

“WHAT PHANTASMAGORIA THE MIND IS”:  
READING VIRGINIA WOOLF’S PARODY OF GENDER

Esther Sánchez-Pardo González  
*Universidad Complutense*  
esanchez\_pardo@filol.ucm.es

This essay will attempt to show how Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* acts as a parodic contestation against the late Victorian sexual codes prescribed and enforced upon individuals in the first decades of the twentieth century. Woolf’s conceptualisation of androgyny in *Orlando* (as a prelude to *A Room of One’s Own*) poses a major theoretical problem that this paper will address. The contradictory manly and womanly appearances of Orlando are resolved with the creation of an androgynous being whose gender is constantly mocked. Woolf’s fetishistic vision of a genderless being is a desire that supports her idea of the neutralization of gender. Together with androgyny, as a Bloomsbury intellectual, one of Woolf’s central concerns in *Orlando* turns out to be same sex love. The gender binary, the main foundation of heterosexuality, is deconstructed with a critical and subversive impulse similar to those present in Strachey, Wilde, Barnes, Lawrence, and Joyce.

KEY WORDS: androgyny, masquerade, neutralization of gender, parody, sexual change, same sex desire.

[I]t is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman—manly or man—womanly.  
Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

Virginia Woolf, like a good number of her critics, considered *Orlando* (1928) to be a minor work when compared with the rest of her literary production. Despite the success and large sales that followed the first printing of the book,<sup>1</sup> Woolf was never fully satisfied with it: “Orlando is of course a very quick brilliant book. Yes, but I did not try to explore. And must I always explore?” (qtd. Bell 1972: 251). Some recent studies, along with Leonard’s and Vita Sackville-West’s own opinions on the book, have nevertheless emphasized the originality of its style, as well as its innovative treatment of sexuality and gender. Quentin Bell acknowledged *Orlando* as the one novel by Virginia Woolf that comes closest to sexual, or rather to homosexual feeling. To consider overtly the issue of sexuality and its relation to gender, does not mean, however that erotic impulses have any implicit or explicit presence in the narrative. On the contrary, the seductive tone with

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1. Quentin Bell notes that “*Orlando* sold 8,104 copies in the first two months. Financial debts were at an end” (1972: 140).

which the narrator tells the story is devoid of sexual rapture. Sexuality is in absentia and its deferral shapes the narrative.

Androgyny is an issue that has been largely discussed by most of the critics that have studied Virginia Woolf's works under a feminist prism. *A Room of One's Own* (1929), the work following *Orlando*, is the essay that prompts the critical debate on androgyny. The sight of a couple getting into a taxi-cab and melting into London's flowing traffic suddenly triggers a fascinating analogy for the narrator: "For certainly when I saw the couple get into the taxi-cab the mind felt as if, after being divided, it had come together again in natural fusion. The obvious reason would be that it is natural for the sexes to co-operate. One has a profound, if rational instinct in favour of the theory, that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness" ([1929] 1989: 98). In her vision Woolf reorients feminism with a conciliatory gesture that considers difference fertile and heterogeneous instead of oppositional and univalent.

Both Toril Moi and Makiko Minow-Pinkney argue against Elaine Showalter's view on Woolf's androgyny for whom it represents an escape from the confrontation with femaleness or maleness.<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Abel agrees with Minow-Pinkney and Moi in considering Woolf a feminist. For Abel, Woolf "feminizes" the concept of androgyny: "Despite Woolf's declaration that 'some marriage of opposites has to be consummated,' she calls into question the heterosexual prototypes of women's literary maternity by never representing a marriage with the masculine, and by including no women in her list of androgynous writers" (Abel 1989: 108).

In her endeavour to write an essay about women and fiction, Woolf's first aim is of course to explain why the feminine voice has been silenced in the past in literature. Her essay adopts a subversive form that tries to emulate the hypothetical voice of a female writer who strives to find a place in the exclusive male dominated essayist genre.

In her attempt to rescue the feminine voice and explicate its nature, Woolf privileges the mention of women writers throughout the narrative and she articulates her concept of androgyny. Although "the women writers' list" aforementioned by Abel is not included in the chapter on androgyny, it is true that Woolf emphasizes women's silence in literature, as for instance, when she claims that "Elizabethan Literature would have been very different from what it is if the woman's movement had begun in the sixteenth century and not in the nineteenth" ([1929] 1989: 101). While Abel aptly demonstrates that Woolf privileges the appearance of the female voice, she fails to prove that her concept of androgyny is of a balanced nature.

