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# Sex, Gender, and Androgyny in Virginia Woolf's Mock-Biographies "Friendships Gallery" and Orlando

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SEX, GENDER, AND ANDROGYNY  
IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S  
MOCK-BIOGRAPHIES  
"FRIENDSHIPS GALLERY" AND *ORLANDO*

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ABSTRACT

This is an examination of sex, gender, and androgyny in Virginia Woolf's "Friendships Gallery" and *Orlando*. These texts, written twenty years apart, highlight Woolf's development as a feminist who seeks to obliterate the assumed sex and gender binary. She accomplishes this through a mock biography format. Her first attempt highlights the androgynous nature of the main character Violet, whereas in *Orlando* her message of the constrictive nature of an assumed link between sex and gender is far more emphatically proven through the utilization of the titular character undergoing a biological sex change that ultimately leaves his/her gender unaffected.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

As a predominant figure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century Modernist literary movement, Virginia Woolf is renowned for her stylistic innovativeness. Woolf's experimentation with her linguistic approach to conveying a story or character not only flouted the pre-conceived expectations of Victorian literature, but those of Victorian society as well. As Woolf questioned and toyed with the traditional stylistic approach to biographies, which typically progressed chronologically and highlighted relatively predictable "key" life events, she was simultaneously exploring the relevance of sex and gender as fixed characteristics. This examination, and eventual dissent, from tradition culminated in Woolf's assertion that the traditional biography was severely limited in its ability to represent a person as a whole, just as binary sex/gender expectations were severely limited in their ability to truly encapsulate an individual's identity. Woolf's work regarding biography and sex/gender identity intersected in "Friendships Gallery" and *Orlando*. These works were composed about two decades apart, thereby providing ample fodder to compare the development and refinement of Woolf's ideas regarding the limitations of biographies as well as her perception of sex and gender being exclusive

characteristics that are not inherently dependant on each other. It is my intent to show Woolf's digression from tradition in the aforementioned works and highlight the more fluid notions of biography, sex, and gender that she wished to supplant tradition with, as evidenced through her work.

Virginia Woolf published three books whose subtitle read "A Biography," all of which cannot be comfortably classified as biographies in the traditional sense. *Orlando: A Biography* (1928), *Flush: A Biography* (1933), and *Roger Fry: A Biography* (1940) each contained biographical elements combined with the creative nuances commonly associated with Woolf's writing. *Orlando* spans approximately four hundred years as it recounts the life of the protagonist who incidentally changes sex midway through the work. *Flush* was written as a stream of consciousness piece from the perspective of Flush, the dog owned by Elizabeth Barrett Browning. Conversely, *Roger Fry* was written, classified, and accepted as an actual biography, although this contention does not remain unchallenged due to Woolf's stylistic approach that was divergent from that of most Victorian biographers. As noted by Frances Spalding in *Virginia Woolf: Paper Darts: the Illustrated Letters* "[Woolf's] novelistic skills worked against her talent as a biographer, for her impressionistic observations jostled uncomfortably with the simultaneous need to marshal a multitude of facts" (139-140).

Woolf's deviance from the stereotypical construct of biographies as a means to highlight the concept of biographical limitations, among other things, was not an idea exclusively contained and challenged within these novels; Woolf broached this idea in numerous essays, notably including "The New Biography" as well. Despite the fact that Woolf had numerous essays devoted to exploring the nature and ramifications of

biographical style and presentation prior to her publication of *Orlando*, I would suggest that Woolf's text "Friendships Gallery," a rarely discussed story written in mock biographical form, is actually the greatest precursor to her writing in *Orlando* and functioned as an early attempt to hone in on her presentation of the traditional biography as an absurd notion that she attempts to supplement with a grandiose hybrid of fact and fiction. Although Woolf mused about the inherent limitations of traditional biographies and reflected on the difficult nature of embodying in words the true nature of a multi-faceted human, "Friendships Gallery" allowed her a forum to facetiously expose these limitations through their ironic implementations, as she would twenty years later in *Orlando*.

Perhaps even more significantly than their similar classification as mock biographies, "Friendships Gallery" also highlights Woolf's emergence into the world as a feminist as she begins to explore, although far more tentatively than in *Orlando*, the notion of gender as an ambiguous and often fluid notion. In "Friendships Gallery," Violet, the protagonist, defies many firmly established gender expectations implemented and normalized throughout England's Victorian era. Written twenty years later, the titular protagonist in *Orlando* continues to defy preconceived gender expectations through his characteristics, actions, and reactions to other, oftentimes gender flouting, characters. Midway through the novel Woolf offers a more direct challenge to the notion that sex and gender are intrinsically linked and determined by biology by having Orlando emerge from a great sleep as a woman. This biological transformation serves to radically sever the presumed connection between sex and gender by keeping Orlando's gender identity gloriously intact even when his penis was nowhere to be found. This separation



of sex and gender ultimately results in Woolf's characters embracing an androgynous harmony in which characteristics and sexual attractions are individually and internally manifested, as opposed to the standard societal imposition of external expectations determined exclusively through the biological sexing of an individual. It is my belief that Woolf used both "Friendships Gallery" and *Orlando* as vehicles to methodically undermine the stereotypically accepted expectations regarding sex, gender, and androgyny through her intentional ironic presentation of these societal expectations and her ultimate deconstruction of them. Just as a formulaic approach to determining gender attributes based off of sex is short-sighted and categorically inaccurate and limiting, so is a formulaic approach to penning a biography. In both cases adhering to a traditional approach and set of expectations greatly limits a person's ability to accurately understand and/or portray the nuances and idiosyncratic attributes of an individual.

A comparison of the two works is worthy of further study due to the fact that *Orlando* (1928) and "Friendships Gallery" (1907) are so similar in premise that they provide fertile ground for the exploration of Woolf's development as a writer and of her personal philosophies, particularly those regarding the inevitable limitations of the written word, sex, gender, and androgyny. The academic exploration that I am undertaking will be nestled amongst the vast dissection of *Orlando*, yet will be forging a new trail based off of the fact that "Friendships Gallery" is a largely unexplored and often overlooked piece of work in Virginia Woolf's vast writing career. Many critics have hailed *Orlando* as a revolutionary work that was a break from literary tradition and Virginia Woolf's personal style of writing. Instead, it is significant to note that twenty years prior to the publication of *Orlando*, Woolf had already begun toying with the

notion that sex and gender were not intrinsically linked in a very similar format and fashion in her mock biography “Friendships Gallery.” Although *Orlando* was a commercial success and regarded as a defining piece of literature in Woolf’s career, it was far from a spontaneous revelation. The ideas of disconnecting sex and gender in a fantastical biography had been an artistic concept and approach that Woolf was actually refining, based off of her earlier foray, not experimenting with for the first time.

Judith Butler’s discussion of sex and gender essentially disengages the misguided notion that sex and gender are intrinsically linked to each other in the stereotypical construct which is understood to be that a male has a masculine gender, whereas a female possesses a feminine gender. Butler asserts that there is no necessary connection between a person’s sex and gender. In the article “Variations on Sex and Gender: Beauvoir, Wittig, and Foucault”, Butler describes gender as a “choice.” This description doesn’t fall under the typical notion of choice meaning a conscious decision. Instead she defines it by stating that, “...[t]o choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that organizes them anew. Less a radical act of creation, gender is a tacit project to renew one’s cultural history in one’s own terms. This is not a prescriptive task we must endeavor to do, but one in which we have been endeavoring all along.” Butler’s interpretation of gender, similar to the notion of gender being presented by Woolf, is of an intrinsic identity that is unique to each individual, largely shaped and influenced by societal norms, but a source of potential empowerment when a full exploration and acceptance of one’s gender identity is undertaken and utilized as a means of promulgating acceptance and advancing an erosion of the hetero normative standards being promoted by the masses.

