Breaking The Binary: Virginia Woolf’s Subversion of the Heteronormative Through Gender Play in *Orlando: A Biography*

by

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ABSTRACT

Breaking The Binary is a thesis that examines Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography* as a feminist subversion of the heteronormative patriarchy. The novel was written for Vita Sackville-West, whom Woolf loved and was romantically involved with from approximately 1925 to 1929. The thesis suggests that Sackville-West experienced the phenomenon known as gender dysphoria and argues that Sackville-West’s masculine tendencies and experiences were incorporated into the novel. Woolf effectively uses both temporality and biography to explore the gender fluid Sackville-West’s life and perspectives on gender.

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Introduction

This is a thesis that interprets Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel Orlando: A Biography as both an exploration of alternating gendered experience and a feminist examination of the past that enables a new perspective of the present. This thesis ultimately establishes a connection between the feminist themes and the temporality of Woolf’s novel, while employing the use of modern terminology regarding both gender and sexual identities. This is also a thesis that discusses the relation of art to personal experience. And so, I begin.

When I was very young (age is hard for me to determine), I was raped. Without my realizing it, food became a way for me to cope. Food became my comfort: for me, food was stable. I ate and ate until, inevitably, I gained more and more weight. I dressed in loose, baggy clothing to hide my fat. I accepted the descriptor “tomboy” whenever someone else offered it, because sure, that’s easier than “I dress to hide what I hate most about myself.” Whenever a family gathering would happen, my mom would put me in a dress or indicate that I should wear something a bit more “appropriate for a woman.” This compounded my frustration, because dressing “appropriate for a woman” was actually very difficult as a fat woman. What I did not realize at first was that eating for comfort until I became obese, and even dressing to hide this part of myself, was a response to the trauma that I experienced that many other women also take up following sexual trauma. For a long time, any sign of femininity that I saw in my appearance made me nauseous.

My undergraduate experience didn’t change my perception of gender much, despite attending a liberal college. It wouldn’t be until I became a graduate student that I would be surrounded by people who were also quite unsure of whether their gender fit in the binary that
remained the “standard” of the time. I have always been proud to be a woman: women have it rough, and I had it rough, and in remaining a woman (while hating everything to do with the femininity reflected within myself) I felt a certain sense of belonging and pride. What I did not understand until I was in graduate school was that my gender was simply…whatever it was. I was so determined to label myself according to the gender binary (even when considering a transgender identity) that I didn’t even think about the possibility of shaping the phenomenon of gender to fit whatever blend that I am, rather than shaping myself to a gender. It seemed like gender was supposed to be a force that acted on me; but as I understand it now, it is I who act on my gender.

While gender isn’t necessarily simply an outfit that one puts on each day (although clothing impacts the reflection of gender just as the reflection of gender impacts clothing), the choices that one makes day-to-day impact the reflection of gender as well. These “choices” that we make can, on the one hand, happen purely in the subconscious. For example, the way someone walks. Or, on the other hand, they can be perceptibly conscious, like the clothes someone wears or the way they style their hair. Even something like the way that a person speaks (either the choice of words or the inflection that they use) can be both conscious and subconscious, depending on the situation and the person. If one walks, speaks, and dresses in a masculine fashion, they often identify as masculine, even if it is only a part of the whole that is their gender. If these masculinities line up with the reflection of identity that is whispered (or in many cases, shouted) by society, then everything is groovy. There is no need to question anything: that person is likely masculine and ideally comfortable in their masculinity.

However, what happens when the vast reflective surfaces of community and society reflect the performative aspects (that is: walking, talking, dressing, etc.) of a person’s
internalized inklings of gender, but that reflection does not line up with the gender that they were assigned at birth? By “reflection of gender,” I mean to say the gender identity that is projected by one’s external appearance. I believe that this is simply another part of the equation of gender identity, so to speak. First there is the internal aspect of gender, which I will discuss alongside contemporary transfeminist and gender theorist Julia Serano’s theory of “subconscious sex.” Second, there are the external aspects of gender: biological sex, hair length or style, gender-aligned behaviors like masculine/feminine forms of speech, and even the clothes that one chooses to wear. Finally, the aspect of gender identity that is “reflected,” I believe, is the perception of one’s gender by those they interact with. This is, other than the assigned sex at one’s birth, one of the aspects of gender that one ultimately has the least control over.

Ideally, we will eventually begin to conjure new terms for the variety of internal, external, and conscious or subconscious expressions of masculine and feminine traits (instead of clustering everyone who exists outside of the binary under one simple term). I believe that gender, both identity and expression, can be best understood as a spectrum. The gender spectrum represents a wide range of possibilities for the lived experience or expression of gender. On one side of the spectrum, we have “female,” and on the opposite we have “male.” As we move away from “female,” we begin to get into an area in the middle where both male and female begin to mix, and sitting in exactly the middle of that area is the point representing what we would consider gender neutrality or gender nonconformance. That point in the middle, and any points close to it, represent a combination of genders or gender characteristics that do not align with strictly “male” or “female.” Understanding gender as a spectrum helps to explain the ways in which someone can be both gender nonconforming and transgender, or both male and female.
Moreover, considering gender as a spectrum allows for far more open-minded conversations regarding identity and belonging.

I believe a mismatching of my gender identity (internal, external, reflective) is what I experienced when I chose the baggy, tomboy-ish, clothing in middle school and high school, and, as this thesis will explore, I also propose that this is what Vita Sackville-West experienced when she was born a woman but despised herself for not being born a man. Today I understand the mismatch of my gender identity to be reflective of a gender non-conformity, rather than as a “tomboyish” type of femininity, but the spectrum of gender is fluid and flexible. I often dressed very masculine: baggy shirts, jeans, hair up in a ponytail or bun and stuck to my head with hairspray or gel to prevent fly-aways because I could never be bothered to deal with it or style it or go and get it cut in a very particular way that would require arduous upkeep week after week or month after month. I looked at other women constantly, measuring myself and my appearance against theirs. I longed to be able to look like the women I saw in public and on tv: I longed to be desirable, but I never stopped to ask myself why I needed to be desired; why women must be desired above all else. Whenever a cis male made sexual advances, it flipped a switch in me that I wasn’t aware was there and often caused a binge eating episode. If a woman made advances, I would smile and thank them for the compliment, but no, I was unfortunately straight (or so I thought). I thought that sexual attraction was about the genitals and sexuality occurred through some strange exchange of pheromones. I thought that normal women pursued the phallus, and it was all about the phallus and what the phallus thought of us. If a man wasn’t attracted to me, it was likely my fault for not being attractive or desirable enough. This is why I choose to write about gender: because once I was lost, unaware and convinced by society (and mass media/the
beauty industry) that I wasn’t good enough—but I could be better if I bought the right products, or if I could just somehow lose the weight.

In my second year of graduate school, I read Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) for the first time. As I learned more and more about Woolf’s life (sexual violence, depression, madness) and about Woolf’s relationship with Vita Sackville-West, I was hooked. *Orlando* has it all: love, subversion of the heteronormative patriarchy, a supernatural slumber bringing about a change in gender from male to female, a protagonist who lives for over 400 years (despite never aging a day past 36, Sackville-West’s age at the time Woolf wrote *Orlando*), and crossdressing across the eras! Woolf managed to publish a novel in which a woman loves (and marries) another woman without being censored, a fate that befell Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel *The Well of Loneliness*, which was censored in England due to “obscenity” concerns. Leslie Taylor describes the sequence of events leading up to the formal ban of the novel in Britain:

By September [1928], the British Home Secretary unofficially declared *The Well* obscene. Rather than face a trial, [Publisher] Jonathan Cape, much to Hall’s displeasure, voluntarily withdrew the book and ceased printing in Britain. Then Cape—with Hall’s permission—subleased the rights to Pegasus Press, a Paris firm, and a new edition was printed in France. On October 4, customs authorities seized 250 copies of *The Well* at Dover, only to release them two weeks later. British officials had ordered the book’s seizure and later its release as they sought the best legal grounds upon which to test the book’s obscenity. On October 19, only one day after the books were released, police raided several bookstores and Cape’s offices and charged Cape with violating the Obscene Publications Act of 1857. The Act defined a book as obscene if it ‘tended to corrupt those whose minds were ‘open to immoral influence.’ Despite testimony from some of the most influential British writers, including Virginia Woolf, the British courts found Hall’s book obscene in November 1928. The appellate court affirmed the lower court’s decision in December: it took only ten minutes for the twelve judges to rule that *The Well* was a ‘disgusting book…prejudicial to the morals of the community.’ The ban lasted in England until 1948.¹

Unfortunately, the book was banned before it could ever really have a chance at circulating. Sackville-West had planned to take the novel to Germany with her, and on August 31, 1928, wrote to Woolf:

> I feel very violently about *The Well of Loneliness*. Not on account of what you call my proclivities; not because I think it is a good book; but really on principle...Because, you see, even if the *W. of L.* had been a good book, — even if it had been a great book, a real masterpiece, — the result would have been the same. And that is intolerable.²

The censure, more than anything, was the problem. The novel would be published in the United States by Covici-Friede, despite threats made by head of the New York Society for Suppression of Vice, John Sumner, and within the first month of publication would sell an astonishing twenty thousand copies.³ Covici-Friede went to trial in defense of *The Well*, and the book was determined to be written in accordance with the law in New York City. The lower customs court of the United States would declare the book obscene in May 1929, but the decision would be reversed by the higher court in July that year.⁴ With the ruling in favor of the novel and the publicity generated by the entire process, *The Well of Loneliness* became, as Lillian Faderman describes it, “the one novel that every literate lesbian in the four decades between 1928 and the 1960s would certainly have read.”⁵

The novel tells the story of Stephen Gordon, an upper-class girl who hates dresses, wants to cut her hair short, and wants very badly to be a boy. In the novel, Stephen begins to dress in masculine clothing and falls in love with Angela Crossby, the wife of a neighbor. As to why Hall’s novel was seen as threatening in the first place, Celia Marshik suggests:

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3 Taylor, “I Made Up My Mind to Get It”, 284.
Hall’s novel…ran afoul of the Home Office because it failed to condemn or mock the sexual deviance which it presumably represented…The narrative follows Stephen’s difficult childhood, success as an author, service during the Great War, and final sacrifice of the woman she loves to heterosexual marriage. Throughout the book, Stephen suffers at the hands of heterosexuals, and she and the narrator plead for…compassion and understanding.6

This pleading for compassion and understanding from heterosexuals hits very close to home, even at the time of this writing in 2023. The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) is, at the time of this writing, tracking 491 anti-LGBTQIA+ bills in the United States alone.7 It has become clear to me that there is a need for patience, compassion, and an earnest desire to listen to others in our community, whether we identify as one of them (queer, straight, trans, neurodivergent) or not.

Perhaps Orlando escaped censure in England because Woolf buried her context, that of gender roles and fluidity as well as female sexuality and a sapphic protagonist, within the subtext of Orlando. Gender is all about subtext, and that is only one of the many reasons why Orlando is brilliant. Orlando is also different in the sense that it is a bit more whimsical or humorous than Woolf’s other work, because Woolf needed something different after processing her grief for her lost parents; something (or someone) alive.8 Finishing a novel (and the fantastic success that was To the Lighthouse, at that) was surely taxing emotionally and spiritually, and perhaps dreaming up Orlando enabled Woolf to keep going, to keep writing. J.J. Wilson suggests this, citing a diary entry of Woolf’s that states “I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered…I think this will be great fun to write; and it

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6 Celia Marshik, “‘History’s Abrupt Revenges’”: Censoring War’s Perversions in the Well of Loneliness and Sleeveless Errand, 148-149.
8 Susan Bennett Smith, Reinventing Grief Work: Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Representations of Mourning in Mrs. Dalloway and To The Lighthouse, 318.
will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next.”⁹ So, perhaps Orlando was a writer’s vacation, of sorts, as much as it was a celebration of the woman who inspired her to continue pondering questions of gender freedoms and the absurdity of normative roles based on one’s assigned sex at birth. Moreover, perhaps the writing of Orlando assisted Woolf in the sorting out her own theory of gender.

Orlando can be seen as part of a continuum of Woolf’s examination of gender. In Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own (1929), in which she also works to establish interpretations and theories of sex and gender, the concept of androgyny isn’t defined until near the conclusion, but she talks about subjects related to gender and gender equality throughout. For example, she discusses androgyny:

Perhaps to think…of one sex as distinct from another is an effort. It interferes with the unity of the mind. … The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two [genders] live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating, if one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman must also have intercourse with the man in her. Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine…¹⁰

Woolf uses the term “intercourse” to describe a fusion of the mind, and furthers this metaphor by pointing out that one sex alone, or a “purely masculine mind,” cannot produce offspring. For the purposes of this thesis, I suggest that “intercourse” could also represent a form of teamwork. If one identifies as a woman, to cooperate with the man (or masculine qualities or tendencies) within herself will aid her in her endeavors, whether this be literary, professional, or otherwise. This is perhaps what Woolf meant when she wrote of the two genders “living in harmony together” being the normal and comfortable state of being.