It is important to point out that Woolf actually mentions male writers by contending that their uniqueness is due to their androgynous mind. Woolf indeed claims that "one must turn back to Shakespeare, for Shakespeare was androgynous, and so was Keats and Sterne and Cowper and Lamb and Coleridge" ([1929] 1989: 103). She even acknowledges Proust as "wholly androgynous, if not perhaps a little too much of a woman" ([1929] 1989: 103). Woolf's failure to cite any women writers reflects the exclusion of women from literature. Their absence is thus more pertinent than any possible inclusion, and it

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2. According to Minow-Pinkney, Showalter claims in *A Literature of Their Own* that "the false transcendence of 'sexual identity' entails 'evasions of reality' and of the 'female experience'" (Minow-Pinkney 1987: 12).

reflects a political commitment on the part of Woolf to claim recognition for the silenced women writers.

Moreover, Woolf openly states that androgyny does not originate when overemphasizing the feminine. As Abel wants to demonstrate, it begins when one unites the two sexes into one: "Coleridge certainly did not mean—argues Woolf—when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women . . . He meant perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided" ([1929] 1989: 98). Taking the former explanation as a starting point, it might be interesting to speculate on the sexual ontology of Woolf's androgynous being, since she never fully addresses the question. Carolyn Heilbrun (1985) tackles this issue in her essay on androgyny, and most of the aforementioned scholars, especially in their studies concerning *A Room of One's Own*.

It would seem that in spite of the fact that *Orlando* was only published one year before *A Room of One's Own*, most of the issues concerning sexuality were already raised by Woolf in her fantastic narrative. Such serious consideration of the sexual nature of the androgyne, may have been one of the factors that led Woolf to the realization that her narrative had turned out to be less whimsical than she expected. At the same time, an essential and engaging question that *Orlando* addresses concerns the ambiguous definition of androgyny that Woolf suggests in *A Room*, while claiming that the androgynous mind must be undivided. If the feminine and the masculine have to coexist, and there is no prevalence of any of the two, one might infer that they either neutralize each other, or that one of the two is foregrounded. It would then be interesting to consider Orlando's sexuality as governed by his/her gender and thus determine if he respectively behaves as a "man-womanly" and as a "woman-manly," or as a genderless being whose gendered sexuality has been neutralized.

After the theatrical scene describing a sham castration that announces Orlando's hypothetical sexual metamorphosis, sexual ambiguity becomes even more blatant. On the one hand, it is unclear whether Orlando's sexual change actually takes place or not. According to Freud, the girl's initiation into femininity is triggered by the Oedipus complex, which at the same time is preceded and provoked by the castration complex.<sup>3</sup>

If we consider that Orlando's process mirrors the little girl's development, because of Orlando's birth after his symbolical death, his sexual change never occurs because he never gets to confront the castration complex. This only proves that Orlando was already a woman in his previous life, or at least a man-womanly. The young Orlando is uncertain about his sex, because his sight of his own nakedness does not render visible gender difference. Orlando's inability to distinguish gender in the Other mirrors his subjective vision of himself. This double ambiguity is magnified in seeing Sasha for the first time, "the unknown skater came to a standstill. She was not a handsbreath off. She was a woman. Orlando stared; trembled; turned hot; turned cold" ([1928] 1993: 26).

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3. Freud argues, "Whereas in boys the Oedipus complex is destroyed by the castration complex, in girls it is made possible and led up to by the castration complex. This contradiction is cleared up if we reflect that the castration complex always operates in the sense implied in its subject-matter: it inhibits and limits masculinity and encourages femininity" (1925: 256).

The narrator exploits the gender ambiguities of both characters by strategically blending her voice with Orlando's, and thus creating confusion for the reader who might think that Orlando is the woman indeed. Woolf needs to persuade the reader of the fact that Orlando has become a woman, by emphasizing it, "Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it" ([1928] 1993: 98)—because the language betrays her, revealing one more ambiguous layer of meaning: "But 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" ([1928] 1993: 98).