In *Gender Trouble* Butler further explores the sex and gender debate within her theory of performativity:

Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender. (37)

Although a person does not choose their own gender, and a person's sex does not determine their gender, gender is (according to Butler) something that each person is born with already determined. Despite each person's established gender identity, each individual has to determine how their gender identity, whether it adheres to societal norms or not, will be presented to the world within the largely hetero normative framework that has been typically established by society. In discussing the construct of compulsory heterosexuality, Butler suggests that the foundation of gender can be disrupted, although she does not offer a practical instance describing how this phenomena could occur, "...[t]he task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat, or, indeed to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to displace the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (148). In both "Friendships Gallery" and *Orlando* Woolf establishes fantastic and surreal scenarios which allow "...the very gender norms that enable repetition itself" to be disrupted. Woolf recognized that the perceived dependence of gender determination upon biological sex was ridiculous, yet temporally existed in an era that did not provide a fertile atmosphere to foster lasting substantial change with regards to the interpretation of sex and gender. In response to this environmental limitation, Woolf created a fictional atmosphere in which she could subvert the hetero

normative assumptions and could effectively divorce gender from sex in its inherent construct within her works and in the lives of her protagonists.

## CHAPTER II

### “FRIENDSHIPS GALLERY”

“Friendships Gallery” was written as a private gift to Violet Dickinson in approximately 1907. Woolf asked for it back numerous times and was quite distraught when Dickinson did not keep her confidence and shared the lovely little gift story that was typed in violet ink and bound in purple leather with some of her friends. As succinctly described by Hermione Lee, “Friendships Gallery” was “...the mythologized life of Violet...” that “...begins with the birth and measuring of a baby, continues with a parody of female upbringing, and develops into the life of a single woman who builds her own house and says ‘I’m very happy alone.’ Its coda is a story told to make children sleep, of the two Sacred Princesses whose preferred form of worship is to be shown ‘your Babies in their Baths,’ whom they bless” (231). Although thoughtfully prepared and clearly edited as determined by the relatively clean manuscript, Woolf was still conscious of what she considered to be an unfinished, immature, and imperfect work.

“Friendships Gallery” remained a largely overlooked, yet nevertheless important, work which provides striking similarities to the structure, theme, and presentation of *Orlando*. Karin E. Westman published the most comprehensive examination of the two

works to date in an article, “The First *Orlando*: The Laugh of the Comic Spirit in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Friendships Gallery’” in *Twentieth-Century Literature* (2001). This piece focuses on, as stated by Westman, “...three ways in which this early comic sketch anticipates *Orlando* and the feminist concerns of Woolf’s later work...” (41). The elements of “Friendships Gallery” that she assesses to support her theory are Woolf’s narrative style, usage of the notion of comic spirit, and the narrative form. Although I generally agree with Westman’s over-arching ideas, I feel that Woolf’s philosophical development regarding the notion of gender and her ability to ironically criticize an accepted institution is where my ideas shift focus from Westman’s. My thesis will rest comfortably beside her ideology, while simultaneously expanding the current dialogue regarding Woolf studies. It is my contention that Woolf used both “Friendships Gallery” and *Orlando* as vehicles to challenge the generally accepted societal conventions regarding sex, gender, and androgyny utilizing the framework of a mock biography as the forum for both. In both of these fantastical narratives, the main characters demolish preconceived gender roles and achieve fantastic things, whether it be independence, super human feats, or a longevity that spans centuries.

Violet Dickinson, to whom “Friendships Gallery” was written as a gift for, was initially introduced to Woolf through her Duckworth siblings, most likely Stella, with whom Violet had an established friendship. Violet was a unique woman, particularly considering the conventions of her contemporaries both temporally and economically. Violet was the daughter of wealthy landowners and maintained substantial amounts of upper crust social connections throughout her lifetime. Vanessa Curtis, author of *Virginia Woolf’s Women*, states that she, “...had no need to work for a living, residing

comfortably with her brother, Ozzie, in a house at Manchester Square and a cottage, Burnham Wood, near Welwyn, which she had designed and built herself. Never marrying, she cheerfully advocated spinsterhood and retained total independence throughout her long life” (79). Violet’s lack of concern regarding her unmarried status, her willingness to partake in activities generally reserved for men (design and construction among others), and her formidable size (she stood around six feet tall) made her a strikingly unusual woman and an indispensable influence in Virginia Woolf’s life.

Woolf and Dickinson were significant players in each other’s lives for decades. In *Virginia Woolf: A Biography* written by Quentin Bell, Woolf’s nephew, the interactions between Dickinson and Woolf, and the influence derived from their relationship, was described as “...chiefly moral and, when other and more remarkable people came into Virginia’s life, passion slowly faded into kindness. One must think of this friendship as an affair of the heart, where I think that it in fact remained; while the affair was at its height, that is to say from about 1902 to 1907, it was intense” (84). As the two women were just getting to know each other Woolf tried to capture Dickinson’s essence in a short biographical sketch. According to another Woolf biographer, Hermione Lee, Woolf wrote this sketch of Dickinson as “Aunt Maria” in 1902. At 21 years old Woolf seemed to be perceptively circling the qualities that made Dickinson unique without being able to fully articulate why she was intrigued with this woman:

We... showed her to her room & left her to dust her long travel-stained limbs. She came down to dinner in flowing & picturesque garments- for all her height, & a certain comicality of face, she treats her body with dignity. She always wore suitable & harmonious clothes- though she made no secret of the fact that they had lived through more seasons than one. Indeed she was singularly unreserved in many ways; always talking and laughing & entering into whatever was going on with a most youthful

zeal. It was only after a time that one came to a true estimate of her character- that one saw that all was not cheerfulness & spirits by any means- She had her times of depression, & her sudden reserves; but it is true that she was always quick to follow a cheerful voice. In that lies much of her charm-... To a casual observer she would appear, I think, a very high spirited, rather crazy, harum scarum sort of person- whose part in life was [to] be slightly ridiculous, warmhearted & calculated to make the success of any kind of party. She has a very wide circle of acquaintances mostly of the landed & titled variety in whose country houses she is forever staying- & with whom she seems very popular. She is 37- & without any pretense to good looks, -which she knows quite well herself, & lets you know too- even going out of her way to allude laughingly to her gray hairs, & screw her face into the most comical grimaces. But an observer who would stop here, putting her down as one of those cleverish adaptable ladies of middle age who are welcome everywhere, & not indispensable anywhere- such an observer would be superficial indeed. (Bell 82-83; Lee 162)

Woolf's observation that the perception of Dickinson as a benign socialite, who flits from social engagement to social engagement, is an inaccurate and shallow misreading of her character is astute, yet Woolf simultaneously lacks the appropriate language, or perhaps evidence, to express why this classification would in fact be so dreadfully wrong, although she does note that it would be superficial.

Throughout the duration of their most intense interactions (1902-1907) Woolf convalesced with Dickinson after a mental breakdown; Dickinson helped the entire Woolf family when Leslie Stephens, Woolf's father, was suffering from cancer; and the two women maintained a mutual and steady flow of letters back and forth. It is within these letters that the nature of their relationship becomes most clear. As described by biographer Hermione Lee, "Virginia's intimacy with Violet was playfully erotic from the beginning of their correspondence. The teasing jokes, the demands for attention, the confiding secrets, were part of an extortionate appeal for petting and mothering. Violet was her 'woman'" (164-165). Their correspondence was formal and tenuous at first and



slowly developed into an affectionate banter that included Woolf regularly referring to Dickinson as “my woman” or “my beloved woman” and often depicting herself as a lovable, caressable, needy, furry little creature that greatly desired the attention of Dickinson. Woolf herself categorized their relationship as a “romantic friendship” in a letter tentatively dated 4 May 1903; “Your letters come like balm on the heart. I really think I must do what I have never done- try to keep them. I’ve never kept a single letter all my life- but this romantic friendship ought to be preserved” (75). Woolf ultimately did not end up keeping the letters from Dickinson although their relationship, in varying forms, was maintained for the duration of Woolf’s life.

