" (153). Orlando has to foreswear foul language, realizes she can no longer swim or stride with ease, and experiences the pang of anxious control over the Captain's tender ego. So Orlando's body may be altered by the sex change, but her *gender* change cannot be effected until clothing—that external social trapping—pressures her to conform with social expectations of gendered behavior. These expectations work like an outside that seeps in, and clothing attracts and activates these expectations. It is as if *she*, Orlando, might have continued to be a he, if only by virtue of dressing as a man. And so, we are told, Orlando is herself convinced that it is "often only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness" (189).

Although the clothes control Orlando as she adjusts to womanhood, she is well aware that she is the one who chooses the clothes.<sup>18</sup> Throughout the novel Orlando engages in cross-dressing.<sup>19</sup> As a woman Orlando occasionally pulls on a man's breeches and cloak so that she might go roving about the countryside with the same freedom a man experiences in his nightly wanderings (215). In this manner she meets Nell, a friendly streetwalker who gives her the odd sensation of first being mistaken for a (male) lover and then, when discovered a woman, being made into a friend and confidant (215ff). Orlando thus experiences herself as different in response to gender expectations inspired by means of cross-dressing. The impact of clothing extends also to categories of class. As a man Orlando uses clothing to disguise himself as lower class (123 and *passim*), in order to spend time away

from the constraints of the upper classes, mingling with the men and woman of local pubs and byways.

Clothing, however, is not always just clothing in *Orlando*. The parallel between the biographer's duty to relay "Truth, Candour, and Honesty" and the necessity of revealing sexual "truths" in the scene of Orlando's awakening suggest another figuration: that of language and, specifically, of writing. The biographer struggles to write the "naked truth" about Orlando, but the revelation of his sex change tells us little. Likewise, Orlando later gets embroiled in the struggle to "say what one means and leave it." What she finds in trying to abandon metaphor, however, is that simple statements get no closer to the truth. Sentences like "The sky is blue," are no more or less true than "The sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair" (101–02). As with Sasha, so with language; Orlando must conclude that both "are utterly false" (102).

In light of this suggestive parallel to language we might notice how cross-dressing happens somewhat unintentionally as well, in *Orlando*. That is, sometimes the "fashion of the time" obscures a person's sex and gender, and confusion results. The first thing we learn about Orlando is that "There could be no doubt of his sex," although the narrator admits that "The fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (13). Such ambiguity becomes important when Orlando comes of age. His first "true" love, Sasha, is remarked as "a figure, [either] boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex" (37–38). Orlando is ready to "tear his hair with vexation," so certain is he that the figure is a young man's and "thus all embraces were out of the question" (38). The figure, however, turns out to be that of a woman and an affair ensues. Sexual determination is thus not secured prior to affection in Woolf's novel, but *fixing* gender becomes an important part of courtship, at least prior to the twentieth century. As Woolf approaches the modern era, she ironizes gender stabilization and comes very close to valuing homosexual love explicitly. At one point, cross-dressing is used to introduce homosexual possibilities when Orlando, as a man, is wooed by the Archduchess Harriet. Harriet later reveals *himself* to have been Harry all along (178). He confesses that he had been so swept away by Orlando's beauty that he had disguised his sex to press his suit (115ff). Orlando's rejection of Harriet-Harry allows the story to elide homosexual relations; we later hear, however, that Orlando's elaborate cross-dressing allowed her to "enjoy . . . the love of both sexes equally" (221). So Woolf writes in some ambivalence around this issue.

While Orlando can participate in the changing re-constitutions and articulations of her gender through her dress, clothes can also sometimes contrarily coerce her behavior. Woolf tests the question of whether “it is clothes that wear us and not we them” when she turns to what was, for Woolf, the most socially coercive of eras, that of the Victorians (188).<sup>20</sup>

As the Victorian age descends, Orlando faces her third crisis as she attempts to resist the “Spirit of the Age,” which dictates marriage. Not in the least inclined to matrimony, Orlando’s “natural temperament,” we are told, is to cry “Life! A Lover!” not “Life! A Husband!” (244). The narrator goes on to explain that “Orlando had inclined herself naturally to the Elizabethan spirit, to the Restoration spirit, to the spirit of the eighteenth century. . . . But the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme” (244). Here, Woolf takes on the question that troubles contemporary debates about feminism and psychoanalysis. Is there ever room for rebellion or resistance on the model of social construction?<sup>21</sup> Woolf seems to judge that there is not room for resistance, but this is only when extremes are postulated in advance. If the external world and inner self are polarized with respect to questions of influence, then on Woolf’s model here the individual loses control over his/her self. One result of this conflict, in Orlando’s experience of the Victorian era, is that she can no longer write.

