

## CHAPTER 11

### HOW TO DO THINGS WITH GENDER: TRANSGENDERISM IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*

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*Orlando* has often been regarded as little more than a playful interlude in Virginia Woolf's oeuvre, and has suffered considerable critical neglect as a result. The responsibility for the dismissive mode adopted by many critics partly lies with Woolf herself, who disparagingly described the novel as 'a joke', 'farce', 'a writer's holiday', 'an escapade' (quoted in Minow-Pinkney 1987: 117). When *Orlando* is not simply omitted from critical discussion altogether, it tends to be read as a fictionalized biography of Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West. Matching the novel's characters and events with their counterparts in the real world becomes the sole objective of critical inquiry (Cervetti 1996: 171-72). What this type of response hides from view, however, are the very serious, non-biographical concerns motivating the text's apparently frivolous play. These issues have only come to be appreciated in the last few years, which have seen a marked increase in scholarly work on the novel (Burns 1994, Cervetti 1996, Hovey 1997, Knopp 1988, Lawrence 1992, Minow-Pinkney 1987, Parkes 1994, Schaffer 1994, Watkins 1998). Taking my cue from some of these writings, I argue that *Orlando*, far from being an insignificant *jeu d'esprit*, is in fact a radical text, whose subversion of deep-seated and taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered behaviour is suppressed by its reduction to an escapade or a mere tribute to Vita Sackville-West.

#### *Preliminaries*

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

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

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

It may be that the very categories of sex, of sexual identity, of gender are produced and maintained in the *effects* of this compulsory performance [of heterosexuality], effects which are disingenuously renamed as causes, origins, disingenuously lined up within a causal or expressive sequence that the heterosexual norm produces to legitimate itself as the origin of all sex (Butler 1991: 29).

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

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

The abject designates here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the 'unlivable' is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject (Butler 1993: 3).

For Butler, the domain of abjection – that which the subject must exclude in order to constitute itself – offers a vantage point from which the heteropatriarchal symbolic can be challenged: 'These excluded sites come to bound the "human" as its constitutive outside, and to haunt those boundaries as the persistent possibility of their disruption and rearticulation' (Butler 1993: 8). She makes a case for this threat of disruption to be

considered as a critical resource in the struggle to rearticulate the terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility. In her view, the persistence and proliferation of gender identities that fail to conform to norms of cultural intelligibility 'provide critical opportunities to expose the limits and regulatory aims of that domain of intelligibility and, hence, to open up within the very terms of that matrix of intelligibility rival and subversive matrices of gender disorder' (Butler 1990: 17). By denaturalizing reified notions of gender, the domain of abject, delegitimated bodies can contribute to dismantling the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. The loss of gender norms would result in the meaning of what counts as a valued and valuable body in the world being vastly expanded.

If, as Butler claims, the domain of abjected alterity is populated by 'those [identities] in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not "follow" from either sex or gender' (Butler 1990: 17), then Orlando, the sex-changing, cross-dressing and bisexual protagonist of Woolf's novel, has all the right credentials to be considered one of its inhabitants. As an 'incoherent' or 'discontinuous' gendered being who fails to conform to the norms of cultural intelligibility, s/he can be seen to subvert and displace those naturalized and reified notions of gender that support masculine hegemony and heterosexist power.

### *Gender*

A first glimpse of *Orlando's* revolutionary conception of gender is afforded by the novel's opening sentence, which begins: 'He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it [. . .]' (Woolf 1992: 13).<sup>1</sup> Calling the reader's attention immediately to gender, the narrator seems to protest too much, creating the very doubt that his words would deny.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, the interruptive qualification comically dismantles the male subject announced by the narrative's first word. In its muddling of the expectations of reading, the sly introduction is representative of the novel as a whole, which forces us

<sup>1</sup> All subsequent quotations from *Orlando* will be cited parenthetically by page number only.