Throughout their correspondence there were countless sexual allusions and references to Woolf’s seemingly insatiable desire for affection and attention from her beloved Dickinson. In a letter presumed to be from October or November of 1902 Woolf requests, “Do write a good hot letter. Nessa is going to stay with Ly. Carnarvon Friday to Monday so if yr in London you must come then” (60). When reading a letter removed temporally from its creation, culturally from its colloquialisms, and emotionally from the actual relationship it is tenuous business trying to interpret the actual intent or meaning of the words strung, in some instances, haphazardly together. The request for a “good hot letter” seems to insinuate something sexually arousing or gratifying and this assumption is substantiated by the fact that Woolf later states that Dickinson doesn’t feel comfortable writing the aforementioned sort of correspondence; “This is because you think, or say, you oughtn’t to write nice hot letters” (76). These two women are clearly comfortable expressing their mutual affection and devotion to each other, although it seems that

expressing sexual desires is a boundary that Dickinson is not willing to traverse and something that Woolf craves.

Although Dickinson voiced her discomfort at communicating via letter regarding sexual topics, it appears that Woolf was willing to traverse into thinly veiled sexually explicit remarks within her end of their correspondence. In the summer of 1903, presumably 7 July, Woolf wrote to Dickinson, “The summer is winding up, and then two months will separate our friendship. It is astonishing what depths- hot volcano depths- your finger has stirred in Sparrow- hitherto entirely quiescent” (85). This passage is hard to construe as non-sexual. The reference to a volcano, a naturally occurring phenomenon that periodically erupts due to the shifting of tectonic plates, is an accepted euphemism for an explosive orgasm. The sexual nature of this passage is also reinforced by the fact that Woolf is crediting Dickinson’s finger with arousing “hot volcano depths” which had been previously been inactive. This penchant for describing sexual desire and sexual activity in her writing and correspondence in a covert, yet relatively accessible, manner was a trait which also characterized Woolf’s correspondence with Vita Sackville-West. As Lilienfeld points out in “The Gift of a China Inkpot” Woolf’s “... letters to Dickinson resemble her later love letters to Vita Sackville-West in their arch tone and playful sexual allusions” (41). In many ways Woolf’s relationship with Dickinson, the subject of “Friendships Gallery,” and Woolf’s relationship with Sackville-West, the subject of *Orlando*, had many similarities in how they manifested themselves. In both instances, these letters provide a context for Woolf’s relationships and help establish an informed starting point to examine the source of inspiration for her protagonists. Although vastly simplifying Woolf’s creative process, it is significant to note that the two women who

each greatly impacted, and perhaps revolutionized, Woolf's life provided the inspiration for the works in which Woolf sought to revolutionize biographical technique and the perceived connection between sex and gender.

Woolf in her letters to Dickinson, as in her letters to Sackville-West, often references herself as a friendly, furry little creature that desperately seeks the attention and love of the letter's recipient. Woolf most often references herself as Sparrow, exclusively to Dickinson, and often attributes her desire of Dickinson to those of a Wallaby. The notion of using an animal to personify feelings and emotions is a linguistic strategy that is both accessible and not uncommon. The element that I find intriguing and poignant to note, particularly in an examination of Woolf's perspective regarding gender and the exploration of androgyny, is that the Wallaby that is utilized as a vehicle in expressing Woolf's affection towards Dickinson is always sexed as a male. On 15 November 1906 Woolf writes to Dickinson, "Wall[aby] wipes his tender nose, and nuzzles you" (245). Woolf's decision to sex the wallaby as a male is a perplexing choice. It can be argued that the contemporary conventions regarding romantic relationships were hetero-normative and expressing the need for physical affection was easier to articulate within the accepted cultural paradigm. Then again, there is the possibility that this choice is actually because of Woolf's desire to point out the limitations being imposed by conventions by expressly drawing attention to their absurdity. She will do this again quite blatantly by sexing the narrator in "Friendships Gallery." I am functioning under the presumption of the second theory's accuracy, particularly due to the fact that Woolf chooses to extraneously sex the narrator in very close temporal proximity to the writing

of these letters and, not coincidentally, when writing about (or to) the same subject, Violet Dickinson.

In “Friendships Gallery” “CHAPTER TWO; The Magic Garden” the narrator identifies himself as a male when describing a tea scene; “This is a picture of noble English ladies at tea, as true as I can make it... I will not say how they do these things; for that would require a surgical knowledge of anatomy, neither polite [n]or possible...” (283). This is an interesting choice that acts as a social commentary on the impossibility of reporting and discussing the whole of another individual’s life with an impartial air. The actual act of deciding what life events are worth relating and the priority given to certain events as they are depicted within the work, how they are broached, and how their effect is determined to influence the subject’s life represents an intrinsic judgment being passed by the writer, which in biographies traditionally originates from the masculine view point. Karin E. Westman similarly concludes that, “As she will in *Orlando*, Woolf’s narrator adopts a masculine biographical persona when writing the sketch of Violet Dickinson- a rhetorical move that emphasizes not only how ‘biographer’ is a role one assumes within the biographical narrative but also how this role is usually ‘played’ from a masculine point of view” (43-44). The usage of an explicitly stated male (apparently in sex and stereotypical gender classification) perspective as the presumed author of the piece is a deliberate attempt to subvert the omnipresent perspective historically accorded to biographies. By intentionally and overtly sexing the narrator, Woolf is purposefully drawing attention to the impossible task of creating a purely objective rendition of someone’s life and the inherent ignorance in the presumption of a truly objective omnipresent biographical narrator. This technique employed by Woolf in

both “Friendships Gallery” and later in *Orlando*, is an effective mechanism to comically and ironically draw attention to the inherent limitations of any supposedly objective piece of writing, particularly when convention demands a person’s sex and gender be neatly categorized as opposed to individually investigated and understood.

Woolf’s penchant for sexing the Wallaby as male and her reference to Violet within “Friendships Gallery” as occupying a sex classification completely separated from the accepted male/female binary divide is an extremely telling indicator of her burgeoning resistance to gender classifications and imposed limitations. As Violet, the character in “Friendships Gallery,” is investigating the site for her cottage, Woolf writes, “How does a healthy human being differ from the nobler sorts of quadrupeds? a spectator might have asked; here were pure animal good spirits inspired by the mere mass and pungency of earth. But little we know man- woman- or Violet kind” (289). This creation of a separate classification for Violet indicates Woolf’s acknowledgement of the limitations imposed by the dual sex system that was in place which divided people by sex; males possessing a masculine gender and women having a feminine gender. Throughout “Friendships Gallery” Woolf carefully and methodically takes care to note and extrapolate Violet’s characteristics that make her so unique, generally traits that are reserved for a male with the associated masculine gender identity. Violet’s continual thwarting of the perceived gender expectations works as a running commentary on the perceptions of gender and androgyny that Woolf is beginning to explore in her writing and that she more explicitly expounds in *Orlando*.

Although “Friendships Gallery” has gone largely unnoted as a significant work of Woolf’s, and is often viewed as a childish joke unworthy of academic scrutiny it

possesses significant evidence of Woolf's resistance to demurely accepting tradition, both socially and stylistically. In Ellen Hawkes 1979 Introduction to "Friendships Gallery" she states, "Written in 1907, 'Friendships Gallery' is an early example of Virginia Woolf's way of expressing her affection and admiration for a woman friend. Like the complex and obviously more 'finished' panegyric to Vita Sackville-West in *Orlando*, this spoof biography of Violet Dickinson begins in play and ends in love" (270). The parallels between the two works are again noted, albeit in more depth, in Karin Westman's "The First *Orlando*: The Laugh of the Comic Spirit in Virginia Woolf's "Friendships Gallery." Westman discusses the structure and literary approach that Woolf adopts within "Friendships Gallery" by explaining that it:

...tells Violet Dickinson's history by way of a dialogic emphasis on voice in order to convey the energy and strength of Violet's character from birth through middle age- a range of female experience not traditionally recorded within the conventions of either the nineteenth-century biography or novel. By explicitly calling on both the historiographic and novelistic conventions for writing a woman's life, Woolf's biographical sketch of Dickinson reveals how these narrative forms can limit a woman's material existence within a capitalist society's histories and stories. Woolf therefore explicitly writes into her narrative what patriarchal ideologies and, consequently, history often elide: a woman's individual character, expressed through body and voice. (40)

This detailed exploration into the developmental realm of a woman's life is significant in the process of beginning to lend credence to women in general and also in debunking many of the hetero-normative gender ideals that were uniformly expected and enforced, particularly for women of Woolf and Dickinson's era.