Woolf's use of the plural is suspicious, because her hero has never lost his or her individuality. Orlando is not metamorphosed into two different beings, and Woolf is once more playing with the reader, since with the use of the plurals she is indeed pointing to an androgynous being who is now revealing the feminine side that Orlando the man had been concealing in his behaviour. The narrator ambiguously refers to Orlando's current sexual change as an action that is set in the past: "Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman" ([1928] 1993: 97). Both the past verb and the presence of the dash symbolically separate the confession of the narrator and the news' announcement by creating a temporal confusion that points once more to Orlando's originary androgyny.

While discussing this passage in her enlightening study about the role of the masquerade in *Orlando*, Jamie Hovey claims that "The mirror, the masculine 'himself,' and the narrator's apologetic reassurance that subsequent pronoun substitutions are 'for convention's sake' all suggest that Orlando is and has always been masquerading" (1997: 399). If Orlando "has always been masquerading" as she argues, Woolf's male hero masquerades as a woman, even when he strives to be a man, or Orlando is indeed a woman that masquerades as a man. The last hypothesis is interesting for she probably reinserts *Orlando* into the biographical genre, because it might represent Vita masquerading initially as a man, and as a woman in the second part of the narrative.

This paper, however, considers a third hypothesis by conceiving the idea of androgyny as a point of departure. *Orlando* might be Woolf's attempt to articulate androgyny before actually theorizing about it in *A Room of One's Own*. One might even speculate that it was precisely Vita's androgynous image that captivated Woolf so deeply, and that Vita's masculine two faceted image might have triggered her theory on androgyny. *Orlando* might, therefore, be the literary representation of Woolf's emerging theory on androgyny. In this case, Orlando's respective portraits as man and woman only illustrate that the androgyne is a man-womanly or a woman-manly. One sex always commands at least physically, in spite of the tight collaboration between both sexes.

Further in the narrative, Orlando's feminine development seems to be following symbolically the same sexual evolution that, according to Freud, any other woman would undergo. For Freud, female sexual development evolves through a masculine and a feminine period (1933: 126–28). Orlando shows thus "no signs of perturbation" at his/her transformation, which leads one to speculate that Orlando has not been deprived of his phallus yet.<sup>4</sup> She also undertakes an adventurous trip to join the gypsies, which might be

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4. Freud rarely uses the term "phallus," though he frequently uses the adjective "phallic." He analyses the phallic stage in which sexual difference is established and based on the phallic-castrated

considered as an endeavour that by eighteenth-century standards was most likely to be considered as a masculine action. It might seem thus that her behaviour is still more masculine than feminine. In the highly theatrical set that is arranged for the coronation after Orlando's appointment as Duke, most of the ornaments are sophisticated, excessive and sham, such as the "candelabras," "negroes in plush breeches," "pyramids of ice," "fountains of negus," "jellies made to represent His Majesty's ships," "swans made to represent water lilies" or "birds in golden cages" ([1928] 1993: 92). The presence of such glamorous decorative objects suggests and anticipates the ornaments of femininity that will be presented further in the narrative. The artistic ornaments that are set for the Duke's coronation are burnt in the insurrection and after his sexual transformation Orlando is left naked. Both the adornments and Orlando's garments drop as if they were announcing the end of the masquerade that has governed the coronation. The removal of symbolic veils is another irony of the narrator, because Orlando's sexual metamorphosis is followed by an extreme display of disguises and clothing apparels that help hide Orlando's sex.

Orlando begins displaying signs of the masquerade that according to Joan Riviere functions in the production of femininity. In the repeatedly quoted passage of Riviere's paper on masquerade, the author states that femininity and masquerade are equivalent terms of the enigmatic equation posed by Freud. The unknown factor of the equation is Freud's crucial question on the essence of the feminine, what he, following Goethe, calls the "ewige Weibliche," and that Riviere seems not to solve: "The reader may now ask how I define womanliness or where I draw the line between genuine womanliness and the masquerade. My suggestion is not, however, that there is any such difference, whether radical or superficial, they are the same thing. The capacity for womanliness was there in this woman—as one might even say it exists in the most completely homosexual woman—but owing to her conflicts it did not represent her main development, and was used far more as a device for avoiding anxiety than as a primary way of sexual enjoyment" (1929: 306).

Femininity is theatrical for Riviere. Her concept of femininity conceptualizes women as the Elizabethan theatre once did. Men with disguises simulating femininity, recreating thus a world of appearances where the real feminine essence does not exist.