While trying to work on “The Oak Tree,” Orlando finds that words suddenly abandon her. Once she admits that it is “impossible” for her to write, however, she suddenly sees her own hand and pen possessed by “the spirit of the age.” Spilling out “the most insipid verse she had ever read in her life,” her pen creates a parody of Victorian poetry. While still ill from this “involuntary inspiration,” Orlando becomes aware of a strange tingling in her left ring finger, the first sign of coercion toward marriage (238–40). 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” (246). Language can thus function independent of the author’s will—what, to the reader, might resemble something of a parodic extreme of anxieties about deconstructive and psychoanalytic theories of language. In order to regain control of her writing, Orlando must give up her preferred social position of the single, sexually ambivalent subject. To save her writing, Orlando contemplates conformity.

Rational capitulation, however, does not bring about Orlando's fall into conformity. It is rather the fabric of the age, literally, that drags Orlando down and overwhelms her avowed passion for independence:

She stood mournfully at the drawing-room window . . . dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves and straw. The plumed hat tossed on the breeze. The thin shoes were quickly soaked and mud-caked. Her muscles lost their pliancy. She had become nervous lest there should be robbers behind the wainscot and afraid, for the first time in her life, of ghosts in the corridors. All these things inclined her, step by step, to submit to the new discovery, whether Queen Victoria's or another's, 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. (244–45)

Woolf thus again takes a form of mental pressure and turns it into a palpable, physical effect; the heavy crinoline of the Victorian age imprisons Orlando's person and weakens her resolve for independence. In her final attempt to avoid social transformation, Orlando rushes out onto the heath (a favorite sport in English literature), she trips (for Orlando is rather ill-coordinated), she breaks her ankle, and gives herself up for dead in the fields. Just at this moment, in parody of Jane Austen, *Jane Eyre*, and the novel that closes in marriage, a young man rides up. Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine jumps off his horse and exclaims, "Madam . . . you're hurt!" to which she stunningly replies, "I'm dead, Sir!" (250). Resurrection immediately occurs, and "A few minutes later, they became engaged." The snap effect of this capitulation to the Victorian spirit is played up as parodically extreme here, and is tinged with a certain horror. After Orlando's long resistance, her instant and gleeful reversal marks a feminist shock.<sup>22</sup> As it turns out, however, Orlando's conformity is not absolute, nor was her capitulation ever complete.

Eventually Orlando achieves a comfortable gender ambiguity in the modern era. This ambiguity, or androgyny, is remarked by Orlando's spouse, Shelmerdine, shortly after their engagement: "You're a woman, Shel!" Orlando cries. "You're a man, Orlando!" he cries. And, after "a scene of protestation and demonstration," they settle back into their assumed sex roles and sexes (252). But not precisely. Soon after,

Orlando reflects on the way her marriage—which turns out to be strikingly nontraditional—has given her an odd freedom:

She was married, true; but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (264)

Although she conforms by virtue of marrying Shelmerdine, Orlando resists the particular demands of Victorian marriage and womanly roles. She finds that she has conformed just enough to slip by unnoticed in the age, while she may also maintain a resistance to further constraint.

After her marriage, Orlando asks herself if she has satisfied the demands of the age and if she might again write in her own hand. She reflects that “the transaction between a writer and the spirit of an age is one of infinite delicacy” and finds to her great relief that “she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself” (266). It is the degree of conformity (and nonconformity), unmeasurable as it is, that determines the space left for resistance to an undesirable paradigm. That is, Orlando takes the category that is forced upon her (marriage), but she subverts it by negating many of its more traditional constraints.

Our inability to mark what is world and what the individual has lent great anxiety to contemporary debates about the constructedness of subjectivity. Paul Smith, for example, has voiced concern that Julia Kristeva's more recent philosophy of the subject leans away from a dialogically constituted subject—one that identifies with a range of possibilities and responds to the world—and tends toward a description of a subject who would “understand and accept that its own crisis is not out of phase with the social but is more nearly the truth of the social.” Smith argues that the imperative to “stop worrying and love your crisis” would “make the analysand conform to a pre-given social world.” What Smith and others like him are concerned about is conformism or forced collaboration, the collapse of heterogeneous drives. Judith Butler attempts to answer such concerns, as well as to take issue with a view that post-structuralist theories of the subject threaten to undermine the possibility of political action. She sharply identifies a problem for movements of social change, emphasized in Michel Foucault's recognition that institutions and juridical systems of power produce the subjects