One of the traits that Woolf draws a fair amount of attention to in her character Violet is her universal decency and respect for all humanity. In a simple exchange that Violet has with a gardener while visiting the Cecil family, Woolf demonstrates what a

commonplace occurrence this is for Violet, juxtaposed with the profound impact that being treated decently has upon the gardener;

“Good day” she began, with a heartiness that made the bent old creature straighten himself and look at her. Yes, she was a real lady; and- what was that odd feeling she gave him? [*His usual*] <The> crust of demeanour which sheltered all [*the*] <his> natural passion [*of the untaught man*] and protected him from ladies and gentleman and gave him a body wherewith to appear decently in their eyes, the crust that they both agreed to accept for the real man since the real man was not presentable, [*a*] <was pierced> by this ladies voice and her friendly gaze. He felt excited as though something long suppressed were now rising into daylight... He forgot for the first time for twenty years that half hours are the property of the C[*eci*] family, and have been so “for centuries and centuries I dessay.” (286)

This exchange is portrayed as a very natural and un-extraordinary thing for Violet, whereas it seems pivotal in the revolutionizing of the gardener’s sense of self worth. Later, during the course of the same social visit, Violet inquires about the physical workings of the estate, specifically the drainage system. Not one person present is familiar with the system, as “...no one remembered that there were drains” (287) and they offered her the indirect and non-specific answer of, ““Yes, Miss Dickinson, in a house of this size the drainage system, you may be sure, is complicated” (287) in an attempt to placate her inquiries. Despite the convention that dictated the demure acceptance and unchallenging presence of women, Violet continued to inquire about the manner in which the Cecil family managed their estate despite the fact that this was clearly outside of their realm of knowledge. It can also be inferred that they felt it was not worthy of their concerns.

This is further proven by the family’s lack of knowledge regarding a man, and his family, who had been employed by them in excess of three decades. Violet informs

them, “‘He’s a gardener Mylord, aged 72, and he has been in your service thirty years, and he has two sons now in your glasshouses, and he knows more about roses than any man in Hertfordshire.’ And then Violet obeying some native instinct that was certainly not polite, gave such a picture drawn in coloured detail of the Cookson family, that no one could help laughing...” (288). Violet’s intention is clear; as her words are accompanied by a “native instinct that was certainly not polite,” she is attempting to flagrantly point out that her host’s humanity only extends as far as their social class, much to her chagrin. She compounds this point by sharing stories about James Cookson, the gardener, that were so amusing and engaging, “...that no one could help laughing, no one had been heard to laugh so loud for twenty or thirty or forty years” (288). In this situation she is not complying with social standards for polite social calls, let alone the vastly more significant impact of her actions upon the supposed social order because she is a woman intentionally flouting these standards and openly contradicting her hosts, while simultaneously criticizing their lifestyle.

Violet, the character, remains unmarried for the duration of her life. During this time Violet constructs a cottage independently. This provides her with a physical shelter, but in a metaphorical sense, this embodies the notion that Violet sought to establish her own space in the world in which she constructed the boundaries according to her own needs, not those dictated or normalized by society. It was relatively uncommon for a woman to live independently during the era in which this narrative was written and set, and those who did were fully cognizant that their actions were contrary to the accepted standards of decency and therefore suspect. When Violet is discussing the notion of a cottage, the possibilities and associated freedom that are inherent in an independent living



arrangement seem to spew forth, “To have a cottage of one[‘s] own? Yes, my good woman’ [*shrieked*] Violet- ‘With real drains, and real roses, and a place to sit out in and ones own china, and no ancestors’ continues Lady R\_\_\_\_t. Such was the beginning of the great revolution which is making England a very different place from what it was” (288). This small exchange is fraught with significance. The reference to “no ancestors” is a deliberate invocation of the inherent role that facilitating familial traditions has on the perpetuation of perceived sex and gender roles and the demand that people, particularly women, adhere to such, oftentimes, limiting expectations. The rejection of ancestral expectations is then coupled with the acknowledgement that this action of divergent thinking and autonomous living is “...the beginning of the great revolution...” of which Violet, and others like her, play an integral part of.

Later on in the work, Woolf’s male narrator inserts his voice into the narrative regarding Violet’s cottage, allowing Woolf to facetiously comment on the formulaic male attitude; “It is clear I hope from the very few examples I have given that Violets cottage stood for a symbol of many things; and that indeed is the pitfall into which her biographer is forever pitching himself. A gross brick wall would be the outcome of a lifetime of scrupulous solitudes; and the prayer with which she crowned the building was the sum of many vows” (290). The allusion that the discussion of Violet’s cottage by a biographer is a “...pitfall into which her biographer is forever pitching himself” has blatant negative connotations. It also seems to imply that once the discussion has commenced, there is no way to remove oneself from it, signifying that a responsible biographer would not want to partake in the discussion of Violet’s cottage or the extrapolation of the full ramifications of Violet’s movement towards independence that

clearly does not fall in line with accepted gender norms. In addition to the narrator acknowledging the significance of Violet creating her own physical space independently, there is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the symbolic representation of her action as a harbinger of a gradual movement towards a more autonomous and self-directed lifestyle for women in general.

In the last portion of “Friendships Gallery” “CHAPTER THREE; A Story to Make You Sleep” the narrative shifts direction and manifests itself as a fairy tale like story meant to ease a child to sleep. This segment, although clearly fantastical, continually draws attention to Violet’s large imposing size and powerful stature, although the proportions of which are exaggerated; “...one of them nine or ten or twenty feet high...” (294). This is extrapolated further when the Giantess was described as having:

...swallowed a magic seed when she was born so that nothing on earth could stop her growing; but as her clothes grew too it did not matter; moreover her powers were as marvelous as her height; she could heal cripples, make small children appear out of bags; marriages were made by her; she could tame wild beasts; and make surly bears dance; she was forever in motion because the seed within her was forever putting forth new shoots; she was worshipped in her own land where there were Temples raised to her, and maidens brought offerings all day long; indeed she had shrines in all the chief market places, and no one, not the humblest or most diseased, was prevented from offering, there telling his case, and receiving her answer. (295)

Aside from again stressing her size, which Dickinson was truly about six feet tall (and provided the fodder for many jokes between her and Woolf), this passage highlights her (Violet the character’s) fair-mindedness and penchant for looking beyond economic means and purposefully examining and appreciating the inherent value of each individual.

“Friendships Gallery,” was written by Woolf and presented to Dickinson as the most intense and romanticized period in their relationship was coming to a close, a pattern that was mirrored with Woolf’s creation of *Orlando* as her relationship with Vita Sackville West was becoming less intimate. “Friendships Gallery” and the correspondence between the two women firmly establish the romantic affection that mutually existed between them and simultaneously highlighted Woolf’s burgeoning sense of feminism; her discontent with society’s interpretation of a binary gender system and the inherent and repressive limitations associated with such; her ultimate desire to subversively reject and reinvent the interpretation of gender with the eventual acceptance of an androgynous and fluid gender norm as an idealized outcome; and her discontent with the limitations of the traditional biography. It is these philosophical concerns of Woolf’s that continued to gestate over the course of the next twenty one years, eventually culminating into a more articulate and nuanced work, born of a similar situation, *Orlando*.

