

BLADES, SONYA ELISA., M.A. *The Feminine Erotic*. (2009)  
Directed by Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly and Dr. Anthony Cuda. 30 pp.

For this paper I propose an experimental application of Hélène Cixous's theory of *écriture féminine* to the erotic works of Anaïs Nin, particularly the erotic short stories written in the 1940s that are now found in her books *Little Birds* and *Delta of Venus*. I also refer to statements Nin made in her diaries concerning her conflicting emotions about creating her own style of writing that encompasses feminine writing. I believe Anaïs Nin illustrates Cixous's expression of a form of feminine writing and began the notion of *écriture féminine* before Cixous coined the term.

My thesis counters the various critics who criticize Nin for supposedly copying the masculine pornographic descriptions of sexual encounters. In rebuttal, I argue that through her poetic portrayal of intimacy and sexual experience, through her diction, imagery, characterization, sentence structure, and plot sequences, Anaïs Nin uses a feminine form of writing in order to subvert the male depiction of the erotic experience that has reinforced the objectification, domination, and oppression of women's sexuality.

BLADES, SONYA ELISA., M.A. Gen(d)re Bending: Ambiguity and Sexual Androgyny in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. (2009)  
Directed by Dr. Hephzibah Roskelly and Dr. Anthony Cuda. 59 pp.

The purpose of this paper is to argue that Virginia Woolf's main concern in *Orlando* is to show the problematic 'nature' of socially constructed norms. Woolf problematizes cultural norms by playing with established forms of sexual identity, genre, and the Romantic notion of the 'self' in order to highlight a kind of necessary multiplicity or "androgyny" to blur the boundaries of socially constructed roles. Ambiguity offers Woolf the means to express her doubts of the common acknowledgment of a fixed universal and essential state of being, therefore showing how Woolf's works may be viewed as feminist.

Though it has not been taken seriously by most Woolf scholars nor feminist theorists and has been described as mere escapism by Woolf herself, I use *Orlando* to show how Woolf expresses her philosophy of ambiguity, including both ambiguity of sex as "androgyny" and ambiguity of genre in order to show her reader the complicatedness of what is generally taken for granted as natural or normal. I also reference Woolf's pivotal essay *A Room of One's Own*, as well as many of her journal entries and letters to show how Woolf's view of *Orlando* and its importance to her as a writer changes during the process of its creation.

THE FEMININE EROTIC  
and  
GEN(D)RE BENDING: AMBIGUITY AND SEXUAL ANDROGYNY IN VIRGINIA  
WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*

by  
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## THE FEMININE EROTIC

When I write, I feel I am more honest than when a man generalizes....  
Man's language is that displacement from the personal to the impersonal,  
but this is another form of self-deception. The self in them is disguised, it  
is not absent as they believe.

-Anaïs Nin, 1934

Forty years before the French feminist movement, Anaïs Nin wrote in her diary of her conflicted feelings regarding sexual difference. She knew she must live in harmony with men in the patriarchal society she was subjected to, yet she could not help but feel a distinguishably feminine creative force within herself. Despite maintaining primarily male friendships and mentors, Nin struggled to assert her own rhythm and writing style, which she felt could not, unfortunately, be understood by her comrades. She lamented this feeling of isolation, wishing she could find someone with whom she could share her 'world.' She writes in her diary about her struggle: "Conflict between my feminine self who wants to live in a man-ruled world, to live in harmony with men, and the creator in me capable of creating a world of my own and a rhythm of my own which I can't find anyone to share" (*Diary* 2.62).

Ill-fatedly, Anaïs Nin died in 1977 from ovarian cancer, but if she had lived only a little longer, she might have found a comrade in France who had just two years before Nin's death published some of what is now considered part of the most influential writings on sexual difference. Hélène Cixous, a French feminist

poet/philosopher/essayist, began writing in the 1970's on the relationship between sexuality and language, believing our sexuality is directly tied to how we communicate in society. The core 'tenets' (Cixous would never use the term) appear in her essays entitled "The Laugh of the Medusa," "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays," and "Castration or Decapitation?" Cixous denounces the strict disciplinarian nature of most theory, yet she creates an 'idea' of l'écriture féminine – writing that is said to be feminine. I prefer the use of 'idea' instead of the specific terminology of 'theory' when referring to Cixous' work because she keeps her ideas abstract enough to lend itself to various interpretations, and I will summarize my own interpretation of Cixous' body of work. Cixous avoids giving a solid definition, but she does give characteristics that may be attributed to a socially-constructed feminine writing.

Although Anaïs Nin claims she exemplifies a form of feminine writing in her erotica, many critics argue that Nin's descriptions of the erotic experience are merely a copy of the masculine pornographic conventions that objectify and oppress women through use of crude language and vulgar experiences. In contrast to these critics, I propose to analyze Anaïs Nin as writer of the feminine by applying Cixous's features of écriture féminine to Nin's erotic works, particularly the erotic short stories written in the 1940s that are now found in her books *Little Birds* and *Delta of Venus*. I believe Anaïs Nin illustrates Cixous's expression of feminine writing and began the notion of écriture féminine before Cixous coined the term. I argue through her poetic portrayal of intimacy and sexual experience, through her diction, imagery, characterization, sentence structure,

and plot sequences, Anaïs Nin subverts rather than copies the male depiction of the erotic experience that has reinforced the objectification, domination, and oppression of women's sexuality. Anaïs Nin prefigures Cixous's 'theory' of *écriture féminine* to rewrite the erotic experience not only from a woman's experience and point-of-view, but in the writing style of 'woman.'

In order to find links between Nin's erotic short stories and Cixous's feminine writing, I must first venture a kind of definition and understanding of *écriture féminine*. The reason for 'a kind of' definition is because Cixous feels a feminine practice is impossible to define, but I feel it is necessary to come up with an understanding and show how I interpret Cixous 'theory' because there have been many varying interpretations of *écriture féminine*. For Cixous, to define *écriture féminine* - to impose theory and coding - would be to reduce it to phallogentrism since "[*écriture féminine*] will be conceived of only by subjects who are breakers of automatism, by peripheral figures that no authority can ever subjugate" ("Laugh of the Medusa" 883). Understanding that we live in a patriarchal society, Cixous allows for a pseudo-definition in her 1981 essay "Castration or Decapitation?" She describes a feminine textual body as a 'female libidinal economy,' endless with no closure and no origin, and no masculine question of 'where do I come from?' because feminine writing starts on all sides at once. Instead, a feminine writing would ask the question of giving: 'What does this writing give? How does it give?' ("Castration" 53). This question of giving blends the roles of both reader and writer as a shared moment, giving authority to both since the writer gains authority through writing



while also considering the impact of his or her voice on the reader.

Considering the idea of a shared moment of authority and voice, one important characteristic of *écriture féminine* is in fact a privilege of voice. Cixous argues that women have been denied their bodies, taught to ignore them through false sexual modesty and made to feel that their own voices are incomprehensible as woman's voice because it "almost always falls on the deaf, masculine ear, which can only hear language that speaks in the masculine" ("Sorties" 92). Women engage in lyricism and singing of voice and must break the silence to leave the margin man has subjected her to, therefore giving her a sense of authority in her speaking. She is not easily understood by the masculine because her discourse is never simple or linear or 'objectivized,' universalized. She involves her story in history, therefore it is never ending and never follows a simple pattern. Similar to another French feminist known for her work concerning sexual difference, Luce Irigaray, Cixous states woman, being without 'end,' is also without principal 'parts.' Her libido is cosmic, overflowing, and has no fear of 'going too far' as, in the Freudian sense, she has no fear of castration. As Irigaray would clarify in "This Sex Which Is Not One," the term placed on the idea of 'woman' resists 'adequate' definition, a patriarchal definition, because patriarchy will never understand her. According to Irigaray, our Western culture - an obviously patriarchal one - understands the concrete, the countable, the unit; however, "[woman] is neither one nor two" (Irigaray 26). Just as Cixous claims a cosmic, overflowing libido, Irigaray adds to the discussion "woman has sex organs more or less everywhere. She finds pleasure almost anywhere"

(28). Masculine language may focus on the penis, but feminine writing has an endless feminine libidinal economy.

Irigaray further helps in an understanding of a feminine writing, - or 'womanspeak,' as she would prefer - as she describes her views of writing the feminine. She understands the contradictions found in woman's writing, "inaudible for whoever listens to them with ready-made grids" (29). She argues "one would have to listen with another ear, as if hearing an 'other meaning' always in the process of wearing itself, of embracing itself with words, but also of getting rid of words in order not to become fixed, congealed in them" (29). Irigaray enhances the argument of Cixous's feminine writing in "The Power of Discourse" as she describes the characteristics of feminine writing in almost the same words as Cixous: "its 'style' resists and explodes every firmly established form, figure, idea or concept.... its 'style' cannot be upheld as a thesis, cannot be the object of a position" (79). Like Cixous, Irigaray also refutes a linear way of writing, stating it would no longer be possible if one were to employ woman's writing. Both Cixous and Irigaray portray the notion of nonlinear writing in their own works as each of their collections of essays blend together as one large work through common themes. In particular, reading one of Cixous's essays is basically like reading all of them with only a few minor elaborations in later works.

Unlike masculine writing which needs to know 'how it runs' in order to 'make it run' through a forced domination and manipulation, a writer employing *écriture féminine* feels free to play with sentences and structure while running away with syntax. She does

away with personal pronouns and possessives for she is “in a pervasive relationship of desire with every being” (“Sorties” 96). The writer of *écriture féminine* refuses to accept the phallogcentralized body, and it is her duty to relieve man of the phallus and to “return him to an erogenous field and libido that isn’t stupidly organized round that monument, but appears shifting, diffused, taking on all the others of oneself” (“Castration” 51). Her writing is about multiplicity, and she “scrambles spatial order, disorienting it,” moving things and values around, “emptying structures” and turning what is “proper upside down” (“Sorties” 96). In disrupting the patriarchal order she fights the urge to judge, diagnose, digest, and name – all laws of masculine writing. Cixous calls her feminine text “the text of the unforeseeable” (“Castration” 53) due to its detachment from the typical sequences found in masculine texts. It represents a metaphorical wandering, an excess that chances the incalculable and unknowable, making it appear disturbing and unpredictable to the masculine mind.

Cixous’s main purpose for enacting *écriture féminine* is to promote societal change, to break down the patriarchy’s hold on women’s bodies. For Cixous, the only way we can escape this control is to break the silence and write through our bodies, creating our own language and discourse. Women must “invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes...” (“Laugh of the Medusa” 886). Cixous fosters her metaphor in “Sorties”:

Voice: unfastening, fracas. Fire! She shoots, she shoots away. Break.  
From their bodies where they have been buried, shut up and at the same  
time forbidden to take pleasure. Women have almost everything to write

about femininity: about their sexuality, that is to say, about the infinite and mobile complexity of their becoming erotic, about the lightning ignitions of such a minuscule-vast region of their body.... Woman's body with a thousand and one fiery hearths, when – shattering censorship and yokes – she lets it articulate the proliferation of meanings that runs through it in every direction (94).

When woman writes of her libidinal economy, she seizes the moment to take control because of the enormity and variation of her libidinal drive; her imaginary is “inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: [her] stream of phantasms is incredible” (“Laugh” 876). Cixous compares *écriture féminine* to a form of masturbatory writing, a “world of searching, the elaboration of a knowledge, on the basis of a systematic experimentation with the bodily functions, a passionate and precise interrogation of her erotogeneity (“Laugh” 876). She also uses the metaphor of women in flight so that women may leap forward in search of themselves and of their feminine sexual pleasure. Women must speak/write and affirm their difference. She must learn to speak of her pleasure, un-censoring her sexuality and “[tearing] her out of the superegoed, over-Mosesed structure where the same position of guilt is always reserved for her” (“Sorties” 97). She must explore her powers, her potency, and her strength. Only when women take up the pen and force their discourse into society's conversation can they break the shackles and free their never-ending voice/bodies: “Write yourself: your body must make itself heard. Then the huge resources of the unconscious will burst out. Finally the inexhaustible feminine Imaginary is going to be deployed. Without gold or black dollars, our naphtha will spread values over the world, unquoted values that will change the rules

of the old game (“Sorties” 97).

As opposed to the feminine libidinal economy, Cixous describes masculine sexuality and writing through notions of patriarchy such as obsession with power, control, and domination. In addition, it focuses on virility, authority, money, and his own individual pleasure, “all of which reinforce his phallogentric narcissism” (“Sorties” 87). He enjoys his logic and his so-called truths. Typically, masculine writing either obscures women or reproduces the classic representations of women as sensitive, intuitive, and dreamy (“Laugh” 878), grossly exaggerating all the signs of sexual opposition, *not* sexual difference. Woman’s body has been made the cause and location of inhibitions, with phallogentrism stealing her body and libidinal economy/drives. The masculine economy contains and takes away while the feminine never holds back and is always giving. It scorns hate – scorns the phallogentric concept of one master/one slave. Cixous views masculine writing as a repressive censorship of philosophical nomination/conceptualization and urges the reader not to get trapped by names (“Castration” 52).

Cixous does not blame men as essentially patriarchal because patriarchy is beyond men as a social construction, and men suffer under the system as well because a society built upon dualistic power relations creates the idea that men must be dominant and competitive despite the real desires of each man as an individual. Cixous does admit that men have the ability to appropriate feminine writing, although they rarely do, which escapes the biology trap that often places men and women in an essentialized role while

discrediting writing as a social construction. Cixous specifies that writings by women are not always feminine, and writings by men sometimes exhibit *écriture féminine*. Because of society, Cixous reasons, men have a difficult time breaking from law, moderation, and phallic authority due to the fact that “masculine profit is almost always mixed up with a success that is socially defined” (Sorties 87). Our Western culture puts value on the power and wealth of our men. On the other hand, women have the ability to transgress the power-play enforced on man, and they also have the advantage of what Cixous calls a ‘bisexuality.’ Due to her position in society, woman contains within herself the presence of both sexes. This bisexuality allows her to switch roles in accordance with her needs, also allowing her to understand both sides of the fence when it comes to writing. Although she may write either as man or woman, she must push past the urge to conform to a standard phallogocentrism. She must bring down the obsession with the phallus:

Though masculine sexuality gravitates around the penis, engendering that centralized body (in political anatomy) under the dictatorship of its parts, woman does not bring about the same regionalization which serves the couple head/genitals and which is inscribed only within boundaries. Her libido is cosmic, just as her unconscious is worldwide. Her writing can only keep going, without ever inscribing or discerning contours, daring to make these vertiginous crossings of the other(s) ephemeral and passionate sojourns in him, her, them, whom she inhabits long enough to look at from the point closest to their unconscious from the movement they awaken, to love them at the point closest to their drives (“Laugh” 889).

