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“Kissing a Negress in the Dark”: Englishness as a Masquerade in Woolf’s *Orlando*

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HOW “ESSENTIAL” is national identity to the modern subject? According to Benedict Anderson, “in the modern world everyone can, should, will ‘have’ a nationality, as he or she ‘has’ a gender” (14). Anderson’s use of quotation marks around “have” highlights the difficulty of choosing to take up an identity when ideology (here nationalism) masks this process as a formulation. Anderson implies that national identity is partly chosen and partly imposed, that it is a product, like gender, of both individual agency (“everyone can”) and collective constraint (“everyone should”). Tom Nairn notes that “[w]henver we talk about nationalism, we normally find ourselves talking before too long about ‘feelings,’ ‘instincts,’ supposed desires and hankerings to ‘belong,’ and so on” (334). Indeed, national ideology often depends on essentializing equivalences between elements of identity such as gender and sexuality, on the one hand, and race and nationality, on the other. George Mosse has argued that before World War II nationalism was a strong ideology because of the deployment of other controlling ideologies, such as an implicitly normal middle-class “respectability,” a term, he explains, that indicates “‘decent and correct’ manners and morals, as well as the proper attitude toward sexuality” (1). And as the cultural critic Paul Gilroy has insisted, English nationality in particular always implies a racial claim: “The politics of ‘race’ is fired by conceptions of national belonging and homogeneity which not only blur the distinction between ‘race’ and nation, but rely on that very ambiguity for their effect” (45). Given the extent to which ideologies of national inclusion depend on equating gender with the performance of heterosexual respectability and equating national affiliation with notions of racial belonging, one might conclude that gender and nationality can operate as essentializing ideologies of identity only if sexuality and race remain nationality’s half-hidden or forgotten others.

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) can be read as an ambivalent articulation of English nationalism in the 1920s, an era in which the essentializing imperatives of an Englishness "at once less imperial and more inward-looking, more domestic and more private" (Light 8) came to preoccupy the English public. A novel loosely based on the life of Virginia Woolf's lesbian lover Vita Sackville-West,¹ *Orlando* seeks a place of national belonging for the polymorphously sexual, masculine-identified white woman. This is no easy task. In the fifty-odd years preceding the publication of *Orlando*—the heyday of British imperialism—the morally upright, heterosexually respectable Englishwoman had come to be associated at home and in the colonies with notions of racial purity.² These notions, implicit in national assumptions of English racial homogeneity and authenticity, were shaken after World War I by shifting racial and gender demographics and by public anxiety about blurred gender roles, masculine women, and lesbianism.³ Tracing moral panics and censorship in the 1920s, Jeffrey Weeks observes that the lesbian novels and films that proliferated throughout the decade, as well as Parliament's 1921 attempt to criminalize lesbianism and the sensational 1928 obscenity trial involving Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*, helped make lesbianism an issue that occupied the general public (116).

Orlando is often read as a novel about transvestism, androgyny, and lesbianism (see Stimpson 253; Gilbert 405; Knopp 33; Whitlock 578)—indeed, as lesbian romanticism's "most elegant and inventive text" (Stimpson 253)—as if these practices were separable from other aspects of identity, such as race or nation. Yet Woolf's novel, published less than a week after the *Well of Loneliness* trial began in October 1928, is a product of public anxieties and historical debates about race and nation, and it only ambivalently contests national ideologies of Anglo-Saxon racial homogeneity and heterosexual respectability. *Orlando* is the story of an unmarried Elizabethan lord who "becomes" a woman. At first Orlando lives and travels as a man, sleeping with whomever he chooses; however, once Orlando takes up femininity, she becomes the kind of "superfluous woman" (Melman 19) whose sexuality, because it is less than respectable, is neither white nor En-

glish, a polymorphously perverse woman who inclines toward lovers of other races and classes and who describes her freewheeling sexual adventures with Gypsies, prostitutes, and servant girls as "kissing . . . negress[es]" (258). As I show here, *Orlando*'s popularity derives largely from its comic refiguring of postwar discourses in which race, class, nation, and sexuality were already embedded and combined.⁴ I begin by examining how British newspaper stories and editorials of the 1920s linked together colonial immigrants and sexually emancipated white women as foreign and morally suspect subjects. I then consider another type of discourse, a psychoanalytic case study that obliquely outlines the psychic constraints of gendered national belonging by drawing unconsciously on racial stereotypes in analyzing white femininity. This study, Joan Riviere's semiautobiographical "Womanliness as a Masquerade" (1929), provides a national and symbolic framework for reading the textual equivocations and humorous double entendres of Woolf's "lesbian" novel. *Orlando*'s exploration of queer white female sexuality can thereby be seen as firmly anchored in the national and racial concerns of 1920s England, as paradoxically and ambivalently concerned both with establishing a place for the sexually polymorphous white woman within her class and nation and with contesting the ideological parameters of national inclusion.