## CHAPTER III

### *ORLANDO*

While “Friendships Gallery” highlights Woolf’s burgeoning sense of feminism and her desire for a non-repressive acceptance of gender apart from sex, *Orlando* exploded onto the literary scene and immediately became a wildly popular novel that transitioned into a canonical work that more forcefully examined, dissected, and directly criticized the notions of sex and gender that were being oppressively enforced by Woolf’s contemporaries and society as a whole. Similar to “Friendships Gallery,” *Orlando* was inspired by an actual relationship in Woolf’s life, this time with Vita Sackville-West. Woolf’s relationship with Sackville-West was tenuous at first; gradually developed into a mutual, albeit tumultuous, attraction and romantic relationship; and eventually evolved into a lasting and affectionate friendship. Their relationship was inherently more complicated because both women were married, although the boundaries of their respective marriages were not particularly restrictive, and Sackville-West was often conducting or nurturing numerous intimate relationships at any given time. Although Quentin Bell seems to downplay the significance of Woolf and Sackville-West’s relationship on both of the women and their lives (specifically his description of their

husband's nonchalance), even he acknowledges that their relationship was not simply a friendship nor an affair; it was love. He queries:

What should or does one imply if you quite baldly says: "Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West had a love affair between, shall we say, 1925 and 1929"? Vita was very much in love with Virginia and being, I suspect of an ardent temperament, loved her much as a man might have loved her, with a masculine impatience for some kind of physical satisfaction- even though Virginia was now in her forties and, although extremely beautiful, without the charm of her youth, and even though Vita herself was a little in awe of her... Virginia felt as a lover feels- she desponded when she fancied herself neglected, despaired when Vita was away, waited anxiously for letters, needed Vita's company and lived in that strange mixture of elation and despair which lovers- and one would have supposed only lovers- can experience. (116-117)

It is significant to note that one of the most conservative Woolf biographers (Bell has Sackville-West listed in the index under "Nicolson, the Hon. Mrs Harold" and "Nicolson, Vita" despite the fact that he acknowledges Sackville-West's preference to be referenced as Sackville-West) lends credence to the significance of Woolf and Sackville-West's relationship and the generally acknowledged authenticity of their mutual feelings.

Contrary to her relationship with Dickinson, Woolf was far more self-reflexive regarding her feelings and relationship with Sackville-West. On Thursday 20 May 1926 Woolf writes in her diary, "And Vita comes to lunch tomorrow, which will be a great amusement & pleasure. I am amused at my relations with her: left so ardent in January- & now what? Also I like her presence & her beauty. Am I in love with her? But what is love? Her being 'in love' (it must be comma'd thus) with me, excites & flatters; & interests. What is this 'love'?" (86-87 LIII). Despite Woolf's existential examination of love, her relationship with Sackville-West contained deep longing, constant devotion, intense jealousy, and a carnal craving all of which are expressed far more overtly than

similar sentiments in her writings to Dickinson. Saturday, 5 February 1927 Woolf Wrote to Sackville-West, “No letter since you were careering through the snow in Westphalia- that is nothing since Monday. I hope this doesn’t mean you have been eaten by brigands, wrecked, torn to pieces. It makes me rather dismal. It gets worse steadily- your being away. All the sleeping draughts and the irritants have worn off, and I am settling down to wanting you, doggedly, dismally, faithfully- I hope that pleases you” (DeSalvo 176).

This melodramatic expression of despair regarding their physical separation is repeated in countless letters throughout their most intense period of courtship.

Despite the fact that Woolf and Sackville-West acknowledged their feelings and desires (personally, professionally, and sexually) to each other, their ability to express these thoughts with complete transparency was somewhat thwarted by convention; one of the most salient manifestations of these societal conventions was their respective husbands. On 19 November 1926 Woolf writes to Sackville-West, “You are a miracle of discretion- one letter in another. I never thought of that. I’ll answer when I see you- the invitation, I mean” (302 LIII). This is a particularly interesting notion. Apparently the ideas and sentiments being shared between the two women were so private, and perhaps taboo, that there had to be a decoy letter to publicly share with Leonard Woolf. Even more significant here is the mention of an invitation that Sackville-West had extended. Being that Woolf and Sackville-West routinely corresponded about their plans and schedules via letter, this invitation can be safely inferred to be of a sexual nature, a proposal so intimate that the privacy of it had to be preserved strategically. Woolf also initiates, or attempts to initiate, numerous rendezvous in which the two women can be alone together. On Sunday 22 August 1926 Woolf writes to Sackville-West, “Yes- that

will be perfect. I think I shall be alone on Wednesday- couldn't you come early and enjoy a scambly lunch?" (DeSalvo 139). Their privacy and intimacy seems to function as both the quest and the goal.

Throughout the most intense segment of their relationship (1924-1927) Sackville-West pursued other sexual conquests, which resulted in Woolf's endless jealousy. On 4 July 1927 Sackville-West affectionately taunts Woolf about her jealousy, "I like making you jealous; my darling, (and shall continue to do so,) but it's ridiculous that you should be" (DeSalvo 213). Interestingly enough, on the same date Woolf admonishes Sackville-West, "...You only be a careful dolphin in your gamboling. Or you'll find Virginia's soft crevices lined with hooks." Again, the sexual references are not explicit, but are ultimately accessible to the intended subject and particularly to modern readers who have access to a more holistic view of the situation. When considering the situation, even from a removed perspective, the allusion to Woolf's "soft crevices" is abundantly clear. In October of the same year, Woolf's frustration at Sackville-West's continued sexual escapades with others leads her to more unequivocal expressions of her discontent, "Please tell me beforehand when you will come, and for how long: unless the dolphin has died meanwhile and its colours are those of death and decomposition. If you have given yourself to Campbell, I'll have no more to do with you, and so it shall be written, plainly, for all the world to read in Orlando" (431 LIII). Despite Sackville-West's continued dalliances, her love for Woolf, both in writing and physical expression, cannot be denied. In a particularly poignant response to Woolf's complaint that Sackville-West was not expressing her affection clearly enough in her correspondence, she responds, "I'm in a queer excited state, -largely owing to your letter- I always get devastated when I hear

from you. God, I do love you. You say I use no endearments. That strikes me as funny. When I wake in the Persian dawn, and say to myself ‘Virginia... Virginia...’” (DeSalvo 190).

Prior to Sackville-West’s relationship with Woolf, Sackville-West was deeply involved with Violet Trefuis. During their lengthy involvement with each other, Sackville-West and Trefuis spent months at a time abroad living and traveling together. As described by Sackville-West in *Portrait of a Marriage*:

Paris... We were there for about a week, living in a flat that was lent us in the Palais Royal. Even now the intoxication of some of those hours in Paris makes me see confusedly; other hours were, I admit, wretched, because Denys came (the war being just over), and I wanted Violet to myself. But the evenings were ours. I have never told a soul of what I did. I hesitate to write it here, but I must; shirking the truth here would be like cheating oneself playing patience. I dressed as a boy. It was easy, because I could put a khaki bandage round my head, which in those days was so common that it attracted no attention at all. I browned my face and hands. It must have been successful, because no one looked at me at all curiously or suspiciously- never once, out of the many times I did it. My height of course was my great advantage. I looked like a rather untidy young man, a sort of undergraduate, of about nineteen. It was marvelous fun, all the more so because there was always the risk of being found out. Of course it was easy in the Palais Royal because I could let myself in and out by a latchkey; in hotels it was more difficult. I had done it once already in England; that was one of the boldest things I ever did. I will tell about it: I changed in my own house in London late one evening (the darkened streets made me bold), and drove with Violet in a taxi as far as Hyde Park Corner. There I got out. I never felt so free as when I stepped off the kerb, down Piccadilly, alone, and knowing that if I met my own mother face to face she would take no notice of me. I walked along, smoking a cigarette, buying a newspaper off a little boy who called me “sir,” and being accosted now and then by women. In this way I strolled from Hyde Park Corner to Bond Street, when I met Violet and took her in a taxi to Charing Cross. (The extraordinary thing was, how natural it all was for me.) Nobody, even in the glare of the station, glanced at me twice. I had wondered about my voice, but found I could sink it sufficiently. Well, I took Violet as far as Orpington by train, and there we found a lodging house where we could get a room. The landlady was very benevolent and I said Violet was my wife. Next day of course I had to put



on the same clothes, although I was a little anxious about the day light, but again nobody took the slightest notice. We went to Knole!, which was, I think, brave. Here I slipped into the stables, and emerges as myself. Well, this discovery was too good to be wasted, and in Paris I practically lived in that role. Violet used to call me Julian. We dined together every evening in cafes and restaurants, and went to all the theatres. I shall never forget the evenings when we walked back slowly to our flat through the streets of Paris. I, personally, had never felt so free in my life. Perhaps we have never been so happy since. (109-111)

Sackville-West's foray into the world of cross dressing seems to be based off a desire to live freely and without the social constraints and gender expectations forced upon a woman, particularly a married woman, and especially a married woman with homo-erotic inclinations living during their era. Far from being transgendered (identifying as possessing a male gender and the desire to be physically male, despite being biologically female) Sackville-West simply craved the freedoms and autonomy automatically assigned to the male sex and associated gender, not the total rejection of the stereotypical female sex and gender with the goal of supplanting it with the quintessential masculine gender. She instead strove to garner whatever personality characteristics felt most comfortable to her, whether they were traditionally feminine or masculine. This penchant for resisting the automatic gendering according to a biologically binary system promoted an androgynous lifestyle that she greatly embraced and embodied. Sackville-West never once expressed dissatisfaction with being a biological woman, instead she was categorically dissatisfied with what society expected and demanded of women. Her incursion into cross dressing was simply a mechanism to provide her, and Trefuis, with the anonymity and self-determination that they sought, while assimilating whichever gender characteristics she valued, not what her biological sex was stereotypically linked with.