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¹⁰ Woolf, Virginia A Room of One’s Own pp. 95-97
Susan Gubar notes in her introduction to the Harcourt edition of *A Room* that Woolf’s term in the manuscript for this harmony between the man-self and the woman-self was “gunandros,” rather than Coleridge’s term “androgynous.” “Gunandros” could be a nod at the term “gynandrous,” which describes both sexual organs in a plant being near enough to each other to be joined in a column, such as in orchids. I would argue that the term “gynandrous,” metaphorically, would better represent the character Orlando from Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*, due to the physical nature of their changes in the story, more than it would represent the concept of two minds within one person. Finding ways to use terms like androgynous and gunandros are certainly a start, but they are both examples of language that was created with an archaic understanding of gender, and that understanding is based on a gender binary that we who ponder gender today are no longer restrained by. Just as we, near the end of the first quarter of the twenty-first century, find ourselves moving away from the restriction of gender identity within the gender binary, so too do we find ourselves pondering other ways to describe or identify fluid forms of gender expression and identity.

Julia Serano is one such person who ponders gender, focusing particularly on the internalized, and for many, unspoken, feelings of gender or sex when they misalign with the external signaling or reflections of gender from society at large or assignment at birth. Serano, an American writer and trans-bi activist, has been writing transfeminist books since the early 2000s. Serano’s book *Whipping Girl*, first published in 2007, is a collection of essays in which she explores the lived experience of being a trans woman and presents to us her theory of subconscious sex. Serano argues that one’s brain sort-of “expects” their body to look or feel a certain way, regardless of a sex or gender assigned at birth. Serano specifies that she uses the term “sex” intentionally to express the physical or “body” aspect of one’s sex rather than gender
alone. She does this, she writes, because she “has experienced it [gender identity] as being rather exclusively about [her] physical sex, and because…this subconscious desire to be female has existed independently of the social phenomena commonly associated with the word ‘gender’” (Serano 82). We will examine Serano’s theory as we explore Sackville-West’s life and the pieces of \textit{Orlando} that seem to have been written to represent Sackville-West’s perception, or theory, of gender. For now, it is enough to understand that there are (at least) two parts to the formulation of gender: internal and external. Sackville-West was assigned female at birth, and she did perform the rituals of womanhood (i.e., getting married and having children), but throughout her life Sackville-West wished she was born a man instead, as I will discuss further in Chapter One. Moreover, Sackville-West intentionally cross-dressed several times, perhaps seeking to live as a man even if just for a few hours at a time.

Woolf herself does not seem to identify with a masculine conscious, or subconscious, but instead perhaps sought a harmonious state in which there are the perfect proportions of masculine and feminine traits, which she describes in \textit{A Room}. Thinking about a person as a mix of male and female, rather than simply one or the other, is a promising approach because it removes biology-based bias, allowing us to better understand ourselves. Even for those who identify outside of the prescribed binary, there is typically a mix of masculinity and femininity involved in the decisions they make each day. This could be when, for example, one styles their hair or chooses jewelry or clothing, or could even involve subtle things where there may be less of a choice and more of an inclination. In the novel, Orlando uses clothing to her advantage (particularly after her transformation into a woman) as discussed by Suzanne Raitt: “When dressed as a lady, Orlando pretends to be interested in the advances of male suitors. The gown of flowered taffeta is as much a disguise as any other costume, perhaps more so, since it effectively
masks Orlando’s sexuality.”11 Just as Orlando used clothes to her advantage, so too did Sackville-West in an extremely formative moment in her life, which we will discuss further in Chapter One: her time in Paris with Violet Keppel.

In 1918, Sackville-West spent several months in France playing the part of her friend and lover Violet Keppel’s male partner, Julian. This was at a crucial time in Sackville-West’s life, as it could be argued that she was trying to escape a life careening down a heteronormative path following her marriage, and thus likely perceived by her to be restrictive. While in France, Sackville-West dressed as a man, specifically a “wounded” soldier (being 1918, this was just after the first World War came to an end) with head covered in a bandage. Each day she ventured out with Violet Keppel to eat, drink, and take in all that Paris had to offer a romantic heterosexual couple. Following her formative experience as Julian, Sackville-West created her own theory of gender while ruminating on her time in France with Violet, primarily in a journal that she kept hidden until the time of her death, when her son Nigel Nicolson found and published it. This I discuss in Chapter One.

The work I do in this thesis is intended to share my understanding of the work that women whom I deeply admire have done regarding the perception and projection of gender.12 I believe that the theories of people like Woolf and Sackville-West paved the way for the concepts of nonbinary and/or genderfluid expression that we understand today to be embraced and built further upon, which I will discuss further in Chapter One alongside the work of Julia Serano. I use Serano’s theory to examine Sackville-West’s experiences as Julian and her own inclination to

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12 I would like to note here that while the work that Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West have done regarding gender, identity, and sexuality is admirable, my admiration of Woolf’s and Sackville-West’s theories of gender is not meant to downplay the existence of the very negative opinions these women likely possessed regarding class, race, or nationality. I do contend, though, that this should not take away from the value of my argument.
masculine traits and clothing throughout her life alongside the ways in which her inability to express her gender could have become something of an obstacle in her writing.

In the second chapter, I turn to Woolf’s theory of gender and explore it through the lens of Megan Burke’s examination of feminist experience as temporality. Burke’s book *When Time Warps* (2019) is a philosophical examination of the lived experience of gender, race, and sexual violence. In it, Burke offers: “A phenomenological account of gender normativity in order to examine the way social and historical constructs of racialized sexual domination engender the subject” (Burke 87). Essentially, Burke shows us the ways in which society imposes gender upon people dependent on their assigned sex at birth. This “imposing” of gender upon people aligns with what Serano describes of her experiences as a trans woman. She was assigned the sex of male at birth, but she knew from an incredibly young age that she was, and wanted to be, female. The imposition of the male gender upon her is what led her to understand the difference between what she calls her subconscious sex and the physical sex she was assigned at birth.

In the second chapter I work to explore the ways in which Woolf intentionally subverts what Megan Burke terms the “heteropatriarchy” in *Orlando*. The heteropatriarchy can be understood to be the systemic and hierarchical power that “men” (meant here to mean men in power, men who seek to control women, or men who further this system perhaps without even realizing it) exert over women every day. Burke makes a compelling case for the use, or threat, of sexual assault as a form of infliction of this power, as it has been in the past. It is this historical context, the assigning of gender at birth and enforcing of roles and even *personality* related to one’s assigned gender or sex, that is subverted by Woolf in *Orlando* in spectacular ways. For example, near the end of the novel Orlando seeks freedom from a form of domination by a force Woolf names the “spirit of the age.” Orlando, who was born a man but is also a woman who
prefers the sexual company and attention of women, meets the perfect man: a man who is also a woman. They meet suddenly and marry quickly, as both characters see that they are perfectly unconventional, and thus so too will their marriage be. Here Woolf shows that marriage, despite its history as a machine of inheritance that uses child-bearing women as a vessel through which property is funneled from father to son, can instead be adapted to be whatever two people may need it to be. In Orlando’s case, she needed to marry someone so that the “spirit of the age,” which I take to represent the heteropatriarchy, would finally allow her to complete her life’s work without interruption. Both Orlando and her husband are concurrently both sexes/genders, but what bonds them is not this compatibility alone, it is also their status as “other” in an otherwise heteronormative world. By portraying this, I contend that Woolf is pushing back against the normativity of heterosexuality and arguing that the emotional bond of marriage, rather than the reproductive or sexual obligation of it, should be pursued. Ultimately, this thesis argues that Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* works as both biographical tribute to a woman whom Woolf loved, while also questioning and challenging normative gender roles for men, women, and those who do not identify within the parameters of a gender binary. The way that Woolf plays with time in the novel also serves as a feminist approach to questioning said gender roles throughout England’s history, from the Elizabethan era to what was present day when the book was published in 1928. I begin Chapter One with an excerpt from Bettina Aptheker’s *Communists in Closets* (2023) because I feel that it represents a good starting point for my discussion of heteronormative gender expectations: the misconception that queer people (gender queer or sexually queer) are deviant.
Chapter 1: Crested Not Cloven

“We can ask, ‘Why does it matter?’ It mattered so much because all of us know we were ‘different,’ in ways that were deemed by society to be not only abnormal, but perverse.”

Bettina Aptheker, *Communists in Closets* (2023)

Aptheker begins her intimate collection of the stories of queer members of the American Communist Party and the various forms of “closets” that they metaphorically occupied with a confession of her own: she “came out” of the closet in 1965 as a member of the Communist party. At the time, it was against the rules of the Communist party for a queer woman to be a member, and in the introduction to her book Aptheker discusses her experiences navigating the party, being monitored by the FBI, coming out to her first class of students at UC Santa Cruz, and departing the Communist party in 1981 as an openly queer woman.  

One story in *Communists in Closets*, that of Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965), offers us a perhaps more modern (Late 1950s rather than early 1920s) perspective which many queer women (including Woolf and Sackville-West) could understand: a heterosexual marriage lacking in sexual desire yet uniquely loving and supportive. Once within the safe confines of a seemingly heterosexual marriage, these women had the space and support not only to ponder their sexuality, but also to develop their own liberatory understandings of biological sex, gender, love, and the institutional role of marriage.

Hansberry’s experience is quite like that of both Sackville-West and Woolf regarding their marriages. Hansberry is perhaps most widely recognized as the playwright of *A Raisin in the Sun*, for which she won the Drama Critics’ Circle Award at the age of 29. Hansberry met her

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future husband, Robert B. Nemiroff (1929-1991) on a picket line, “protesting NYU’s exclusion of Black students from its basketball team.” Of their marriage, and Hansberry’s sexuality, Aptheker notes that from the beginning of her marriage, Lorraine had been honest with her husband about her attraction to women. Like Sackville-West, Hansberry was both lesbian and poet, and like Woolf she had her first homosexual experience after she married a man (this she also shared with Aptheker herself).

As the language that we use to discuss gender has evolved, so too has the role and significance of marriage. Perhaps both Sackville-West and Hansberry’s heterosexual marriages allowed them to pursue their creative endeavors more easily. Similarly, perhaps Virginia Woolf’s marriage to Leonard Woolf did the same. Sackville-West married Harold Nicolson in 1913, unaware at the time that her husband was also queer (Glendinning 86). Virginia married Leonard Woolf in 1912, and with him she would go on to begin the Hogarth Press and publish several novels of her own as well as the works of many others (Lee 358). On Sackville-West and Woolf’s marriages, Karen Z. Sproles writes in her book *Desiring Women*, “Like Orlando, Woolf and Sackville-West forged marriages that protected them from social pressure and camouflaged their desires. Their marriages also fostered them as writers.” This suggestion that the marriages “camouflaged” Woolf’s and Sackville-West’s desires is both intriguing and a beautiful sentiment. What I intend to discuss in this chapter, however, is how this camouflage fostered them as writers and gender theorists. Like Aptheker and Hansberry, perhaps Sackville-West and Woolf were afforded the time and security to have important discussions about gender, sexuality, and

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14 Aptheker, *Communists*, 185.
16 Aptheker, *Communists*, 192.
love because of their stable (and seemingly heterosexual, thus safe from social scrutiny) marriages.

For Sackville-West, the safety allowed her to develop an understanding and acceptance of her masculine traits and qualities as they existed alongside her feminine traits and qualities. In a letter written to her husband on November 20, 1926, Sackville-West explains that Woolf had brought something up that was missing in her writing: a sort of emptiness, or blankness, that Woolf seemed to believe held Sackville-West back from mastery over her art. Sackville-West herself did not seem to properly understand what this emptiness was, either, but she understood it was there:

She asks if there is something in me which does not vibrate, a “something reserved, muted.”… Damn the woman, she has put her finger on it. There is something muted…Something that doesn’t come alive. I brood and brood, feel I am groping in a dark tunnel. It makes everything I write a little unreal; gives the effect of having been done from the outside. (Portrait 212, emphasis mine)

This “effect of having been done from the outside” sounds a bit as if it seems fake, or intentionally done to appear more normative by Sackville-West, a truth that is not outright told. As I will discuss later in this chapter, Sackville-West wrote herself into her novels as a masculine, Byronic, hero, including in her novel Challenge (1920).

Understanding Sackville-West’s excursion as Julian and other ways in which she found an outlet or presentation for her masculinity helps us to see that Sackville-West could seek this release in her writing, as if she were attempting to create for herself a world in which she could be the man she wished she was in truth. As I will discuss, Sackville-West’s desire to be male was not unlike Julia Serano’s desire to be female despite her assignment of the male sex at birth. Before we examine Sackville-West’s experiences as an adult, it will be important to ground the conversation in her experiences in her youth. Just as Serano understood from a young age that
she was a girl, Sackville-West appeared to understand from a young age that she had masculine tendencies in addition to her feminine tendencies. In this way, Sackville-West’s feelings of emptiness and blankness mentioned above, I contend, represent a subconscious sex that did not align with the gender that she identified with internally, potentially even beginning during her time as a young girl growing up at Knole.