I

In the decade after World War I, when Great Britain was rocked by race riots and labor strikes, the rejection of racial integration emerged as vital to the process of reordering gendered nationality.⁵ The intensity of public concern about the Englishwoman's dubious racial, and thus national, loyalty is evident in newspaper accounts of the 1919 race riots, which were started by angry mobs of white men who suspected African, West Indian, and Arab immigrants of taking their jobs and of consorting with white women (see Rich 121; Fryer 300; Little 81; Shyllon 212–13). Many of these accounts manipulated public fears of miscegenation by conflating dark skin with moral corruption. For example, a London *Times* article titled "Black Men and White Women" describes the prosecution of a West In-

dian man for serving liquor to “women of loose character.” Another, titled “Black Man and White Girl,” attributes racial rioting in Newport to “a coloured man’s accosting a white girl” and thus links the disreputable sexuality of white women to a supposedly disruptive body of black men.

Although Parliament granted women limited suffrage in early 1918 “as a gesture of recognition for [their] contribution to the war effort” (Kent, *Making Peace* 4), unmarried women under thirty could not vote for another ten years (Kent, *Sex* 222). During this decade, connections drawn between unstable white women and unstable race relations among laboring men reflected continued social unease both with the influx of racial others into seaport towns and with the sexual, economic, and political emancipation of white women. The supposedly uncontrollable sexuality of poor white women in particular is cast as the cause of English moral decay and vice by articles and editorials of the period that construct racial difference in terms of national and sexual difference. In a *Western Mail* account of the Cardiff riots, a Somali man, entreated by his “white wife” to find a safe hiding place from the mob, watches his house burn with “Eastern Stoicism” (Little 80). An essay in the *Liverpool Courier* interpellates readers with a white male “you”: “You glimpse black figures beneath the gas lamps, and somehow you think of pimps, and bullies, and women, and birds of ill-omen generally, as now and again you notice a certain watchful callousness that seems to hint of nefarious trades and drunkenness in dark rooms” (Fryer 302). In this description, black figures evoke (implicitly white) women, an association that then seems to lead to crime and vice. By implication, curbing the promiscuous sexuality of poor white women was seen as a step toward eradicating racial dissension and general social upheaval. As the political historian Paul Rich demonstrates, the Victorian fear of “‘half-caste’ pathology” had long conflated mixed-race relationships with “immorality and a slumland underclass standing outside the main social order of Britain” (120). This prejudice continued to grow into the late 1920s, becoming so virulent by the end of the decade that antimiscegenation laws based on South African models were introduced in England on the grounds that “social ostracism [as] a sufficient deterrent . . . does not

dominate a certain class of women in the British Isles” (127–28).

If disciplining the sexuality of poor white women might help control the economic and sexual competition posed by black men, confining middle-class white women to heterosexual marriage might reserve both jobs and white women for white men alone. Susan Kingsley Kent observes that “[f]or many . . . the notion of women’s doing men’s work created enormous anxiety” (*Making Peace* 37). Billie Melman notes that the focus of the “superfluous women” panic in England in the 1920s was “the ordinary, disfranchised young woman,” the boyish, middle-class white flapper whose presence at the center of debates about sex roles reflected public concern over the fact that many women were delaying or even avoiding “marriage and the conjugal family” (3). And indeed, as I argue here, public anxiety over female sexual perversity was not concerned only with issues of reproduction and family. The “ambiguous and historically peculiar image” (1) of the androgynous flapper exposes the fear that the masculine women who were supposedly taking men’s jobs might also steal men’s wives and girlfriends.

This anxiety found an outlet in the persecution of women who looked less than feminine, worked in men’s jobs, or wrote frankly about lesbianism. Indeed, the masculine woman, the working woman, and the lesbian were often collapsed into the queerly gendered, morally corrupt “monstrous figure” of the cross-dressed lesbian (Brittain 52). For example, in 1918 the Metropolitan Police succeeded in discrediting the newly formed Women Police Service merely by calling attention to the abnormal appearance of a short-haired policewoman in a group photograph (Hamer 48). Vera Brittain notes in her account of the 1928 *Well* obscenity trial that a photograph of a crop-headed, bow-tied, lantern-jawed woman—not, incidentally, Radclyffe Hall—published alongside James Douglas’s vitriolic editorial condemning Hall’s novel as “moral poison” was used to sway public opinion against the book.⁶ Douglas’s condemnation—a sensationalist ploy to sell newspapers—appeared on 9 August 1928; by 9 November the obscenity case, urged by the home secretary, William Joynson-Hicks, had begun, and by 16 November a Bow Street magistrate had

ordered all seized copies of the book destroyed. One contemporary satirist suggested that Douglas's and Joynson-Hicks's efforts to ban the book had contributed to corrupting the already precarious morals of working women: "Thanks to their crusade, millions of shop, office, and mill girls have been led to ask the furtive question: What is Lesbianism?" (Brittain 97).