Sackville-West's experiences while in drag seem to operate as both an example, using Judith Butler's terms, of performativity and performance. Her experience in drag can be classified as an act of performativity when it is considered that Sackville-West was operating comfortably within her own relatively androgynous gender identity that pulled from both the stereotypical masculine gender and the traditional feminine gender. Her choice to dress in accordance with the masculine gender is completely in line with elements of her own personal identity. Conversely, her intentional flouting of society's expectations, of her as a woman and of a member of an economically privileged class, allows us to also evaluate her actions as an instance of performance. This is particularly the case when she chose to dress in drag while walking around in London, where she was a recognizable social fixture. This particular instance, as an example of gender performance, is further supported by Sackville-West's decision to return to Knole, her family estate, in drag. These choices are a blatant challenge and a concrete rejection of the concept of a binary sex/gender divide as it existed in England contemporary to Sackville-West and Woolf.

While "Friendships Gallery" challenged the hetero-normative assumption that a feminine gender is explicitly associated with females by showcasing Violet's somewhat androgynous self though her larger than usual size, autonomy, and fearlessness in challenging the existing social order, *Orlando* promotes the concept that gender and sexuality are not exclusively linked to sex, thereby normalizing and promoting a more androgynous reality as an arguably more natural state. *Orlando* is written in the form of a mock biography and spans approximately 400 years in duration, although the protagonist, Orlando, only ages thirty six years over the course of the narrative. A

particularly pivotal moment in the text is mid-way through the novel when Orlando awakens to find that he is now a biological woman whose gender and identity has remained intact and unaltered even though his biological sex has been completely changed. It is this unrealistic and fantastical event which allows Woolf to create a fictional case study examining, and essentially promoting, androgyny.

Being that *Orlando* is a text that has been thoroughly examined on many levels and through many different lenses, my exploration will be limited to the instances and occurrences directly related to sex, gender, and androgyny, while considering the biographers role in the presentation of these concepts. The book starts off by describing Orlando slicing at the severed head of a Moor with his blade and imagining himself engaging in battle beside his father and grandfather. This masculine image is almost immediately juxtaposed with a description of him that is phrased in predominantly feminine terms:

The red of his cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and closely fitted to the head. But, alas, that these catalogues of youthful beauty cannot end without mentioning forehead and eyes. Alas, that people are seldom born devoid of all three; for directly we glance at Orlando standing by the window, we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them..." (12-13)

This description focuses on the softness and beauty of his features, a method of description most commonly associated with females. Although this could be perceived as a minute deviance from standard protocol, it is significant to note because Woolf has already begun the process of disassembling the accepted and promoted binary standards

of sex and gender expectations in small subversive ways. These discrete variances from the expected interpretation of the world slowly acclimate her reader to the notion of sex and gender being disengaged from each other and ultimately replaced with an androgynous personhood that comfortably pulls from all realms of personal attributes.

The next particularly poignant event relevant to my explanation was Orlando's initial observations regarding Princess Sasha; "The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person" (28). Aside from Orlando's inability to immediately discern whether the person he is looking at is male or female, it is particularly imperative to note that his attraction is not limited by the boundaries of sex. He immediately senses this person's "extraordinary seductiveness" despite having no knowledge of the typical cultural markers (i.e. sex) that would denote an appropriate mate. After a more prolonged observation Orlando concluded, "...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). Despite having experienced and responded to the seductiveness that seems to exude from this individual, Orlando remains bound by convention to reject the possibility of a homo-erotic connection despite the fact that his attraction appears palatable to both the reader and to Orlando himself, as demonstrated by his expressed frustration.

At the onset of the second chapter the narrator in *Orlando* re-emerges as a character in and of himself, guaranteeing and highlighting the impossibility of an

objective perspective in the retelling of Orlando's life. The narrator interjects, very similar in nature to the narrator in "Friendships Gallery," using his own voice:

Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (49)

Although the narrator is asserting his dedication to remaining impartial, the interjection of his own voice, opinion, and interpretation already establishes his voice as a tempering force and equally provides evidence of the ever present patriarchy as the lens through which Orlando's story is being examined and ultimately expressed through. Earlier in the narrative, the biographer articulates that writing about a subject such as Orlando is a joy, "Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!" (12). In this instance the biographer has abandoned all facades of objective distance in the process of relating the subject's life, and instead clearly expresses delight.

The third chapter in *Orlando* features the literary culmination of the sex and gender ambiguity that Woolf has been carefully infusing within this work. After seven days of existing in a trancelike sleep, Orlando awakens to find that his body has been transformed into that of a female, "He stretched himself. He Rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess- he was a woman" (102). Again, this pivotal moment is being recorded and expressed subjectively, the narrator has, "...no choice left but to

confess...” which leads the reader to believe that given a choice, the narrator would have preferred to suppress this information from being shared openly. This sentiment is also expressed when the narrator comments, “Would that we might spare the reader what is to come and say to him in so many words, Orlando dies and was buried. But here, alas, 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!” (99). This effectively tells us that the narrator would prefer to not relate the whole story of Orlando’s existence and feels that by not exposing the reader to Orlando’s mid-story sex change that the reader would be “spared”; essentially providing a protection against the vile, from the narrator’s perspective, notion of sex and gender being fluid identities.

In the moments before Orlando’s transformation is revealed Lady of Chastity, Lady of Purity, and Lady of Modesty converge upon Orlando’s sleeping body. The three metaphorical sisters attempt to cover up Orlando’s naked body despite the trumpets that are repeatedly calling for their dismissal and the emergence of Truth. They in turn sing, “Truth, come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful; the dark you make clear. Hide! Hide! Hide!” (101). This strategic personification of value traits allowed Woolf to allegorically present the cultural forces that actively sought to oppress divergent opinions regarding, and manifestations of, sex and gender. It is only through unbridled Truth (untempered by Chastity, Purity and Modesty) that a more natural ordering of sex and gender, often presenting itself in an

androgynous form, can be realized. As the sisters are being driven from the room they wail:

For there, not here (all speak together joining hands and making gestures of farewell and despair towards the bed where Orlando lies sleeping) dwell still in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; 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 is here. (101-102)

The realms in which Chastity, Purity, and Modesty acknowledge that they are welcome within are ironically described in negative terms. They fit in well with the ideology of people who “deny,” are “respectable,” “desire not to know,” and perhaps most tellingly “those who reverence without knowing why.” These embodied characteristics are most applicable and openly received within circles that succumb to the dictates of convention without questioning the validity of such or challenging why they must adhere to so many arbitrarily imposed and personally restricting cultural mandates. It also seems clear from this situation that Truth cannot comfortably exist in an environment in which Chastity, Purity, and Modesty are present; this, in and of itself, is an enormous social commentary being put forth by Woolf. The idea that the revered values of the Victorian era, particularly for women, could not exist harmoniously in the presence of Truth, or in a more practical sense-while living an authentic lifestyle, was a revolutionary notion that was in complete opposition to the accepted social paradigm.