they eventually come to represent. “Feminist critique,” Butler argues, “ought . . . to understand how the category of ‘woman,’ the subject of feminism, is produced and restrained by the very structures of power through which emancipation is sought” (2). What Butler offers as a possible avenue away from such a cyclical dilemma is an awareness that one does not necessarily *just imitate* the model, and hence is not deterministically bound to repeat the conventional model of “woman.” Rather, one can “locate strategies of subversive repetition” and parodically repeat, yes, repeat—but with a difference (147–78). “The task,” as Butler notes, “is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” (148). Butler labels this form of subversive repetition “parody.” While I would not go so far as to say that *all* parody is subversive<sup>23</sup> (it is not clear whether Butler believes this or not), I do believe that the form of parody that Butler describes—one that presses toward heterogeneous mixtures of the norm and the contra-normal—carries with it the politics she describes.<sup>24</sup> Her model offers parody and cross-dressing, in particular, as acts that cross boundaries and allow one to *perform* subjectivity in a dialogue with social expectations for conformity—to resist without fully breaking with, to remain politically active within the system without conforming to it. Butler addresses the same early philosophical debates over humanist individualism and determinism to which Woolf responds; moreover, Butler’s concerns about subjectivity, as they inform contemporary feminism, are interconnected with Woolf’s own ambivalences, embedded as they are in American feminism’s current identity crisis.

Woolf’s hope, as she first confided it to Sackville-West, was to “revolutionise biography in a night” while also working to “untwine and twist again” the various strands of Sackville-West’s character (*Letters* 3:429). The two actions are inextricably related; to “revolutionise” biography—the science of the self—one must be weaving together disparate strands. Woolf goes further and weaves strands of herself together with references to Sackville-West, thus inscribing the paradoxical representation of one self constructed from two (or more), and thereby only loosely tied. And all this through the practice of writing.

Writing has a psychologically constructive function for Woolf, one that helps the author re-determine herself. In “A Sketch of the Past” (1939), Woolf reflects on the difficulties of biographical writing:



Consider what immense forces society brings to play upon each of us, how that society changes from decade to decade; and also from class to class; well, if we cannot analyse these invisible presences, we know very little of the subject of the memoir; and again how futile life-writing becomes. I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place; but cannot describe the stream. (80)

The tension between self-control and historical influence here signals Woolf's changing sense of the historical process, her interest in causality. This interest is also necessarily directed toward concerns about how one writes about the self, a process that Woolf seems to believe will give her back to herself. In *A Room of One's Own* she urges young women to find their voice (and, I suggest, their *selves*) through the act of writing. Woolf believes that she can free herself from undue social influence only by describing the stream that surrounds her, and, while she is here "caught" in the stream, at other moments her writing suggests a more active engagement with the influences that surround her.

In the act of writing the (auto)biographical narrative of *Orlando*, Woolf can address questions about her own (and women's) sexuality and subjectivity—how these things are determined by context or predisposition—through strong identification with the biography of a woman whose name, Vita, holds in it the Latin meaning of life, life force, and—biography. I point toward this close relation between "the self" and biography that constructs the self through language in order to emphasize the ways in which *Orlando's* surviving question—that of who Orlando *is*—and Woolf's genre, parodic biography, are integrally related. I would like to suggest through a reading of *Orlando* that notions of the self are intricately linked to writing for Woolf, and that the essence of a word functions just like the essence of a person, clothed in social conventions and full of indeterminacy. Locke's essentialist doctrine of personal identity in fact trembles when he begins to reflect on language in the *Essay* (476–77). Referring to the "double use" of words, Locke divides the use of language into two projects: that of recording autobiographical notes to the self, and also that for conveying ideas to others (to express truths). He articulates an uneasy concern about the "doubtfulness and uncertainty of [words'] signification" on account of there being no relationship between words and ideas but that which man artificially imposes. It is as if words might be the *fabric* that veils the truth, but Locke is nervous about the project of unveiling. He worries that "no one has Authority to determine the signification of the Word Gold" (486).