The question of the queerly gendered woman's place in her society and in her nation also found its way into discourses of the period through Freud's developmental theories.⁷ Elizabeth Abel has noted that during the 1920s psychoanalytic "developmental narratives" and anthropological "evolutionary narratives," both concerned with gender, circulated among London intellectuals (3). Debates focused on the "cultural inheritance" of the symbolic threat of castration (Mitchell 17), which Freud considered central to the process by which girls assume heterosexual femininity (Rose 28). While the popular perception of sexually and economically independent white women as masculine was partly due to these women's new status as enfranchised subjects, Freud's discussions of the castration complex, of lesbianism, and of female masculinity associated with an atavism that evoked the primitive and racial.⁸

One disciple of Freud who saw questions of female masculinity and lesbian desire as submerged questions of racial and national affiliation was Joan Riviere, an analyst from an intellectual Cambridge family who was one of the first translators of Freud's works into English (Heath 45). Riviere also knew many members of the Bloomsbury group—Vanessa and Clive Bell, Roger Fry, E. M. Forster, Ottoline Morrell (Hughes 15). In "Womanliness as a Masquerade," published a year after *Orlando*, Riviere suggests that the performance of an exaggerated femininity might mask both a woman's aggressive masculine identification and, on a deeper level, lesbian desires. Riviere argues that gender is not a natural bodily attribute but, for women at least, a struggle and a performance produced to allay men's fears that women will usurp their intellectual and sexual dominance. She theorizes that femininity is produced as and through a masquerade and that it is in fact inseparable from the masquerade. "My suggestion," she writes, "is not, however, that there is any . . . difference [between femininity and

masquerade]; whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing" (38). "Excessive femininity"—the flamboyant, theatrical, and aggressively underhanded performance Riviere purports to investigate—proves to be white heterosexual feminine sexuality itself. Moreover, the masquerade's success depends on the displacement of the white woman's sexual desire and masculine identification onto a black man, who serves as a scapegoat. "Womanliness as a Masquerade" contains a narrative whose plot bears a striking resemblance to that of *Orlando*: a masculine-identified subject performs a strenuously self-conscious white femininity to divert suspicion from her perverse sexuality.

Riviere argues in her semiautobiographical case study⁹ that humor is essential to the successful masquerade of white femininity, especially for a woman intellectual engaged in public speaking, who must "treat the situation of displaying her masculinity to men as a 'game,' as something *not real*, as a 'joke'" (39). For Freud, the joke is a "double-dealing rascal" whose meaning often turns on substitution, displacement, dissimilarity, and "the bringing forward of what is hidden" (*Jokes* 155, 14). Riviere's "joke" takes the form of a flirtatious, self-deprecating mask that distracts powerful men from the woman's performance of intellectual authority and dupes them by presenting an equivocating heterosexual woman who eagerly solicits their approval. The mask of excessive femininity is used defensively "both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if [a woman is] found to possess it" (38). Like Freud, Riviere asserts that women must struggle to achieve a proper heterosexual object, but she adds an emphasis on the social and constructed component of femininity, which consists in producing "the woman men want" (Heath 52)—that is, a creature who could never be mistaken for masculine or lesbian. Riviere's case study does not deal explicitly with lesbians' choice of a sexual object, but she attributes the performance of excessive femininity to homosexual anxiety. She also collapses intellectual prowess, masculine identification, and lesbian desire into a murkily defined masculinity. In desiring to be a successful intellectual, Riviere's female subject occupies what Judith Butler, reading Riviere, has called "the place of the father in public discourse as speaker, lecturer, writer—that is, as a

user of signs rather than a sign-object, an item of exchange" (*Gender Trouble* 51).¹⁰ The wish to usurp the father's speaking position is a "castrating desire" (51) and thus operates against Freud's notion of the castration complex, which, as he wrote in 1925, "inhibits and limits masculinity and encourages femininity" ("Some Psychological Consequences" 256).¹¹ Jacqueline Rose stresses the concept of castration as the intervention of a third term, an occurrence that throws any dyadic relationship onto the axis of the symbolic (35–37). In one of the dreams described in Riviere's study, a black man functions as an embodiment of this third term of castration, serving both as a site for the white woman's masculine identification and as her scapegoat. Riviere interprets the subject's flirtation with and distraction of the man in the dream as a "compulsive reversal of her intellectual performance," part of the "double-action" that disguises the masculine aspects of a life bifurcated into "masculine and feminine activities" (38).