<sup>2</sup> Throughout this article, I will designate the narrator as a male, though – as will become apparent later – there can be as much doubt of his sex as of Orlando's. Early on in the narrative, however, the narrator identifies himself as a male person (14), and for a long time this assertion goes unchallenged.

to reconsider virtually everything we thought we knew about gender and sexuality. The novel's protagonist, who lives through centuries, undergoes a sex change halfway through the narrative, and loves both men and women, is a transgressive figure who recognizes no borders or rules of time, gender or sexuality and fails to conform to any pre-established pattern.

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

the first duty of a biographer [. . .] is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. [. . .] Our simple duty is to state the facts (63).

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

The text marks subjectivity as multiple and shifting, and clearly implies that the biographer's attempt to find the 'single thread' (75) of personal identity is quite useless. In the words of Christy Burns, 'the notion of an essential self [is] comically reduced to a belief that Woolf's less than competent narrator struggles to defend, while the parody of that narrator's attempt results in the realization of the modern, constructive figuration of subjectivity' (1994: 346). Exasperated at his failure to pin Orlando down, the biographer exclaims that, 'when we write of a woman, everything is out of place – culminations and perorations; the accent never falls where it does with a man' (297-98). The assertion that the elusiveness of identity is typically feminine chimes in with Luce Irigaray's view of woman as being outside representation and always 'elsewhere' (1996: 317). To the dismay of the biographer, who wants everything to be predictable and in its place, woman refuses to be contained and tied down by his masculinist narrative paradigm.

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

As Mary Ann Doane points out, the representation of woman as veiled maps onto sexual difference the dialectic of truth and appearance. In the discourse of metaphysics, 'the function of the veil is to make truth profound, to ensure there is a depth that lurks behind the surface of things' (quoted in Lawrence 1992: 267 n.22). The theatrical unveiling of the female body in *Orlando* exposes as a metaphysical illusion the notion that gender identity is an intractable depth or inner substance. No bare, naked, essential truths are revealed in this passage; obscurity still functions. That the truth of femininity is anything but plain is evidenced by the pronoun slippage in the sentences announcing Orlando's transformation: 'we have no choice left but confess – *he* was a woman' (132; emphasis added); 'Orlando remained precisely as *he* had been. The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity' (133; emphasis added). Human subjectivity is not unified and coherent but shifting and fluid. Orlando is composed of a multiplicity of selves none of which can lay claim to being more authentic or essential than the rest. Indeed, the narrator makes it clear that labelling Orlando either 'he' or 'she' signals nothing more than compliance with the social compulsion to tie human beings down to one of two genders: 'in future we must, for convention's sake, say "her" for "his", and "she" for "he"' (133). What is revealed in the moment of unveiling, then, is the arbitrariness and instability of the binary system of gender differentiation.

The feminization process which Orlando undergoes after her sex change reinforces the case against an essentialist view of gender. Orlando's physical change does not of itself entail a change of gender identity: "The change of sex [. . .] did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (133). In fact, Orlando remains uninterested in her sex until she decides to sail from Turkey to England and so must dress as a 'lady'. She has been living with the gypsies and wearing Turkish trousers, and gypsy women, 'except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men' (147). The narrator comments that 'It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought' (147). Orlando finds herself abruptly faced with the task of coming to terms with her new sex. Her feminine clothing now pressurizes her to conform to social expectations of gendered behaviour, and slowly but surely she becomes feminized.

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

maternal protectiveness incited by the odd vision of Shelmerdine as a 'boy [. . .] sucking peppermints' during his passionate struggle against the waves (241).