As I noted in the introduction, occasionally the external factors of gender (that is, the physical characteristics or the assignment at birth of one sex or the other) do not match up with the internal perceptions of gender or identity. Mark Yarhouse brings this concept into his discussion of gender dysphoria:

Dysphoria means being uneasy about or generally dissatisfied with something. Thus, gender dysphoria refers to the experience of having a psychological and emotional identity as either male or female, and that your psychological and emotional identity does not correspond to your biological sex—this perceived incongruity can be the source of deep and ongoing discomfort. Specifically, gender dysphoria, is on the one hand the experience of being born male (biological sex) but feeling a psychological and emotional identity as female. Similarly, gender dysphoria is the experience of being born female (biological sex) but feeling a psychological or emotional identity as male. When a person experiences gender incongruence and it is causing them significant distress or impairment, they may meet criteria for the diagnosis of Gender Dysphoria.18

We can take gender dysphoria to represent a dissatisfaction with, and ongoing discomfort regarding, the experience of having an identity that does not resonate with that which is imposed upon a person. Throughout this chapter I will discuss the role that gender dysphoria may have played in Sackville-West’s life as she grew up with masculine desires and tendencies in a social environment still heavily enforcing the rule of the gender binary and the repressive norms that came with it. I will explore the extent to which Woolf took experiences of Sackville-West’s and integrated them into the story of Orlando to subvert and disavow what we will define as the

heteronormative patriarchal system, which Woolf refers to, more simply, as “society.” I will endeavor to plot the growth of the character Orlando from the primarily masculine nobleman into Orlando the sexually fluid poet, examining the ways in which Woolf uses them both to employ gender as a lens under which we place existence or personhood. Finally, I will examine the role of poetry in the novel, and claiming that it is the vessel through which Orlando achieves independence after cleverly evading the oppressive “spirit of the age,” which restrained her until she performed the ritual demanded of her sex, marriage.

Not so much as a proper kilt

Both Woolf and Sackville-West seem to suggest that a person can be made up of male and female qualities or traits and that it is the combination of the two, more than anything, that leads to a peaceful marriage or powerful mind. Moreover, they both attribute traits (more than clothes or genitals) to femininity or masculinity. For Woolf, some of these traits are found in her descriptions of Sackville-West: “Florid, moustached, parakeet colored…hard, handsome, manly; inclined to double chin” (Lee 487). Woolf weaves the masculine in with the otherwise gender neutral or feminine, such as the description of a flushed or rosy complexion placed alongside “moustached,” and “handsome” to signal that which she seemed to find attractive about Sackville-West. For Sackville-West, many of the traits she aligns with gender are seen in a journal, written primarily in 1920 and published after her death by her son Nigel Nicolson as Portrait of a Marriage in 1973.

Also throughout her journal are references to the ways in which her clothing or behavior almost never matched up with what was expected of her. For instance, Sackville-West discusses the way she couldn’t be comfortable around her mother because, as she recorded on July 23, 1920, she “couldn’t be rough when she [her mother] was there” (Portrait 5). Additionally, when
discussing Rosamund Grosvenor, one of Sackville-West’s first romantic interests from when she was much younger, she writes in the same journal entry:

> Even in those early days (I was six and she was ten) [Rosamund] was always clean and neat whereas I was always grubby and in tatters…the trenches I dug in the garden during the war; the ‘army’ I raised and commanded amongst the terrorized children of the neighborhood; my khaki suit, and the tears of rage I shed because I was not allowed to have it made with trousers—no, not so much as a proper kilt. (Portrait 13)

Sackville-West was many things, but strictly female (according to the early twentieth-century British norms) was not one of them. In the quote above Sackville-West herself compares the feminine qualities she found desirable in Rosamund to the boyish tendencies (physical sport, getting dirty while playing outside, and even “tears of rage” when she was forced to wear a dress) she noted in her own behavior, indicating that she perceived differences in gender expression even at a young age. I would argue that this was a form of experiencing dysphoria, as she seemed to be aware from a young age, just as Julia Serano was aware that she was not simply a boy at a very young age, that she was not (nor did she necessarily desire to be) like other girls (Portrait 5).

Sackville-West was assigned female at birth, and the only child of Lionel Sackville-West, meaning she would never inherit Knole, the ancestral home of the Sackvilles. In *Portrait*, Nigel Nicolson writes of his mother’s frustration with her assigned sex: “Vita since her childhood had never ceased to regret that she was not born a boy. Once she quoted to Violet [Keppel] Queen Elizabeth’s magnificent phrase: ‘Had I been crested not cloven, my Lords, you had not treated me thus’” (Portrait 191). It is appropriate that Vita would quote Queen Elizabeth, since, as we learn in Sackville-West’s *Knole and the Sackvilles*, it was Queen Elizabeth who gifted Knole to Thomas Sackville, the first Baron Sackville, in 1586.\(^\text{19}\) Published in 1922, *Knole and The

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\(^{19}\) Vita Sackville-West. *Knole and the Sackvilles*. William Heinemann, 1922, 10.
Knole remains the last standing medieval deer park, turned over to the National Trust in 1947 by Charles Sackville, who inherited it from Sackville-West’s father Lionel Sackville when he died in 1928 (Glendinning 188). The National Trust artfully tells the great history of Knole in the space of a paragraph:

Knole has been the home of the Sackville family since 1603 when the building was substantially changed for Thomas Sackville, 1st Earl of Dorset. The house has remained more or less unaltered since that time and is a superb example of late medieval architecture, overlaid with Renaissance embellishment. In spite of its massive scale and labyrinthine grandeur, Knole stands apart from the other

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*Sackville-West, Knole, 5-6.*
great ‘prodigy houses’ of the period in that Sackville chose to retain his medieval house and to adapt it to the needs of a Jacobean courtier. As a result, Knole has little of the height and symmetry which typify its contemporaries.\(^{21}\)

It is not difficult to see why Sackville-West loved, and desired, her ancestral home so greatly: her family had cared for it dedicatedly, each generation of Sackvilles contributing to it without allowing it to lose its sense of history. Lee points out that “the first gift Virginia [Woolf] received from Vita after their first meeting was a copy of *Knole & The Sackvilles,*” suggesting the significance of Sackville-West’s feelings for Knole and the pride she felt in the way she captured it in her book (Lee 481).

When Woolf and Sackville-West first met in 1922, Woolf knew Sackville-West was a successful novelist and poet, having published two books of poetry (less-than-successful) and two novels, *Heritage* (1919) and *The Dragon in Shallow Waters* (1920), as well as the informational *Knole and the Sackvilles* in 1922. Woolf, meanwhile, was still lesser known, having only published *The Voyage Out* (1913) and *Night and Day* (1919). When they met, Woolf was in the process of finalizing her third novel, *Jacob’s Room,* published in 1922. More than merely a novelist, Sackville-West seemed to have caught Woolf’s eye because of her aristocratic roots and the story that lay therein. Woolf knew about Sackville-West’s family, but, by her first visit to Knole with Sackville-West in January 1927, she seemed to be just as enchanted by Knole as Sackville-West was. Sproles describes the invitation and the trip to Knole, writing of the way the inspiration of this trip would make its way into *Orlando*:

Woolf recognized Knole as Sackville-West’s metaphorical safe house. Knole was both a locked safe holding treasure and a protected place where Sackville-West could feel secure enough to desire what she could not have, whether Knole itself or Virginia Woolf. Sackville-West’s fantasy of Knole was the key to an internal treasure chest of security, and she created that fantasy through writing even as that fantasy inspired her to write. … Sackville-West wrote to Woolf, inviting her into a

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bed she could describe but not own. Woolf responded with a description of the bed and of Sackville-West in it as Orlando.22

The union of these authors wound up being one of alternating comfort, each giving the other what they felt they needed most. For Woolf, it was a maternal kind of love and support that was desired (Lee 479). For Sackville-West, it was the fantasy of taking what she believed was hers by right. Sackville-West’s love for Knole and the story of her family would draw Woolf in, but I believe it was Sackville-West herself whom Woolf desired more than anything.

When Sackville-West and Woolf first began their friendship in 1923, Sackville-West was happiest when she was in the fields of Knole, walking the land like her father and male ancestors before her and, as she herself wrote, “always out, either with the guns or with the farmer’s boys, or by myself with the dogs” (Portrait 19). Sackville-West knew she would never inherit Knole, purely because she had been born the wrong sex, or as her biographer Victoria Glendinnett describes it, an “accident of gender” (Glendinnett xvii). Sproles describes the way that this knowledge would haunt Sackville-West’s life:

> It may be that the realization that her sex prevented her from inheriting Knole was the founding trauma of Sackville-West’s life. It would be difficult to exaggerate her attachment to Knole. In 1947, nineteen years after her father’s death and Knole had passed out of her immediate family, she describes it as ‘MY Knole which I love more than anything else in the world except [her husband]’...Even as late as 1951, at the age of fifty-nine, Sackville-West wrote to her husband, ‘If only I had been Dada’s son, instead of his daughter.’23

As Sproles suggests, dreading having to leave Knole simply because she was born a girl may have been a founding trauma of Sackville-West’s. The gender dysphoria that Sackville-West likely experienced went beyond simply desiring an ancestral home, however, as she found outlets for her masculinity in the form of writing, sapphic romance, and crossdressing.

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22 Sproles, Desiring Women, 71.
23 Sproles, Desiring Women, 43.
I had wondered about my voice

On November 6, 1918, Sackville-West learned that her husband, Harold Nicolson, had been having affairs with men and had contracted a sexually transmitted disease when he informed her that she too must get tested (Glendinning 87). Following the difficult conversation, Sackville-West likely realized that her marriage was destined to be unusual. Before that conversation, Sackville-West had no idea that her husband was like her, or perhaps purely homosexual rather than the form of bisexuality Sackville-West arguably experienced. Rather than labeling Sackville-West’s sexuality as “bisexual,” Sproles suggests, “[t]he journal represents sexuality not in terms of what Sackville-West was (words such as invert and lesbian are not used) but in terms of what she did and how she felt.”24 Returning to the difficult conversation with Sackville-West’s husband, Glendinning writes:

Vita’s response to Harold in this embarrassment, and subsequent explanations and revelations, go a very long way to explain his almost superhuman tolerance of her behaviour to him in the following three years. For her, the immediate aftermath was complex: she had to rethink her whole marriage and her picture of her husband, of his sexual nature – and her own. She had to recognize a parallel duality in her own nature that was sexual and not just temperamental. The unthinkable, after the first shock, becomes the thing most thought about. It was a turning-point. (Glendinning 88)

The parallel duality that Glendinning mentions could be the dual personhood that Sackville-West writes of in her journal, referring to what I believe are her masculine and feminine identities. From here, Sackville-West’s relationship with Violet Keppel would strengthen, and grow into something that gave Sackville-West the comfort and acceptance she needed to explore the masculine side of herself, which she released in the form of a male alter-ego named “Julian.” In September 1918, Sackville-West dressed in men’s clothes and met Keppel at Hyde Park Corner

24 Sproles, Desiring Women, 42.
in London. Glendinning describes the adventure they shared: “Tall thin ‘Julian,’ smoking a cigarette, strolled around Mayfair with his much shorter, plumper girlfriend…They took a train to Orpington – a suburban town on the line to Sevenoaks – and stayed in a boarding-house for the night as man and wife” (Glendinning 95). In her journal entry dated October 5, 1920, Sackville-West contemplated the significance of this experience:

I had [cross-dressed] once already in England; that was one of the boldest things I ever did. … 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. … (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 daylight, but again nobody took the slightest notice. We went to Knole!, which was, I think, brave. Here I slipped into the stables and emerged as myself. (Portrait 109-10)

So much of this journal entry speaks to the ease with which Sackville-West found herself embracing her masculinity. If we can equate “normal” to “natural,” perhaps Sackville-West is finding herself amazed at how easy it was to fall into this masculine role. In fact, I would argue that in this journal entry Sackville-West proclaims that which she normally kept hidden: her feelings of a desire to be a gender that was not the one she was assigned at birth. She knew that it would be frowned upon by “society,” or perhaps the heteronormative patriarchy, which we will discuss more in-depth in Chapter Two, but she could not deny how natural, or perhaps right, it felt. This short trip would be the precursor for a much more difficult trip in which Sackville-West and Keppel would stay in Paris from late November 1918 until March 1919, when their husbands traveled there together to convince them to return. In this window of time, Sackville-West would be tempted by the opportunity to run away and live as a man with Keppel as her wife until the
end of their lives, but ultimately, she would choose her husband and return home to her children in London (Glendinning 100).

While in Paris with Keppel, Sackville-West again assumed the identity of “Julian” as frequently as possible for several months. In 1920, Sackville-West would pen Challenge, a novel based on her experiences as Julian while staying in Paris. Glendinning outlines the ways in which Sackville-West wrote herself and her experiences into Challenge:

In the story, Violet [Keppel] is portrayed as ‘Eve’ and Vita herself as the troubled ‘Julian’. The two of them were quickly building up a fantasy world, with its own language. … Violet made suggestions and emendations throughout the writing of the novel, especially in the characterization of Eve and Julian: ‘The description of Julian I thought most adequate. You say it’s not like you! It is you, word for word, trait for trait.’ (Glendinning 93)

Julian, both in Challenge and in Sackville-West’s lived experience, embodied a masculine gender, and with the help of makeup and a bandage around the head, he easily passed as a man in public. Sackville-West would continue to place her masculine identity and desires into the characters in her novels as both code and a way to express herself. Perhaps this is what Woolf was referring to, quoted in the letter Sackville-West wrote to her husband in November 1926, when she said that Woolf believed her writing felt “as if having been done from the outside.” If Sackville-West intentionally wrote herself into Challenge as Julian, despite writing it in her typical “code,” it would make sense that the character was close to Sackville-West herself.