Orlando’s emergence as a woman is not a troubling or problematic experience for her, although those around Orlando who were present in her life as a man seem to need

time to fully accept and reconcile this transformation within their world view. “The sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has even looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace... Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (102). This initial description of the freshly transformed Orlando greatly emphasizes the androgynous aspect of Orlando’s personhood. The amalgamation of a notably masculine trait with a markedly feminine trait epitomizes the concept of androgyny. During this segment of the work the non-fixed nature of identity is emphasized by Woolf’s repeated usage of male pronouns when referencing Orlando, even though it has been clearly established that Orlando is now definitively a biological female. This intentional usage of categorically male pronouns makes it even clearer that categorizations firmly based off of a strict binary divide are often inept at capturing the essence or identity of the person being described, as in the case of Orlando.

Woolf further focuses on the inaccurate assumption that gender and sex are intrinsically linked by having the reluctant narrator state:

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman- there is no denying it. 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. His memory- but in the future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’- her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. Some slight haziness there may have been, as if a few dark drops had fallen into the clear pool of memory; certain things had become a little more dimmed; but that was all. The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that



such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. (103)

This explicit clarification that Orlando remained completely intact with her identity and gender after having switched biological sexes is extremely significant. Her sense of self, identity, history, and world-view remains unaltered in its entirety, although how the world reacts to her and the expectations placed upon her by society at large will alter vastly despite the fact that Orlando is intrinsically the same person as before, simply with an altered anatomy. The divorcing of gender's assumed reliance upon sex is significant because many of society's presumed conventions are based off of assigned gender roles determined by sex. The deterioration of these pre-conceived notions allows for more flexibility within the gender roles and also makes space for the acceptance of the androgynous person, the type of character being presented to us in both "Friendships Gallery" and *Orlando*.

After waking up as a woman, "Orlando had now washed, and dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex; and was forced to consider her position" (103). Dressed androgynously, Orlando decided to leave Constantinople with a, previously unmentioned, Gipsy. As she integrates herself into the wandering lifestyle of the Gipsies the value differences between the tribe and Orlando becomes more and more apparent. The Gipsies thought of Orlando as, "...inferior to them, [although] they were willing to help her become more like them... But Orlando had contracted in England some of the customs and diseases (whatever you choose to consider them) which cannot, it seems, be expelled" (105). Orlando's valuing of nature

for its inherent beauty and her pride in her ancestral home didn't correspond with the more simplistic lifestyle and expansive history of the Gipsy people:

She sought to answer such arguments by the familiar if oblique method of finding the Gipsy life itself rude and barbarous; and so, in a short time, much bad blood was bred between them. Indeed, such differences of opinion are enough to cause bloodshed and revolution. Towns have been sacked for less, and a million martyrs have suffered at the stake rather than yield an inch upon any of the points here debated. No passion is stronger in the breast of man than the desire to make others believe as he believes. Nothing so cuts at the root of his happiness and fills him with rage as the sense that another rates low what he prizes high. Whigs and Tories, Liberal party and Labour party- for what do they battle except their own prestige? It is not love of truth. but desire to prevail that sets quarter against quarter and makes parish desire the downfall of parish. Each seeks peace of mind and subserviency rather than the triumph of truth and the exaltation of virtue- But these moralities belong, and should be left to the historian, since they are as dull as ditch water. "Four hundred and seventy-six bedrooms mean nothing to them," sighed Orlando. "She prefers a sunset to a flock of goats," said the Gipsies. (110)

These differences between Orlando and the Gipsies eventually lead Orlando to the conclusion that she would be happiest situated elsewhere, essentially amongst her own culture. This voluntary emersion by Orlando into an unfamiliar way of life and the subsequent clashing of cultural values, that are shortsightedly considered universal within each respective group, is neatly juxtaposed with the idea of comparing preconceived gender notions and a more fluid and liberal view of sex and gender by the close proximity within the novel of Orlando's sex transformation and her experience with the Gipsies. This segment of the work emphasizes the impact of deeply ingrained cultural ideals and how they are internalized and often manifest themselves as rigid boundaries that cultural groups feel compelled to enforce and encourage conformity to despite the fact that they are not universal truths or values, simply cultural conventions idiosyncratic to one group.

The Gipsies embraced a minimalist lifestyle in which their physical possessions did not exceed their actual needs and they considered nature to be a resource, whereas Orlando, as a representative of mainstream Victorian English culture, greatly valued her enormous family estate and was drawn to appreciate nature for its beauty and not as an imperative resource. This is an interesting conflict considering that the vast majority of Woolf's readership would identify more readily with Orlando's perspective, as opposed to that of the Gipsies. This conflict of values is contrasted with Orlando's unchanging gender identity that is threatening to the rigid Victorian system which centered on a strict dual sex system, whereas "...the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men" (113). These conflicts are quite effective when examined one immediately after the other because each situation highlights a value system that is socially and culturally constructed and implemented, with the expectation of universal adherence. When a digressive individual conflicts with the system in place the masses, which are conforming to the expectations, tend to react in a negative manner and assume the non-conforming individual is a threat to their way of life, as opposed to examining the validity of their accepted traditions and cultural construct. Orlando, whose mere existence is a threat to the notion of sex and gender identity in Victorian English culture, was simultaneously cast as an outsider in her relationship with the Gipsies due to her Victorian sensibilities. In both instances the value systems being rigidly implemented are subjective, culturally constructed, and far from universal. This whole segment effectively highlights the constant struggle to recognize what is authentic and natural for humanity compared to what is imposed upon people through the vehicle of acceptable cultural decorum and social expectations.

After leaving the Gipsies, at the onset of Chapter Four, Orlando dons women's clothing and boards a ship to sail back to England. This is Orlando's first foray into English culture as a woman, "At any rate, 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 the deck that she realized, with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position" (113). For the first time she is presented with concrete evidence regarding the vast chasm in etiquette between men and women. She begins examining the ramifications on her life and the role society expects her to play as a woman:

"A little of the fat, Ma'am?" he asked. "Let me cut you just the tiniest little slice the size of your finger nail." At those words, a delicious tremor ran through her frame. Birds sang; the torrents rushed. It recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago. Then she had pursued, now she fled. Which is the greater ecstasy? The man's or the woman's? And are they not perhaps the same? No, she thought, this is the most delicious (thanking the Captain but refusing) to refuse, and see him frown. (114)

While beginning to experience Victorian England as a woman, who is doted on while simultaneously being restricted, Orlando concludes that the chivalrous pedestal she had placed women on in the past to exalt and protect their perceived sublime moral aptitude, functioned in reality as more of a cage, "She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for these desires,' she reflected; 'for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature'" (115).

While on the boat Orlando begins postulating on the limitations of both sexes and her inability to comfortably identify with the prescribed gender for either:

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. "To fall from a mast-head," she thought, "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!" she thought, "what fools they make of us- what fools we are!" 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 weakness of each. (117)

This consternation has nothing to do with Orlando's identity, which she has remained cognizant of throughout the text. Instead she has realized that society has restricted the emergence of the naturally developed personality traits of people whose gender identity isn't in exact accordance with their biological sex; thereby creating quite a conundrum for Orlando who doesn't seem interested in pursuing repression or denial as modes to seamlessly blend in with society and who possesses both masculine and feminine inclinations.

Orlando, consistent in the maintenance of her identity, was still sexually attracted to women:

And as all Orlando's loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to conventions, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man. For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity. (119-120)

This desire for women, as well as the occasional man, was a constant throughout Orlando's life. This element of the text tends to provide fodder for critics to discuss this

work as a lesbian text, a contention that I would refute. Although there are homo-erotic narrative strands, the manifestation of them consistently presents itself within the context of a sex and gender anomaly. To extract the homo-erotic attraction from the carefully constructed sex and gender quandaries in the work is greatly detracting from the overall carefully crafted critique of oppressive cultural norms and expectations. Although homosexuality as a concept or lifestyle was not troubling to Woolf, the classification of Orlando's sexual nature into strict binary terms (homosexual/heterosexual) defeats the purpose of the methodically deconstructed male/female sex and masculine/feminine gender binary that Woolf had methodically exemplified in her work thus far.