Orlando's efforts to achieve 'normal' gender status involve her in what, in the literature on transsexualism, is generally referred to as 'passing'. It is often argued that, in the pursuit of passing, transsexuals capitulate to the traditional sex/gender system that forbids transgressive violations. In their attempt to fade into the 'normal' population as a member of either gender, transsexuals can be seen to sustain the 'natural' attitude with respect to gender, which is made up of the assumptions that there are only two genders, that one's gender is invariant and permanent, that genitals are essential signs of gender, that there are no exceptions, and that gender dichotomy and gender membership are 'natural'. At the same time, however, transsexuals reveal the ways in which such a natural attitude is socially and culturally achieved. As Marjorie Garber points out, "The phenomenon of *transsexualism* is both a confirmation of the constructedness of gender and a secondary recourse to essentialism – or, to put it a slightly different way, transsexualism demonstrates that essentialism *is* cultural construction" (1993: 109).

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

In the transsexual as text we may find the potential to map the refigured body onto conventional gender discourse and thereby disrupt it, to take advantage of the dissonances created by such a juxtaposition to fragment and reconstitute the elements of gender in new and unexpected geometries (1991: 296).

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

hard at being men or women, at achieving culturally recognized identities, and in that sense we are all transsexuals.

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

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

Orlando's femininity is created, brought into being, through performance: by putting on the clothes of a woman and acting like one, Orlando effectively *becomes* a woman. The narrator goes on in the same vein: 'there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking' (180). Rather than being a mere expression of an essential gender identity, clothes actively create the identity they are purported to reflect. Or, to quote Butler, 'There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results' (1990: 25).

Though his own account of Orlando's cross-dressing adventures and transformation after her sex change provides strong support for the performative model of gender, in the next paragraph the narrator rejects the idea that clothes wear us, and professes a preference for a different (set of) belief(s):

That is the view of some philosophers and wise ones, but on the whole, we incline to another. The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex. And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather more openly than usual – openness indeed was the soul of her nature – something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above (181).

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

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

The suggestion that in each individual the sexes 'intermix' invokes an ancient tradition of androgyny, going back to Plato, which idealizes the psychological or spiritual union of gendered opposites. In this tradition, androgyny often comes to mean a reconciliation of neatly complementary characteristics that are stereotypically masculine and feminine; an idealized synthesis of heteropatriarchal gender constructs that leaves existing power relations basically unchanged. However, androgyny can also be seen as a mode of resistance to established sexual norms and as a positive and liberating concept. Woolf has been associated with both positions. In *A Literature of Their Own*, Elaine Showalter famously accuses Woolf of being a 'bad mother' for betraying feminism by her 'flight' into androgyny and away from the field of political contestation (1977: 264). Makiko Minow-Pinkney, in contrast, reads Orlando's androgyny as a purposeful and subversive blurring of the socially constructed boundaries between genders: 'Androgyny in *Orlando* is not a resolution of

oppositions, but the throwing into a metonymic confusion of genders' (1987: 122). According to Minow-Pinkney, androgyny in Woolf does not reinscribe conventional ideas about sex and gender but functions as a disruptive, chaotic force that exposes the artificiality of gender dichotomies and sexual dimorphism.

Androgyny is indeed presented in *Orlando* as a dynamic and fluctuating quality of identity that liberates the self from any supposed determinism of the body. During the process of her transformation into a woman, Orlando at one point finds herself 'censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither' (152). 'And indeed', the narrator goes on, 'for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirling state of mind to be in' (152). Identity, then, is far less implicated in physical norms than is commonly believed to be the case. The narrator also ends his long aside on the status of clothes with an acknowledgement of the elusive and indeterminate character of Orlando's gender identity: 'Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided' (182). The many instances of cross-dressing which the narrator records can be seen as a literal realization of the vacillation between sexes said constantly to take place in all people. In the end, even without disguise, Shelmerdine recognizes a man in Orlando, and Orlando a woman in Shelmerdine (240, 246).

Through the concept of androgyny, the text opens up a space of heterogeneity within unitary being. Gender is shown to be fluid and multiple, irreducible to binary oppositions, which are exposed as unduly regulatory and exclusionary. Butler confirms that the subject, as it is constituted in contemporary hegemonic discourses, 'produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity, the crossings of identifications of which it is itself composed' (1993: 115). With Woolf, she celebrates the *incoherence* of identity, envisaging

an economy of difference [...] in which the matrices, the crossroads at which various identifications are formed and displaced, force a reworking of that logic of non-contradiction by which one identification is always and only purchased at the expense of another (1993: 118).