The black man also becomes the marker and the disguise of her aggressive wish for masculine authority and identification. In the dream, which Riviere connects to fantasies the subject had as a child growing up in the American South, the subject has killed her parents and sits awaiting retribution: "then a negro [comes] in and [finds] her washing clothes, with her sleeves rolled up and arms exposed." The subject "resist[s] him, with the secret intention of attracting him sexually, and he beg[ins] to admire her arms and caress them and her breasts" (37). The intruder, who appears as a bearer of masculine retribution, is distracted by the display of the dreamer's bare arms, which, along with her breasts, signify white femininity and seem to have the power to neutralize his phallic threat. The subject draws on commonly held stereotypes of predatory black hypermasculinity in posing as a "guiltless and innocent" castrated woman (38). Riviere indicates that a crucial part of the murderous daughter's strategy of masquerade is her plan to turn the black man over to a white sheriff. The subject relies in her dream on racist prejudices and laws that guarantee the success of her performance of white femininity over black masculinity.¹² Her power is secured through her participation in the racial scapegoating practiced by her nation.¹³ In her fantasy, the social superiority of the white

woman over the black man in a racist country affords the woman masculine status and feminizes the man. He is the figure of castration that secures her authority. In a racist culture, the man of African descent becomes symbolically available as a site of masculine identification for the queerly gendered white woman.¹⁴

Queer theorists used Riviere's essay to show that gender is performed—even parodied—through masquerade. The notion of gender as performative has been read as an element of the law that, according to Judith Butler's Lacanian observations, "takes sexual difference as a presupposition of its own intelligibility" (*Gender Trouble* 44). Butler argues that gender depends for its intelligibility on the difference it supposedly creates and on exclusions it seeks to hide (*Bodies* 39). Sexuality and other dimensions of identity, such as nation and race, are seen as performed through gender, and gender is seen as performed through them.¹⁵ These performances occur according to the conventions of what Lauren Berlant has termed the National Symbolic, a concept that links the Lacanian notion of the subject constituted through language to Benedict Anderson's idea that discursive practices constitute the "imagined . . . community" of the nation (15). In the National Symbolic, narratives and stereotypes reflect the "general law" of the nation and "provide an alphabet for a collective consciousness or national subjectivity" (Berlant 20). Reading Riviere's essay as a narrative produced within a National Symbolic system enlarges the notion of masquerade so that it applies to the simultaneous multidimensional layers of the subject's position, including the "collectively-held history" and cultural imperatives of her nation (Berlant 20). Although Riviere might see the dream's racial symbolism merely as a reflection of her subject's American background, the operation of racial exchange to divert attention from white feminine gender transgression was, as I have suggested, also a vital component of the "collectively-held history" of racial and sexual exclusions that informed English national belonging throughout the 1920s.

As Riviere's analysis of the "joking" aspect of feminine masquerade suggests, this performance strikes a balance between contesting and adopting the identity constraints both of nation and whiteness and of gender and heterosexuality. Analogously,

Orlando critiques whiteness and heterosexuality ambivalently and unevenly;¹⁶ it uses racially and sexually “foreign” subjects to explore the ambiguous national and social identity of a queerly gendered white Englishwoman, excluded from the nation by her polymorphous sexuality. Beginning with an image of a decapitated Moor, *Orlando* appropriates the exoticized subjects of colonial discourse to create for its protagonist a sexuality that is not bourgeois or heterosexual. However, *Orlando*'s playful but insistent production of white femininity allows the protagonist to pass as respectable and heterosexual by displacing her transgressive sexuality onto racial others, thereby masking Orlando's masculine-identified literary and sexual desires. The “playful” exchange of racial others for sexual tolerance allows the novel both to interrogate and to affirm the national belonging of the queerly gendered Englishwoman, notwithstanding Woolf's well-known mistrust of the nation as a political affiliation for women: “What does ‘our country’ mean to me an outsider?” she asks in *Three Guineas* (107).

As readers have observed, costume, one form of masquerade that appears in *Orlando*, allows Woolf's protagonist to subvert gender roles.¹⁷ Humor operates as another kind of masquerade in the novel.¹⁸ The construction of the protagonist's polymorphous lesbian sexual desire as an exotic, humorous fantasy may have helped *Orlando* slip past the censors who banned Hall's relentlessly serious, stolidly identitarian lesbian novel for describing “certain acts . . . in the most alluring terms” (Brittain 100). By contrast, Woolf's frequently cited journal entries have encouraged the reading of her literary “Sapphism” as a cheerful “wildness,” a masquerade for gaining the freedom “to kick up [her] heels and be off” (*Diary* 131). As Pamela Caughie points out, humorous rhetoric is one of the chief “signifying systems” the novel uses to make—and to question—meaning (*Postmodernism* 81).