In Desiring Women, Sproles points out that the last name Sackville-West chose to give Julian in her novel Challenge was Devenant, which, “[f]rench for ‘becoming,’ suggests the question the novel and journal propose: should she become Julian?”25 This is a fascinating question, which I will discuss more near the end of this chapter, but it signals the intensity of the feelings of potential transformation following her experience living as a man for several months.

25 Sproles, Desiring Women, 36.
in France in 1918. Should Sackville-West become Julian? Should she, could she become a man? *Challenge* would not be published in England in 1920 when it was finished, as Sackville-West’s mother interfered and forbade her from publishing it, but it did appear in the United States in 1923. The Baroness Sackville knew how thin the veil that covered real events in her daughter’s life was, and seemed to believe it could cause real harm to the family, and Sackville-West, if it were published and her code was cracked (Glendinning 109).

When, in 1920, Sackville-West wrote of her experiences in France as Julian, it was likely much more of an ordeal to make public one’s feelings of gender dysphoria. Madelyn Detloff’s piece “Modern Times, Modernist Writing, Modern Sexualities” explores homosexuality as it was portrayed and lived between the end of the First World War through 1946. Detloff calls this period “the intricate landscape of transatlantic, English language modernism” and inspects what they call the “queer circuitry” of women who wrote English-language modernist texts such as Virginia Woolf and Radclyffe Hall.\(^{26}\) While talking about the common persecution of those engaged in same-sex erotic behavior, Detloff explains that those who engaged in homosexual acts were “unprotected by the law at best,” and often targets of persecution by the state. Detloff also points out that men were more likely than women to face any legal repercussions if they were caught participating in homosexual activities. Women, on the other hand, were not believed to be able to have sex with each other, and thus more often ignored:

> Sex between women was inconceivable in this worldview because the libido necessary for two women to contemplate sex was (supposedly) absent. … That said, women with the means (and predisposition) to thumb their noses at the threat of scandal were, unlike their male counterparts, not subject to direct legal prosecution for their homosexual acts.\(^{27}\)


Detloff explains that because many (men) did not understand that women possessed sexual libido of their own, the idea of two women having sex may have been considered a joke at the time. Detloff also takes care to explain that it was primarily the women who were self-sufficient financially that were able to snub the rumors that spread throughout society, citing Sackville-West specifically as an example: “Thus, women such as Vita Sackville-West…could live as notorious Sapphists without risking the fate of [playwright] Oscar Wilde [1854-1900], who was imprisoned for two years with hard labor for acts of ‘gross indecency’ with other men. Of the “fate of Oscar Wilde,” Ari Adut writes that Wilde is considered the “iconic victim of 19th-century English puritanism.” Adut also points out that Britain was, at the turn of the 20th century, the only country in Western Europe that had criminalized all male homosexual acts. Just as Oscar Wilde’s sexual exploits were not necessarily news to most of London when the sentence was passed and he was jailed in 1895, those who knew Sackville-West knew that the rumors of her physical relationships with other women were indeed likely to be fact (Lee 483).

In 1960, two years before her death, Sackville-West professed her frustration that Harold Nicolson had not been more honest with her about his sexuality when they first married. In Portrait, Nigel Nicolson introduces this sentiment, explaining that after 1917, and the discovery that her husband preferred the sexual company of men more than women, it gradually became clear that their [Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson’s] mutual [sexual] enjoyment was on the wane. … Simultaneously, therefore, and without placing any great strain upon their love for each other, they began to seek their pleasure with people of their own sex, and to Vita at least it seemed quite natural, for she was simply reverting to her other form of 'love.' Marriage and sex could be quite separate things (Portrait 136).

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Harold Nicolson had shown her that she was free to love whomever she wanted while retaining the structural integrity of their marriage, and thus the love and support that came with it. In this way, the marriage was just as much a social safety net for Harold Nicolson as it was for Sackville-West. Glendinning explains that, when Sackville-West first married, “she knew that there were ‘effeminate’ men (and Harold was not effeminate) but she did not know the physical realities of male homosexuality” (Glendinning 47). So, even if Sackville-West had a suspicion of her husband’s sexual alignment, she may not have realized that her own preferences were similar, in a way, to her husband’s. In the following letter, dated November 23, 1960, Sackville-West tells Nicolson that he should have been honest with her from the beginning:

> When we married, you were older than I, and far better informed. I was very young, and very innocent. I knew nothing about homosexuality. I didn’t even know that such a thing existed – either between men or between women. You should have told me. You should have warned me. You should have told me about yourself, and have warned me that the same sort of thing was likely to happen to myself. It would have saved us a lot of trouble and misunderstanding. But I simply didn’t know. (Glendinning 47)

While, yes, she is arguing that Nicolson should have informed her of his sexual preferences before they were married, it is also true that Sackville-West herself did not disclose her own sexual (or romantic) history either. The acceptance and freedom that Sackville-West experienced during her affair with Violet Keppel was perhaps her first experience feeling truly free in both whom she loved and which gender roles she performed in a relationship. Perhaps it was more tempting to run away with Keppel and assume the life of a man because then she could be more openly accept the parts of herself which she understood to be masculine, and thus potentially a source of shame.
Duality

Sproles reads Sackville-West’s and Woolf’s relationship as that of two women who are embracing and exploring desire for other women. As part of this reading, Sproles examines the gender roles present in Sackville-West’s *Challenge* (1920): “The fictional Julian [the protagonist] is a perfect stereotype of masculinity. Heroic in battle and passionate in love, he is the embodiment of active desire. The characters articulate as well as perform traditional gender roles.”

As I have discussed previously in this chapter, Sackville-West often portrayed herself in her stories as a sullen, male, Byronic hero, and *Challenge* was no different. Even Sackville-West’s mother identified right away that Julian in the novel was simply Sackville-West coding herself, and that the story being told was the story of Sackville-West and Violet Keppel’s experiences in Paris (Glendinning 109).

When enlisting the thoughts, experiences, and works of those who can no longer speak for themselves, there are a few important things to keep in mind. First, Sackville-West is no longer living, and therefore has no way to contribute to the conversation regarding her representation. As Sackville-West passed away in 1962, any assumptions I make about her gender, or her pronouns, would be disrespectful. Therefore, I will continue throughout this thesis to refer to her with the she/her pronouns which she herself employed while she was alive. Bettina Aptheker, visiting Sonoma State University on a “tour” following the publication of *Communists in Closets* in 2023, explained to me that those who have lived and died before us were not likely to have the same language or forms of expression in the past that we have now. Gender manifests in many ways. To express one’s gender in words is extremely complicated,

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30 Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 18.
31 I thank Bettina Aptheker for this illuminating perspective.
particularly without an established vocabulary for it. The term “transsexual,” for example, did not emerge until the 1960s, and even then, it was largely considered a negative term. It would not be until the 1990s that the term “transgender” began to circulate to describe the identity of those who are assigned a gender at birth that did not align with their lived experiences. Serano defines and discusses the various descriptive terms and specifies the ways in which she uses them in *Whipping Girl* (2007):

I will use the word ‘gender’ in a broad way to refer to various aspects of a person’s physical or social sex, their sex-related behaviors, the sex-based class system they are situated within, or (in most cases) some combination thereof. … While the word [transgender] originally had a more narrow definition, since the 1990s it has been used primarily as an umbrella term to describe those who defy social expectations and assumptions regarding femaleness and maleness; this includes people who are transsexual (those who live as members of the sex other than the one they were assigned at birth), intersex (those who are born with a reproductive or sexual anatomy that does not fit the typical definitions of female or male), and genderqueer (those who identify outside of the male/female binary), as well as those whose gender expression differs from their anatomical or perceived sex (including crossdressers, drag performers, masculine women, feminine men, and so on).32

The abundance of words or labels is both necessary and complicated. It is necessary and important to have a word, an identity, available to use to label oneself that is both familiar and accurate. It is also, unfortunately, complicated. The difference between one’s biological sex and one’s (socially constructed) gender is a very important distinction to draw. Many who identify outside of the gender binary were still assigned a sex at birth based on physiological aspects present at the time, and as I will discuss a bit more in Chapter Two, this assignment of a sex at birth is also the admission into a category that will define this person’s existence regarding the resources available to them and the way they are treated for the duration of their lives.

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I pause here to define these terms to illustrate how they may serve us today in examining experiences from the past. A person is typically considered to be “trans” when the sex that they were assigned at birth (external) does not align with the sex that they understand themselves to be (internal). Transgender people can be acutely aware of their subconscious sex, while also being acutely aware that their internalized gender identity does not reflect their exterior, or what is reflected at them. I use the term reflection here, as I did in the introduction, to represent the perception of gender that happens in other people that one interacts with. As an example, take my “subconscious sex.” My gender, or internalized view of my gender, was (and remains) somewhere between masculine and feminine, without leaning too far into either category. If we think of gender expression as a spectrum, ranging from male to female with points spreading along the width of the space between, the place where my gender would fall is somewhere closer to the middle of the feminine half. The way that I dress typically reflects this. However, if I were to wear something more stereotypically feminine, like a dress, the reflection of my gender would be much further toward the feminine side of the spectrum. Looking back on the choices I made in my expression of gender throughout my own life and realizing that it was absolutely okay that I didn’t see myself as a perfect vision of femininity while still identifying as a woman, today I identify as gender nonconforming: my pronouns are She/They. I’m proud of my experiences as a woman, including my trauma, because they have formed me into who I am today—regardless of my gender. Where on the spectrum of gender my gender falls doesn’t necessarily matter to me, but my identity does, and that identity should be identifiable to others through the use of mutually understood language—even if it is complicated.

Serano’s theory acknowledges that there are both biological and social factors at play where one’s gender is concerned. By assuming that subconscious sex, gender expression, and
sexual orientation each represent separate influences or determinants of gender, placing the origin of gender identity in the subconscious allows us to accept what Serano describes as the “natural variation that exists amongst people” as the norm (Serano 99). Moreover, Serano’s theory argues for an internalized, and adaptable, sense of gender. This sense of gender is a passive, subconscious, phenomenon and when accepting spaces are created for people to express their gender in whatever way they desire, it is often something of a mix between masculine and feminine, or somewhere closer to a blend rather than strictly one or the other. On gender and its role in Woolf’s *Orlando*, Sproles states that “*Orlando* alludes to homoerotic desire, and it disentangles sex, gender, and sexuality. It defines gender as a socially constructed category that serves the interests of the patriarchy” (Sproles 73). Sproles’ suggesting that sex, gender, and sexuality are disentangled by Woolf in *Orlando* helps us see how Woolf takes the “story” of Sackville-West’s life and uses it to subvert societal expectations regarding women’s lives and behaviors. For example, as I will discuss in the next section, a separation, or dissociation, of assigned sex at birth and sexuality seems to take place following Orlando’s transformation in the novel.

Woolf wrote her ideas regarding society and systems into *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), and later in *Three Guineas* (1938). Woolf discusses the society that women find themselves being born and/or married into as one that is oppressive and silencing. In *Orlando*, Woolf anthropomorphizes this system into the form of a sentient, talking, omnipresent cloud she calls “the spirit of the age.” I will discuss this spirit in-depth in Chapter Two, but for our purposes here we may understand it simply to be a force that seeks to keep women in line, doing their duty to marry and give birth to boys who will grow up to inherit wealth and land from their fathers and find a woman with whom to continue the cycle. *Orlando* is written to disrupt this system in
magnificent ways through the fluidity of Orlando’s gender, her stubborn defiance of gender norms (including normative marriage roles), and her determination to always be true to herself and her own desires, rather than succumb to those that are forced on her by the society she lives in.

For there could be no doubt about his sex

_Orlando: A Biography_ begins with an introduction of Orlando as “He,” and a subsequent explanation, “for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it” (_Orlando_ 1). At first glance, this is an entirely forgettable line. Why would there be any doubt of his sex on the first page? Orlando proceeds to grow up and go through the motions expected of a male aristocrat, rising through the social elite, and eventually becoming a Duke. After becoming a Duke, and accidentally marrying a Spanish dancer by the name of Pepita, Orlando falls into a deep sleep (a form of death, which I will discuss in Chapter Two) that lasts several days. He awakens on the seventh day, and with some fanfare, as he realizes that his form is now the form of a woman:

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 whatsoever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in 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. … the change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. (_Orlando_ 102-103)

Now, perhaps, the line that the novel opens with begins to make sense. There was no doubt about Orlando’s sex, until of course there was a doubt of his sex; but even then, it was more a doubt of where on the spectrum his sex fell than whether she was purely a man or a woman. Woolf describes this phenomenon the same way one might discuss the weather in a novel, it simply is
what it is. Note, also, the use of pronouns. Woolf effectively transitions Orlando from male to female in the space of several sentences. The fact that *they/them* pronouns were used in between the change from one sex to another indicates that there was (albeit briefly) a moment of existence outside of, or between, the gender binary which Orlando would carry with her through the end of the novel. If we agree that gender exists on a spectrum, then we can suppose that Woolf has also depicted Orlando’s shift from one side of the spectrum to the other—which involved passing through androgynous territory. Moreover, with the addition of the line, “His memory—but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his,’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’” (*Orlando* 103), Woolf appears to be telling a joke (one of many in *Orlando*!). Making sure to include “for convention’s sake,” Woolf laughs in the face of normativity: “For convention's sake, however, we will continue to refer to her as the sex she appears to be, rather than the sex (or gender) she understands herself to be,” she seems to say.