When supporting Anaïs Nin’s appropriation of *écriture féminine*, and therefore disputing critics who argue that Nin supported masculine *pornographic* conventions, one must make a distinction between ‘erotica’ and ‘pornography.’ While many would say

there is no definite difference between the two – erotica is often referred to as ‘soft’ porn that targets a female audience – Gloria Steinem disagrees in her pivotal essay entitled “Erotica and Pornography: A Clear and Present Difference.” Steinem distinguishes the roots of the opposing terms, explaining how ‘erotica,’ from the root ‘eros,’ means “passionate love.” This explanation is significant for two reasons: one, it gives the feeling of positive choice – of “free will, the yearning for a particular person” (37); secondly, the definition of erotica leaves open the question of gender. From the definition, one can assume that the subjects participating in a sexual act in erotica can fit into any number of combinations including heterosexual, homosexual, and self-love. ‘Pornography,’ on the other hand, comes from the root ‘porno,’ meaning ‘prostitution’ or ‘female captives,’ thus letting us know the subject is not mutual love, but domination and violence against women. Not only is the denotation negative, but it also supplies a gendered subject to be dominated: a female.

In “Pornography and Violence: What Does the New Research Say?,” Diana Russell expounds on the differences between erotica and pornography. She describes pornography as “explicit representations of sexual behavior, verbal or pictorial, that have as a distinguishing characteristic the degrading or demeaning portrayal of human beings, especially women” (218). Although the idea is as negative as Steinem’s depiction, she does include the possibility of the degradation of men. In contrast, ‘erotica’ is “not degrading or demeaning women, men, or children” and it “often tends to be more subtle and/or artistic than is usual for sexually explicit materials” (219). Russell’s description

provides more information concerning the style and structure of erotica, as well as content, whether a movie or in written literature.

If pornography is comparable to a masculine sexual writing, then we can assume that masculine sexual writing/pornographic convention supports the patriarchal, phallogentric subjugation of women as it portrays dominance, the use of the ‘other’s’ body, humiliation, and violence. Like Cixous’s description of masculine writing, pornography uses the sexual experience to display power and control, using sex as a weapon. Therefore, if Anaïs Nin appropriates a feminine writing, her writing would defy pornographic convention and focus more on shared pleasure, sensuality, and mutual respect in addition to the other characteristics of *écriture féminine* described earlier. Furthermore, Nin would have to play with and rework sexual imagery through, for example, role-reversal – depicting men as passive and objectified – in order to break down the generic definitions associated with gendered sexuality. While this may repeat the objectification of pornography, one could view this role reversal as a mimetic device that shows the complication of simplified gender identification, which could in turn challenge previous depictions of woman as object.

Before providing examples of Anaïs Nin’s feminine writing, I would like to contrast her writing to that of her mentor and ‘friend,’ Henry Miller. I use the term ‘friend’ loosely because although they shared a sexual and artistic relationship, Nin and Miller’s relationship became complicated as Nin began to write in her own style. Furthermore, Miller was often cruel to Nin, using her for her money, stealing her ideas



for his own works, and scornfully mocking her poetry in parodic episodes in his own stories. Lynette Felber argues in “Mentors, Proteges, and Lovers” that Nin's relationship with Miller created a kind of productive antagonism as Nin began to rebel against her lover's conception of art while finding her own identity as a writer, and “this configuration is likely to produce tension, infusing both the mutual professional interest and the romance” (167). Felber argues that since Miller was twelve years Nin's senior, as well as being more experienced and confident in his writing ability, the relationship between the two began as a classic mentorship; however, Nin quickly assumed the role of patron, “thus it was Nin who offered Miller protection and a kind of sponsorship, the usual function of the mentor rather than the protege” (170). Perhaps Miller saw a talent in Nin that differed positively from his own style because shortly after Nin showed Miller her written description of his wife June, “Miller 'stole' her observations to use in his own depictions of his wife in *Tropic of Capricorn*” (Felber 177). When Nin discovered Miller's deception, she wrote in her diary:

I discovered that I had given away to Henry all my insights into June, and that he is using them. He has taken all my sketches for her portrait. I feel empty-handed, and he knows it, because he writes me that he 'feels like a crook.' And what have I left to work with? He is deepening his portrait with all the truths I have given him. What was left for me to do? (1.128).

Nin answers her own question using ideas similar to Cixous's feminine écriture. Her answer is “To go where Henry cannot go, into the Myth, into June's dreams, fantasies, into the poetry of June. To write as a woman, and as a woman only” (1.128). Miller may

have taken the outward 'truths' of Nin's depiction, but Nin shows that he cannot understand, and therefore cannot use, the art of woman's writing to show June's *inner* being.

Unlike Nin, the works of Henry Miller illustrate the masculine pornographic convention, particularly his core work *Tropic of Cancer*. In his slightly autobiographical/fictional travelogue, Miller only refers to women sexually, and usually with misogynistic overtones. He continuously calls the women throughout the book 'cunts,' 'bitches,' and 'whores' while describing vulgar, disgusting, and humiliating sex-acts. In addition, Miller describes women as giant sex organs (or 'pussies' or 'twats' as he would prefer), particularly when referring to the prostitutes who repeatedly appear throughout the novel. The terminology Miller uses conveys an image of women as objects, focusing on the lowliest slang terms imaginable for the female body. An example worthy of repulsion:

O Tania, where now is that warm cunt of yours, those fat, heavy garters, those soft, bulging thighs? There is a bone in prick six inches long. I will ream out every wrinkle in your cunt, Tania, big with seed. I will send you home to your Sylvester with an ache in your belly and your womb turned inside out. Your Sylvester! Yes, he knows how to build a fire, but I know how to inflame a cunt. I shoot hot bolts into you, Tania, I make your ovaries incandescent. Your Sylvester is a little jealous now? He feels something, does he? He feels the remnants of my big prick. I have set the shores a little wider....After me you can take on stallions, bulls, rams, drakes, St. Bernards. You can stuff toads, bats, lizards up your rectum. You can shit arpeggios if you like.... I am fucking you, Tania, so that you'll stay fucked... (5-6).

Not only are the words base and the images almost clinical in description, Miller also

demonstrates the 'divide and conquer' mentality of both women and the men with whom he competes. He insists that once he has 'had' the female she will forever be marked by his 'enormous member,' an example of pornographic crudity, the oppression of women, and the penis-obsessed/phallogocentric notions of masculine language.

Lynette Felber observes the distinctions between Miller's and Nin's sexual language, advocating a difference in both point of view and style. She asserts the explicitness of Nin's writing; however, Felber claims that Nin utilizes sensual and extravagant surrealist images, while Miller uses an absurdist language that can be *too* real with a Rabelaisian vulgarity as it "depicts women from a perspective of limited 'insight' that can only be called masculinist, in the most pejorative sense of the word" (174).

Anaïs Nin was not blind to the differences between her own writing and that of Henry Miller. Nin writes in her diary "I get so tired of his obscenities, of his world of 'shit, cunt, prick, bastard, crotch, bitch'" (1.55). Nin adds, "At moments he can say the most delicate and profound things. But this gentleness is treacherous because when he sits down to write, he denies this; he does not write with love but with anger, he writes to attack, to ridicule, to destroy. He is always against something. Anger incites him; fuels him" (1.55). She stresses her difference from Miller: "Anger poisons me" (1.55). She will later assert in her diary that "the key to Henry's work is contained in the word burlesque. What he writes is a burlesque of sex, a burlesque of ideas...a burlesque of life" (2.62). Nin concludes, "What I feel is too deep and too human for that" (2.62). When first writing her erotic short fiction, Nin realized she and other writers of erotic literature had

only one model – the writing of men (*DV* xii). Like Cixous, Nin felt women must affirm their differences in writing, championing the feminine over a form of androgyny (Felber, 168). In her essay Felber, reasons that Nin’s intention was to develop a language of her own, one that would surpass the style of her own mentors, including Miller, who could never understand her way of writing. She argues that Nin purposefully chose to cultivate a ‘feminine’ identity, reaching for her own autonomy (Felber 177). Like Cixous, Anaïs Nin claims that her reason for appropriating a distinctively feminine writing is to promote change, or autonomy, to help women free themselves – to soar through the air, as Cixous would later describe it.

Anaïs Nin and Helen Cixous share more than a love of poetic, feminine writing. They both were unsure of their writing abilities, worrying how others would perceive their works. Cixous feared her own strengths and drives, fearing her own desire to write her own way. She writes: “You are mad! What’s the meaning of these waves, these floods, these outbursts?” (“Laugh” 876). By the time Cixous wrote “The Laugh of the Medusa,” she understood how women are made to believe that they are well adjusted only if they have ‘divine composure.’ Nin felt the same pressure from society, enough so that she buried her own work, hiding the erotic stories she had written for money during her days of ‘literary prostitution.’ Years later Anaïs Nin would look back at those stories, rereading them only to find that her own voice had not been completely suppressed: “In numerous passages I was intuitively using a woman’s language, seeing sexual experience from a woman’s point of view” (*Delta of Venus* xvi).

Secondly, both women assign themselves to a study of the unconscious, perhaps due to similar childhood situations. They both were raised in culturally mixed households: Cixous's mother had Austro-German ancestry, and her father had French-colonial and Jewish origins; Nin's mother was French-Danish, and her father, Cuban. Cixous felt she did not belong, straddling the borders of two very different worlds (Bray 2). Although Nin did not feel exclusion, she did move between France and America several times during her life, making it difficult to adjust to any one concept of cultural identity. In addition, like Cixous, Nin lost her father at a young age; however, unlike Cixous, it was not from death. Nin's father left her and her mother when Nin was a child, fostering in her a sense of loss and betrayal. Shortly after referring to her father's coldness in her diary, Nin writes, "I always thought that one had to *deserve* love, I worked so hard to merit it" (1.176). Cixous and Nin would continue to carry this emotional baggage throughout their lives, trying to compensate for this first loss through an understanding of writing.

Through this fascination with the unconscious and hidden drives, Anaïs Nin created her own ideas pertaining to a feminine writing. Similar to Cixous's *écriture féminine*, Nin creates works connecting the story and the dream – "the flow and absence of rational pattern" (Hoy 65). Nin wrote in her diaries for over thirty years trying to understand her own unconscious, and she developed her works around these diary entries with the goal of destroying the barriers between the conscious and unconscious, "the elimination of the artificial divisions of time into past, present and future, so that

experience occurred in some inner space where everything was simultaneously accessible to the conscious mind,” creating a world “without end – a cosmic vision” (Hoy 65).

Nin’s unconscious parallels Cixous’ *écriture féminine* in that both are timeless, flowing, and ‘cosmic,’ Nin's diaries the greatest example of this timeless endlessness as she draws on stories and references from various moments in her life.

Furthermore, Nin may be understood as Cixous’s comrade in controversy. Critics of both Cixous and Nin maintain they promote essentialism due to their distinctions between masculine and feminine, as though these characteristics are innately part of one’s physical sex. Cixous defends herself by saying that anatomical sex or essence is not what determines who we are. On the contrary, Cixous argues that history and culture all play a part in who we have become. Therefore, the stress on sexual difference is “an effect of representation and, as such, capable of being subverted and remade” (Bray 21). The fact that masculine and feminine writings are not tied to biologically sexed bodies is apparent because men can write *écriture féminine*, and vice versa. Cixous actually uses feminine writing as a metaphor for expanding discourse to include different ways of writing or speaking in a less totalitarian way than what is usually accepted as a standard (and often academic) form of communication. Abigail Bray furthers Cixous’s argument stating “we must develop autonomous definitions of woman and femininity for it is only then that the phallogocentric dialectic of man/not-man, self/other can be challenged” (21), showing how an assertion of sexual difference promotes societal change. Nin parallels Cixous in “*Eroticism in Women*,” adding that we must “peel off the false selves, the programmed

selves, the selves created by our families, our culture, our religions” (4). By doing so, people can undermine the sexuality centered around control and power that has been built by patriarchy, but the only way it can be accomplished is for men to find the femininity in themselves and for women to accept the masculinity in themselves – a form of Cixousian bisexuality. Like Nin, Cixous acknowledges the ineffectiveness of gender neutrality because neutrality is artistically limiting and falls prey to both an exclusionary majority and divisions in difference. In opposition to gender neutrality, Cixous lauds bisexuality beyond Irigaray's survivalism and inevitable social construction: bisexuality becomes the solution for a multiplicity of desire (“Sorties” 84-85).

In addition to the controversy surrounding issues of essentialism, Anaïs Nin and Hélène Cixous have both been accused of unrealistic, petty bourgeois writing that takes no political responsibility. For example, in an article in *The New Yorker* entitled “Sex, Lies, and thirty-Five Thousand Pages,” Claudia Pierpont criticizes Nin as both a pseudo-artist and a self-made character (rather than a 'real' human being), including her ‘immoral’ lifestyle as a sex-addicted polygamist, arguing that Nin was a narcissistic liar. Pierpont suggests that when Nin found Surrealism in Paris, the “ ‘modern spirit’ became an excuse for unintelligible writing, as her father’s desertion was the excuse for her games of betrayal” (77). She mentions that Nin’s friends would read her works and beg her to give them more concrete, pictorial writing (77). The article ends in judgment of Nin’s dishonesty about her abortion. Pierpont references Nin's short story entitled “Birth,” which Pierpont implies is a distortion and a lie concerning Nin's experience of pregnancy.

While the story “Birth” describes a miscarriage, Pierpont asserts that Nin's diary explicitly tells of Nin's desire to rid herself of her problematic pregnancy through abortion while Nin purposefully portrays herself as a martyr to her art (89). Pierpont declares, “This is a horrifying scene, if not in the way that Nin intended, and is perhaps, even now, a dangerous one” (90). Pierpont is referring to the idea that Nin's dismissal of her abortion could have had serious political implications. While Pierpont valorizes women who are open to the public about having an abortion, she states of Nin's case: “In this instance, rewriting her history was probably Nin's best deed for the feminist cause, and her most important lie” (90) because of what Pierpont views as a self-inverted and self-important flaw on the part of Nin. For Pierpont, Nin's embellishments and “obscene” lifestyle come together to create a woman who deserved nothing but pity and who had nothing positive to offer society.