In her aforementioned essay on *Orlando*, Hovey articulates an interesting argument on masquerade where she argues that Orlando's white and "respectable" femininity is indeed a behavioral mask that covers her masculine ego and bisexuality, which in turn are displaced onto "racial others." The concept of masquerade invades nevertheless the narrative at different symbolical levels in addition to racial and national aspects, such as Hovey has persuasively demonstrated.

Woolf describes Orlando as she steals "a hen's egg now and then"—although the author excuses her for she "always put a coin or a pearl in place of it" ([1928] 1993: 100). A very sophisticated action emerges hidden among the completion of numerous masculine tasks such as herding cattle, treading the grapes, or drinking from the goat-skin. The pearl necklace, which is a clear reference to Vita, is the only allusion to femininity, and a symbol

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distinction. We owe to Lacan the elaboration and circulation of the concept "phallus," used to emphasize the symbolic significance taken on by the penis in the process of accession to the Symbolic. The phallus comes to be an abstract signifier in Lacanian theory (see Lacan 1982: 74–85).

of it. The pearls shine with all their glamour such as femininity does, although compared to the eggs they are false and useless. The eggs symbolize fertility, whereas Orlando only possesses infertile pearls that in some way epitomize the ornamental character of femininity over its reproductive function.

Orlando's femininity is so unstable that it even provokes physical changes, since she is suddenly described as a woman that has "dark hair and a dark complexion" ([1928] 1993: 100). Despite the fact that Orlando's physical description is never very accurate, in one of the few instances where Woolf reveals her hero's physical traits, Orlando is depicted with a white forehead. Femininity needs disguises for its deployment. In this instance, it sprouts easily with an ephemeral physical disguise, one that does not correspond to any of Orlando's portraits, or is ever again mentioned in the text.

Once more, fantastical and unreal transformations are associated with Orlando's changes of gender. Orlando has fits of nostalgia during her spiritual retreat among the gypsies. The dry and hot barren Turkish land turns into Knole's garden. Orlando is strongly identified with Knole, and the house sometimes takes a life of its own, reflecting thus Orlando's spirit. The geography of her body is also undergoing a transformation.

Orlando's whimsical vision precedes the scene where she first becomes aware of her own feminine sexuality: "At any rate, it was not until she felt the coil skirts about her legs and the Captain offered . . . to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realized with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position" ([1928] 1993: 108). Orlando's body and conscience are still dissociated, and her sexual awareness is triggered by the masculine other while she discovers the sexual snares typically associated with women "nothing is more heavenly than to resist and to yield, to yield and to resist" ([1928] 1993: 109). Woolf ironically presents her heroine in the process of masquerading as a woman.

Dresses play a very important part in concealing or accentuating Orlando's femininity. In her attempt to prove the similarities between masquerade and fetishism as two pathologies that articulate the use of veils or clothing to conceal hidden desires, Emily Apter goes back to nineteenth-century French authors to show the creation of feminine stereotypes that were later, according to Apter, reappropriated by psychoanalytic theory. The definition of "femininity" that Apter selects from a theoretical essay on femininity by Edmond de Goncourt bears striking similitudes with Woolf's own conception of Orlando's femininity: "Applied to the intangible qualities of a woman's innermost being, "femininity" emerges as an essentialist label that subordinates subtle permutations of psychological sensibility to outward clichés of women's culture fixed by mid-century convention" (1991: 69)

Sartorial evolution runs parallel to Orlando's sexual changes. Orlando's clothes are rarely described in his life as a man, since he is only depicted when dressing for the Queen. Clothes play, however, a very important role in Orlando's portrait as a woman. As it has been pointed out previously, both clothing and the male figure provoke Orlando's awareness of her femininity. Woolf's self-consciousness about her dressing style and her admiration of Vita's is well-known. Despite Vita's mastery of the feminine art of accoutrement, Orlando is nevertheless portrayed as a woman who often feels certain uneasiness about her feminine attire.

Her dresses conceal sexual impulses in most cases. When Orlando first appears as a woman, she is dressed in a sensual skirt that shows her legs and arouses the sailor's desire, "These skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. Yet the stuff (flowered

paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world" ([1928] 1993: 109). Orlando seems to be behaving here as a clothes fetishist who prefers aesthetic display to practical concerns. While discussing a case of a clothes fetishist male patient, Freud claims that women are generally clothes fetishists and he argues that both pathologies are caused by the repression of the same drive. The fetishist's desire is to see what clothes hide and in the case of the woman, Freud defines fetishism as "the passive form of allowing oneself to be seen" (1988: 156).