So, Orlando goes to sleep in the body of a man and wakes up in the body of a woman. The woman is the same person, and is of the same body, as the man was. Woolf diligently points out that it is *definitely* the same Orlando, regardless of the change in appearance of sex. This is arguably in line with Serano’s theory of subconscious sex, as it demonstrates an understanding that one’s sex (or one’s external appearance) does not determine one’s identity or personhood. While Orlando’s physical sex had changed, nothing else about her had changed, not even her sexuality. Take for example the biographer listing truths following Orlando’s change: “The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. … 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” (*Orlando* 103). That the change was all but unnoticeable to Orlando, combined with the
confidence with which the narrator reassures us, we can accept the fact that Orlando is indeed still the same person before and after the change. Moreover, it could be argued that Orlando is perhaps closer to their true gender and identity after changing from a biological male into a biological female. While aboard the ship that returns Orlando to Britain from Constantinople after her transformation and time spent among the Romani, Orlando begins to ponder her sexuality, understanding that it is different from her gender or her biological sex, but seems to remain the same as before the change.

Orlando’s transformation is an example of what Sproles described as Woolf’s “disentangling” of sex and sexuality. In the novel, Orlando wonders to herself if her change in sex had changed her desires in any way. Thus, Orlando conjures “love” in her mind and, as it takes a human shape, it is female:

> And as all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being 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. (Orlando 119-120)

This is all the confirmation we need. Orlando understands that her gender is different from her sex, which is in turn different from her sexual desires. Woolf has begun to demonstrate the disentangling of sex, sexuality, and gender that Sproles describes. Additionally, because Orlando has now been both a man and a woman, effectively combining the lived experiences as the two sexes within herself, the obscurity that separated the sexes and the “impurities” imposed on Orlando by society, or perhaps more specifically the heteronormative patriarchy, were also removed. Each of these things works together to form Orlando’s identity, and Woolf shows what a place of privilege Orlando finds herself in, as she had been a man and experienced all that
society had to offer him at the time and carries this privilege into womanhood. Having experienced a life full of opportunity that only people assigned male at birth seem to be permitted, Orlando is now ready to experience what a feminine existence has to offer. Following her transformation, Orlando is well on her way to becoming her perfect self.

Perhaps this form of Orlando, the man who became a woman and thus was able to balance the feminine and masculine within herself without interference from normative disapproval, was how Woolf saw Sackville-West. I have discussed Sackville-West’s masculine tendencies and her wish that she had been born a man instead of a woman, but after the affair with Keppel in Paris Sackville-West seems to achieve a balance that sustained her in her heterosexual marriage while intently pursuing romantic and sexual affairs with other women. Before she met Woolf, Sackville-West had fleshed out her own theory of gender based on her personal experiences and suggests that as ages pass, more and more people will think about gender and sexuality the way she did. In a journal entry dated September 27, 1920, she writes:

I hold the conviction that as centuries go on, and the sexes become more nearly merged on account of their increasing resemblances, I hold the conviction that such connections [love and relationships between those of the same sex] will to a very large extent cease to be regarded as merely unnatural, and will be understood far better, at least in their intellectual if not their physical aspect. … I believe that then the psychology of people like myself will be a matter of interest, and I believe it will be recognized that many more people of my type do exist than under any present-day system of hypocrisy is commonly admitted. … I advance, therefore, the…theory that cases of dual personality do exist, in which the feminine and the masculine elements alternatively preponderate. (Portrait 106)

Sackville-West recorded her thoughts around gender roles and sexualities, and seems to argue that in the years to come there will be an influx of perspectives and a change in what is accepted or acknowledged by society. At the time of her writing, she did the best that she could with the limited terms and understandings to pull from, and I believe that this becoming “more nearly
merged on account of their increasing resemblances” that Sackville-West predicted is indeed underway today.

Perhaps it is because Woolf was writing about Sackville-West’s life and family, or that she was more focused on capturing lived experience, as she does in her other novels, that Woolf focused primarily on one character, rather than the broader societal expectations as Sackville-West did. In the quote above, Sackville-West is discussing her lived experience with what she calls dual personality, referring to the interactions of potentially several gendered personalities within a single person. For herself, she understands that she has feminine qualities and masculine qualities, and each of these ebbs and flows and interact with each other to generate the person that was Vita Sackville-West. She appears to have predicted a sort of breaking down of the gender binary, and I believe this is also what Woolf sought to portray in Orlando. Woolf arguably uses Sackville-West’s theory to explore Orlando as a person who experiences life through several positions of gender on the spectrum. Orlando the character does not change when their sex changes, and so Woolf uses this concept of dual personhood, or dual genders, when she describes Orlando’s journey as a poet to show that British society’s, or the heteropatriarchy’s, insistence on keeping the genders or sexes apart is both intentional and oppressive. By enforcing the assignment of a gender, and thus the gender roles that come with it, on someone at the time of their birth, this “heteropatriarchal” system (or society) continues to oppress both men and women. As we will see in the next section, Woolf places the story of a man who progresses through transformations in gender identity alongside the story of a person who works to hone their poetic expression over the course of eras (both arguably frowned upon at various times throughout the ages for one reason or another) to suggest that these kinds of journeys may lead to advances in one’s craft.
The Oak Tree

Orlando’s journey from man to woman runs alongside their journey from naïve nobleman to award-winning poet. Throughout this section I will argue that Woolf’s intention when depicting Orlando’s journey on the path of poetry was not simply to represent Sackville-West’s career as a writer, but perhaps also to suggest that anyone could be passionate about and write great poetry, or literature, if only they could get in touch with the side of themselves that sits on the opposite side of the spectrum from where their own gender identity is nestled. In other words, as Orlando begins the novel as a man it is his feminine side that he must embrace and explore if he is to become a great poet. Ideally, this would be an easy and comfortable process. For Orlando, however, there are several roadblocks that he must overcome before he can succeed.

We learn early in the novel that Orlando has a penchant for the arts when Woolf as biographer steps in to describe the times in his boyhood when would sit down with a book instead of practicing swordplay (Orlando 55). Orlando, it turns out, deeply loves to read literature. He also, the reader learns, has a vast secret stash of poetry and other works that he himself has written:

He [Orlando] crossed the room, took a silver key from his pocket and unlocked the doors of a great inlaid cabinet which stood in the corner. Within were some fifty drawers of cedar wood and upon each was a paper neatly written in Orlando’s hand. He paused, as if hesitating which to open…in fact there was scarcely a single drawer that lacked the name of some mythological personage at a crisis in his career. … The truth was that Orlando had been afflicted thus for many years. Never had any boy begged apples as Orlando begged paper…but though it gave him extreme delight, he had never dared show it even to his mother, since to write, much more to publish, was, he knew, for a nobleman an inexpiable disgrace. (Orlando 57)

This moment takes place after Orlando is abandoned by the mysterious Russian Princess, Sasha, with whom he fell desperately in love. Alone and betrayed, Orlando turns to his writing in search
of that which he feels he is missing. What Orlando has written, however, is written not for himself but catered to men whom he has idealized as gods of their craft, as we will see when he invites Nick Greene to his estate. Shortly after this passage lies the first time that we see the piece that will remain with Orlando as he journeys from one end of the gender spectrum to the other and will become his life’s work, “The Oak Tree,” mentioned: “Now, however, that it was the dead of night and he was alone, he chose from this repository one thick document called ‘Xenophilia a Tragedy’ or some such title, and one thin one, called simply ‘The Oak Tree’ (this was the only monosyllabic title among the lot)” (Orlando 57). “Xenophilia,” we do not see again, but the thinner document Orlando will continue to revisit several times across the span of the novel.

Orlando begins his career as a writer with an abundance of both wealth and space with which to think and create. He is effectively using his writing to process the loss of his love and seeking something to live for. The “mythological personage at a crisis” could be the only story he can tell at this point in his life due to his lack of experience, or perhaps the fact that he has not yet opened the door to the full breadth of himself artistically and spiritually, as he requires a change. Orlando ponders his ancestors’ achievements, and their bloody and seemingly inconsequential impacts on history, and asks himself what he has to show for the incredibly masculine activities that have comprised his life thus far:

He said (reciting the names and exploits of his ancestors) …But all of that killing and campaigning, that drinking and love-making, that spending and hunting and riding and eating, what remained? A skull; a finger. Whereas, he said, turning to the page of Sir Thomas Browne, which lay open upon the table—[A]nd again he paused…Orlando, comparing that achievement with those of his ancestors, cried out as they and their deeds were dust and ashes, but this man and his words were immortal. (Orlando 60)
A change is beginning within Orlando as he finds himself with less and less in common with his male ancestors, and actively questioning the violent, masculine, identity, he has inherited. While his ancestors had reached a seemingly less influential form of immortality via murder and campaign and lovemaking, Orlando would achieve immortality as a writer, “against the English language” he vows, just as Sir Thomas Browne had done before him (Orlando 61). Thus, Orlando begins to write once more.

This is, more importantly to this thesis, the moment that begins Orlando’s traversal across the spectrum of gender toward his true sex. Orlando seeks to win the glory of a man who has been published and attain a form of immortality like Sir Thomas Browne, as he has already won the glories of “blood and state” and found it less than satisfactory (Orlando 61). This is a very significant place in the novel, in which Orlando turns away from the long line of extremely masculine-oriented men in his family and chooses art over conquest, creation over mutilation. Woolf sets this strategic pivot away from the normative male behavior as something rather subtle, but it is the beginning of the journey of the artist instead of that of a mere nobleman. Orlando thus invites the published writer, Nick Greene, to his estate for dinner to talk shop.

I pause here for a moment to examine who Nick Greene is meant to represent. Maria DiBattista, in the notes for the Harcourt edition of Orlando (2006), explains that Nick Greene was likely meant to represent Robert Greene (ca. 1558-592): “Greene, reputed to be the first English literary celebrity due to the popularity of his writing and his conscious crafting of a public persona, is satirized in A Room of One’s Own” (Orlando 271). While Nick Greene may be partly meant to represent Robert Greene, J.J. Wilson suggests that he is also modeled after Roy Campbell, who stayed on Sackville-West’s property in a cottage with his wife (Mary Campbell,
who Vita was also romantically involved with) for eight months.\textsuperscript{33} In her biography of Sackville-West, Glendinning describes \textit{The Georgiad}, which Roy Campbell published after his stay in the cottage at Long Barn (just as Nick Green publishes a pamphlet after his stay with Orlando):

Vita saw well in advance of its publication \textit{The Georgiad}, a ‘satirical fantasy’ in verse—a blistering attack on Bloomsbury and the Georgian poets, but also on the Nicolson, especially Vita—who is ‘Georgiana’, the hostess at ‘Summer Schools of Love’ for ‘piping nancy boys and crashing bores’. He mocked her love of dogs (mentioning Canute) and \textit{The Land}.\textsuperscript{34}

From this we also see that Campbell was writing about The Bloomsbury group, a notoriously revolutionary group of artists and thinkers, comprised of (mostly) men. Regarding \textit{The Georgiad}, Sackville-West and her husband decided on a policy of non-retaliation, Sackville-West stating, “I detest literary rows and I will never be drawn into them” (\textit{Portrait} 240). However, once again, Woolf’s clever use of subtext shines through. Woolf does not outright exclaim that Roy Campbell wronged her or her friends, but she does appear to allude to it in her novel. Returning to \textit{Orlando}, we see that Nick Greene’s absurd behavior and opinions do not live up to Orlando’s lofty expectations regarding this “celebrity.”

Before the interaction with Greene, Orlando believed men like him (who have published their work) to be on a level with gods. At the table with Greene, however, Orlando realizes that the men whom he had worshiped were perhaps not deities at all:

Half were drunken and all were amorous. Most of them quarreled with their wives; not one of them was above a lie or an intrigue of the most paltry kind. Their poetry was scribbled down on the backs of washing bills held to the heads of printer’s devils at the street door. Thus Hamlet went to press; thus Lear; thus Othello.” (\textit{Orlando} 67)\textsuperscript{35}

\textsuperscript{33} I thank J.J. Wilson for informing me about the connection between Nick Greene and Roy Campbell.
\textsuperscript{34} Glendinning, \textit{Vita}, 239
\textsuperscript{35} Italics for titles omitted in the edition.
Here was this mere mortal eating Orlando’s food and complaining about his peers, and, as if to add insult to injury, he is nothing like the immortal beings Orlando imagined writers or poets to be. Sir Thomas Browne, it turns out, was rather a special man, whereas the author Nick Greene represented was a fool. Following his visit to Orlando’s castle and his partaking in Orlando’s food and drink, Nick Greene would publish a scathing story (just like Roy Campbell) about his experience and about Orlando himself. Orlando reads this pamphlet, understands the betrayal that has occurred, and instructs his footman to travel to Norway and purchase two breeding hounds from the king there. “For,” Orlando explains, “I have done with men” (Orlando 70). He then proceeds to burn every single written piece of his own poetry and literature—except for “The Oak Tree,” which was his boyish dream and very short” (Orlando 71). That his “boyish dream” would be what he carried with him for the rest of his journey on the path to an ideal gender identity is indeed quite fitting, as it begins as something Orlando is embarrassed by, but throughout the story this piece travels with Orlando everywhere they go and through everything they experience, eventually becoming an award-winning piece.