During the course of Orlando's continued flouting of sex and gender conventions, while exploring her place in the world as a woman, Orlando encounters the Archduchess Harriet Griselda, who when the truth is revealed, ends up being a man, "...he was a man and always had been one; that he had seen a portrait of Orlando and fallen hopelessly in love with him; that to compass his ends, he had dressed as a woman and lodged at the Baker's shop; that he was desolated when he fled to Turkey; that he had heard of her change and hastened to offer his services..." (132). Archduke Harry's cross dressing as a means to pursue Orlando under the guise of adhering to convention is fraught with absolute ridiculousness as he originally attempted to romance Orlando (when he was a biological man) dressed as a female, but immediately upon hearing that Orlando was a biological female disregarded his disguise and pursued her as a man. Although Archduke Harry is a comic character, his actions do suggest a significant point. He readily admits to Orlando his previous deception and is apologetic for any hardship that this may have created for her, but remains unconcerned about the implications of this confession

regarding his perceived masculinity, or lack thereof. Archduke Harry does not seem distressed in the least that his actions were homo-erotic in nature; instead he views society's conventions as an irritant that impedes his pursuit of satisfaction, love, and attraction. The bizarre antics that he engaged in to pursue his own inherent sexual inclinations ultimately, viewed in conjunction with the entire novel, work towards making him a sympathetic character attempting to live according to his own authentic needs within an oppressive cultural construct.

As Archduke Harry is departing after their initial meeting he becomes emotional, "As he spoke, enormous tears formed in his rather prominent eyes and ran down the sandy tracts of his long and lanky cheeks. That men cry as frequently and as unreasonably as women, Orlando knew from her own experience as a man; but she was beginning to be aware that women should be shocked when men display emotion in their presence, and so, shocked she was" (133). This is directly contrasted with the freedom Orlando had just discovered regarding her own emotional expressions, "Do what she would to restrain them, the tears came to her eyes, until, remembering that it is becoming in a woman to weep, she let them flow" (122). This exemplified the gradual realization facing Orlando regarding the nuances of social conduct and gender expectations. Although Orlando doesn't necessarily promote their implementation she is slowly becoming indoctrinated to their existence and learning how to deftly navigate within a society framed by strict expectations for each sex without causing a stir.

As Orlando spends more time living as a woman she begins internalizing the cultural expectations and perceptions of women and reflecting them in her own actions, "She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more

vain, as women are, of her person” (138). Living as a woman dictated how people interacted with Orlando, to which she responded by altering how she acted; “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 redefining of interactions based upon people’s perception of Orlando as a woman and of Orlando’s gradual adoption of some stereotypical behaviors gradually alters her actions, behaviors, and the traits and strengths that she externally emphasizes:

The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex. And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather more openly than usual- openness indeed was the soul of her nature- something that happens to most people without being this plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what is above. Of the complications and confusions which thus result every one has had experience... (139)

After experiencing the cultural interpretation of being a woman, Orlando became fully cognizant of the vastly variant opportunities between the sexes, all developed around the notion of sex and gender expectations. Some of these changes she slowly assimilated into her life, examples being Orlando’s discovery of the oppressive notion of the fragility of the feminine mind, yet simultaneously experiencing the freedom to express emotions that she had been expected to repress as a man; “Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided” (140). These changes, coupled with the stereotypical masculine gender traits that Orlando continued to feel and



demonstrate, exemplify the omnipresent power of cultural ideas and the inherent limitations presented by such in a binary gendering system.

Orlando (as a biological woman, yet dressed as a man) encounters a prostitute one night while out walking. Their initial encounter was laden with stereotypical interactions; “To feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one. Yet, having been so lately a woman herself, she suspected that the girl’s timidity and her hesitating answers 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 her masculinity” (158). After Orlando exposes herself as a woman, Nell, the prostitute, responds with, “‘Well, my dear,’ she said, when she had somewhat recovered, ‘I’m by no means sorry to hear it. For the plain Dunstable of the matter is’ (and it was remarkable how soon on discovering that they were of the same sex, her manner changed and she dropped her plaintive, appealing ways) ‘the plain Dunstable of the matter is, that I’m not in the mood for the society of the other sex to-night...’” (159). This interaction further exemplifies the extent of the impact regarding sex and gender stereotypes. The cultural constraints imposed are so ingrained within people’s psyche that they have lost the ability or desire to attempt sincere, purposeful interactions across sex/gender lines. They instead simply accept that women are of an assigned personality and temperament, as are men. Their outward appearance of demure acceptance of their assigned position (particularly in the case of women), and the passive, private, divergence from these gender roles in safe company, furthers the general acceptance of stereotypical gender roles and their place in dictating appropriate cultural interactions. Orlando was immediately welcomed into the crass,

open, and honest of the prostitute's dialogue as a woman, yet would have been prevented from participating within the conversation if she had been perceived as a man, regardless of the fact that throughout her existence Orlando's gender and self identity had remained intact irrespective of sex.

The realization of her ability to float between groups easily and experience the tangible benefits of both sexes by simply changing her clothes opened up endless possibilities regarding Orlando's range of experiences:

She 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. From the probity of breeches she turned to the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (161)

It is particularly significant that Orlando's sex is described as "...chang[ing] far more frequently..." which insinuates more conversions than the singular dramatic transformation mid-way through the book. These subsequent changes are metaphorical in nature, Orlando truly only switched physical sexes once. But, these subsequent transformations were just as significant, perhaps even more so. Each of these later transformations was based upon the perception of other people. This ironic fact is significant because due to the interpretation of Orlando's clothing and demeanor as masculine, she was assumed to be a biological male and thereby afforded all the rights and freedoms of a Victorian English male. Conversely, if Orlando's clothing and actions were determined to be feminine, she was interpreted to be a biological female and was coddled, protected, and prevented from fully actualizing her autonomy as an individual. This drives a definitive wedge into the concept of sex and gender being intrinsically

linked. Orlando was a biological female, yet possessed the ability to conduct herself as a stereotypical man, the quintessential woman, and yet claimed no true affinity to any one formulaic gender identity.

As the dawn of the nineteenth century came upon England, Orlando felt compelled to marry, partially as a mechanism to alleviate the cultural suspicion heaped upon single women. Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire was her ideal partner, another person of androgynous identity who wasn't an oppressive force. Yet due to the fact that an androgynous lifestyle wasn't a common or accepted identity, both Orlando and Shel were suspicious of the actual sex of the other. On two separate occasions they mutually inquired, "'Are you positive you aren't a man?' he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, 'can it be possible you're not a woman?'" (189).

In discussing the many selves present in any one person, the narrator identifies the most predominantly examined manifestations of Orlando's identity:

Orlando may now have called on the boy who cut the nigger's head down; the boy who saw the poet; the boy who handed the Queen the bowl of rose water; or she may have called upon the young man who fell in love with Sasha; or upon the Courtier; or upon the Ambassador; or upon the Soldier; or upon the Traveller; or she may have wanted the woman to come to her; the Gipsy; the Fine Lady; the Hermit; the girl in love with life; the Patroness of Letters; the women who called Mar (meaning hot baths and evening fires) or Shelmerdine (meaning crocuses in autumn woods) or Bonthrop (meaning the death we die daily) or all three together- which meant more things than we have space to write out- all these selves were different and she may have called upon any one of them. (226)

Although they can be listed singularly and denote specific eras and experiences in Orlando's life, each experience worked towards shaping one singular identity that was gradually tempered over time by experience, knowledge, and maturity.

In a conversation with Mr. Pope, Orlando expresses, “It is equally vain...for you to think you can protect me, or for me to think I can worship you. The light of truth beats upon us without shadow, and the light of truth is damnably unbecoming to us both” (151). The assumption of any overarching generalities regarding gender and sex tend to be repressive notions that function more to thwart the growth of an individual, rather than encourage autonomous growth according to intrinsic desires. This was a notion that Woolf began to explore through her ironically biased narrator’s playful description of Violet’s androgyny in “Friendships Gallery” and her later debunking of the claim regarding the assumed inherent connection of sex and gender, and its eventual replacement with an androgynous ideal as a far more natural existence, within *Orlando*. “Friendships Gallery” was a work written by Virginia Woolf that contained ideas that were later brought to full fruition in *Orlando*.

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