### *Sexuality*

Another major area of subversion in *Orlando*, besides the dissolution of gender dichotomies, is the contestation of the regime of compulsory

heterosexuality. The novel recounts how heterosexuality gets established as one of the norms that qualify a body for life within the domain of cultural intelligibility, only to contest this naturalization and to open up a space for alternative configurations of sexuality. Indeed, *Orlando* has been read as a kind of lesbian-feminist manifesto by critics such as Sherron Knopp and Elizabeth Meese. The text not only disrupts gender boundaries but also shakes the foundations of the entire edifice of heteronormativity.

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

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

Orlando's heterosexual commitment to Shelmerdine allows her to elude moral surveillance of her lesbian poetry:

Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that'll do.  
And so the spirit passed on (253).

Allusions to homosexuality are not always so veiled, though. Earlier on in the narrative, cross-dressing is used to introduce homosexual possibilities. The narrator explicitly states that Orlando, changing 'frequently from one set of clothes to another' and living both sexes, 'reaped a two-fold harvest [. . .]; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied' (211). Cross-dressing enables Orlando to enjoy 'the love of both sexes equally' (211). By the time we get this declaration, lesbianism has already been made somewhat palatable in the text by the (then) fantastic device of Orlando's sex change. Even after Orlando has become a woman, it remains women that she loves, 'through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention' (154). Despite her change of sex, Orlando's former love for Sasha has not changed. The Russian princess haunts the memory of Orlando the woman as powerfully and pervasively as she dominated the passions of Orlando the man; indeed, 'if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man' (154). Through the device of Orlando's sex change, the novel "'exculpates" the then shocking issue of lesbianism', achieving a 'cunning naturalization' of it (Minow-Pinkney 1987: 134).

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

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

own sex and hold each other in the greatest aversion', what can we suppose that women do when they seek out each other's society?

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

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

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

Besides validating homosexual desire and denouncing its silencing, this passage also calls into question the stability of the narrator's sex. Like Orlando, the narrator, who up until then has always seemed male, is revealed here to be 'a figure of perpetual oscillation' (Parkes 1994: 453). Indeed, it is extremely difficult to pin the narrator down to one particular sex in this passage. Having access to the women's quarters, he first appears to be a female observer, but then shifts to another realm where the voice is implicitly detached from the women ('they' as opposed to 'we'), yet not necessarily associated with the man whose step is heard on the stair. The narrator assumes an ironic distance from Mr S.W. and his appeal to the supposedly 'objective' authority of common knowledge and the quasi-scientific 'proof' of Mr T.R. A few lines later he claims sexual

neutrality for himself, but this may be a male pose designed to give the air of impartial authority – the very strategy adopted by Mr S.W., in fact. It is indeed rather ironic to find the narrator dissociating himself from ‘gentlemen’ who are ‘very fond’ of proving things when, throughout the novel, the narrator’s own anxieties betray an immense concern for ‘facts’ and ‘truth’. The indeterminacy of the narrator’s gender – which modulates from male to female to neutral in the space of just a few sentences – contributes to the text’s overall project of dissolving reified gender categories.

*Orlando*’s pushing at the boundaries of what it is possible to think in the areas of gender and sexuality may be understood as an attempt to prevent the closure of the gender system. By making gender trouble, the text hopes to effect a rearticulation of the terms of symbolic legitimacy and intelligibility which would result in gender configurations being proliferated outside the restricting frames of masculinist domination and compulsory heterosexuality. Without meaning to downplay *Orlando*’s humorous quality or to diminish the importance of Vita Sackville-West in Woolf’s life and writing, we can reaffirm in conclusion that by reducing this novel to biography or gratuitous play, we risk rendering these subversive motives invisible and preventing them from influencing and altering other texts and discourses.

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