Orlando thus retreats inward, ignoring humanity and further devoting himself to his craft. He would continue to live, secluded in his castle (which he decorates lavishly as if to spite Greene’s comments from the pamphlet) until he is given the job of Ambassador and sent to Constantinople where he worked hard and won the affection of many people—men and women, Turkish and English alike. Orlando’s time as ambassador to Turkey is busy indeed: he aids in the negotiation of treaties and attends meetings and ceremonies with various local hosts and men and women close to the king, and is quite the busy Ambassador (Orlando 90-92). Orlando deftly performs his duties and is soon awarded the title, and obligation, of Duke. On the night in which the Embassy hosts a lavish celebration for Orlando, he falls into a mysterious slumber. While he
sleeps, an uprising begins which leads to the death, or desertion, of most of Orlando’s entourage. Perhaps this mysterious slumber is in response to the marriage that Orlando may or may not have agreed to, or perhaps Woolf intends it to be a result of Orlando’s being named a Duke. Either of these events have the potential to lead Orlando astray from his ultimate destiny, that of a poet. Again, we see Orlando experiencing a form of death, which I will discuss more in Chapter Two.

Orlando’s sleeping body is robbed, but otherwise ultimately unharmed. There is, however, a fascinating interaction between what Woolf calls three “[g]ods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer,” Truth, Candour, and Honesty, who, “[P]utting their silver trumpets to their lips demand, from Orlando’s sleeping body, ‘Truth!’ (Orlando 99). These Gods appear to be drawing out or demanding Orlando’s truth (true gender or identity, perhaps?), calling for it three times before three other figures, the Lady of Purity, Lady of Chastity, and Lady of Modesty enter the room. In this battle between anthropomorphized depictions of truth, candor, honesty and what could be argued are their antitheses, particularly when the qualities they represent are forced onto women in society, Woolf seems to stage a sort of battle fought for Orlando’s very being.

Those who prohibit; those who deny

Each of the ladies approaches Orlando and seeks to prevent him from waking up. It is the lady of Purity that steps forward and speaks first, determined to prevent Orlando’s truth from materializing:

I am the guardian of the sleeping fawn; the snow is dear to me; and the moon rising; and the silver sea. With my robes I cover the speckled hen’s eggs and the brindled sea shell; I cover vice and poverty. On all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends. Wherefore, speak not, reveal not. Spare, O spare! (Orlando 100)

Next, it is the Lady of Chastity who speaks:
I am she whose touch freezes and whose glance turns to stone. I have stayed the star in its dancing, and the wave as it falls. The highest Alps are my dwelling place; and when I walk, the lightnings flash in my hair; where my eyes fall, they kill. Rather than let Orlando wake, I will freeze him to the bone. Spare, O spare! (Orlando 100)

Finally, the Lady of Modesty comes forward:

I am she that men call Modesty. Virgin I am and ever shall be. Not for me the fruitful fields and the fertile vineyard. Increase is odious to me; and when the apples burgeon or the flocks breed, I run, I run; I let my mantle fall. My hair covers my eyes. I do not see. Spare, O spare! (Orlando 100-101)

Each of these mysterious figures seem to have their own reasons for seeking to hold Orlando back from any kind of actualizing change. With each attempt at freezing, covering, or otherwise preventing Orlando from connection with their truth, the trumpets of the “Gods of biography” ring louder and prevent their advances. Each of the sisters that seeks to block Orlando’s transformation appears to represent a critical quality that society, or what I discuss as the heteronormative patriarchy, forces upon women. Purity, for example, likely represents the desire for women to be “pure” (a virgin) when they marry. This is an absurd tradition and nothing about a thin membrane being intact in a woman indicates any sort of purity whatsoever.

The second sister, Chastity, could refer to the assumption that women will not have sex with anyone but their husbands, or that they will refrain from “extramarital” sex (despite the husbands participating themselves whenever they wished, of course). Finally, the sister of Modesty perhaps refers to the way that a woman dresses, specifically ensuring that she dresses in a way that would not elicit any sexual feelings in others, as if she were property painted discretely so as if to discourage intruders. After each of the sisters has said their piece and done their best to hinder Orlando’s transformation, they are chased off by the trumpeters demanding from Orlando, “The Truth and nothing but the Truth” (Orlando 101). The sisters, on their way out, proclaim in unison:
For there, not here (all speak together joining hands and making gestures of farewell and despair towards the bed where Orlando lies sleeping) dwell in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honor 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 us here.” (Orlando 101-102)

Once again, we see Woolf operating on two levels. On the surface, there sits an impassioned speech from three disgruntled beings who proclaim all those who love them and believe in their cause. On another level, a more subtle level, Woolf is weaving an argument against the normative, heterosexual, patriarchy. The word “boudoir” comes from 18th century French, literally meaning “sulking place.”36 This is a word ripe with sexist undertones, and Woolf wields it with great skill in this passage. “Office and lawcourt” likely refer to places where “lawyers and doctors” can be found. Each is an example of an office of men, “those who prohibit; those who deny,” I would argue. Lawyers may prohibit women from obtaining legal independence, and doctors arguably do the same in other ways. As for the mention of “Virgins and city men,” they may as well be saying instead, “women who don’t know any better or haven’t experienced any kind of sexual awakening and men like the prostitute Nell’s customers, who exist in the purposes of this novel only to interrupt and prevent conversation of any true meaning from taking place between women.”37 It is interesting that Woolf established these characters (Purity, Chastity, and Modesty) to be women. Indeed plenty of women—whether aware or unaware of this fact—may, in some ways, strengthen or contribute to the patriarchy.

36 https://www.etymonline.com/word/boudoir
37 I will discuss Nell and her customers in more depth in the next chapter.
So, if we accept that Purity, Chastity, and Modesty each represents a trait that is inflicted on women, perhaps Orlando’s experiences as a man ultimately protected him from these qualities enforced on women who otherwise have no option or idea of the restraint. As if in a cocoon, Orlando’s sleep transforms them into a woman as Truth, Candour, and Honesty protect her. While Purity, Chastity, and Modesty could represent the qualities that men impose on women, Truth, Candor, and Honesty are the qualities which seem to represent a good person—regardless of their gender. At last, the true Orlando emerges from her supernatural slumber and, naturally, she is a woman. Orlando quickly dresses and “[examines] the papers on the table; took such as seemed to be written in poetry, and secreted them in her bosom” (Orlando 103). She then leaves the room where she had slept, unaware of the battle fought over her fate.

Orlando would then be escorted to the home of a tribe of Romani located high in the mountains. She seemed to enjoy her time there, away from society as she knew it as a man and instead enjoys the pleasure of “having no documents to seal, or sign, no flourishes to make, no calls to pay … and when she remembered how, at about this time of day, she should have been making the motions of drinking and smoking over an empty coffee cup and a pipe which lacked tobacco, she laughed aloud” (Orlando 204-5). Despite the freedom afforded to her by the Romani, Orlando inevitably begins to miss writing, as well as other things afforded by British society, and decides she must leave Turkey and return to England at once.

When she arrives again in her country of birth, Orlando finds herself adjusting to life as a woman, a new experience compared to the life she lived previously as a man. Orlando retains each of these experiences as they impact her and her identity, noting the birds singing and the beauty of nature but also the tedious responsibilities of womanhood: “There’s the hairdressing,’ she thought, ‘that alone will take an hour of my morning; there’s looking in the looking-glass,
another hour; there’s staying and lacing; there’s washing and powdering; there’s changing from silk to lace and lace to paduasoy; and there’s being chaste year in year out…’ (Orlando 116). She is thinking about what it means to exist as a woman, different and separate and apparently worth less to civilization than men.

The closer that Orlando moves toward a more “perfect” androgyny, or mixing of the two sexes, the more she finds herself pondering questions of existence and composing. On one such occasion, following a busy day of roaming and reconnecting with every foot of her estate after her return, Orlando finds herself in the Chapel. Once there, she lights a cigar, opens Queen Mary’s prayerbook, and ponders the letter “S”: “The letter S, she reflected, is the serpent in the Poet’s Eden. Do what she would there were still too many of these sinful reptiles in the first stanzas of ‘The Oak Tree’” (Orlando 128). Even after an exhausting day of traversing her lavish estate, Orlando can think of nothing but her craft! She realizes this is the beginning of what she understands to be maturing, and shrugs off the pain and loneliness from the Princess (Sasha’s) abandonment experienced earlier in the novel:

Slowly there had opened within her something intricate and many-chambered, which one must take a torch to explore, in prose not verse…She had formed here in solitude after her affair with Greene, or tried to form, for Heaven knows, these growths are age-long in coming, a spirit capable of resistance. ‘I will write,’ she had said, ‘what I enjoy writing’; and so had scratched out twenty-six volumes…Next morning, in pursuance of these thoughts, she had put out her pen and paper, and started afresh upon ‘The Oak Tree,’ for to have ink and paper in plenty when one has made do with berries and margins is a delight not to be conceived. (Orlando 130)

This is a crucial moment for Orlando the poet, as she has realized that she can write for pleasure, rather than for fame, success, immortality, or the approval of others. As a man, just before he departed for Constantinople, Orlando had given up on trying to please others (particularly Nick Greene), and instead chose to write to please himself (Orlando 76). Despite this, he still found
himself still trying to please others with his writing. Something was missing, or blocking his efforts, that prevented him from writing from the heart and baring his soul. Perhaps he had more “growing” to do, or so to speak. Perhaps the novel implies he was not yet in touch with his feminine side, and thus could not truly write to please himself.

At last, Orlando has begun to work on her magnum opus once more. However, at that moment, a figure from her past reappears and begs her to marry him. She ultimately, and after much wooing on his part, declines and he leaves her to her ponderings. As the Archduke (her suitor) leaves her, she finds herself mourning the loss of two things that she believes he was able to offer her that she could not generate herself. These are life and a lover, which Orlando tries to comprehend as a loss: “but life she heard going from her, and a love. ‘Life and a lover,’ she murmured; and going to her writing-table she dipped her pen in ink and wrote: ‘Life and a lover’--a line which did not scan and made no sense with what went before” (Orlando 137). Here we see the “spirit of the age,” which we will discuss more in Chapter Two, beginning to creep in and exert its influence on Orlando. Orlando decides she must live life and find a lover, which she does successfully. Orlando experiences much before she meets the “man” who would become her husband (he is in fact a woman), and once she has appeased the “spirit of the age,” she is able to complete her life’s work. Somewhere in the mid-to-late Victorian period, Orlando runs into Nick Greene again after she has completed her poem, although he has since been Knighted, as he is ranting about the state of literature. This rant is eerily similar to the rant he had gone on in front of the male Orlando hundreds of years prior, although Greene is naming different names. As they are talking, “The Oak Tree” falls onto the table and Sir Nicholas picks it up and reads it. He commends Orlando’s work, saying that it has “no trace in it, he was thankful to say, of the modern spirit. It was composed with a regard to truth, to nature, to the dictates of the human
heart, which was rare indeed, in these days of unscrupulous eccentricity. It must, of course, be published instantly” (Orlando 206). Sir Nicholas sweeps up her work and carries it off to his publisher, where it is indeed published and will go on to win the “Burdett Coutts’ Memorial Prize” (Orlando 228). This prize is an allusion to the prestigious Hawthornden Prize that Vita Sackville-West won for her long-form poem The Land in 1927.

I believe that Woolf injects expansive meaning and value into the subtext in her work. Sometimes that which she conveys is frustration with the field of literature and academia and those that uphold it. Other times, it is disgust with the system of repression that all but holds women hostage. The story of Orlando the poet is a subtle one that occurs over the course of the novel, but it is the story of Orlando’s becoming the perfect version of themself—male, female, or a mix of the two. On the surface, Woolf uses the story of a protagonist who lives over the course of 400 years to tell the history of the art of writing, and contained in the subtext is a gendered experience of achieving true selfhood.