In *Sexual/Textual Politics*, Toril Moi criticizes Cixous, arguing that there is a libertarian individualism running through her work that fails to take into account the complex political realities women face. She describes an incident when Cixous wore an ermine coat to one of her lectures. Moi writes, “Ermine as emancipation: it is odd that the women of the Third World have been so ludicrously slow to take up Cixous's sartorial strategy” (126). Viewing Cixous's essays as overly utopian, Moi feels Cixous's wearing an ermine coat shows her lack of political consciousness, a self-interested aestheticism, an indulgent sensuality, and a failure to provide useful strategies for forming feminist identities. However, like Nin, Cixous blatantly declares her ambivalence toward politics



and never declared herself a feminist. In an interview in 1976, Cixous goes so far as to suggest a link between politics and patriarchy when she states that masculine structures have “a tendency to edification, to centralization (which inserts itself within a political reality under the guise of state, of leader, of nation), which goes back to the father, back to the mind, back to government...” (“Rethinking Differences” 74). Like Nin, Cixous would describe some forms of feminism as patriarchal – some only want to copy what has already been done to them by a patriarchal system – or, as Nin would say, some women are just trying to be like men. Both women would rather change the system than fight to become the system.

The critics have attacked not only Nin’s character and ideas, but also her literary works as well. In a book review for Nin’s *Delta of Venus*, Albert Carter argues that Nin concentrates solely on sex and creates a predictable variation of erotica centered on voyeurism, anonymous lovemaking, fetishism, and exhibitionism. He states, “In leaving out the poetry, the stories are weak in characterization, plot, and over-all themes,” and he argues that the stories are written in the male tradition (409). Bruce Bawer, a critic for the *New York Times*, agrees with Carter, adding: “If Nin is remembered at all, it will not be as a pioneer but as a colorful peripheral character who embodied...some of the more unfortunate distinguishing characteristics of our age...a rejection of intellect in favor of feeling...selfishness and irresponsibility” (10). In response to these remarks, Cixous would claim these two *men*, the masculinist writers that they are, cannot understand Anaïs Nin’s feminine writing. The features these men denounce – weakness of plot,

weakness of themes, and rejection of intellect – are a few of the characteristics Cixous hails as *écriture féminine*. Just as important is the way that these critics distort what is actually in Nin's stories. Anaïs Nin does not focus only on sex, and her writing does not focus on masculine convention and predictability.

For example, one of the shorter stories in Nin's *Delta of Venus*, "Mallorca," contains no concrete descriptions of sexual intercourse whatsoever. The story begins with "I was spending the summer in Mallorca" (34), giving the feel of only part of a story, like a chapter from a book. It appears continuous and infinite, with no beginning or end. Then, in the next paragraph, the narrator says, "one evening some years go," adding to a sense of timelessness. Concrete time is of no concern to Nin's narrator. The narrator includes lyrical language with water imagery, one of Cixous's reoccurring images of the feminine libidinal economy: "Walking thus and dreaming and watching the effects of the moon on the sea, the soft lapping of the waves at her feet..." (35). Nin's description compares to Cixous's imagery: "I, too, overflow; my desires have invented new desires, my body knows unheard-of song" ("Laugh" 876). – a bursting forth and overflow of fluidity.

In the story, a fisherman's daughter walks along the shore one moonlit evening and comes across someone swimming nude by the cove, someone who she believes is an American woman she had met the day before. The girl is in a dream-like trance and is so enthralled by her natural surroundings, "the effects of the moon on the sea, the soft lapping of the waves at her feet," that she does not question the sex of the person she can

barely see (35). When the person calls to her, the fisherman's daughter uses gender-unspecific language by referring to "the voice." All she can see are unidentifiable, and therefore unsexed, body parts such as the bobbing of a head and the movement of an arm in the water, which coincides with Cixous' focus on endlessness and a lack of origin because both the fisherman's daughter and the reader have no closure as to where the parts begin or end. The girl soon realizes the person is actually the American woman's younger brother who then seduces her and "[takes] her there in the water, swaying floating...the wavelike movements of their bodies as they enjoyed each other seemed part of the sea...they found a foothold on a rock and stood together, caressed by the waves, and shaking from the orgasm" (37). The girl repeatedly refers to the boy/man (this is also not made specific) as "her friend," and refers to his body as "her friend's body" (36). Her sexual identity is ambiguous because she had been aroused without knowing the sex of the person swimming, then had been sexually intrigued believing "her friend" to be female, and then when she does realize "her friend" is male, she maintains her arousal. Apparently the sex and any other particulars are unimportant to the fisherman's daughter. Nin's language and sexual imagery differ from the previously quoted passage from Henry Miller because there is no vulgarity, no objectification, and it is written in a beautifully lyrical and metaphorical language. Rabelais would be greatly disappointed.

The story ends with the narrator's reminiscences as she still feels she can see them swimming together and making love. The story is simple, yet beautifully written; and Anaïs Nin, like Cixous' feminine *écriture*, does not try to infuse it with logic nor closure,

for there is nothing to figure out. It is simple with no judgments to be made – a spontaneous, natural overflowing; a “writing of the womb,” as Nin would say. And in support of Cixous’s *écriture féminine* and writing the body, Nin could never be said to be a victim of ‘false sexual modesty.’ Many of Nin's erotic short stories come from passages in her diaries and from friends’ experiences, adding to a paradoxically nonlinear continuity because experiential segments blend into a holistic 'knowledge' or 'life'. In addition, several characters, including the character named “Manuel,” appear in different stories as though their narratives overlap into others’ accounts.

Speaking of “Manuel,” the story itself turns convention upside down. In the preface to *Delta of Venus*, Nin describes how she would write erotica for a dollar a page. The collector of her erotica would always tell her to leave out the poetry and concentrate only on sex, so Nin began to write tongue-in-cheek, “to become outlandish, inventive, and so exaggerated that I thought he would realize I was caricaturing sexuality. But there was no protest” (ix). “Manuel” is humorous in its depictions, showing the ridiculousness of masculine sexual conventions. Nin not only reverses the role of the objectified by making the man the object to be gazed upon, but she does so in an exaggerated manner to make the man appear foolish for his penis obsession. Manuel agrees to do a woman’s housework if she will look adoringly at his penis. The woman dramatically praises Manuel’s penis, and as she does so he becomes so excited that he collapses to the floor and ejaculates into his own face (257).

Another example of parodic role-reversal is found in the erotic short story “The

Veiled Woman.” While the story appears to be about a nymphomaniac who finds random men in bars to 'use' her for their own sexual pleasure, the reader cannot help but notice the recurring image of the mirror and how the woman cannot become aroused until she sees their actions reflected back to her. The “veiled woman,” who had been so attractive in her mysteriousness, becomes the voyeur in her own fantasy, and the man who had thought himself the 'colonizer' who “loved to recount his exploits...hint[ing] that as soon as he set foot in the street some adventure presented itself, that he was never at a loss for an interesting evening, or for an interesting woman,” becomes the object to be gazed upon (*DV* 88). Eventually the man will discover that he has not only been the object of the woman's gaze when a friend, “a confirmed voyeur,” tells him a story of when he had witnessed a passionate episode between a man and a woman in a mysterious house filled with mirrors. The 'adventurous' man realizes that he has been made a spectacle for the entertainment of others, and he leaves both embarrassed and enlightened to the “play-acting” often used between men and woman (96).

As a last example of Nin's portrayal of *écriture féminine*, “The Woman on the Dunes” addresses concepts of a more positive role-reversal, intimacy, and Cixous' idea of mutually shared sexual experience. The main character, a man named Louis, is sexually aroused and decides to wander aimlessly to appease his fever. From the beginning Nin shows her use of bisexuality, trying to understand the story through the experiences and sexuality of a man. Also, Nin includes water imagery yet again as she describes the sounds of the ocean's “rhythmic movements” (*LB* 23). Louis sees a woman remove her

clothing and run into the waves, so he follows in pursuit. Although strangers, both are mutually caught up in the thrill and begin to tease each other playfully. Their passions reaching new heights, the couple run onto the beach, laughing and dripping with water; however, when trying to make love to the woman, Louis repeatedly loses his erection. He is humiliated, but the woman consoles him saying there is plenty of time, and then a role-reversal takes place. The woman demands Louis stick out his tongue while they kiss, the narrator describing “she let him, now and then, touch his tongue against hers. She let him pant like a dog in heat, open his being, stretch towards her” (25). The woman has become the aggressor, placing demands and allowing Louis sexual pleasure on her behalf.

After making love the woman tells Louis a story about a woman who had made love to a man she had never seen. She describes the scene without use of possession of body parts, giving the feeling of shared disconnectedness:

She felt dizzy with conflicting sensations. She did not move or turn her head. A hand now sought an opening in the skirt and discovered the buttons. Each button undone by the hand made her grasp with both fear and relief. The hand waited to see if she protested before proceeding to another button. She did not move (28).

Nin uses a vagueness of sexuality and gender as ‘the hand’ is never possessed by an individual, nor is it sexed. Nin describes another scene of disconnected frenzy and random, unpossessed, and unsexed parts in her erotic short story “Marianne,” who recalls penny movies she had once seen in Paris:

...of figures rolling on the grass, hands fumbling, white pants being opened by eager hands, caresses, caresses, and pleasure making the bodies curl and undulate, pleasure running over their skins like water, causing them to undulate as the wave of pleasure caught their bellies or hips, or as it ran up their spine or down their legs (*DV* 81).

There is a “rhythmic and unusual irregularity” when Nin describes sensuality or sexuality (Papachristou 59), and she uses commas and repetition as a sense of urgency and built-up desire. Again, in the above quote, the reader does not know who is doing each action nor to whom the random body parts belong. Papachristou explains in Nin’s erotic writing, “an abstract definition corresponds to every concrete movement,” making “lived sensations and feelings concrete, to preserve them with words that create images” (60). Nin uses tangibility to convey her abstract ideas and the unconscious in a way that resembles the imagery Cixous uses throughout her essays, particularly when Cixous uses the image of a laughing Medusa to show the different meanings it conveys depending on one's sex.

The story “Marianne” contributes to feminine *écriture* through its use of sexual ambiguity and the writing of the body. This layered story begins with a sort-of autobiographical first-person narration when Nin refers to an 'I' who calls herself “the madam of a house of literary prostitution,” which is a direct reference to Nin's own career as an erotic writer (*DV* 74). The narrator hires a young painter named Marianne to type her erotic stories – a woman who had previously had many unfulfilling sexual experiences. The narrator hopes, as Nin possibly hopes, that the reading of the erotic

fiction will awaken something sensual within Marianne. Marianne becomes affected enough to be “taken with the desire to write down her own experiences” and reflect on the past (76). She begins by admitting that “most of what happened to [her] was clinical, anatomical. Here were the sexes touching, mingling, but without any sparks, wildness, sensation” (76). She asks herself “How can I attain this? How can I begin to *feel* – to *feel*?” (76). This description brings to mind the problems with Miller's writing style when he demonstrates the vulgarity of the purely physical and 'clinical.' Nin asserts that in order to feel true eroticism, one must move beyond the physical into feeling and emotion. The reader is soon introduced to Fred, a man who, similar to the man in “Manuel,” can only become aroused if he has been made the object; however, Fred differs from Manuel because his need for adoration is not made ridiculous. In contrast, Fred has a kind of innocence and sexual ambiguity in his embarrassment over his fetish. He stutters his request to become the painter's model, and he blushes “like a woman” (76). Since Fred's story is being told by a woman, we get no description of her physicality. We only hear of how she “studied his violet eyes, the fine, gold, downy hair on his hands, the fine hair on the top of his ears” (77). Fred becomes the object of desire, and interestingly that object has “a faunish air and a feminine evasiveness which attracted [her]” (77). There is ambiguity in who is the object and who is the subject, and there is also sexual ambiguity concerning masculine and feminine roles and concerning the sexual preference of a speaker who sleeps with men but is highly attracted to this seemingly effeminate man.



The collector's insistence that Anaïs Nin leave out the poetry and concentrate only on sex inspired her to come to a greater understanding of what it means to write 'woman,' what she would contribute as a form of poetry, or a deeper understanding of the unconscious and hidden drives. Although not as apparent as in her longer fiction, Nin holds to her feminine writing in her erotic short fiction, finding that she cannot leave out the poetry as the collector had insisted. To leave out the poetry would be to leave out the sexual experience, for who wants to read a clinical description of penis insertion in vagina? As to Cixous's question of 'what does this text give?' and 'how does this text give?,' Anaïs Nin would answer: 'it gives sexual pleasure or jouissance. How? Through the writings of 'woman.'

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GEN(D)RE BENDING: AMBIGUITY AND SEXUAL ANDROGYNY IN VIRGINIA  
WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*

One is not born but rather becomes a woman.  
-Simone de Beauvoir

In a now infamous essay concerning the 'Woolf as feminist' debates entitled "Virginia Woolf and the Flight Into Androgyny," Elaine Showalter tries to reinvent and reinterpret the debate by attacking what she perceives to be a kind of general Woolf-ophilia of mid-twentieth century feminism by stating, "The concept of true androgyny – full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements – is attractive, although I suspect that like all utopian ideals androgyny lacks zest and energy" (263). Showalter finds fault with what she holds is Virginia Woolf's prescription of androgyny for social and artistic freedom, particularly Woolf's explicit defense of androgyny in her essay *A Room of One's Own*. Showalter's rhetoric, like many other negatively critical Woolf readings, revolves around notions of Woolf's fear, defensiveness, struggle, crisis, withdrawal, madness, exile, and the inevitable suicide. Showalter's terminology builds together to help her convey the opinion that Woolf's androgyny is an ultimately unsuccessful, and even possibly dangerous, concept in its perceived elusiveness and passivity. Androgyny becomes a "myth that helped [Woolf] evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition" (264). Viewed as having surrendered to some kind of

“psychic withdrawal” or escape via a sort of unsexing through both sexes, Woolf’s critics use accusations varying anywhere from classicism to utopianism, from sterility to ambivalent modernism (Showalter 286). Apparently Woolf is never ‘realist’ nor feminist enough for critics like Showalter because, according to these negative reviews, she does not describe the struggles of ‘real’ women, never gives a ‘realistic’ political goal for women to follow, and seems to completely disengage herself from the text.

Although Lisa Rado, in a more recent look at modernist androgyny, refers to the androgyny debates as rather out-dated and over-used, she still feels compelled to present a “change [of] lens” in order to place Woolf in her “cultural moment” (139).