Mastery, authority, and control over the self (and one's word)—these are issues as well for Woolf. Of the novel that precedes *Orlando*, Woolf admits she has inscribed an ambivalence about her own power as author. When her friend Roger Fry writes a long letter in praise of *To the Lighthouse*, he confesses that the “symbolic meaning” of the Lighthouse escapes him. Woolf writes in response that “I meant *nothing* by *The Lighthouse*. One has to have a central line down the middle of the book to hold the design together. I saw that all sorts of feelings would accrue to this, but I refused to think them out, and trusted that other people would make it the deposit for their own emotions—which they have done. . . . I can't manage Symbolism except in this vague, generalised way” (*Letters* 3:385). Woolf's habit of writing in ambivalent symbols that admit of a variety of definitions is a way of giving some partial authority to her readers, which creates more conspicuously this double/multiple-mirror effect.

Likewise, readers of *Orlando*, as noted, identify with Orlando's formation of “identity” variously. This is perhaps because subjectivity itself in *Orlando* is increasingly depicted as a mesh of various optional identities. The present moment of the novel—its closing day in October 1928—finds Orlando constantly invoking her own history, recharging her memory, and re-narrating her past (298ff). She calls to herself, “Orlando?” upon which we are treated to a long reflection on personal identity, which concludes with the exasperated query: “How many different people are there not—Heaven help us—all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit?” These alternative selves (some two thousand and fifty-two, the narrator speculates) are “built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand” (308) and all are attached to certain weather, locales, circumstances, and people, and so can be triggered on appropriate occasions. The conscious self then struggles to form a dominant identity of them all; Orlando undergoes this exercise shortly before the novel's close.

One is left to ask, much like an echo of Orlando herself, what if anything constitutes Orlando's identity. Has anything remained essential or even consistent throughout the history? Various strands, such as memory and her ownership of the estate, might be suggested. But memory lapses and Orlando travels about. The one truly persistent aspect that remains with Orlando throughout her life may seem more arbitrary than essential; only her name, “Orlando,” truly remains the same. Moreover this name (Orlando) is also the name of Woolf's fictional text (*Orlando*), which points up something significant about

biography. That is, once the corporeal body is gone, only the textual body remains. *Orlando* ends abruptly with the appearance of an odd, elusive goose that flies beyond Orlando's nets. Earlier, Orlando recalls how she has always been "Haunted! Even since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea. Up I jumped (she gripped the steering wheel tighter) and stretched after it. But the goose flies too fast. . . . Always I fling after it words like nets (here she flung her hand out) 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" (313). Whether this is all merely a wild goose chase, as J. J. Wilson has suggested, or some moment of serious personal strife, Woolf admits that the fish (or goose), the self, or the "essential truths" about one's life, will never be caught, nor in a sense will they ever be lost, for there will always be silver dregs at the bottom of the subject's net, interestingly figured as the curious residue of language. It is in a sense only this residue that both invites and resists our insistent refigurations, our attempts to make Woolf conform to our societal demands. Thus in *Orlando* Woolf has already, in the process of playing out her own anxieties about conformity and identity, anticipated our attempts to clothe her writings in our own desires. She offers, as always, both a sympathy (a partial identification with our desires and requirements) and a parody that resists such reductive (or "fishy") attempts to fix a single subject position within our nets.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Critics all concede that Vita Sackville-West is Orlando's primary model. Woolf solicits her response to the novel's premise early on: "Suppose," she writes, "Orlando turns out to be Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind" (*Letters* 3:429). With Sackville-West's permission, Woolf goes on to model Orlando's various lovers on Sackville-West's own. Lord Lascelles, who unsuccessfully wooed Sackville-West from 1912 to 1913, appears as the Archduchess/Archduke Harry (*Letters* 3:433n). Violet Trefusis, one of Sackville-West's early lovers, gets transformed into Sasha (*Letters* 3:430 and *Diary* 3:162). Vita's own family history, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, supplies Orlando's distinguished ancestry and the description of Orlando's estate. Orlando further shares Sackville-West's literary aspirations; his/her poem, "The Oak Tree," takes large pieces out of Sackville-West's "The Land." Like Sackville-West, Orlando exhibits a penchant for transient sexual attachments as well.

<sup>2</sup> In her diary (3:163) Woolf reflects that she is writing *Orlando* "half in a mock style," but trying to strike a balance between truth and fantasy. Woolf's

brand of humor is parodic, modeled, I believe, on Jane Austen's lightly satiric tone. *Orlando's* parodic twist is suggested immediately in the preface, in which Woolf thanks the "many friends" who helped her along with her project. "Some are dead," she notes, "and so illustrious that I scarcely dare name them, yet no one can read or write without being perpetually in the debt of Defoe, Sir Thomas Browne, Sterne, Sir Walter Scott . . ." and the list continues. Woolf's preface simultaneously performs the gesture of thanking those who assisted her project while also parodying the genre's constant hat-tipping, source-naming, and allusion to key literary figures.