Sproles proposes that Sackville-West was considering becoming Julian Devenant in her examination of the relationship between Sackville-West and Violet Keppel in 1920, but I put forth that the idea of “becoming” also applies to Woolf’s story of Orlando. As Orlando proceeds through their life, they are gaining valuable material in the form of lived experiences. Orlando lives for over 400 years as a man and a woman, and with each experience (emotional, physical, painful, pleasurable) they move closer and closer to a perfect balance of male and female experiences and qualities. This, I contend, shows us that Woolf is arguing for equality between the sexes or genders, whether masculine or feminine, to bring forth the best possible art: whether literature, poetry, or traveling the world and pursuing one’s dreams. This, Woolf perhaps argues, is the true path to immortality.
The Most Remarkable Human Being

As we seek to explore Woolf’s ideas about gender, let us return to events previously discussed above. Following the journey taken with Keppel, Sackville-West would return to her husband and remain happily married while continuing to explore relationships with women as her husband explored men. One of those women was Virginia Woolf. When Woolf and Sackville-West first met, they quickly began to read each other's work. In March 1924, Woolf invited Sackville-West to publish a book with the Hogarth Press, which Leonard and Virginia Woolf ran together (Lee 489). Sackville-West accepted and would publish Seducers in Ecuador with them later that year. From then on, Sackville-West and Woolf would visit each other regularly, even sleeping over at each other's houses often (Lee 490, 494-95, 499). Woolf enjoyed visiting with Sackville-West’s children as well, and Nigel Nicolson’s description of her in Portrait of a Marriage is a glowing one:

Virginia was the most remarkable human being I have ever known. She could attract, yet she could also remove to a distance. She did neither deliberately, for she was without conceit, being on the contrary anxious to please, anxious to discover (she was very inquisitive), and touchingly sensitive to praise or reproach, but one was aware of her occasional withdrawal, and never quite knew how deep to penetrate, how shallow should be one’s response.” (Portrait, 200)

Woolf had her own feelings about gender and sexuality, which is likely what she was referring to when she wrote in a diary entry dated December 1925, that Sackville-West was “(what I have never been) a real woman” (Diary III. 52). I would argue that this could have been a form of gender dysmorphia that Woolf felt, albeit different from the dysmorphia that I have discussed Sackville-West potentially experiencing. Similar feelings are also captured in a letter to Sackville-West dated February 1927:

D'you know it's a great thing being a eunuch as I am: that is not knowing what's the right side of a skirt: women confide in one. One pulls a shade over the fury of sex; and then all the veins and marbling, which, between women, are so
fascinating, shows out. Here in my cave I see lots of things you blazing beauties make invisible by the light of your own glory. (Letters, III. 320)

Sackville-West helped Woolf understand more about the affairs of and the love between women, and while Sackville-West seems to have suffered for much of her life because of a subconscious sex that did not align with her physical sex, Woolf suffered for other reasons. Louise DeSalvo suggests that Woolf suffered from depression because she was severely neglected as a child and was abused sexually, not once, but often and year after year by her stepbrother (Lee 102). For Woolf, meeting Sackville-West and learning about the different ways Sackville-West expressed her gender, desires, and even her theory of duality, Woolf likely began formulating a theory of her own. This theory is referenced primarily in Orlando and A Room of One’s Own, and I believe it is Woolf’s theory of androgyny. In her introduction to the Harcourt edition of A Room of One’s Own, Susan Gubar writes:

Woolf seems to be juxtaposing against her critique of male sexuality the alternative and more joyously unplotted erotic relationships women have with other women, or that manly women have with equally androgynous partners. … The lyrical solution proposed in A Room looks like an ideal related to an effort throughout to transcend the partiality and competition of binary terms (like male and female) so as to arrive at liberating moments of resonant being available to men as well as women." (AROO, lviii)

Woolf’s musings on gender, sexuality, and marriage are multifaceted in A Room of One’s Own. Gubar establishes for us in her introduction that Woolf’s aim is a truly feminist one: equally liberating moments of resonance becoming available to men and women. Moreover, Gubar points out that Woolf seeks to level the playing field, or so to speak, for men and women, particularly where binary terms are concerned. We see this in action as the progression of Orlando on her path to a perfect gender, or perhaps androgyny. Orlando’s path to a perfect gender is also a path to creative freedom, which is what I would argue Woolf ultimately wants for us all. This taking back of creative freedom can be found in Woolf’s critique of male sexuality and
dominance, and therein lies the subtext of her commentary on men's exclusive, and repressive, control of the “Ivory Towers” of education depicted in *A Room*.

While *A Room* uses biography to explore equality and creative freedom, *Orlando*’s implementation of biography explores gender expression and equality. In the next chapter I will discuss Woolf’s use of biography to explore Vita Sackville-West both as a character and as inspiration for a gender fluid woman. Woolf writes of androgyny as the vehicle with which we can transcend the partiality and competition of binary terms (like male and female), which is precisely what is happening in conversations of gender and sexuality today. Megan Burke’s book *When Time Warps* (2019), for example, examines the fascinating role of temporality, or the way that time is experienced, and the way it affects, or is affected by, gendered existence. In the next chapter, I will examine the omnipresent “spirit of the age,” which seeks to keep women in line with expectations placed upon them by society beginning in or around the Victorian period in England. Similar in spirit to the three sisters who were chased off as Orlando slept, and transformed, this “spirit” appears to want to hold Orlando back—to dissuade her from independence and freedom. The “spirit of the age,” I contend, represents what Burke has deemed the “heteropatriarchy,” the system which pits a man (and all his power) against a woman (and her lack of power) with no room for deviation of any kind. As part of this exploration, I will inquire as to the ways in which Woolf’s novel meaningfully demonstrates a solid foundation of a marriage, built on trust and genuine heart-felt love, and facilitates the personal growth and development necessary to write and achieve great things.
Chapter Two: Multiplicities of the Past

“In every human being a vacillation from one sex to another takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.”
- *Orlando* (139)

In the previous chapter I discussed Vita Sackville-West’s tendency toward masculine clothes, behaviors, and desires as it was written into *Orlando* alongside the history of her family that spans 400 years. In writing *Orlando: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf took experiences from Vita Sackville-West’s life (such as dressing as a man and roaming London), combined them with stories from Knole’s history, and wove them together to create an entertaining, fascinating, demonstration of the social and emotional freedoms produced by disentangling oneself from societal constructs like gender and marriage norms. The quote that opens this chapter is regarding clothes and one’s gender, of which Woolf writes in the novel, “clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (*Orlando* 138). That clothes offer us a change in perspective is a fascinating idea, particularly when we consider the art of Drag. It can be quite difficult to pinpoint a very specific definition of drag, so let us take the National Center for Transgender Equality’s definition first: “Drag is a type of entertainment where people dress up and perform, often in highly stylized ways. The term originated as a British theater slang in the 19th century and was used to describe women’s clothing worn by men.”

The only thing that this definition leaves out is the more modern nod to gender that is a pivotal part of drag performances, so I’ll try a more modern definition next. In response to a comment from Mary Cheney comparing drag to

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blackface as a form of style in 2015, RuPaul (of “RuPaul’s Drag Race”40) starred in a video titled “A Message to Mary Cheney from RuPaul’s Drag Race.” In the video, RuPaul defines drag in a different way:

Drag is underground, and over-the-top. Drag is political, and politically incorrect. Drag is camp and couture. Drag is punk and mainstream. Drag is a laugh riot, and it can start a revolution. Drag is never having to say you’re sorry, because drag is all about being whoever the hell you want to be. Drag brings people together.  

So, drag is a form of entertainment and performance that can both “start a revolution” and let you be “whoever the hell you want to be.” As I continue to explore the ways in which Woolf subverts the heteronormative, I will work to examine the ways clothing may have impacted Orlando’s experiences and the way that these impacts influence her interactions with the men and women in the novel.

In their time together Woolf saw how important Knole was to Sackville-West, and she reclaimed it for her in the form of a biographical fairytale with a strong, independent, gender fluid protagonist. In this chapter, I will examine the way that Woolf explores the lived experience, or phenomenology, of womanhood in a patriarchal society that regards women as a mere objects situated in a system of passing wealth from one man to another, which arguably leads to their being objectified and sexualized as property. To that end, the jarring masculinity produced by such a patriarchal society is often analyzed in drag as a form of social commentary.42

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40 Ru Paul’s Drag Race is an American reality TV show in which drag performers compete. First aired in 2009, the show is now in its 15th season. For more information, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/RuPaul%27s_Drag_Race
41 “A Message to Mary Cheney from Ru Paul’s Drag Race,” YouTube; https://youtu.be/5G4-oatHs3A.
In this chapter I will discuss the onset of a sexual awakening for women in early 20th century Britain, which will help to explore the background with which Woolf was working when she wrote *Orlando*. Bringing Megan Burke’s book *When Time Warps* (2019) into the discussion, I theorize about the ways that the heavy enforcement of normative gender roles, and the resulting subjugation, works to preempt the possibility for subversion by those who dissent. With this foundation in place, I move to Woolf and Sackville-West’s marriages, exploring the ways they were perhaps more meaningful, and creatively fruitful, than if they were to attempt to conform to a more heteronormative standard. Finally, we will arrive at a reading of the untraditional, and disruptive, nature of the marriage of Orlando and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire in the novel. To understand just how disruptive this relationship is, I will examine it through the lens of what a normative marriage looked like at the time of its writing in the early 20th century.

At a key moment, the novel draws special attention to an oppressive force that appears to coalesce into a more powerful form near the beginning of the Victorian period. This force first appears as an ominous storm that spreads across London, and steadily transforms into something Orlando experiences as strange sensation within her own body. This spirit is a patriarchal one, working to shape Orlando’s life to its heteronormative standards, effectively holding her art (and thus, I would argue, her self-expression) hostage until she conforms to its demands: that she marry to properly fulfill the “role” of womanhood. This role is the role of the wife and mother, or perhaps more precisely the role of the body through which the property (and thus, power) would ultimately transfer from father to son. Orlando does pursue marriage, but she manages to evade the relationships that would further limit her in her sexual and gendered freedoms. She meets Shelmerdine, and they quickly fall in love and marry. Orlando is not *only* a woman, and her husband is not *only* a man, thus the marriage disrupts normative, gendered, tradition. Moreover,
in the novel, Shelmerdine spends most of his time away from home, and so away from Orlando. While this was true for Sackville-West and her husband, for any other marriage according to the typical ideas of that time and place, such separation could be considered a sign of disaster. Woolf, however, likely intentionally references Sackville-West’s marriage as a model for Orlando’s marriage to demonstrate that there are perfectly happy marriages that lie outside of normative assumptions. It is, I would argue, a marriage between two people who understand and accept each other, perhaps identified best by the respect and admiration they hold for one another. This discussion will also allow us to better see the intention with which, I suggest, Woolf establishes Orlando’s poetry throughout the novel as a form of subversion of the influence of various systems, only one of which is the heteronormative patriarchy I will discuss. This chapter will argue that Woolf’s subversion works brilliantly to dispel the expectation of marriage and the established rituals of men in a heteronormative society that excludes women.

**Spirit of the Heteropatriarchal Age**

We have discussed what Woolf called “the spirit of the age” as it related to Orlando’s poetry, but what, or who, exactly is it? Sproles suggests, "*Orlando* demonstrates the coercive pressure the 'spirit of the age' exerts to enforce the respectability of marriage (and thus the outward show of patriarchal control of sexuality) before a late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century woman is free to write." Sproles suggests that the spirit of the age represents a force that acts, likely mainly on women and rarely on men, to continue the trend of what she calls the “outward show of patriarchal control of sexuality,” and thus, I would argue, perhaps also the

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normativity of marriage. My argument is in line with Sproles’s, but I believe the spirit of the age is perhaps also a representation of the repressive patriarchy that I will examine in this chapter.

Leslie Stephen, Woolf’s father, discussed a form of the “spirit of the age” in an essay published in May 1887: "You should, I say, understand the spirit of the age, and by that I do not mean that you should study what is called the philosophy of history. What you require is not a clever analysis, but a vivid representation of the period. You should see it, not be full of formula about it." Woolf’s father suggests that we should see this spirit, which is certainly made easier for the reader when it is presented in the form of a menacing cloud that settles over London (Orlando 165). On the inclusion of Leslie Stephen’s “spirit of the age” in Orlando, Jane De Gay writes,

Woolf’s quarrel with Stephen’s approach is at its most cutting in her treatment of the concept of ‘the spirit of the age’ which reverberates throughout his work, but is satirised by being repeated ad nauseum in Orlando. … [I]t quickly emerges that [the spirit of the age] applies specifically to the work of [only] the great male writers.45

De Gay seems to argue that Woolf sought to mock her father’s spirit of the age, which is likely due to the fact that Woolf’s father was biased against women. De Gay explains further:

Stephen’s gender bias may be seen in Hours in a Library [1874], where he praises Sir Walter Scott for expressing the spirit of his age, but criticises Charlotte Brontë for being out of tune with hers. … Brontë is criticised both for neglecting the works of two male writers and for apparently ignoring the status quo by not giving in to the ‘dominating’ ideas of her time.46

Stephen suggests that a spirit of the age must be present, and he also seems to indicate that the spirit is one that is naturally and forcefully, as if by design, much harder on women than it is on men.

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44 Stephen, Leslie “The Study of English Literature,” Cornhill Magazine (May 1887) 494-495
45 Jane De Gay, Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Historiography; p. 65
46 Jane De Gay, Virginia Woolf’s Feminist Historiography; p. 65
Woolf adapted this idea of a spirit that defines, and works to maintain, an age of men beginning in the Victorian era in the novel. The depiction of this force also represents the oppression of women at the hands of a dominantly patriarchal system. To understand what this looked like at the time, there are many factors to consider in the discussion of oppressive societal norms imposed to maintain the patriarchal powers-that-be. One such factor, as Kate Faber Oestreich discusses, is the increased availability of commercial items such as crinolines and petticoats due to rapidly growing industrialization. Oestreich argues that one of the obstructions could originate from the patriarchal desire to enforce “social jurisdiction over women’s preconjugal sexuality.”47 As an example of this, as I discuss later in this chapter, one of the moments in which Orlando is heavily obstructed from completing any writing appears to happen directly following an outing of hers in which she dared to wear pants (and not a dress or a skirt) as she rode by Buckingham Palace. Orlando seemed to overstep the boundaries of what was deemed appropriate garb for a woman at the time, and as a result experiences a physical reaction. This is another powerful moment in which I suggest that clothes appear to help or hinder the expression of one’s gender, both in the novel and in society today.