II

From the first page of *Orlando*, the narrator stabilizes Orlando's indeterminate gender by articulating his masculinity within the racialized terms of national identity:

He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters. It was the colour of an old football, and more or less the shape of one, save for the sunken cheeks and a strand or two of coarse, dry hair, like the hair on a cocoanut. Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa; and now it swung, gently, perpetually, in the breeze which never ceased blowing through the attic rooms of the gigantic house of the lord who had slain him. (1)

Although the “fashion of the time”—a phrase that suggests not only clothes but also customs and mores—disguises Orlando's sex, the narrator insists that his display of valor puts his masculinity beyond question. The narrator takes pains to allay suspicion about Orlando's gender identity by admiring his masculine militarism, which repeats the behavior of his English forefathers, and his feudal service, demanded of him by his nation and his queen. By miming masculine imperialism, Orlando engenders the narrative that bears his name and enters the social and symbolic fields as a national subject.

Yet Woolf's text undermines the certainty it appears to create. The narrator's tone remains ambivalent throughout the novel, performing a delicate balancing act that juxtaposes critique and celebration of Orlando. The sarcastic rendering of Orlando's racialized masculinity questions the terms that valorize his behavior as a gendered national ideal (see Phillips 186). The claim that Orlando demonstrates “chivalry” in hanging the head almost out of his reach appears doubtful since the fight is a fixed one against a long-dead “enemy” (14). Indeed, the spectacle of the Moor's repeated demise at the hands of England's young heirs, even after his head is reduced to little more than “an old football,” suggests that colonial conquest is both a rite of passage and a sign of immaturity. Orlando seems to embody the popular phrase “vigorous, manly, and English” (Dodd 6), yet he and his head-hunting forefathers also appear to be far more barbaric than the Moor, whose disembodied head serves as a perpetual reminder of the violent appropriations that built the wealth and identity of the “gigantic” houses of the English upper class.¹⁹

The narrator's libidinal partiality to and fondness for Orlando moderates the novel's critique of racist nationalism and gender respectability:

[W]e must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples. (15)

This parody of Victorian and Edwardian poetic convention serves to temper the infatuated sincerity of the tribute to Orlando's beauty rather than to interrogate its racialized terms. The narrator's purple ecstasies over Orlando's "marble dome" forehead, "blank medallion" temples, and "drenched violet" eyes racialize and eroticize the contrast between Orlando's Caucasian youthful vitality and the defeated head that "grin[s] at him through shrunk, black lips triumphantly." Indeed, the narrator's biographical scrutiny—and ironic distance—gives way to undisguised admiration of the "shapely legs," "handsome body," and "well-set shoulders" that compose Orlando's charms (14). Woolf's joking, breathy send-up of the poetic conventions of physical beauty may question the equivalences between whiteness and beauty, militarism and masculinity that constitute Orlando's recognizable Englishness, but it also depends on them.

Rhetorical masquerades and narrative coyness continue to inform the construction of Orlando's sexuality as fundamentally ambiguous when he changes gender. While serving as an English governor in Constantinople, Orlando adopts the clothes and customs of his new city, has an affair with a Gypsy woman, and becomes a she. Since it is unclear whether Orlando becomes female before, during, or after the affair with the Gypsy, the sexual configuration of the relationship remains murky. The dearth of information about Orlando's sojourn in Constantinople suggests that the queering of Orlando's identity obfuscates his official role as governor: "We have done our best," the narrator insists, "to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination" (119). Moreover, the incongruence of Orlando's gender (she has "become" a

woman) and sexual-object choice (she has an affair with a woman) means that she is neither English nor a lady in the eyes of respectable British society; thus the text renders her a biographical puzzle and an unintelligible exile. The narrator states that Orlando has "become" a woman but also implies that Orlando has been a combination of both sexes for some time: "we have no choice but to confess—he was a woman" (137). The pronoun play continues even after this confession, when the female Orlando "look[s] himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure" (138). The mirror, the masculine "himself," and the narrator's apologetic reassurance that subsequent pronoun substitutions are "for convention's sake" all suggest that Orlando is and has always been masquerading.

The theatrical, campy staging of the protagonist's gender mutability, which points to performativity and queerness, also pokes fun at the hypocrisies of middle-class sexual mores: "We go; we go. I (*Purity says this*) to the hen roost. I (*Chastity says this*) to the still unravished heights of Surrey. I (*Modesty says this*) to any cosy nook where there are curtains in plenty" (136). If the "hen roost" is the only home of purity, if the "heights of Surrey" are the last bastion of virginity, and if "curtains in plenty" are the only requirement of modesty, then these supposed virtues exist only for show. Whereas these repressive qualities are consigned to England, Orlando's body, gender, sexuality, and morals appear to belong to another country and culture altogether. The narrator implies that Orlando's sexual behavior—the "secret communication," or secret intercourse, with the Gypsy—borders on treachery and constitutes the catalyst for colonial insurrection. In the various fragments from which the narrator reconstructs Orlando's gender metamorphosis, the politically rebellious behavior of colonized subjects is linked to threatening sexual behavior; an Admiral Brigge, whose name suggests military repression and incarceration, takes pains in his duty to accentuate the perceived threat the rebels pose to "English ladies in the company" (127).