<sup>3</sup> See *Marxism* 375 and *Political* 136. James Naremore also argues that *Orlando* and *Between the Acts* "present history as a kind of a pageant, where the costumes change but the actors remains the same" (195). Gillian Beer argues as well that history changes only the outer lights, while humans remain essentially the same.

<sup>4</sup> Critics have in part begun to pick up on this motif in *Orlando*. Sandra Gilbert, for example, argues that each change of clothing constitutes an identity for Orlando.

<sup>5</sup> For several articles giving serious thought as to how we might reconsider Woolf's impact on contemporary American feminist thought, see the special issue called "feminist miscellany" of *Diacritics*, 21.2 (Summer–Fall 1991). See especially Rachel Bowlby and Bette London.

<sup>6</sup> London here is concerned that "in remaking Woolf—or any other figure—as mother of feminist literary criticism . . . we risk creating a mirror to magnify our own achievements" (20).

<sup>7</sup> London also points to Judith Newton's emphasis on *A Room of One's Own* as a call for a canon of women's writing, and she notes as well that Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar extend this project in their work.

<sup>8</sup> Woolf parodies the Victorian insistence on bare facts, the resistance to imaginative construction. In "The New Biography" Woolf suggests that, though fiction and biography are conceptually incompatible, they are necessarily always interwoven arts. She there recommends the use of what she calls "creative facts" to reconstruct the personality as well as the historical life.

<sup>9</sup> Fredrick Harrison, G. H. Lewes, Richard Congreve.

<sup>10</sup> For eleven years, starting in the year of Woolf's birth, Stephen worked on sixty-three volumes of the *Dictionary*, contributing over 370 entries and editing a mass of others. See Leslie Stephen *Men, Books, and Mountains* 13. The biographer's task, for Stephen, was to bring order to the chaos of available material, to provide the framework that would allow the subject to speak for itself. Although Stephen, like Woolf, argued that biography should be classified as an art, he favored a much more condensed and less imaginative approach than the one Woolf chose.

<sup>11</sup> She uses this in contradistinction to Morley's and Stephen's emphasis on the lives of great *men*. In "Women and Fiction" Woolf remarks that "the history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female" (44). Her "Lives of the Obscure" gives a female line to women writers, and a history of struggle against social constraint and disappointment.

<sup>12</sup> Cited in J. J. Wilson 179.

<sup>13</sup> Woolf opts for Coleridge's model of the "androgynous" artist. She

imagines a mind that might be a mixture of male and female gender traits, a mind such as she has just sketched in *Orlando* (98). She complains that men of her time write with too much of the male side of the brain. She complains, in general, that "it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (104). By merging the two, she argues, the anger that can damage a woman's writing will be disassembled.

<sup>14</sup> See London 20. London makes an important case for turning toward figures besides Woolf in our struggle to revise notions of feminism. While I would not argue to erase Woolf, who seems to operate as a strong map of American feminism's unconscious and conscious struggles, I would say that by turning to a broader range of figures we might ease up on the more competitive and critical urges that make Woolf a figure who does seem, in a sense, to have grown disproportionately large.

<sup>15</sup> Locke promotes the notion of a solid essence, composed of unchanging attributes of the object. This notion of an object's essence was applied to theories of personal identity into this century. See Book II, chapter 27, where he argues that consciousness (or memory) is alone constitutive of consistent character. David Hume expands on and contradicts Locke's theories in *A Treatise on Human Nature* (1739–1740) and *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. In Book I, part IV, section VI of *Treatise*, he argues that the self is only a fiction that we construct through memory. Hume, however, is invested in refuting religious notions of the soul which Locke's work supports. Consequently, Hume links the body to the self, whereas Locke insistently separates the two.

<sup>16</sup> This moment is not only a coming-out narrative; it is also a feminist gesture. Woolf is placing woman into a national history that largely excluded her, a point she remarks with great energy in *Three* 33. One might also note, as does Carolyn Heilbrun, that this tribute to Sackville-West goes one step further and returns to her the home and estate she would have inherited had she been male.