Orlando clearly seems to be experiencing the same fetishistic desire, and her wish for the gaze of the other might be caused by her yearning to see her sex acknowledged. For femininity is depreciated by the narrator, it needs to be idealized with the depiction of a woman beautifully dressed, and therefore idealized, "As the Middle Ages began to repress sensuality and to degrade women, it was only possible to do so with the simultaneous idealization of the mother as the Virgin Mary," argues Freud (1988: 156). Orlando's idealized image of beauty is emphasized by the richness and colourfulness of her garments. In one of the clearest scenes where masquerading and exhibitionist drives are played out, the narrator disrobes and dresses Orlando as if peeling some fruit and making a garnish: "Then since pearls do not show to advantage against a morning gown of sprigged cotton, she changed to a dove-grey taffeta; thence to one of peach bloom; thence to a wine coloured brocade. Perhaps a dash of powder was needed, and if her hair were disposed—so—about her brow, it might become her" ([1928] 1993: 130). Orlando is thus simultaneously veiled and unveiled, losing and uncovering her femininity while fully displaying her sensuality.

The arrival of the nineteenth century obliges Orlando to wear a crinoline, the most troublesome accessory. "So she stood mournfully . . . dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted . . . None had ever so impeded her movements" ([1928] 1993: 168). Despite the fact that the effect of the crinoline is not so sensual as the flowing movement caused by other fabrics and colors of past dresses, Apter argues in her essay that the crinoline was described in nineteenth century French literature as a highly sexual accessory. As Apter acknowledges, "the French writer Rétif de la Bretonne like no other writer appreciated the inherently fetishistic nature of the prosthetic appendages favored by eighteenth-century fashion. Many of his texts sexualized the extremities of the female anatomy and its sartorial extrusions: corsets, crinolines, and, most especially shoes" (1991: 71). The crinoline is also sexualized in Orlando's case, for she blushes for it as she would in front of her husband: "The blushes came and went with the most exquisite iteration of modesty and shame imaginable. One might see the spirit of the age blowing, now hot, now cold, upon her cheeks. And if the spirit of the age blew a little unequally, the crinoline being blushed for before the husband, her ambiguous position must excuse her" ([1928] 1993: 162).

On the one hand, the crinoline also emphasizes sexual ambiguity. The lack of gender discrimination is symbolized by the fluctuating movement of the temperature and the blushes' tempo. It is also insinuated by Orlando's "ambiguous position." On the other hand, the crinoline conceals sexuality more efficiently than any other accessory, for it deforms the body shape.

There is thus a constant parody of femininity, which emerges out of the narrative, as a prosthetic appendage—as if it were one of the nineteenth century accessories described by Rétif de la Bretonne—and as such it deforms, conceals and creates the idea of a woman. A grotesque pantomime that points, as all masquerades do, to the camouflage of the

phallus, for considering femininity as a covering, requires a presence underneath which can only be taken by the phallus.

While opening her prayer book, Orlando develops her own spirituality. The three objects that are hidden between the pages of the book become spiritual fetishes that absorb Orlando's gaze and thoughts: "Hair, pastry, tobacco—of what odds and ends are we compounded . . . What phantasmagoria the mind is and meeting place of dissemblables" ([1928] 1993: 125). The three objects are substitutes for a sacred writing that Orlando acknowledges and disavows. It recalls the possibility of her own writing. Because of its length and the spiritual fervor with which she approaches her task, her own work also tends towards sacralization. By trying to bury her book as if it were the body of the beloved, she attempts to consecrate her own work in a symbolic act of religious internment: "I bury this as a tribute . . . a return to the land of what the land has given me" ([1928] 1993: 225).