Orlando extends its critique of the morals held to by the "tribe of the respectable" (137) by displacing the problem of artistic censorship onto the band of Gypsies Orlando joins after the Constantinople

uprising.²⁰ The Gypsies' variations on prohibitions related to love and writing effectively ridicule the censoring of both. Instead of prohibiting love in writing, as the English Home Office did in the Hall obscenity case, the Gypsies prohibit love of writing, especially when the object choice reflects a foreign pathology: the "English disease, a love of Nature." Because "How good to eat!" is the only way to express beauty in the Gypsie language, Orlando's passion becomes a love that, like homosexuality, cannot speak its name. Although the Gypsies do not condemn Orlando's sexuality, her "English" textualizing of everyday life is to them a frightening and disgusting "malady" (143). She expresses her forbidden love of nature only through writing—a solitary vice she practices in secret, as if it were somehow shameful and masturbatory. Orlando experiences the Gypsy prohibition of this love—indeed of all writing practices—as a threat that reflects Gypsy cultural law: "Already the young men had plotted her death" (151).

Having outed Orlando as a writer and an Englishwoman and suggested the exoticism of her sexual desires, the text intimates that the Englishness of her artistic sensibilities demands her repatriation: "Orlando had contracted in England some of the customs or diseases (whatever you choose to consider them) which cannot, it seems, be expelled" (142). Indeed, the "dome of smooth, white marble" and "white spires" of Saint Paul's (163), which recall the imagery used to describe Orlando at the opening of the novel, suggest that Orlando's whiteness and affinity for England produce each other. However, London is the opposite of the "savages and nature" to which Orlando has been accustomed (165). And the narrator deploys colonialist images to depict the constraints English culture imposes on the implicitly white female sex: "still, if it meant conventionality, meant slavery, meant denying her love, fettering her limbs, pursing her lips, and restraining her tongue, then she would turn about with the ship and set sail once more for the gypsies" (163). To be sure, privilege spares Orlando from the gender "slavery" she fears: indeed, conventionality offers her the social privilege she once enjoyed as a man. Social respectability and rank require that her earlier sexual alliance with the

Gypsy woman—a lesbian alliance, since Orlando is legally a woman—be disavowed. Her public heterosexual commitment to Shelmerdine solidly establishes her national and class legitimacy and helps restore her status, land, and titles. Correctly inferring that the legal decree of Orlando's congruent gender and sexuality signals national recognition of her Englishness, the common folk mime Orlando's masquerade of a coherent national identity by burning "Turkish women by the dozen" in effigy "in the market place" (256).

Yet Orlando's pragmatic heterosexual union does not satisfy her wayward nature. Her longing for a husband indicates her susceptibility to bourgeois heterosexual contagions—the "housemaid's fancies" (Kaplan 58)—that originated among the nineteenth-century working and middle classes. Woolf critiques Orlando's acquiescence in compulsory English heterosexuality by humorously casting Orlando's longing for a husband as unhealthy, as the cause of neurasthenic bouts of mania and lethargy. Moreover, not only is heterosexual marriage "against her natural temperament," it does "not seem to be [of] Nature" (243, 242). In a startling hallucination, Orlando sees the "heterogeneous" symbols and spoils of Victorian culture's "garish erection" being propped up by a bourgeois heterosexual couple in the drag of absolute gender difference: "the whole supported like a gigantic coat of arms on the right side by a female figure clothed in flowing white; on the left, by a portly gentleman wearing a frock-coat and sponge-bag trousers" (232). The woman's gendered yet sexless moral purity is linked to a whiteness that hides the body beneath her dress, while the man's expansive physique and business costume together suggest the gluttonous disposition of the capitalist. As the "coat of arms" suggests, both gender roles operate as national and nationalist costumes. Passing Buckingham Palace, Orlando notices that she is cross-dressed in breeches, and feeling that her lack of femininity has shamed her before the queen, she "never cease[s] blushing till she ha[s] reached her country house" (233).

Orlando and Shelmerdine participate in the cultural values of empire, which uphold the fictions of national belonging tied to fictions of racial belonging and heterosexual, middle-class respectability.