Unfortunately for Woolf this new insight shoves her back into the same corner that previous critics had placed her after the Woolf-o-philia had apparently gotten old. Rado points her lens toward androgyny as a failed sublime because Woolf fails at her attempt to “authorize and stabilize her identity as both a woman and a writer” and that because Woolf is focused on finding an identity through a theory of non-identity, “this goal is agonizingly difficult for Woolf to achieve” (139, 149). I would like to enter this ongoing debate – a debate that seems to be ongoing whether it is called “outdated” or not – by focusing on the idea of a problematic and ambiguous androgyny as Woolf’s goal, rather than androgyny as an unambiguous ideal.

Rather than choosing between the positive optimism of Carolyn Heilbrun’s *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny* (the self-proclaimed first thorough study of androgyny and its implications) or the pessimistic criticism of Showalter or Rado, I argue

that Virginia Woolf's main concern is to show the problematic 'nature' of socially constructed norms. Woolf problematizes cultural norms by playing with established forms of sexual identity, genre, and the Romantic notion of the 'self' in order to highlight a kind of necessary multiplicity or “androgyny” to blur the boundaries of socially constructed roles. As Rachel Bowlby puts it in *Feminist Destinations*, “[Woolf's] concern is more to dissect the presuppositions of received forms of representations” (15). Bowlby further argues that “...it is precisely in her insistence on the sexual inflection of all questions of historical understanding and literary representation that Woolf is a feminist writer” in so far as she “constantly associates certainty and conventionality with a complacent masculinity which she sees as setting the norms for models of individual and historical development” (15). While this 'dissection' or 'problematization' is not always freeing (quite the opposite, it is most often times complicated and riddled with uncertainty as Rado points out), it is, however, certainly not a denial of the self nor of one's sexual and social dilemma. Ambiguity offers Woolf the means to express her doubts of the common acknowledgment of a fixed universal and essential state of being. Though it has been described as a “tedious high camp” of a novel (Showalter 291) and mere escapism by Woolf herself, I shall use *Orlando* to show how Woolf expresses her philosophy of ambiguity, including both ambiguity of sex as “androgyny” and ambiguity of genre in order to show her reader the complicatedness of what is generally taken for granted as natural or normal.

In defense of Virginia Woolf as a feminist writer, Toril Moi asserts that Showalter

is simply frustrated that Woolf's texts cannot be pinned down and therefore appear uncommitted to a feminist stance (3). The important point here is that Woolf is practicing what she preaches: her supposed 'noncommittal' attitude projected through her art reflects her feelings toward a positive use of modernist ambiguity that refrains from overt didacticism. Moi argues that Woolf “radically undermine[s] the notion of the unitary self, the central concept of Western male humanism and one crucial to Showalter's feminism” (7). Basically, Moi believes Woolf to be the exemplary feminist because she calls into question the idea of 'Truth' as fundamental and refuses to acknowledge that she could possibly know *anyone's* 'real' experience because there is no such thing as a real or truthful depiction of 'woman.' Definitions of the self, of the sexes, and of societal values are ridden with contradictions and conflicts, and Woolf displaces her reader's security by placing ambiguity front and center in all its contentious glory.

Virginia Woolf's diaries and letters show her struggle with the ambiguity she presents throughout the writing of *Orlando*, and I feel it is important to sketch her thought process during the writing of the text in order to highlight the complexities as they unfold. Woolf began devising her plan for *Orlando* in March of 1927 as a fantastical and satirical “escapade” after the arduous and “serious poetic experimental” works “whose form is so closely considered” - works that had become part of her signature stream-of-consciousness style among the public (*AWD* 104). Woolf continues her description of *Orlando's* conception and her need for a kind of running away or escape: “I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little

ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons” (104). From her representation of the creation (“the” and not “her” because there are doubts as to whether Woolf is in control of this creation) of her flight of fancy, we can assume that Woolf did not take the beginning stage of *Orlando* seriously because she felt it would simply be an inside joke on a large scale. In the same passage she states, “I think this will be great fun to write; and it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next,” which refers to her next project – the ambitious and often-argued most experimental of her novels – *The Waves*. Writing about the ease with which she felt the pseudo-biography would develop, if it were to develop at all due to its evanescent frivolity, Woolf writes, “I might dash off a page or two now and then by way of experiment. And it is possible that the idea will evaporate. Anyhow this records the odd horrid unexpected way in which these things suddenly create themselves – one thing on top of another in about an hour” (104-105). It is interesting how she chooses her diction with emphasis on terms such as “oddity” and “horrid,” “unexpected” and the idea of things “suddenly creat[ing] themselves,” as though *Orlando* contained some life-force that could take over her own consciousness. I believe this beginning description of a mental “take-over” is no coincidence considering that the frivolity of *Orlando* will later be challenged when Woolf eventually becomes consumed by her work as she also begins writing her most pivotal essay, *A Room of One's Own*, perhaps as a way to get through the underlying difficulty and ambiguity contained within both her own consciousness and in the text itself.



Six months after her first mention of the need to write something purely for fun, Woolf finally gives her hero a name and a temporality, as well as a kind of genre for the story: "One of these days...I shall sketch here, like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends.... It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one's own time during people's lifetimes. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman" (112). A couple of months later and Woolf is still stuck on this "fantasy" creation, laying down the genre and setting as "a biography beginning in the year 1500 and continuing to the present day" (114); however, Woolf has added one new dimension, another "treat," in her inclusion of her lover Vita Sackville-West: Vita shall "change about from one sex to another" (115). The ambiguity and androgyny of Orlando's sex has now been officially declared, and now Woolf must further struggle with her desire for an ambiguous text when she declares about her new "biography," "I thought I could combine it with Fiction, but once the mind gets hot it can't stop" (115). Paradoxically, "Fiction" for Woolf becomes just as intolerably dull as the boring and "stale" criticism she supplies in her critical essays, so her new blending of genres that incorporates a sense of history and biography (both supposed "Truths") with the fantastical element of fiction add new exciting directions to her writing process. While ambiguity often induces feelings of uncertainty and therefore creates anxiety, Woolf finds this ambiguity more freeing and pacifies herself with thoughts of writing *Orlando*:

But the relief of turning my mind that way was such that I felt happier than for

months; as if put in the sun, or laid on a cushion; and after two days entirely gave up my time chart and abandoned myself to the pure delight of this farce; which I enjoy as much as I've ever enjoyed anything.... I am writing *Orlando* half in mock style very clear and plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth and fantasy must be careful (115).

One question a reader must ask oneself: Why is it so important for Woolf to write in a way for people to understand, and who are these “people”? Are these “people” the general public, or is this work of ambiguous “fiction” meant for only that small group of friends who are incorporated into the mock biography? The reader gets the feeling that this is perhaps one of the few times Woolf has intended her fiction to be easily read, yet as I will argue, Woolf herself did not realize how unreadable and difficult *Orlando* would become.

By late November, she was still struggling over her “escapade.” As the third chapter moves along, she asks herself if she has learned anything so far. Her response, “Too much of a joke perhaps for that,” conflicts with her further observation that she is enjoying her use of “plain sentences” and “externality,” although it appears Woolf cannot allow herself to remain comfortable in any sort of “novel-esque” writing (116). Earlier in her reflections of her writing, Woolf had briefly mentioned her ability to create scenes, but not actual plots (114), and she refers to her creation of *Orlando* as “too thin” and “splashed over the canvas” (116). Woolf gives the impression that *Orlando* might not be deep nor rich enough to be a true work of art. Furthermore, a month later she admits that she views her writing of *Orlando* as “mere scribbling,” yet she discloses her dissatisfaction of what she hints is modernism's “irrational scale of values” which make

her feel that her essays and critiques are of more importance than a work of fiction that might have too much of the personal included to be a valid and rational work of art (117).

Woolf struggles with the modernist devaluation of Romantic notions of inspiration when she describes how *Orlando* has taken over her entire being and has apparently come into existence of its own volition. She exclaims, “How extraordinarily unwilling by me but potent in its own right, by the way, *Orlando* was! as if it shoved everything aside to come into existence” (118). Unfortunately, the ever-conflicted Woolf repeats criticism of her work two days later: “when V[irginia] lets her style get on top of her, one thinks only of that; when she uses cliches, one thinks what she means.’ But...I have no logical power and live and write in an opium dream.. And the dream is too often about myself” (118). In true modernist fashion Woolf concludes that she must correct this personalization by “forget[ing] one's own sharp absurd little personality, reputation and the rest of it, one should read; see outsiders; think more; write more logically; above all be full of work; and practise anonymity” (119). *Orlando* exemplifies Woolf's conflicted views of modernism's depersonalization because of the ambiguous nature of the so-called “novel.” Woolf places both herself and the people she knows into the story, such as Vita as Orlando. Moreover, although Woolf argues that the writer should keep politics separate from art, Woolf cannot keep her politics out of the text, just as she could not in *A Room of One's Own*. It is no coincidence that many of the feminist/political themes and social satire included in *Orlando* are further explored in *A Room of One's Own*, which was first written contemporarily with *Orlando* as the lecture “Women and Fiction” and

later expanded. Also going against tenets of modernism, Woolf cannot help but write emotionally, passionately, and 'frivolously' throughout *Orlando*, not only because it is a supposed work of ambiguous fantasy, but also because the work is in part influenced by Woolf's love affair with Vita Sackville-West. Furthermore, there is little explicit 'logic' or fixed moral standard running throughout the text, and due to what Woolf calls the "externality" of the text there is more purpose/aim and more acknowledgment of the effects of the social.

Despite her apparent excitement over the initial conception of *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf eventually became frustrated with her "escape." By February of 1928 Woolf became concerned that her fun little fantasy had morphed into something a little more serious than she had planned, and she becomes exhausted by the final chapter:

For some reason, I am hacking rather listlessly at the last chapter of *Orlando*, which was to have been the best. Always, always the last chapter slips out of my hands. One gets bored. One whips oneself up. I still hope for a fresh wind, and don't very much bother, except that I miss the fun, which was so tremendously lively all October, November and December. I have my doubts if it is not empty; and too fantastic to write at such length (121).

A week later we find that Woolf has been in the process of writing her lecture "Women and Fiction," which has apparently led her to writer's block in *Orlando*. Woolf writes, "It is the oddest feeling: as if a finger stopped the flow of the ideas in the brain; it is unsealed and the blood rushes all over the place. Again, instead of writing *O[lando]*, I've been racing up and down the whole field of my lecture" (121). It seems as though the ideas spawned from *Orlando*, ideas that had started out in jest, have a new urgency – and this

urgency can only be captured in a more 'intellectual' or 'straightforward' form of writing such as the essay; however, upon the book's completion, Woolf will repeat her idea of *Orlando* being the quickly written “writer's holiday” that left her mind “appeased” (122).

Critics who view *Orlando* as Woolf's bastard stepchild – a ridiculous and, as Showalter states, “tedious” work of frivolity that shoves its existence in between her more 'serious' works – love to point out Woolf's change of feeling toward her odd creation starting around the time of her diary entry from March 22<sup>nd</sup>. Woolf writes, “Yes it's done – *Orlando* – begun on 8<sup>th</sup> October, as a joke; and now rather too long for my liking. It may fall between stools, be too long for a joke, and too frivolous for a serious book” (*AWD* 122). Is it not ironic that this playful little fanciful oddity would wind up creating such controversy between not only critics but also within Woolf herself, as well as being the 'novel' to launch Woolf into renowned (and monetary) success (*Letters* 543)? A month later Woolf calls *Orlando* a “freak,” and by May *Orlando* has become not only “freakish” but “unequal;” however, she admits the book is “very brilliant now and then” (124-125). Leonard Woolf would testify to the brilliance of the book. Woolf writes in her diary:

L[eonard] takes *Orlando* more seriously than I had expected. Thinks it in some ways better than the *Lighthouse*: about more interesting things, and with more attachment to life and larger. The truth is I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously. Hence it lacks some unity. He says it is very original. Anyhow I'm glad to be quit this time of writing 'a novel'; and hope never to be accused of it again” (126).

Woolf's letters concerning *Orlando* mirror the conflicted response portrayed

throughout her diaries and buttress negative criticism toward the book that mark it as an unimportant vacation from the 'serious' works in the Woolf canon. In a letter dated March 6, 1928 written to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf calls *Orlando* an “addled egg: too hasty, too splash-dashery, and all over the place” (*Letters* 468). Two days later she refers to *Orlando* as “a wretched silly thing,” but she insinuates that she feels compelled to complete the book (*Letters* 470). On March 20<sup>th</sup> Woolf again writes Vita, now describing *Orlando* as “all over the place, incoherent, intolerable, impossible – and I am sick of it,” and includes her opinion by the end of the letter: “*Orlando* so bad” (474-475), which was previously stated in almost the exact same words on the 16<sup>th</sup> of November in 1927, shortly before Woolf describes *Orlando* in her diary as “too much of a joke” (116). By May *Orlando* becomes simply “an extremely foolish book” (*Letters* 491).

In a letter written on October 11, 1928, Vita Sackville-West responded to the various letters Woolf had sent her throughout the months of writing *Orlando*. It was the first time Vita had read the entire text of the novel, and her first impression, whether from narcissism or pure enjoyment of the story, was utterly positive and supportive of the book as a fine work of art. Vita writes:

I am completely dazzled, bewitched, enchanted, under a spell. It seems to me the loveliest, wisest, *richest* book that I have ever read, - excelling even your own Lighthouse. Virginia, I really don't know what to say, - am I right? am I wrong? am I prejudiced? am I in my senses or not? It seems to me that you have really shut up that 'hard and rare thing' in a book; that you have a complete vision; and yet when you came down to the sober labour of working it out, have never lost sight of it nor faltered in the execution (*Letters* 574).

What I believe to be one of the most fascinating statements made by Vita concerning *Orlando* is the idea that Woolf had not only created a 'complete vision,' but that she never strayed from this supposed 'complete vision.' Based on the conflicting statements in her diary entries and letters, it seems Woolf would have disagreed with this statement, but Woolf did in fact stick to a 'solid' and 'unitary' idea – the paradoxical idea that *nothing* is actually solid nor unitary, and that nothing is actually a complete vision – that everything, particularly social constructions, must be identified, stressed to the point of absurdity, and challenged through the art of satire. Woolf (and the reader, for that matter) is constantly battling two conflicted goals: the goal to grasp some kind of unitary vision, and at the same time butting heads with the argument that nothing – not even the self – is in a unitary state of being, hence the constant vacillation and ambiguous state of Orlando's identity.