Love also takes an androgynous shape. In his first encounter with the Archduchess Harriet Griselda, Orlando is anxious to recover Shasha's lost love, and misconstrues his feelings for the Archduchess. Love is thus compared to a two-headed bird: "For love has two faces; one white, the other black; two bodies; one smooth, the other hairy. It has two hands, two feet, two tails, two, indeed, of every member and each one is the exact opposite of the other. Yet, so strictly are they joined together that you cannot separate them" ([1928] 1993: 82). As death and life make a unity, love and hate become also one, and beings possess feminine and masculine characteristics. These conceptualizations seem to establish Woolf as a precursor, for she tries to escape the vision of difference that is based on the concept of opposition, and fights for breaking the ontological boundaries between opposites by uniting them.

Orlando prefers sexual ambiguity and indeterminacy to deception, and thus rejects the Archduke's love, but admits Shel and Shasha whose sexual ambiguity parallels hers. In the game of ambiguity, deception plays a very important role. In her meeting with the prostitute, Orlando is cross-dressed as a man, and at the same time Mistress Nell tries to hide her social class, "the pains which the poor creature had been at to decorate her room and hide the fact that she had no other deceived Orlando not a moment" ([1928] 1993: 150).

In their encounter both Nell and Orlando are playing with their roles, Nell with her social class and Orlando with her sexual role. Such a game emphasizes the artificiality of genders and makes them comparable to social classes. Orlando becomes so enthralled by her own game that her hidden masculine sexual feelings arise: "To feed her hanging lightly like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one" ([1928] 1993: 150). Masculinity becomes in this particular case as volatile as femininity. Orlando's awareness of both sexes is always triggered by the presence of the opposite sex. Gender becomes thus a mask that can be worn at one's own convenience, and Woolf does not make a distinction between the two sexes. In spite of this generalization that takes both genders into account, it is important to bear in mind that gender dissolution takes place in the feminine realm, even if masculinity is also depreciated and aborted very often during Orlando's life as a man. Masculinity is not shattered so intensely and overtly as femininity, for its failure is concealed, whereas femininity is openly satirized.

To try to solve the dilemma posed by this differentiated articulation of the two opposite sexes is certainly very tempting, and one could throw several hypothesis that might help to understand such a fascinating enigma. It is clear that open discussions of lesbian love



would not have escaped the censors, as it would later be proved by the trial on *The Well of Loneliness*. As Jane Marcus notes: "Woolf thought that *The Well of Loneliness* was a 'meritorious dull book' but joined vigorously in the protest at its suppression. Possibly she felt guilty that she had escaped the censors with her own comic treatment of sexuality in *Orlando*" (1987: 210).

Woolf would without any doubt attract a feminine audience who would be able to read between the lines. If Woolf wanted nevertheless to attract also a masculine audience she might have to make some concessions. If one takes into account that according to Marcus, "In [Sackville-West's] poems, as in Vita Sackville-West and Woolf's lives, the space for lesbian experience is provided by men . . . [and] in their lives by supportive and understanding husbands" (1987: 15), then one can argue that to please men was as important a task, as to please women. One must also bear in mind that Leonard Woolf's image must have been present in Woolf's mind during her creative process for, according to Marcus, "[Woolf] needed his praise and approval of her work" (1987: 105).

It is nevertheless the idea of femininity, and not femininity itself that Woolf mocks and nullifies. She might indeed be criticizing the concept of femininity as it was conceptualized then by early twentieth century discourses on women. In this sense, Woolf refuses to discuss femininity in Riviere's terms, and exaggerating and satirizing the discourse on femininity, she also rejects it. Many scholars have argued that femininity is at last saved at the end of the narrative once Orlando becomes a woman, and gives voice to her poem. I would like to argue, nevertheless, that both Orlando's fragmented identity and the dismembered sensorial realm where the action takes place at the end of the narrative prevent Orlando's complete initiation into womanhood. On the contrary, sexual boundaries are effaced, and Woolf's reconciliatory fantasy of transcending sexual difference and reaching the neutralization of sex becomes manifest.

Orlando and Bonthrop's wedding ceremony is celebrated in a very expeditious way. The wedding might also trigger the fragmentation of sexual identities, or at least its confirmation for it existed before. As a modern heroine Orlando reads the street signs: "Amor Vin—that was over a porch . . . Applejohn and Applebed, Under—Nothing could be seen whole or read from start to finish" ([1928] 1993: 212). The two clear references to love and death respectively, could express that the path of love that Orlando has just reached might prevent her from attaining death.<sup>5</sup> The blending of both allusions reciprocally need each other to complete the full sense of Woolf's pun. The love "takers" will conquer all. Once more, opposites need each other to be meaningful.