Roughly contemporary with *Orlando*, the 1933 film *Queen Christina*, like Woolf's novel, presents a cross-dressing figure from an earlier century, loosely based on the seventeenth-century queen of Sweden who wore men's clothes and favored women lovers. The film celebrates the attraction of Christina (Greta Garbo) to the "foreign" Spanish ambassador (John Gilbert, in black). (Photo: Museum of Modern Art Film Stills Archive)

And yet they reject the lower-class heterosexual contagion and base their union instead on a mutual understanding of their deviant sexual proclivities. Both Orlando and Shelmerdine understand that sexual sustenance may lie outside a bourgeois and heterosexually monogamous English respectability, and both displace desire onto the exotic other:

[H]e went to the top of the mast in a gale; there reflected on the destiny of man; came down again; had a whiskey and soda; went on shore; was trapped by a black woman; repented; reasoned it out; read Pascal; determined to write philosophy. . . . All this and a thousand other things she understood him to say and

so when she replied, Yes, negresses are seductive, aren't they? he having told her that the supply of biscuits now gave out, he was surprised and delighted to find how well she had taken his meaning. (258)

Orlando and Shelmerdine's snappy repartee masks their discussion of sexual tastes as a conversation about travel adventures, but the "negress" in their exchange, a racially and nationally colonized figure appropriated to mark the closeting of their queerness, signifies sexual perversity and ambivalent gender identification. Wary of censorship, the narrator maintains that such double entendres are necessary as "the main art of speech in an age when

words are growing daily so scanty in comparison with ideas that 'the biscuits ran out' has to stand for kissing a negress in the dark" (258). Assenting to the cultural values that exoticize their homosexual, interracial, and cross-class sexual tastes, Orlando and Shelmerdine agree to closet their sexuality, to kiss their unacceptable sexual objects—their "negresses"—in the dark. The text satirizes their smug endorsement of the secrecy that protects colonialist pleasure. Yet their delight in each other, as well as their willingness to confess all, challenges traditional notions of marital fidelity. Indeed, their frankness with each other in sexual matters throws gender into doubt: "Are you positive you aren't a man?" he asks, and she replies, "Can it be possible you're not a woman?" (258).

Shelmerdine reads Orlando's understanding of his desire for "negresses" in two ways: she tolerates his desires, and she shares them, to the point of having a masculine identification. However, in adopting his racialized erotic language as an intimate code, Orlando sacrifices her masculinity and gender ambiguity to a white, heterosexual national respectability much as Riviere's subject sacrifices the black man to the white sheriff's law. Further, operating as a textual code, the "negress" is also exchanged with *Orlando's* readers as a sign of Orlando's fluid gender. The narrator, asserting that "only the most profound masters of style can tell the truth" (259), defends this coded language as instructive. The vocabulary of colonial and masculine sexual conquest of the racial other through which the text conveys Orlando and Shelmerdine's mutual understanding also enables Woolf's narrator to indicate "the truth" that this prose style conceals.

Shelmerdine and Orlando's masquerade and their triangulation of desire through the "negress" reconfigure the violent image of the Moor's head, domesticating the dynamics of imperialism and conquest into a primitivist, orientalist style. Indeed, Orlando's respectable marriage allows her to write overtly sapphic hymns to the charms of "Egyptian girls" without censure. When the voice of the age interrogates her suspiciously, hilariously, about her writing ("Are girls necessary?"), the narrator implies that having "a husband at the Cape," while hypocritical perhaps, allows Orlando to elude moral surveillance of her lesbian poetry (265).

Whether such reconfigured, domesticated desires resist or consolidate empire is ultimately ambiguous. In the lyrical passage that marks the birth of Orlando's first child, desire simultaneously interrupts the bureaucratic machinations of empire and binds the empire together:

Hail! natural desire! Hail! happiness! divine happiness! and pleasure of all sorts . . . and anything, anything that interrupts and confounds the tapping of typewriters and filing of letters and forging of links and chains, binding the Empire together. (294)

Orlando's child becomes a new marker of pleasure, a properly domesticated successor to the "negress," and thus replaces exotic pleasures with the pleasures of the bourgeois family on holiday in an intimate, accessible rural nation, a "little" England.²¹ As a kind of national mother, Orlando must surrender polymorphous perversity to become a "darkened and settled" self who buys handbags from "polite, black, combed, sprightly, shop assistants" in 1920s London (314, 304). With the figures of empire dispersed throughout England, Orlando hears "goat bells" on Oxford Street and sees "the bare mountains of Turkey" on the English moors that once belonged to her family estate (305, 326).