Using *Orlando* as the playful example of Woolf's dive into ambiguity, I will begin with the most debated aspect of the book's ambiguity – sexual ambiguity presented as androgyny. I will adhere to a structure based on chronology and the unfolding of the narrative because Orlando's gendered transformations develop from each previous transformation. Woolf specifically teases apart gender ambiguities using concepts such as clothing, law, and social constructions based on her own views of the period Orlando is framed within at that specific moment. These concepts are repeatedly taken up in turn beginning with the Renaissance, moving quickly through the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries, coming to a climax during the Victorian period, and ending in the 'present' of

the early part of the Twentieth century.

From the very first sentence the reader is drawn to notions of gender and sexuality: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex...” (11). Woolf unmistakably wants her reader to pause at this first statement that immediately raises doubt of whether one can ever be certain of his or her 'sex' as designed by one's social surroundings. This statement on sexuality is immediately qualified with “though the fashion of the time [Elizabethan England] did something to disguise it” (11). The use of clothing as a disguise or as the referent for one's sex is a reoccurring motif Woolf uses to show the arbitrariness of labeling someone as either/or. Orlando's primary use of clothing is to allow him/herself (mostly 'herself' considering the use of clothing is most important when she becomes a woman) to go back and forth, sometimes by choice and other times of necessity, and play amongst the century she encounters.

The first time we meet Orlando he is proclaimed a 'he,' a young sixteen year old 'he,' who is certainly bound up in his patriarchal ancestry. We find Orlando “slicing at the head of a Moor” that his father, “or perhaps his grandfather,” (the distinction is unimportant – unimportant to the biographer at least, but the reader must know it was a patriarch of some kind) had decapitated however many years ago, and Orlando is practicing for his patriarchal take-over by playing with chivalric gestures of manliness as he “lunge[d] and plunge[d] and slice[d] the air with his blade” (11). However, in contrast to the depiction of the aristocratically triumphant 'man,' the reader is thrown for a loop when the narrator/biographer describes the little patriarch in the image of the feminine



spectacle: “The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down....The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness...the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head” (12). Tongue-in-cheek, Woolf finishes her biographer's description of the young male Orlando with “But, alas, that these catalogues of youthful beauty cannot end without mentioning forehead and eyes,” and the narrator continues to paint the picture of the 'beautiful' Orlando's eyes “like drenched violets” and “a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples” (12-13). The reader cannot ignore the discrepancy between this overly metaphorical description and the proclaimed attitude of the biographer who denounces the use of the poetic in describing one such as Orlando, even though Orlando is but a youth at this point in time and has accomplished nothing – or at least nothing important enough for the biographer to make note of for the reader. For now, Orlando must simply be the object of the biographer's gaze. The biographer/narrator repeatedly states that a “good biographer” detests the outpouring of emotions (could this be a jab at Woolf's fellow modernists?), yet the biographer cannot keep himself (for *his* sex we have no doubt!) from gushing over such a lovely object as Orlando.

The masculine tone of the beginning succumbs to an eventual femininity that overtakes Orlando when the biographer/narrator continues in the assessment of Orlando's awkward years and describes him as clumsy, solitary, and given to feminine fits of passion as he “sighed profoundly, and flung himself...on the earth at the foot of the oak

tree” (15). Comically, the biographer defends his own diction such as “passionate” and his use of words such as “profoundly” and “flung” in an aside that stresses that Orlando's movements were indeed so passionate as to “deserve the word” (15); however, it is difficult to bolster such a defense when it is followed by the statement, “[Orlando] felt the need for something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales every evening about this time when he walked out” (15). It seems as though the biographer/narrator falls prey to the need for metaphorical and emotional language while describing his object of interest, which further problematizes Orlando as a sexed being because the biographer/narrator's gaze further feminizes Orlando.

The reader's attention is placed on Orlando's ambiguous Elizabethan clothing, his “crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them” (16). Maria DiBattista emphasizes the importance of clothing ambiguity at the beginning of the text when she asserts that the biographer's statement concerning 'the fashion of the time' and its disguising one's sex pays tribute to the convention of transvestitism common to Shakespearean comic romances, and she agrees that “the certitude of Orlando's sexual identity is immediately qualified even as it is asserted” (116). Orlando's Elizabethan male 'costume' appears stereotypically effeminate yet acceptable because of Orlando's placement in time, and this placement will become challenging later in the novel when Orlando becomes a woman during the Seventeenth century – a century known for its reliance on a sense of reasonableness and logic.

In addition to its perceived ambiguity of clothing, the Elizabethan period further represents a time of sexual ambiguity because the most powerful person in England is now a woman. When Orlando first meets Queen Elizabeth, the biographer/narrator again depicts Orlando as the beautiful, shy, and effeminate innocent, which is opposite from the exaggeratedly violent and 'chivalric' Orlando we are introduced to in the first scene. Orlando now becomes so "overcome with shyness" that he cannot see the Queen as an entire being (17). The queen becomes an imagined entity attached to the hand that Orlando sees before him, and he can only guess what the rest of her being looks like, albeit he is on his knees directly in front of her. To the biographer's consternation, the effeminate Orlando sees the queen only as he feels. He *feels* that the hand must be attached to an old body covered in luxurious attire. The biographer/narrator, who can never stay objective and unbiased, inserts his stodgy belief into the text that feelings are pointless in an account that is based on historical fact. In an interestingly ambiguous twist, the queen herself can only see the top of Orlando's down-turned head, a head described as "fertile," so she must also imagine his "innocent" form that "implied a pair of the finest legs" (18). Orlando is again portrayed as the object while the female queen becomes the voyeur. Queen Elizabeth becomes the powerfully masculine image who exhibits the courage and the strength to maintain her dignity despite the ever-present dangers of poison, daggers, and cannon-fire, yet she is the one who labels Orlando 'man' while feminizing him at the same time. She immediately falls in love with Orlando and gives him the manly titles of Treasurer and Steward along with lands and houses. She

makes him an officer in the order of the Garter, but she recalls him because “how could she bear to think of that tender flesh torn and that curly head rolled in the dust?” and decides to keep her little innocent close-by (19). After symbolically feminizing Orlando, the queen (or possibly the biographer?) linguistically masculinizes him again with the statement that the queen “knew a man when she saw one,” and she eventually falls ill due to “man's treachery” when she later sees the now rakish Orlando kissing a “brazen hussy” (20). While Orlando's physical sex has yet to change, his identity and selfhood have already proven to fluctuate drastically between notions of the masculine and feminine depending on what social influence has the power of labeling at a particular moment in time.

Ambiguity of sex heightens with the introduction of Orlando's first love interest: the androgynous Russian named Sasha. At first glance Orlando cannot distinguish whether Sasha is male or female. Orlando only sees an ambiguous figure dressed in “the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion that “served to disguise the sex,” which in turn intensifies Orlando's curiosity (27-28). Orlando's sexuality comes into question because it appears that Sasha's androgyny is the most seductive aspect of her being. She is first identified as a 'her,' but then Orlando labels her as seemingly ridiculous objects: “a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox in the snow” (28). Again, the biographer intervenes in the narrative by defending Orlando's apparent silliness:

For though we must pause not a moment in the narrative we may here hastily note that all his images at this time were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy. But if his senses

were simple they were at the same time extremely strong. To pause therefore and seek the reasons of things is out of the question (28).

For a split second the sex of Sasha is irrelevant because she is compared to inanimate objects that have given Orlando pleasure in the past; however, gender trouble collides with Orlando's simple pleasures "When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be – no woman could skate with such speed and vigour – swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question" (28). Ironically, it seems as though a woman *can* vigorously skate because as her visage becomes more visible Orlando realizes that Sasha is in a fact female. It is not her motions nor her demeanor that categorize her sex. Sasha's physical appearance is the soul indicator of her femaleness, and Orlando is thrilled to see a feminine mouth, the outline of breasts, and "eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea" (28). Orlando has been used to his flirtatious affairs with women built like simple constructions of femininity, whether in the image of the prostitute or the nun, and Sasha refreshingly breaks with these established conventions.

Unfortunately for Orlando, Sasha is more evolved in her androgyny than he is, and therefore more dangerous for him. At this time, the young and sensitive Orlando still clings to conventions by spouting "his most impassioned sonnets" while Sasha artlessly wants him to pass the salt, initiating a deep effeminate blush across his face. At first, he feels freed by his love for Sasha and more like a man. The biographer explains, "In one

night [Orlando] had thrown off his boyish clumsiness; he was changed from a sulky stripling, who could not enter a lady's room without sweeping half the ornaments from the table, to a nobleman, full of grace and manly courtesy” (31). Orlando is the one who gives her the sobriquet of 'Sasha,' and in a moment of ironical foreshadowing the reader is told that 'Sasha' was the name of Orlando's childhood pet fox, “a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel, which bit him so savagely that his father had it killed” (33). Like the fox, Orlando tries to claim ownership of Sasha because of her rarity, and she bites him back in return by having a tryst with a sailor.

In an ambiguous moment of sexual swapping, Orlando femininely faints upon seeing Sasha and the sailor, and Sasha waits for him to wake so that she may place doubts into Orlando's head concerning what he had seen. Sasha remains dominant and Orlando gives in, “Ravished with her praises and shamed to think how he had maligned her by fancying her on the knees of a common sailor” (39). The word “ravished” denotes the act of violence of mental rape on Orlando and how affected he is by this dangerously androgynous figure that has entered his life; however, the reader must remember that Orlando had been himself a rake who played games with many women before meeting Sasha. Now he has no chance of winning this battle, and the hysterical Orlando is left waiting in the rain during the violent turmoil of the Great Flood for a Sasha who never comes. The first chapter of *Orlando* ends with its hero “Standing knee deep in water” while hurling at “the faithless woman all the insults that have ever been the lot of her sex. Faithless, mutable, fickle, he called her; devil, adulteress, deceiver” (48). The time of

Orlando's fascination and valorization of androgyny is at an end – at least for the moment – and his own realization of androgyny is put on hold until he awakes mysteriously transformed into a woman.

Orlando's eventual refusal to incorporate any kind of androgynous selfhood creates his second moment of deep humiliation. Orlando makes the acquaintance of the poet Nicholas Greene who is more concerned with notoriety and fame than he is with art and passion, which is in contrast to Orlando's inclination toward the emotions. Orlando falls prey to Greene's philosophy of imitation and enjoys feeling like 'one of the guys' as he listens to stories about famous male writers. In his capitulation, Orlando forgets that his reason for contacting Greene was to show him his own work, which has been completely overlooked. Paradoxically, in his rejection of his multiplicity of selves, Orlando loses the entire concept of selfhood; therefore, he disregards his own work and opens himself up to the humiliation of Greene's satire that casts Orlando as a clumsy nobleman. The humiliation is twofold because Orlando had not only been giving Greene ammunition to use against himself, but he had also been giving Greene a pension during the writing of the satire. Having already given up women, Orlando now declares, “ I have done with men” (70). As Maria DiBattista points out, the masculine first half of the novel is “linked to events of extreme elemental violence...or extreme psychological violence” (116). Regrettably, the damage is done, and Orlando can no longer focus on his beloved poem “The Oak Tree” because he constantly questions his writing style. Because Orlando is no longer accepting of either man or woman he has lost the ability to

use language to “say what one means and leave it” (74). Orlando must now re-find his/her self before being able to write for him/herself.

The most notoriously controversial moment of androgyny happens without warning or apparent provocation when Ambassador Orlando, having just had a coronet placed upon his head, shuts himself away after an uprising breaks out, sleeps for seven days, and awakes as a woman. Yet there is purposeful ambiguity in Woolf's choice to place the sex change at a seemingly random moment in the middle of a chapter, but also at the very moment when Orlando is at the pinnacle of social 'manliness' because he has just married Rosina Pepita, been made a duke, and experienced a violent rebellion. There is confusion as to what exactly occurred, and the biographer, in his biases and embarrassment over the fantastical moment, wishes he could have ended his biography at this pinnacle of masculinity, going so far as to say, “Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando died and was buried” (99); however, because this 'biography' is supposed to be based on historical fact, “Truth, Candour, and Honesty, the austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer, cry No! Putting their silver trumpets to their lips they demand in one blast, Truth! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth!” (99). The biographer cannot bear to explain, or admit that he *cannot* explain, the sex change of the book's hero, and he certainly cannot bear that the “Truth” is that Orlando has morphed into a woman. In the biographer's eyes, death of the hero would be less tragic, or at least less problematic.



This change of sex happens in all of three pages, and mixed into these pages is a strange digression, what DiBattista refers to as an 'exorcism' of Chastity, Purity, and Modesty through the performance of seventeenth century masque: "These spectres housed in the feminine psyche are replaced by a more virile personification of Truth, embodied in the naked form of Orlando who, like Adam, awakens from her sleep-like trance and finds her dream is true" (123). DiBattista further explains, "The masque is an allegory tracing the progress from repression to a resurgent creativity," and Orlando's transformation becomes a kind of "revenge of the repressed" because s/he refuses to succumb to the feminine pressures placed before her and gains new perspective by living a double life (123). Woolf manages to parody these stereotypically positive feminine virtues by showing them in their negative counter-forms. *Our Lady of Purity* enters the room to try to cover "vice and poverty," or, in Orlando's case, things "dark or doubtful" (100). Truth must come in to shoo away this ever-present phantom because Purity portrays the need for socially constructed certainty and conviction, which would hinder doubt and ambiguity, and therefore Orlando's androgyny as well. *Our Lady Chastity* who, drawn up as an ice-queen, is comically described as turning things to ice and stone, and *Our Lady of Modesty*, the most comically portrayed of the feminine virtues because she "speaks so low that one can hardly hear" her, refuses to see any complication by covering her eyes with her hair.

Regrettably, it is implied that these social manifestations will forever remain, but at least there will be those, like Orlando, who will challenge these preconceived notions

of femininity. Purity, Chastity, and Modesty have no choice but to leave Orlando and “dwell...in next and boudoir, office and lawcourt,” and they bemoan that they must find:

...those who love us; those who honour us...those who prohibit, those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. To them we go, you we leave. Come, Sisters come! This is no place for us here (101-102).

They must leave because Orlando's sex change has defied all that is respectable and socially acceptable. Also, since the Sisters speak of those who wish to be consumed by darkness and ignorance, the reader must acknowledge that Orlando's sex change contains some form of understanding that Orlando might have always had the potential for bisexuality, but his androgyny could not flourish in a society that is comfortable in its unchallenged constructions. Orlando's androgyny conflictingly becomes the reasonable unreasonableness.