All the elements orchestrating the narrative at this point represent a chaotic reality, and a shattered structure. Systems that were structured once are henceforth demolished, for the streets are swarming with cars, thoughts assault Orlando unexpectedly, and books lie pell-mell in Orlando's house. There is a lack of space and it seems as if all systems and entities were going to explode and have their elements expand in other spaces. Gender is also constricted and it explodes, no longer a univalent category. "Nothing is any longer one thing" ([1928] 1993: 210), says Orlando while looking at the buses that remind her of the ice blocks on the Thames.

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5. "Amor Vin—" is the beginning of the latin maxim 'amor vincit omnia' (love conquers all) and Applejohn and Applebed are undertakers.

The end of the narrative creates a character that is haunted by the past, and one feels that the ending of the text is also the end of Orlando's life. The fragmentation of reality culminates with the sensorial hallucination that Orlando suffers during the last moments of her life as a character. Apparently, Orlando recovers her senses, although she is finally portrayed as Woolf's fetishistic fantasy, for she is reduced to the glow of her eyes. Orlando shines, "robed in silver" as Woolf's genderless being, a non-entity for it is sexless and genderless. Woolf's *Orlando* might then solve the enigma that the author raised in *A Room of One's Own*, when she resolved the feminist quest with her fascinating and ambiguous concept of androgyny. Toril Moi (1985) has suggested that the stylistic playfulness of *A Room*, points towards the dissolution of the subject, and hence of the category of gender: "Through her conscious exploitation of the sportive nature of language, Woolf rejects the metaphysical essentialism underlying patriarchal ideology, which hails God, the Father or the phallus as its transcendent signified. But Woolf does more than practice a non-essentialist form of writing. She also reveals a deeply skeptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity" (1985: 9).

It seems that *Orlando's* ideological frame evolves towards a similar goal. The impossibility to attain masculinity and the parody of femininity invalidates the generic possibility that is always seen as a social construct, or as a performative act. Throughout the narrative, ironically, the change of sex does not involve a change of gender. Gender is described as a cultural process that has to be learned, and is not inherent to sex. Woolf's and Judith Butler's views on the relation between sex and gender share a common theoretical ground. As Butler argues, gender is a social practice and thus is not prior to subjectivation, "Subjected to gender, but subjectivated by gender, the 'I' neither precedes nor follows the process of this gendering, but emerges only within and as a matrix of gender relations themselves" (1993: 7). Gender is also a learned process inserted into a historically specific cultural context, "The appearance of an abiding substance or gendered self, what the psychiatrist Robert Stoller refers to as 'gender core,' is thus produced by the regulation of attributes along culturally established lines of coherence" (1990: 24). Indeed, feminine and masculine roles are seen as theatrical parts. As Woolf puts it, "In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigor and then fell into natural discourse" ([1928] 1993: 126). Woolf's fetishistic vision of the genderless being seems to prevail to nourish feminism and her own ideal vision of androgyny.

To conclude, Woolf's *Orlando* is much more complex than an essence one can move or mask. What I mean by this is that neither the body of a man nor the body of a woman can represent adequately what a woman is, since women have been systematically written out of discourse. What Woolf does in order to represent the unrepresentable is play with performance. This play extends as well to other areas—the temporal disruption, the pose of the biography, the fake index, and so forth. In Luce Irigaray's terms, Woolf has Orlando "assume the feminine role deliberately" in order "to try to recover the place of [woman's] exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it" ([1977] 1985b: 76). The change from man to woman shows the space of "woman" to have always already been occupied by "man."

If we agree with Irigaray that the paradigm for all sexual pleasure is masculine, then there is no place for Orlando to entertain same sex love, just as there is no place for the representation of same sex desire. Irigaray suggests that in the context of phallogocentric discourse, female homosexuality would remain "obliterated, travestied—transvestized—

and withdrawn from interpretation" ([1974] 1985a: 101). The reality of the social policy of the body must be taken into account; the body will be regulated particularly in terms of how it conducts itself in matters of love.

Woolf seems to argue that same sex desire has been present throughout history. Unable to be articulated on its own terms, it has appeared veiled. Under one of its many masks, in the marginalia of literary history, Woolf's fantasized utopia of androgyny remains a crucial attempt to represent the unrepresentable.

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