The domestication of an imperialist national history into an individual sexual history forecloses the revolutionary possibilities of lesbian desire suggested in the novel: challenges to English notions of respectability and racial homogeneity, contestation of gender roles, and potential alliances with similarly "foreign" racial and sexual others. Yet the text also renders the protagonist of Woolf's "lesbian fantasy" simultaneously English and foreign, white and multiracial, heterosexually respectable and polymorphously perverse. Woolf satirizes Orlando's attempts to suppress these dizzying multiple identities, juxtaposing England and colony, lady and "negress," wife and lesbian in Orlando's consciousness until these terms inhabit a fluid textual, psychic, national space where "[n]othing is any longer one thing" (305). *Orlando's* polymorphously perverse female subject can never be less than national; indeed, the last words of the novel—"Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight"—cite the year universal suffrage, which granted the "superfluous woman" under thirty full participation in the

nation's political processes regardless of marital status, extended the English definition of the voting citizen beyond the boundaries of gender and state-sanctioned sexuality. Thus Woolf presents Orlando and the reader with the task of renegotiating the sexual and racial terms of English national belonging. *Orlando* slyly invites readers to unmask the "joking" terms under which femininity is produced—as gender identities are often, if not always, produced—as both an adaptation and a contestation of the constraints of national, racial, and sexual inclusion.

Notes

¹In October 1927 Woolf wrote in her diary that Orlando was "Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another" (Bell 131).

²The Englishwoman of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became identified not with nation but with "the preservation, perpetuation and enhancement of the race, both physically and spiritually" (Mackay and Thane 192).

³The Liverpool police blamed the rioting during this period partly on "negroes" who supposedly had "relations with white women" (Fryer 302). Billie Melman describes postwar representations of the female parasite who "takes on men's jobs" (17).

⁴Quentin Bell reports that *Orlando* sold 8,104 copies in its first six months; *To the Lighthouse* sold 3,873 copies in its first year (139–40).

⁵After the riots, Parliament passed the Special Restriction (Coloured Alien Seamen) Order of 1925, which implied that whiteness and Britishness were identical and that to be "coloured" was to be alien (Rich 69).

⁶Brittain thought this picture "calculated to be prejudicial to the readers of the day" (52).

⁷Whether Freud's concepts were met with skepticism (Weeks 155) or taken seriously (Abel 17) in England is a matter of debate.

⁸Feminists have noted that "[t]he castration complex in Freud's writings is very closely connected with his interest in man's prehistory" (Mitchell 13) and that "female homosexuality is posited as regressive and reactive, primitive and primal, undeveloped and archaic" (Fuss 49).

⁹Stephen Heath posits that "relations between the paper and the life are doubtless strong, more than strong" (46); however, whereas the subject of the case study grew up in the American South, Riviere grew up in England (see Hughes).

¹⁰Butler also suggests that Riviere's study may mask Riviere's own sexual desire for other women (*Gender Trouble* 54).

¹¹According to Juliet Mitchell, Freud made the castration complex "the focal point of culture," a complex that "operates as a law whereby men and women assume their humanity" (13).

¹²When the English lesbian Radclyffe Hall squired a female cousin around America, she kept "a revolver handy for obstreperous negroes" (Troubridge 19).

¹³See accounts of the American 1931 Scottsboro case (Cunard 250).

¹⁴Toni Morrison writes of blackness that it has functioned as "a way of talking about and a way of policing matters of class, sexual license, and repression" (6–7).

¹⁵The Lacanian subject is created, as Juliet Mitchell succinctly puts it, "from a general law that comes to it from outside itself and through the speech of other people, though this speech in turn must relate to the general law" (5).

¹⁶On ambivalence, see Bhabha 88.

¹⁷See Gilbert 405; Caughie, *Postmodernism* 81; and Garber 135. Stephen Heath suggests that Woolf deploys a Riviere-like mask in *Three Guineas* (56).

¹⁸Some feminist critics have seen Woolf's satirical pose as "a deliberate narrative politics by which she can express what she otherwise prohibits herself" (Minow-Pinkney 120). Jane Marcus insists that Woolf was keenly aware of the necessity of adopting rhetorical disguises (1). Others argue either that Woolf's satirical pose in this fictional "biography" facilitates a comic escape into language for both the protagonist and the novel itself (Caughie, "Double Discourse" 42) or conversely that Woolf's cheerful "wildness" cloaks an aggressive verbal retaliation for Sackville-West's lesbian philandering (Raitt 18).

¹⁹Sackville-West notes in her history of Knole, her family seat, that there was from the early seventeenth century onward always a page of African descent at the house named John Morocco (Fryer 24).

²⁰Indeed, Orlando's experiences among the Gypsies can be read as a comic send-up of literary censorship, inspired by the Radclyffe Hall obscenity trial. Jane Marcus argues that *A Room of One's Own* is a rhetorical attempt to seduce the Hall circle of lesbians, of which Sackville-West was a member, into feminism (163–87).

²¹Alan Hawkins points out that "a large part of the English ideal is rural" (62); Alison Light argues that this rural ideal was central to ideologies of conservative domesticity that pervaded England between the world wars (10).

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