<sup>17</sup> Within the construct of the story, the cause of Orlando's sex change is puzzling. It may have been necessary, as Orlando's only possible escape from the marriage contract found near his body during this trance. Orlando was apparently secretly married to Rosina Pepita, a dancer of uncertain origin, who had borne him several illegitimate children during his stay in Turkey (132). On a broader scale, general social upheaval (the Glorious Revolution of 1689) might suggest the need for transformation. One might even speculate that cross-dressing in Turkish pants, which was not only a favorite trick of Sackville-West's but a popular practice among English women in the 1920s, linked gender ambiguity and Constantinople in the minds of Woolf's contemporaries. Karen Lawrence, for example, reads Orlando's sexual transformation as intricately linked to her trip to Turkey. Marjorie Garber argues that wearing Turkish pants brings about the sex change. Orlando is, however, naked here. Moreover, he seems to have worn English dress at least occasionally. The narrative leaves ambiguous the question of whether or not Orlando wore Turkish dress except before his bath. However it occurs, the sex change stands out as shocking and a-contextual, both in its narrative expression and by virtue of the humor Woolf wrings from such a shock.

<sup>18</sup> Sandra Gilbert has argued that “Woolf’s view of clothing implied that costume is inseparable from identity—indeed, that costume creates identity” (394). Gilbert, however, fails to acknowledge the trauma of the transformations in *Orlando*, and so all tensions between historical, social, and individual determination drop out.

<sup>19</sup> I believe that the novel’s title refers to Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, which also deals with questions of cross-dressing. A romantic epic from the Italian Renaissance, Ariosto’s poem was written over the course of his life, starting in 1502 and finishing only some thirty years later at the time of Ariosto’s death. Orlando likewise writes “The Oak Tree” from the novel’s inception, in 1500, until 1928. In Ariosto’s long series of cantos, sensual love is the prevailing passion, as is its analysis in Woolf’s novel. Most significant, however, is the use of cross-dressing in Ariosto’s poem. Marphisa, a fearless and respected woman warrior, dresses as a man, jousts in the wars, and is famous for her ability to fight like a man. Moreover, the women of her city are said to keep the men home, “to ply the distaff, broider, card and sow,/ In female gown descending to the feet,/ which renders them effeminate and slow” (lxxii in Canto XIX). Gender categories are thus scrambled between cultures as they relate to the performance of cross-dressing.

<sup>20</sup> The narrator comically dissents from the view that, if man and woman had “both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same too” (188). We are given instead the suggestion that “the difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath.” But this opposition breaks down almost immediately in the narrator’s rather haphazard ramblings: “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place” (189). Clothes, we are told, merely anchor temporarily one side of the androgynous nature to which the parodic oscillations in the narrator’s perspective have given rise.

<sup>21</sup> The model to which I refer here is a Freudian notion of developmental, Freudian subjectivity, where personality is formed by early crises. This model is established for Woolf, as I have argued, through Strachey’s work. This fits into a much more precise sketch of social constructiveness in *contemporary* writings by Michel Foucault, whose work takes up the same concerns that seem to be motivating Woolf. Judith Butler’s work, discussed below, is clearly indebted to Foucault’s own struggle with these questions.

<sup>22</sup> At the 1990 International Symposium on James Joyce, Sandra Gilbert read this moment of Woolf’s acceptance of “the new” in contradistinction to Joyce’s repetition of “the old” in *Finnegans Wake*. (Gilbert’s argument is developed in what I understand to be an early draft of her introduction of her and Susan Gubar’s *No Man’s Land*, Volume 3, forthcoming from Yale University Press.) In fact, the “new,” as it is invoked here, is accompanied by a return to the *old* tradition of marriage. Marrying herself to Shelmerdine, Orlando opens herself to new experiences, but she also conforms to tradition. This scene can be misconstrued if not read closely. Sue Roe, for example, argues that “The Oak Tree” “can only be written when Orlando recognizes that she wants to be married, just like everybody else” (97). Roe’s book proves to be one of the best on questions of writing and gender, but here she makes a disturbing slip.

<sup>23</sup> In fact, depending on the aggression and application of its gesture,

parody is seen as either biting satirical or benignly ironic. It can be light-hearted and playful or, per Harold Bloom's "anxiety of influence" model, willfully aggressive toward its target. Both Margaret Rose and Linda Hutcheon are concerned with this ambivalence. Butler builds her notion of parody off of a more deconstructive model, one that emphasizes the play in parodic gestures. See Richard Kearney's and also Jacques Derrida's formulations of parody in *Spurs*. Derrida most powerfully develops a notion of parody implicitly in "Double."

<sup>24</sup> Butler points out that "the deconstruction of identity is not the deconstruction of politics; rather, it establishes as political the very terms through which identity is articulated" (147, 148, *passim*).

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