In contrast to the shameful reaction of the biographer (who feels he has “no choice” but to “confess” that Orlando has become a woman) and to the Sisters, particularly to the consternation of Modesty who “threw a garment like a towel at the naked form which, unfortunately, fell short by several inches” (the reader is permitted another sardonic chuckle), Orlando is not phased in the least over his sexual transformation as he peers at his reflection in the mirror, a “form combined in one the strength of a man and woman's grace” (102). The image of the mirror appears repeatedly

as an ambiguous symbol that can either reveal supposed 'truths' such as when Queen Elizabeth's sees Orlando kissing another girl through the looking-glass, or it can complicate given 'truths' such as in this case when Orlando is assessing *his/her* new identity. The reader is told that Orlando has spontaneously transformed into a woman, and our attention is made to focus on Orlando's form as the body, so we must assume that Orlando's actual physical sex is that of a female; however, Orlando seems oblivious to this new complication as he (for he has yet to be called 'she') looks at himself “without showing any signs of discomposure” (102). In *This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray uses the mirror motif in the introductory chapter entitled “The Looking Glass, from the Other Side” to show that one's image (in the case of Irigaray's chapter, specifically Alice's image) is only a representation of the self. It is never an honest replication because it is altered by external factors like society. Irigaray's argument is that women must push through to the other side of the mirror to see that the image that has always been reflected has been a false one (17). Orlando's use of the looking-glass seems to complicate this postmodern feminist notion of identity because Orlando does not see what society sees even when looking at her reflection; or, in a different vein, Makiko Minow-Pinkney argues that Orlando “only recognises his/her new sexual identity through the image in the mirror,” but s/he is not surprised nor affected because she does not understand the future implications of what being 'woman' will entail because she has yet to *become* a woman because of his/her lack of lived experience as a woman (125).

The biographer feels it is important enough to intrude upon Orlando's experience

and “take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements” (102). This intrusion becomes a violation of Orlando's moment to digest and come to terms with what s/he has become (or has yet to become). The biographer admits that although Orlando had become a woman, “there is no denying it,” “in every other respect, Orlando 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,” as well as her memory of her “past life” (102-103, my emphasis). Sandra Gilbert asserts that Orlando is “no more than a transvestite” because Woolf is able to change selves as easily as a transvestite changes clothes because the 'self' is nothing more than an “easily, fluidly, interchangeable” costume (405). According to Gilbert, this proves that “no one, male or female, can or should be confined to a uni-form, a single form or self” (394); however, according to Minow-Pinkney, while the change of sex does not necessarily alter Orlando's identity, per se, it does alter his/her future (125). By the end of the biographer's statement about Orlando's sex change, we are directly confronted with complication of the sexual self as the pronoun that stands in for Orlando's moves from multiplicity and fluidity to constancy via convention: “but in the future we must, *for convention's sake*, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he’” (103). The stress on convention is important because it reminds the reader that this enforcement of the pronoun is arbitrary and only designated by social constructions – social constructions that, in a political move, Woolf is trying to bring attention to in order to prove their arbitrariness and ambiguity.

The ease with which Orlando's sex change happens is the debated issue amongst the townspeople, but since "such a change of sex is against nature," the law finds it its duty "to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man" (103). Minow-Pinkney claims that, "curiously, these two contradictory positions are in a sense both true. Having lived as a man, Orlando at this moment remains one; s/he will have to learn to be a woman through the years to come" (126). Although Orlando appears to have changed into a woman, she cannot be 'woman' until she has had the experiences of living in a patriarchal society as a woman. Of course the biographer cannot handle such an explanation and decides to "let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can" (103). The book itself is such a loud statement about sex and sexuality, yet the old-fashioned biographer must abstain from such dizzyingly complicated issues that have no "truth" or "fact" other than the "simple fact" that "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since" (103). Woolf wants her readers to contemplate this "simple fact" so as to draw attention to the 'real' 'fact' that sex is indeed *no* fact, as is expressed in the mystical change of Orlando.

As Suzanne Young explains, "[Woolf] exploit[s] the confusion between sexual and social characteristics evident in...social discourse for parodic and political ends....Woolf present[s] female sexual identity as a social process that is shaped by, rather than defined in, contemporary popular discourse on sexuality" (169). The biographer's cut-and-dry pseudo-rationale to such a mysterious and controversial outcome frees the

biographer from having to think about the social implications of Orlando's transformation; however, the biographer again moves from “fact” to opinion when he announces the sympathy he feels for this now “delicate...young lady of rank” of whom we should not place blame if she had “rung the bell, screamed or fainted” (103). These actions would be more appropriate for her new identity, but Orlando defies these expectations by not only showing no signs of anxiety, but also by showing deliberation when leaving for a gypsy camp while straddling a horse. Feminine propriety has yet to cross Orlando's mind, and it will not cross her mind until she returns to England.

During her time with the gypsies, Orlando is never confronted with the issues of her sex because the gypsies are portrayed as living free from societal constraints; however, Orlando *is* confronted with her difference from the gypsies because of her experience as an English male. Orlando might be defined as 'female' because of her physical being, but her views of the gypsies as being ignorant savages stem directly from her previous identity as a privileged aristocratic male. In an ironic turn, when Orlando is pridefully describing her enormous home with its 365 bedrooms and her ancestry that included earls and dukes, the gypsies become uncomfortable: “Now they were courteous, but concerned as people of fine breeding are when a stranger has been made to reveal his low birth or poverty” (109). Orlando must confront her own preconceived assumptions concerning patriarchal concerns of genealogy and ownership because the gypsies feel there is nothing great about ancient birth because everyone from vagabonds to beggars also share it. Furthermore, in contrast to England's preoccupation with land ownership,

the gypsies view Orlando's home as vulgar because the gypsies own the entire earth (109). In the company of the gypsies Orlando becomes what she has always denounced – *nouveau riche*. It seems as though Orlando has yet to find the community to which she will feel like a valid member, and one's ambiguity always leads to danger. Disastrously for Orlando, she cannot escape her sexual ambiguity for long. The young men of the gypsy camp eventually plot her death because “she did not think as they did” (112), so Orlando is again uprooted and must leave the gypsy camp for England.

Orlando is stuck with the dilemma of finding some sort of identity to latch on to in order to survive in English society. Although Sandra Gilbert declares in her article “Costumes of the Mind” that unlike the works of Joyce and Eliot, Woolf has created a character that contains “the best of both sexes in a happy multiform which [Orlando] herself has chosen” (405), I believe at this point in the narrative Orlando has no choice but to capitulate to society's demand for a constant identity when reentering England as an ambiguous subject. Orlando has no experience as a woman, and as a man she had never had to think about sexuality because she was a part of society's universal. She had never been concerned with the limitations of sexuality. Now Woolf has the opportunity again to play with the idea that clothing becomes the main factor in diagnosing one's apparent sex, and clothing becomes both limitation and freedom depending on which mask is worn.

Woolf begins Orlando's ascribed effeminate transformation as she dons “a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore” (113). Women's clothing becomes

society's tool to disguise the sexual ambiguity hidden underneath. Orlando's sex had been hidden during her encampment with the gypsies because both gypsy men and women wore the same loose-fitting trousers. The biographer explains, "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 realised, with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position" (113). Suddenly, Orlando begins to question the commonly held opinions concerning proper femininity, but she does *not* concern herself with chastity. It is interesting that the biographer felt it necessary to begin with statements of a virtuous woman's chastity: "the whole edifice of female government is based on that foundation stone; chastity is their jewel, their centre piece, which they run mad to protect, and die when ravished of" (113). Orlando contradicts this "female government" and refutes it as a natural characteristic of 'woman' because "if one has been a man for thirty years or so, and an Ambassador into the bargain, if one has held a Queen in one's arms and one or two other ladies, if report be true, of less exalted rank, if one has married a Rosina Pepita, and so on, one does not perhaps give such a very great start about [chastity]" (113-114). Having no other experience as a woman, Orlando can only think of what a nuisance women's skirts are.

It does not take Orlando long before she realizes the supposed 'choice' she has made. She remembers how she felt about women when she was a man, how she had insisted that women be "obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled," and she now must participate in the losing end of this construct: "All I can do, once I set foot on



English soil, is to pour out tea, and ask my lords how they like it. D'you take sugar? D'you take cream?' And mincing out the words, she was horrified to perceive how low an opinion she was forming of the other sex, the manly to which it had once been her pride to belong" (116). As Bilge Nihal Zileli notes, Orlando is aware that "these qualities are not innate, but are learned. On the other hand, she also knows that she will be obliged to adapt these qualities by the society, assigning rigid gender roles to both sexes" (206).

Woolf does not necessarily blame men for these social constructs, and, through Orlando's thoughts, we can see that Woolf believes that men are slaves to gender binaries as well. As Orlando becomes more frustrated over the thoughts of gender limitation she "tosse[s] her foot impatiently, and showed an inch or two of calf. A sailor on mast, who happened to look down at the moment, started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth" (116). Orlando thinks to herself:

To fall from a mast-head...because you see a woman's ankles; to dress up like a Guy Fawkes and parade the streets, so that women may praise you; to deny a woman teaching lest she may laugh at you; to be the slave of the frailest chit in petticoats, and yet to go about as if you were the Lords of creation. - Heavens!...what fools they make of us – what fools we are!" (116-117).

At first it seems as though Woolf is censuring men, but the 'we' of Orlando's statement is uncertain because it is said by the ambiguously sexed Orlando. Orlando is still more man than woman at this point, and the biographer states:

And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets,

shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirligig state of mind to be in. The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly denied her. She was a feather blown on the gale. Thus it is no great wonder if, as she pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of the most deplorable infirmities, and was not sure to which she belonged – it was no great wonder that she was about to cry out that she would return to Turkey and become a gipsy again...(117).

As Zileli states, “Woolf seems to be mocking the two sexes; however, actually Woolf is mocking...these everlasting distinctions between what is masculine and what is feminine because gender restrictions form artificial boundaries for both sexes” (207). In *A Room of One's Own* Woolf asserts, “It was absurd to blame any class or any sex, as a whole. Great bodies of people are never responsible for what they do. They are driven by instincts which are not within their control” (49). I believe Woolf actually means society when she refers to 'instinct.' As for Orlando, she wants her sex to remain ambiguous and free-flowing and wishes to live in a society where one's sex does not matter, hence her desire to return to the gypsy camp. In this statement, Woolf explicitly shows the difficulty of one's acknowledged androgyny and society's refusal to 'let bygones be bygones.' To be blissfully unaware of one's temporality as a sexed individual would be nice, but it is an impossibility. Because of this impossibility, one must come to terms with the idea that androgyny can only happen when those around us are comfortable with ambiguity or 'not knowing,' and sometimes those around us can be forced to come to terms with ambiguity when gender performativity is shoved in their faces.

In *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* Jane Marcus argues that *Orlando* is a brilliant mockery of English patriarchy precisely because “one must first

master the form in order to deconstruct it” (10). While Marcus' statement heavily parallels with Luce Irigaray's notions of mimesis, it also seems to borrow from Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity in which the “mastering” of sex comes through costume or drag. Rachel Bowlby claims, “*Orlando* tells the story of how a young man becomes a woman; but how, as a woman, she is forever vacillating between the sexes, as if femininity is an inherently unstable position, or as if its very condition is that of putting on and off the identities of one or the other sex” (51). Butler believes that heterosexual normativity is “both a compulsory system and an intrinsic comedy; a constant parody of itself” (166). Furthermore, “gender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism, and those hyperbolic exhibitions of 'the natural' that, in their very exaggeration, reveal its fundamentally phantasmatic status” (200). We find that 'sex' or 'gender' (for this paper I have blended the two terms just as Virginia Woolf had), is certainly an act for Orlando as she performs her 'womanly' duties by pouring tea, embracing her weeping, and allowing herself to blush from embarrassment and/or faint.

While all markers of sex are a parody, Orlando participates in a couple of scenes where Woolf explicitly plays with the performativity of sexual identity. The second time Orlando meets the Archduchess Harriet Griselda, the very same Archduchess who had professed love for Orlando when she was a he (and of which Orlando's attraction to the Archduchess had made him highly uncomfortable), Orlando (now a she) finds that the unclothed Archduchess is really a man. Once female Orlando realizes she is with the now perceived male Archduke, she begins to faint because she realizes she is alone with a

man. The dynamic between the two ambiguous beings has changed into a comically theatrical exploration of socially-constructed sexuality: “In short, they acted the parts of man and woman;” however, the pretense ends after ten minutes, and they eventually fall into “natural discourse” (132). Woolf continues her experiment with what is 'natural.' The Archduke begins to cry, and Orlando becomes shocked not because of a natural inclination for women to be shocked over the tears of a man, but because she was “beginning to be aware that women should be shocked” (133). Orlando can take no more of this game, and switches to yet another example of performativity.

Orlando breaks free from her confines by “whipp[ing] her pearls from her neck, stripp[ing] the satins from her back” and “[standing] erect in her neat black silk knickerbockers of an ordinary nobleman” (137), but Orlando cannot keep herself from hiding her manuscripts and glancing in the mirror before she leaves her estate. The biographer (in the voice of Woolf) digresses from the story to include the thoughts of philosophers on the effect of clothing on the self:

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....Thus, 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. So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando” (138).

The following paragraph complicates the reader's understanding of Woolf's view of androgyny. The text claims that “Had [both man and woman] worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same too” (139); however, the biographer

steps in to include the opposing view that perhaps Orlando had herself changed and therefore had chosen to wear women's clothing. This leads to one of the most profound statements Woolf makes concerning androgyny: "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" (139). This parallels the statement Woolf makes in *A Room of One's Own* when she claims that great artists are androgynous and either "man-womanly" or "woman-manly" (128). Some feel this statement falls a little too close to essentialism, but I maintain that Woolf is always considering the social factors placed on what makes a person a 'man' or a 'woman.' All the biographer can say is, "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided" (140).

In "Posing Orlando," Talia Schaffer draws attention to what she feels is the most notable example of Orlando's performativity which occurs when Orlando dresses as a man and hires a prostitute. Schaffer asserts that "In a black velvet suit Orlando recollects and utilizes the performances of a nobleman" (37). Orlando must think back and remember how to dress the part of a nobleman and how to act the part. Orlando "sweep[s] her hat off to her in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public place," and the prostitute accepts male-Orlando's arm (*Orlando* 158). But as Schaffer points out, "with a strange sense of disappointment, Orlando finds he can only see women's actions as performances too" (37). The biographer records: "having

been so lately a woman herself, she suspected that the girl's timidity and her hesitating answer and the very fumbling with the key in the latch and the fold of her cloak and the droop of her wrist were all put on to gratify [Orlando's] masculinity” (158). When Orlando removes her disguise, the prostitute drops *her* disguise by dropping her feminine act, and Orlando finds that she enjoys the prostitute's company over that of “the society of wit” (Pope, Addison, and Lord Chesterfield).

Although Orlando finds societal freedom in the male identity, she concludes that she enjoys both sexes equally: “[Orlando] had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied” (161). Orlando has an easier time embracing her androgyny and vacillating between those two sexes as her human experience is multiplied. She learns how to work within her surroundings until her next jump through time which will land her in Virginia Woolf's most dreaded (and least ambiguous) age – the Victorian period.

In addition to clothing, the Law wields the power to brand Orlando a certain sex, and this is made most apparent while Orlando is confined to the Eighteenth century, or “Age of Reason,” a time when sexual identity was arbitrated by lawyers and judges based on their own understandings and 'reasonings' of sexual difference (Fausto-Sterling 40). Upon reentering England, Orlando is faced with three major lawsuits (it's interesting here that the word “suits” is used, as if to return the reader back to the clothing motif). Such

“grave” charges are listed as follows:

(1) that [Orlando] was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons now declaring that their father was deceased, claimed that all his property descended to them (124).

The text itself asserts that Orlando's identity is “in a highly ambiguous condition” because it was “uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity” (125). Now a woman, Orlando has no power and must passively wait to see what the Law Courts have decided because she will not be allowed to maintain ambiguity in a society that only understands identity in dualisms. Eventually Orlando will be declared a woman, and her titles and property will be taken from her. Interestingly, this also parallels with Butler because “juridical power inevitably 'produces' what it claims merely to represent” (3), showing how ideas of 'reason' and fundamental truths were used in order to keep the status quo via easily assigned (and undeniably separate) gender roles.

Sex/gender identity culminates as Orlando exits the Eighteenth century and enters the Nineteenth, and the narrator explains how “a change seemed to have come over the climate of England” as everything turned cold, dark, damp, and gloomy (166). This change is described as a “disease” spreading its chill into the homes (which had become of utmost importance) of all Victorians of all classes as “Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp in their minds” (167). Everything became artificial and cloistered – artificial flowers enclosed in glass cases, rugs covering the floors, trousers made to hide the legs,

furniture muffled by coverings, feelings and life processes “swaddled in a variety of fine phrases” – and this artificialness and cloistering further descended upon the sexes (167).

Woolf as narrator (the biographer seems to have taken a break here) describes the further splitting of the sexes:

The sexes drew further and further apart. No open conversation was tolerated. Evasions and concealments were sedulously practised on both sides.... The life of the average woman was a succession of child-births. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded. thus the British Empire came into existence; and thus – for there is no stopping damp; it gets into the inkpot as it gets into the woodwork – sentences swelled, adjectives multiplied, lyrics became epics, and little trifles that had been essays a column long were now encyclopaedias in ten or twenty volumes (168).

The opening description of the Victorian period foreshadows the conflict Orlando will face because of her androgyny since she must now begin to conform to even harsher gender standards than ever before.

Someone well-versed in the history and writings of Virginia Woolf cannot be surprised by the expression of sudden despair as *Orlando's* is faced with the Victorian period. The portrayal coincides with Woolf's own expectations and experiences as someone who had been caught between a Victorian upbringing and the desire to transcend Victorian notions of the self. Merry Pawlowski argues that Woolf was “colonized” by a “heavy handed Victorian patriarchy most closely emblemized in her own mind by that very eminent Victorian, her father...and by a lovely 'Angel in the House,' her mother” (107-108). Woolf shows her own frustration with her father in a diary entry written in the same year she finished *Orlando*. Writing of her father on his



birthday, Woolf states, “He would have been 96 today...but mercifully was not. His life would have entirely ended mine. What would have happened? No writing, no books; - inconceivable” (*AWD* 135). As shocking as this statement was for those who had been close to Woolf, it explicitly shows the confines Woolf felt under the patriarch and her honest criticism of Victorian sex roles. Leslie Stephen was a well-known essayist and intellectual, and although he encouraged Woolf to read and think for herself, she was also required to “sit politely through the stultifying visits that were an obligatory part of woman's work” (Rosenman 4). Virginia felt uneasy belonging to a world divided into two: the private world of the home which was woman's place and the public world of achievement and profession dominated by men. Woolf's 'tea-table training,' as she called it, “brought her up to hide her strength and intellectual independence beneath a facade of deferential feminine charm” (Rosenman 4). On the topic of the sexes, Carolyn Heilbrun argues that Leslie Stephen was the “typical Victorian” who “found the condition of androgyny to be evil. He used the words 'masculine' and 'manly' to indicate the highest praise; for purposes of denigration, 'effeminate' and 'morbid' were synonymous” (xvii). It is no wonder that Woolf would grow to play with ideas of ambiguity in order to bounce between sexual constructs and to challenge those preconceived Victorian gender ideals that required a boundary between them.

Tragically, and yet humorously, Orlando falls victim to the 'spirit of the age' when she tries to work on her poetry. Reflecting Woolf's concerns from *A Room of One's Own*, Orlando can only produce blots upon a page because, without a room of her own,

servants constantly interrupt her writing process as they march in and out of the sitting room to tend to symbols of domesticity such as the tea set, muffins, and the fire.

Suddenly Orlando is able to write, but to her dismay she produces “the most insipid verse she had ever read in her life” (174). The notes included in the back of the text explain that the verse is from Letitia Elizabeth Landon's “The Lines of Life,” a poem full of excessive and stereotypically 'feminine' sentimentality (*Orlando* 298). A much relieved Orlando becomes full of “involuntary inspiration” and accidentally (or so she believes) spills ink over the page, but she is at once filled with fear, repulsion, and confusion at her inability to control herself (174-175). Orlando will continue to battle with 'the spirit of the age' concerning other factors that will ultimately affect her ability to finish the one project s/he has kept throughout the passing of time – her poem “The Oak Tree.”

Apparently one obsession must be replaced with another, and Orlando becomes distracted by strange tingling sensations in her finger. As Woolf would have wished, the reader is made to understand that Orlando has fallen prey to the idea of marriage and feels she must trade the emerald ring that Queen Elizabeth had given her when she was a man (a symbol of pride) for the “thick ring of rather jaundiced yellow” that many of the women of the Victorian age were wearing (175), which is an obvious reference to the new standard of branding oneself as 'taken' by wearing a wedding ring. Orlando begins to think about the changes in the relationships between men and women:

Couples trudged and plodded in the middle of the road indissolubly linked together. The woman's right hand was invariably passed through the man's left and her fingers were firmly gripped by his. Often it was not till the horses' noses

were on them that they budged, and then, though they moved it was all in one piece, heavily, to the side of the road. Orlando could only suppose that some new discovery had been made about the race; they were somehow stuck together, couple after couple, but who had made it, and when, she could not guess. It did not seem to be Nature (177).

Something inside Orlando tells her that marriage is not only 'unnatural,' but that it is distasteful and “repugnant to her sense of decency” (177); however, even though it is “against her natural temperament” (178), Orlando is a historical being who cannot help but be affected by the social constructions around her. She buys a ring, and when the tingling sensation does not stop she decides the only “remedy” was “to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband” (178). The biographer further describes the situation in Woolf's voice: “Such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age however, that it batters down anyone who tries to make stand against it far more effectually than those who bend its own way” (178). Woolf continues to use words such as “break,” “poisoned,” and “defeat.” The dress she has been wearing becomes even more intolerable as Orlando realizes just how much women's attire impedes her movement (178). As Tracy Hargreaves points out, “Orlando's pleasure in sexual oscillation is interrupted by the oppressive social expectations that arise in the nineteenth century...forcing her into a pure femininity that requires the expulsion or denial of her masculinity” (86). The rhetoric in *Orlando* becomes desperate, and Orlando becomes consumed by timidity and fear of the unknown for the first time in her life. She is no longer her own being because she has sacrificed herself to the culture. Her 'nature' has been destroyed, and therefore she loses her voice when she says, “Whom...can I lean

upon?" (179). The narrator asserts that "it was not Orlando who spoke, but the spirit of the age" (179). What is a woman to do?

Surprisingly, and to the consternation of many feminists, Orlando is saved from her despair by her marriage to Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. The ambiguity of Orlando's marriage is so problematic that some critics try to explain this marriage as a kind of self-willed compromise, or performance, so that she can survive through the Victorian period. Minow-Pinkney asserts that although Orlando's marriage saves her from "disabling self-consciousness in an age so antipathetic to her that it threatens to provoke bitter resentment," the "utopian androgynous marriage" is "none the less...one of the less convincing parts of the book, since it is after all a social facade; it is more a device to maintain appearances than a radical exploration of the issues" (137). DiBattista claims the marriage between Orlando and Shelmerdine itself is an act of submitting to androgyny, and not necessarily to the Victorian period, because both Orlando and Shelmerdine themselves are sexually ambiguous (140). DiBattista further claims that the marriage of the androgynes actually leads to Orlando's freedom because she no longer has to depend on the praise and blame of the times: "Freed from the tyrannies of conventionality in sex, social mores, and literary manners, she can write without distraction" (140). Out of nowhere and without cause both exclaim simultaneously "You're a woman, Shel!" and "You're a man, Orlando!" (184). Shelmerdine's androgyny is stressed when he blushes, "For a man had to blush as a woman had, only at rather different things" (185). This statement is ambiguous because it seems to agree with a

kind of androgyny while at the same time allowing the theory of sexual difference. Furthermore, the following paragraph has Orlando crying out that she is “a real woman, at last” (185). What is the reader supposed to do with this ambiguous statement? Woolf has just seemingly denounced the conventionality of marriage as a social construction, yet Orlando is not allowed to be a 'real woman' until she has married? My answer is that through meeting and allowing a relationship with another questionably androgynous being, Orlando comes to the conclusion that ambiguity and uncertainty of the self is perfectly acceptable, and in that acceptance of her own multiplicity she has in fact become 'real' and 'woman' in her own terms.

With her newfound empowerment Orlando goes back to working on her poem, but she cannot completely rid herself of the socialization she has experienced as a Victorian woman. She vacillates between feelings of hesitation (“What should she do then? Faint, if possible.”) and feelings of triumph (“But she had never felt better in her life.”), and triumph wins as Orlando exclaims, “Hang it all! Here goes!” (195). She begins to successfully write until that frustrating specter reappears – the Angel in the House. In *Orlando* Woolf writes:

At this point she felt that power (remember we are dealing with the most obscure manifestations of the human spirit) which had been reading over her shoulder, tell her to stop. Grass, the power seemed to say, going back with a ruler such as governesses use to the beginning, is all right; the hanging cups of fritillaries – admirable; the snaky flower – a thought strong from a lady's pen, perhaps, but Wordsworth, no doubt, sanctions it; but – girls? Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that'll do (195-196).

Woolf is inserting her own hesitations into the character of Orlando. Woolf describes the Angel in the House in her essay "Professions for Women." Similar to the furies who appear during Orlando's sex change, the Angel in the House becomes the socially constructed part of Orlando's Victorian self – that self that was "immensely charming," "unselfish," and "never had a mind or a wish of her own, but preferred to sympathize always with the minds and wishes of others" ("Professions" 236-237). The Angel symbolizes the hesitance caused by social ideals of feminine decorum. In "Professions for Women" Woolf offers her reader the image of the good Victorian woman and the "rustling of her skirts," the pure Angel who reminds Woolf that because she is writing about man (or in Orlando's case, writing of 'manly' things), she must "Be sympathetic; be tender; flatter; deceive; use all the arts and wiles of our sex. Never let anybody guess that you have a mind of your own. Above all, be pure" (237). Woolf's solution is to kill the Angel in the House; however, *Orlando* (written fourteen years earlier) has not quite reached the kind of angry violence exhibited in "Professions for Women." Instead, *Orlando* offers a reconciliation between 'the spirit of the age' and her own desires through marriage: "Orlando had so ordered it that she was in an extremely happy position; she need neither fight her age, nor submit to it; she was of it, yet remained herself" (196). Now that Orlando has compromised to some degree by marrying, she can focus less on fighting the system and more on writing her poem while still maintaining her ambiguous identity by never fully adapting to womanly roles.

The biographer, in all his conservative glory, cannot help but digress from

Orlando's story yet again to deride her for her focus on thinking and writing instead of on love. Even worse (for the biographer), Orlando is now prone to the “humiliating...dumb show of emotion and excitement” over thought and imagination, which “we know...are of no importance whatsoever” (197). As a woman, Orlando is expected at the very least to replace the action of her past maleness with thoughts of love. The biographer continues: “Surely, since she is a woman, and a beautiful woman, and a woman in the prime of life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin to think, at least of a gamekeeper (and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking)” (198). And if Orlando is to write at all, let it be little love notes to her man. Similar to the judgment placed upon her by the Law, the biographer now condemns Orlando to a metaphorical death of the self because “If then, the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and so leave her” (198). The digression eventually comes to an end when an 'action' has occurred when Orlando finally finishes the manuscript of “The Oak Tree” and it leaves her hands, once and for all.

The most contentious part of *Orlando's* text, and often the most open for debate, is the meaning behind the ending of the novel. Lisa Rado uses the ambiguity of the ending to contest the feminist views that portray the text as supporting a positive androgyny. Rado argues that the ending shows that Orlando eventually becomes hysterical and represses the body, therefore dissolving the self as she becomes riddled with pessimism and despair and eventually self-destructs (166). In contrast, I believe the ending might

better be thought of as a beginning of another of Orlando's multiple selves. The past comes back as Orlando 'sees' (or imagines) all of the figures throughout her development: Sasha, Shakespeare, Queen Elizabeth, and various Eighteenth century writers. Tracy Hargreaves concludes that "Orlando's self dissolves, but the return to her ancestral home represents the coming together of all the historical selves that she had been," and "her awareness of the present moment consigns the memories of the past to an at least temporary oblivion, and a different Orlando reemerges, one who seems to stare into the abyss of her consciousness" (92-93). But this is not necessarily a negative ending because Orlando is becoming aware of the multiple historical selves that she embodies that become one 'real' self ("and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past"), and while it might be scary for her to be confronted with her placement in the present, that confrontation with the ambiguity of past and present is a necessary step toward her present identity (223). She falls silent not because she is hysterical or deteriorating, but language itself is dissolving because it becomes inadequate in her subjectivity: "for it is probable that when people talk aloud, the selves (of which there may be more than two thousand) are conscious of dissection, and are trying to communicate but when communication is established there is nothing more to be said" (230). The book ends with Orlando's mature acknowledgment of ambiguity as the answer to those who demand concrete truths that can never be 'Truth.' Imagination blends with 'factual' history, and Orlando has finally grown to accept that she will never find the 'self' that society has made her want to find throughout her existence. Instead,



Orlando will remain comfortable with uncertainty and ambiguous interconnectivity. Everything has changed, yet nothing has changed – and Orlando is now free to live her own ambiguous existence with Shelmerdine.

While genre ambiguity has been suggested concerning the biographer's biased intrusions throughout the text, *Orlando* itself defies easy generic categorization. Readers have called the book a biography, an auto-biography, social criticism, political criticism, a bildungsroman, a roman a clef, picaresque, historical fiction, fantasy, satire, among other labels. Virginia Woolf herself called the text a novel, stating: "I'm glad to be quit this time of writing 'a novel'; and hope never to be accused of it again" (*AWD* 126).

Interestingly, most people refer to her earlier works as novels as well, although admittedly novels written with a poetic stream-of-conscious style. Woolf will later write:

I mean the situation is, this *Orlando* is of course a very quick brilliant book. Yes, *but I did not try to explore*. And must I always explore? Yes I think so still. Because my reaction is not the usual. Nor can I even after all these years run it off lightly. *Orlando* taught me how to write a direct sentence; taught me continuity and narrative and how to keep the realities at bay. But I purposely avoided of course any other difficulty....Well but *Orlando* was the outcome of a perfectly definitive, indeed overmastering, impulse. I want fun. I want fantasy. I want (and this was serious) to give things their caricature value (*AWD* 133-134, my emphasis).

Despite Woolf's intentions or her supposedly detached view of her creation, *Orlando* is anything but lacking in exploration. Although Woolf did not feel she was being exploratory in her writing process, she was certainly exploring ideas of ambiguity and the self. Furthermore, Woolf explicitly states her intention to mock 'reality' and all that is

'given' when she mentions fantasy and caricature.

In a letter from Virginia Woolf to Lady Cecil dated October 28, 1928, Woolf writes, “Why is *Orlando* difficult? It was a joke, I thought. Perhaps a bad one. I don't know. But I enjoyed writing it, and I should enjoy still more answering any questions about it, if put in person. I won't trust to the ink pot or the telephone” (*Letters* 553). J. J. Wilson refers to this letter in the title of his essay “Why is *Orlando* Difficult?” claiming that *Orlando* has been over-simplified and falsely labeled a roman a clef as well as having been read out of context, causing the book to “fizzle out, fall flat, and [be] too easily dismissed as a jeu d'esprit, ice/escapade” (170-171). Wilson offers the category of 'anti-novel' because it would allow *Orlando* the similarity to the novel form, but allowing the fantastical and freeing elements in their own right. Wilson states, “the 'anti-novel' would break away from conventions of the novel, playing against expectations of the reader” which supports his claim of *Orlando* being an 'anti-novel' because *Orlando* is “a fantasy serving to shatter some rigid, deadening mould of so-called 'actuality'”(174). This becomes the perfect genre for Woolf's plan to show everything in its caricature value.

Yet, if we use the theory of the novel that Bakhtin describes in his essay “Epic and Novel,” *Orlando* shows how it could more easily be accepted simply as one of various and differing examples of a novel. Bakhtin argues that because the novel form is so young, “the novel is the sole genre that continues to develop, that is as yet uncompleted” (3). This would make sense in relation to *Orlando*'s themes of continuity and its not

having a finale. Bakhtin feels the novel form is considerably unique because it “has no canon of its own, as do other genres; only individual examples of the novel are historically active, not a generic canon as such....studying the novel...is like studying languages that are not only alive, but still young” (3). I believe Woolf takes full advantage of this characteristic of the novel, and in particular her use of the novel form to stress her satire. As Bakhtin states, “In general any strict adherence to a genre begins to feel like a stylization, a stylization taken to the point of *parody*, despite the artistic intent of the author” (6). Bakhtin furthers his point:

...it is characteristic that the novel does not permit any of these various individual manifestations of itself to stabilize. Throughout its entire history there is a consistent parodying or travesty of dominant or fashionable novels that attempt to become models for the genre: parodies on the chivalric romance of adventure..., on the Baroque novel, the pastoral novel..., the Sentimental novel...and so forth. This ability of the novel to criticize itself is a remarkable feature of this ever-developing genre” (6).

*Orlando* concedes this point because the genres used to describe the book are themselves parodied throughout the text. For example, Woolf uses the genre of fantasy to parody notions of chivalry, patriarchy, and reality. Also, the bildungsroman is used satirically because in order for human growth, Orlando must 'grow' from a man into a woman. Included in his/her growth is the contribution of a society that is further parodied by Woolf. The pastoral and the sentimental are blended in Woolf's description of Orlando as 'nature's bride' when she becomes desperate to conform to Victorian feminine standards and is then rescued by Shelmerdine. And of course the most amusing parody would be

Woolf's use of biographical conventions, which I will broach shortly. But for now, my main point is that in accordance with Bakhtin's theory of the novel, a theory that allows for freedom and flexibility, laughter, irony, humor, self-parody, indeterminacy, and a 'hero' "who is evolving and developing, a person who learns from life" (10), *Orlando* fits comfortably into an ambiguous and open-ended portrayal of the novel form.

Woolf herself developed her own ideas of the novel form in essays written around the time she was writing *Orlando*. In "The Art of Fiction" (1927) Woolf urges both critics and novelists to step outside their comfort zone and "cut adrift from the eternal tea-table and the plausible and preposterous formulas which are supposed to represent the whole of our human adventure" (*AWE* 125). She continues with a warning: "But then the story might wobble; the plot might crumble; ruin might seize upon the characters. The novel, in short, might become a work of art" (125). Nancy Bazin argues that Woolf shows her appropriation of some dualisms, and in this case it is "the dual vision of the evanescent and the eternal and the need to bring the two into equilibrium" (44). Woolf's ambiguity (including the previously mentioned examples of androgyny) bring together this dualism into a kind of unity, although 'a kind of' because the idea of 'unity' is always problematic for Woolf because she stresses forms of multiplicity. In "Phases of Fiction" (1929) Woolf refers to ideas I have explored in relation to androgyny and societal expectations when she speaks of each readers' historical and social experiences and how the values created by these experiences make the reader read fiction in a certain direction, and she argues for a sort of blending of the personal with the universal (93-94). Woolf

completes her essay arguing that perhaps prose is “the instrument best fitted to the complexity and difficulty of modern life. And prose...is still so youthful that we scarcely know what powers it may hold concealed within it,” and therefore “it is possible that the novel in time to come may differ as widely from the novel of Tolstoy and Jane Austen as the poetry of Browning and Byron differs from the poetry of Lydgate and Spenser” (145). We can hear the obvious parallels between Woolf's view of the novel and Bakhtin's. It seems as though Woolf's frustration with the experimental 'novel' form of *Orlando* helped solidify a deeper respect for what one could accomplish with the novel and the genre's future possibilities in the 'modern' world.

While linking ideas of sex and fiction in *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf writes: when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth” (4). Woolf continues: “One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold. One can only give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker. Fiction here is likely to contain more truth than fact” (4-5). The ambiguity and blending of sexuality and fiction is important here because Woolf directly confronts the problem with perceived 'truths' and their alterations based on the biases of the speaker. 'Fact' and 'truth' are differentiated from each other because 'truths' hold some subjective value no matter how 'factual' they pretend to be. As Woolf asks, “What is meant by 'reality'? It would seem to be something very erratic, very undependable – now to be found in a dusty road, now in a scrap of newspaper in the street, now a daffodil in

the sun” (*AROO* 143). Genres that are primarily accredited with telling 'truths' are biographies and histories, both of which are labels placed on *Orlando*, and both of which are usually recognized as concerning dependable reality; however, Woolf parodies the usual seriousness and 'masculinity' contained within biographies and histories. Anna Snaith argues that the rethinking of biography as a problematic and ambiguous genre is crucial to Woolf's feminism: “Her redressing of patriarchal dominance was intimately linked to generic, stylistic, and conceptual revision. She felt that, as we see in *Orlando*, a written account of life may have a somewhat looser and more complex relationship to the life it is representing” (129). Snaith continues with Woolf's idea of a new form of biography when she alludes to the importance of blending what is perceived as 'truth' with the personal: “Fiction may play a part in that representation.... Woolf strains against the restrictions of the genre, longing to mix accuracy with imagination” (129). I find it no coincidence that Woolf writes her essay involving a new form of biography the same year she begins to think about her development of her own mock pseudo-biography.

In “The New Biography,” written in 1927, Woolf begins with a quote from Sir Sydney Lee: “The aim of biography is the truthful transmission of personality” (149). Woolf uses Lee's statement to help form her own theory of granite-like solidity of truth blending with the rainbow-like intangibility of personality. Woolf attempts to create an argument for the creation of a 'whole' out of these seemingly opposing concepts and asserts that facts must be manipulated in order for personality to show through (150). Her portrayal of Victorian biography is as pedantic as her depiction of Victorian notions

of sexuality as she describes the patriarchal and stereotypically 'masculine' way in which Victorian biographies have cared only for precise actions and not for the inner workings of the mind (150). Woolf felt that biography was concerned with death and past history without acknowledging continuity and the present, while the biography tried to maintain a false sense of objectivity; however, no biographer can maintain complete objectivity, and this is shown in Woolf's declaration that the Victorian biographer "was dominated by the idea of goodness. Noble, upright, chaste, severe; it is this that the Victorian worthies are presented to us" (151). We have seen this shown in *Orlando* when the narrator/biographer becomes embarrassed over Orlando's sex change and the implication that she is unchaste; however, when Orlando was a young boy without a perceived personality or individual history, the biography is happy "to record the life of such a one!" (12). Once Orlando becomes consumed by the imagination the biographer becomes defensive and actively separates himself from the silly frivolities of Orlando's sighing and dreaming. Furthermore, Orlando's biographer explicitly states that "we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which is the aim of every *good biographer* to ignore" (13, my emphasis); however, at the same time the biographer is implicitly showing his own judgment.

In addition, Woolf continues in "The New Biography" with the problem of the traditional biography and its lack of personality when she adds:

The conscientious biographer may not tell a fine tale with a flourish, but must toil through endless labyrinths and embarrass himself with countless documents. In the end he produces an amorphous mass...in which we go seeking disconsolately

for voice or laughter, for curse or anger, for any trace that this fossil was once a living man (151).

Woolf is pushing for the modern biographer to create biography as a piece of art by using the “best of both worlds”: substance and the freedom of fiction (152). As I have previously stated, Woolf saw much truth and substance in fiction itself – perhaps more so than in nonfiction. Similar to her views on sex, Woolf pronounces that the new biography should have “no fixed scheme of the universe, no standard of courage or morality to which [the biographers] insist that he shall conform” (153). She further advances a sort of substantive personal by calling for biographers to make gleeful pronouncements of personal and unique characteristics, which can often happen during a point of action. Woolf does, however, hint at the problems of mixing the truth of real life and the truth of fiction: “[The biographer] can only do it by using no more than a pinch of either. For though both truths are genuine, they are antagonistic; let them meet and they destroy each other” (154). She admits that the truth of fact and the truth of fiction are incompatible; however, she believes this difficulty should be broached because “the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than the act” (155). The biographer must now somehow develop ambiguity in the biography, “that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (155).

In 1938, Woolf would revise her ideas on biography in her essay “The Art of Biography” by admitting that “the combination [of fact and fiction] proved unworkable;



fact and fiction refused to mix (192); however, she provides a new argument with basically the same assertions described in “The New Biography.” Woolf still argues for a blending of fact and fiction, but she feels biography is itself too limited for such an art because “It imposes conditions, and those conditions are that it must be based upon fact. And by fact in biography we mean facts that can be verified by other people besides the artist” (192). The big difference between 'historical' or 'biographical' fact and the facts of science is that the facts of biography are “subject to changes of opinion; opinions change as the times change” (194). Here Woolf's argument is slightly flawed because theorists openly acknowledge how opinion changes scientific 'truths,' and Woolf seems to falter in her position that most Truths are merely historical moments that depend on societal readings; however, the reader can allow him/herself to reflect on the main argument at hand that “the biographer must go ahead of the rest of us, like the miner's canary, testing the atmosphere, detecting falsity, unreality, and the presence of obsolete conventions. His sense of truth must be alive and on tiptoe” (195). In other words, 'biographers must have a living, and therefore developing, sensibility while walking the fine line between reality and unreality. The stress here is placed on a sense of questioning things taken for granted *as* reality.

On September 22, 1928, Woolf writes of her frustration (however slightly comical it might be) that since she has called *Orlando* a biography, it has been placed on the designated 'Biography' shelf and therefore has reduced sales (and I would assume a very confused readership!) (*AWD* 130). Just like *Orlando's* biographer, people have

expectations and wish for things to fit neatly into their designated compartments.

According to Maria DiBattista, “what the objectivity of the biographer hides is the radical subjectivity and indeterminism that invariably attends the treatment of sex in social and political life and in fiction itself” (118). This may be so in most cases, but Woolf has created a biographer who is more 'real' in his fictionalization than most supposed 'objective' biographers and becomes frustrated when his biography is not allowed to follow the necessary rationally, linearly, and historically designated path of man's history.

*Orlando* eventually fails as a 'rational' and 'historical' biography because it is completely saturated in its ambiguity of both sex and genre, and therefore the text succeeds triumphantly in depicting Woolf's theory. Suzanne Raitt claims that “It is peculiarly appropriate that Woolf should have chosen to use biography, so quintessentially respectable a form, to explore new ways of writing lives and inscribing half-concealed relationships,” particularly in the creation of the female subject that had often been left out of biography (25). Woolf flips both gender and genre norms on their heads to create feelings of uncertainty for her readers and asks that we all question what we have been taught is 'natural,' 'normal,' or 'real.' Despite feminist debates concerning Virginia Woolf's feminist politics, I believe this process of questioning is in and of itself a political action. As Herbert Marder affirms, “In *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf...was lecturing on freedom; in *Orlando* she indulged in it” (110). Freedom of the individual self never comes easily, and it always involves questioning the obstacles placed in its path. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf herself states, “I find no noble

sentiments about being companions and equals and influencing the world to higher ends. I find myself saying briefly and prosaically that it is much more important to be oneself than anything else” (145), and there is no better way to find that self than by being not only comfortable in our ambiguity, but by making society see its own.

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