As the age transitions in the novel from the eighteenth century to the nineteenth century, the spirit of the age reveals itself for the first time. Woolf introduces it as an ominous cloud that slowly sweeps over London as Orlando watches:

As the stroke [of midnight] sounded, the cloud increased, and she saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed … With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun (Orlando 165).

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47 Oestreich, Kate Farber, “‘Orlando about the year 1840’: Woolf’s Rebellion against Victorian Sexual Repression through Image and Text” (2016); p. 7
This cloud appears as if it were something that built up slowly over time and manifested in the Victorian era as women began to explore their sexualities. Thus, the firm grip on women’s sexuality gradually began to wane, which I contend led to a more adamant retaliation from the ominous force. Perhaps this is Woolf’s intention, depicting a force that gathered strength over time, as the patriarchal control of women intensified over the centuries. In the novel, Woolf represents the onset of the Nineteenth century as a wave of change that overcomes England:

> Thus, stealthily and imperceptibly, none marking the exact day or hour of the change, the constitution of England was altered and nobody knew it... The muffin was invented and the crumpet... The sexes drew further and further apart. No open conversation was tolerated. Evasions and concealments were sedulously practiced on both sides. And just as the ivy and the evergreen rioted in the damp earth outside, so did the same fertility show itself within. The life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty. (*Orlando* 167-68)

Woolf appears to be arguing that while women embraced their sexualities more often at that time, the social divide between men and women grew further apart. The influence of the spirit of the Victorian age, then, created a society in which people are worth only what they can be made to generate. For men, perhaps it was the wealth or land they were saddled with and the responsibility to grow it and pass it on to the next generation and so keep the wealth in the family. To achieve this, men must have offspring. To guarantee offspring, men must have a wife to produce said offspring. The best way to ensure that this happens on a national (and thus large enough to produce exploitable wealth for the few) level is to implement societal change that sentences women to a life of childbirth and childrearing, with absolutely no room for creative or spiritual endeavors. She will not have a room of her own, because that risks her dismissal of her wifely duties.

While we could consider women acknowledging their sexualities as positive momentum, it remains a reality that many women lived at the hands of men at that time, and it is during the
Victorian era specifically that women’s roles began to be restricted to wifehood, childbearing, and childrearing.\textsuperscript{48} At the time, as Oestreich suggests, men accused women of using fashion, such as crinolines, to hide signs of pregnancy, and thus the fact that they had sex (other than the socially obligated sex with their husband to produce offspring). Oestreich argues that this is due to a sexual awakening in women in the Victorian era:

> Because petticoats and crinolines were used to disguise women’s expanding wombs, Addison’s [Joseph Addison] condemnation of the garments reveals the patriarchal desire to enforce social jurisdiction over women’s pre-conjugal sexuality.\textsuperscript{49 50}

It is in the Victorian age, a time of great sexual awakening, and, as a response, subjugation of women, that we see the “spirit of the age” interfere with Orlando doing anything of meaning without being married first. It is interesting that the repression of the Victorian era happened alongside a sort-of sexual awakening, as if for every action, or semblance of independence gained, there was a much firmer reaction. This reaction would be like a metaphorical tightening of the grip of power that men held over women, beginning with the clothing that they wore.

In the Victorian era, as Orlando experiences, the clothing that she is permitted to wear is decided by forces she cannot control. While today there are no supernatural forces keeping women in line regarding their dress, there is a misplacement of guilt and expectation on women who are sexually assaulted—if they are determined to have been dressed provocatively (regardless of whether or not this was factually the case). Orlando, as a young man, had been able to sit down and write pages and pages of poetry without any kind of supernatural force stopping him—not even the convention that it was improper for nobles to publish their own

\textsuperscript{49} Joseph Addison in \textit{Orlando} reads a passage from the \textit{Spectator} that condemns women wearing petticoats, as it could cause virgins to ‘behave like married women,’ thus perhaps more sexually free (\textit{Orlando} 153)
\textsuperscript{50} Oestreich, ‘\textit{Orlando about the year 1840},’ 7.
work. As a woman in England, however, she finds herself blocked at every turn when she attempts to write. Chastity and Purity appear to be influencing Orlando’s life despite being driven away, as we examined in the previous chapter, by the gods of biography before Orlando wakes up a woman. Woolf’s exploration of the Victorian era in the novel Orlando achieves more than simply stating facts regarding women’s clothing trends and liberties. As I will discuss in the next section, this leap into the past also serves as a vehicle with which one could potentially reinvent their future.

Temporality: Virtual and Actual

The lived experience of Orlando’s, as both man and woman through different eras, is a form of temporality depicted by Woolf, and it is particularly fascinating when considered along with Megan Burke’s ideas regarding feminine existence and the way that one interacts with, or experiences, the past. In their book When Time Warps (2019), Burke explores the many ways that temporality, or our experience of time, and the phenomena of living as a non-male in the United States combine to create lived experiences. Burke states, discussing why a phenomenological (lived experience) account of gender normativity will aid their discussion of social and historical constructs of racialized sexual domination: “A phenomenology of the temporality of gender normativity elucidates the way social and historical constructs become the body-subject” (Burke 87).51 52 Phenomenology here refers to an approach that studies consciousness and the objects of direct experience. So, Burke seeks to study both time and the state of existing within time and how it relates to gender normativity. With this established, Burke proceeds to suggest that there

51 “Body-subject”: From Merleau-Ponty, examining the phenomenology of perception. For more information: https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/merleau-ponty/
52 While the majority of Burke’s book discusses events that happen in the United States, I believe the arguments are applicable to Woolf’s England-based work as well.
is a “necessary invisibility to the visibility of normative gender identity,” which we can take to mean that if one aligns themselves with a gender-normative identity they can blend in with society and perhaps attempt to escape any negative aspects of being persecuted for being different or other. I believe that this experience is why many in the LGBTQIA+ community may choose to remain “closeted” if they find themselves identifying as a non-normative gender or sexuality. For others, it may even be out of fear of rejection or the threat of physical harm. Burke argues further that this invisibility that is central to “maintaining the dominant order” (Burke 88). This dominant order, I would argue, is explored by Woolf in the novel in the form of the notoriously oppressive “spirit of the age.”

In the previous chapter, we saw Sackville-West butt heads with the dominant order, battling her desire to be both unapologetically “out” and free (despite the constant pressure from her family to conform and hide her queerness) yet also acting as something of a mascot for heterosexual marriage. The dominant order in the case of the novel is this “spirit of the age,” which continues to hold Orlando back from speaking, and writing, her truth. Moving on to discussions of a feminist future, Burke lays out for the reader the most significant protective barrier of the heteronormative standard: its “thick and forgotten past.” While Woolf does not explore this in Orlando to quite the extent that Burke does, the way that Woolf plays with time in the novel creates an opportunity for a meaningful discussion of the ways in which we can subvert a dominant order:

The habit of heteronormative gender is difficult to disrupt. If normative habit relies on immobility and is rigid because of its thick and forgotten past, such habit preempts the possibility for play and subversion. … My concern, however, is what to do with the successful repetition—that is, the actualization of the habit—of normative gender. How does one disrupt a habit that is intensely recalcitrant and overdetermined, a habit that is directed by an inability to be disrupted? (Burke 133-34)
Here Burke defines what they mean by the “thick and forgotten past” of heteronormativity: an inability to be disrupted, which we can take to mean an inability to be changed or halted. It is here that Burke pauses to define for us what Elizabeth Grosz’s idea of “the virtual” means for their purposes: “Ultimately, according to Grosz, the virtual leap is a vital feminist effort because it opens up what is and could be. Access to the multiplicity of the past will fissure the presence of power because that presence relies on an occlusion of the virtual” (Burke 135). Arguably, varying access to the past enables access to varying futures. For our purposes, it is enough to understand the virtual leap as the thing that creates a split in the timeline, so to speak. It allows for the creation of new possibilities. Burke discusses this idea of the virtual as imagined by Henri Bergson beginning with his publication of *Time and Free Will* in 1889 and continuing with *Matter and Memory* in 1896:

The temporal concepts of the actual [present], virtual [past], and duration are central to Bergson’s thinking. A discussion of the virtual first appears in his early text, *Time and Free Will*...and is developed to a much greater extent in *Matter and Memory*...where he addresses the virtual as the continuous and differentiating or heterogeneous quality of subjective experience. For Bergson, duration refers to a singular and plural movement, to the way a certain past stays or endures and to a simultaneity of plural past and present movements. Although duration does not determine the future, what is actual is assembled through a particular line or intensity of the past. This particular movement of the past stems from a temporal reservoir of the virtual. The virtual thus refers to a whole past or plurality of pasts, indicating the different rhythms of existence that can actualize or become present. (Burke 133-34)

It's a lot to wrap one’s mind around, but perhaps I can very simply summarize: Bergson argues that the past is virtual, the present is actual, and duration refers to very individualized moments that coalesce to create, basically, normative habit. Burke argues that normative habit is gendered habit, and thus heteronormativity is the dominant perception that heterosexuality is supposedly normal. Burke describes normative habit in detail for us:

The very function of normative habit is to preclude queer performativity. Certainly, as [Judith] Butler notes, the repetition of heteronormative gender is not
always successful such that it is in the promise of failure that queer performativity has a chance. (Burke 133)

So, the rigidity of this dominant perception of heteronormativity is actively working against revolution as if it were an omnipresent force acting against a freedom of gender bias.

The virtual leap, for the purposes of this thesis, applies to moments when Orlando experiences a great change in their life, whether a formative romantic betrayal (Sasha), or the moment in which he reaches the highest honor he would be awarded as a man (becoming a Duke). Following these experiences, Orlando seems to die, or sleep deeply, for several days. I have discussed these forms of death in the previous chapter. These deaths, or slumbers, are, I contend, an “access to the multiplicity of the past” that allow miraculous things to happen, including a completely natural and logical change from one sex to another. How do we (that is, men, women, or those between or without gender), who only have control over our own lives, impact something that appears to be indestructible and negatively affects women everywhere? Disruption appears to be key. Fascinatingly, Burke proposes that a leap into, and reclamation of, the past is one of the potential ways forward:

> When [perceived reality] fails, for instance, I am hurled outside of normal perception, and to resolve the failure, I must make a leap into the past. … If habit preempts access to the whole past, *then the leap into the multiplicity of the past is an untimely action of resistance* and creation insofar as the reservoir of memory can disrupt this present. … Systems of power and domination elide the deep reservoir of the past in order to maintain their hold in the present, to keep intact what has been and still is. (Burke 134-135, emphasis mine)

I take this to mean that when we cannot know for certain that what we see before us or perceive as reality is a proper representation of reality, we must step backward into time and analyze for ourselves what has been in order to grasp what is and what can be. However, as Burke points out, stepping back into time in the most natural sense is blocked by heteronormative habit. To evade heteronormative habit, we must leap into the “multiplicity of the past,” which is exactly what
Woolf does when she “jumbles” the chronology of English history in the novel. The ability to examine the past and measure outcomes enables us to see cause and effect, thus creating the opportunity to change our fate, in a way. Woolf effectively moves England’s history around as she pleases in the novel, placing Nick Greene both deep in the Elizabethan era and near the end of the novel in the early twentieth century, for example. Woolf also crafts a scene in which Orlando, on the ship returning to England, sees Alexander Pope and John Dryden conversing near the Cocoa Tree. As DiBattista points out, “Pope could not be seen in the company of the adult Dryden, since he was born twelve years before Dryden died” (Orlando 285). The biographer, however, insists that this must be a mistake on the part of the captain’s observation. Woolf takes the reader back in time, literally, to follow one nobleman who becomes a woman and thus experiences each extreme of the heteronormative spectrum across the centuries. More importantly, though, it is not time as it happened, it is Woolf’s own version of time. In the creation of her own version of time, Woolf has achieved a form of disruption.

Not only is the way that Woolf begins Orlando’s story in the past a form of disruption, but so too is the way in which Orlando ages (or doesn’t). On the first page of Chapter One, we learn that Orlando is sixteen at the beginning of his story. On that very first page he is doing as his father and his grandfather did before him: playing at war.

Orlando’s fathers had ridden in the fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers, and they had stuck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters. So too would Orlando, he vowed. (Orlando 12)

Here we see Orlando at his most masculine, a young man who only desires to murder people of “all colours,” just like his father and his father’s father. As the story of his life goes on, however,

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53 I use the term “jumbles” here, borrowed from DiBattista in the notes of the Harcourt edition of Orlando (Orlando 256).
Orlando slowly moves away from the purely masculine identity and into the realm of gender fluidity or androgyny. One day, during the great frost, Orlando meets a Russian princess and falls deeply in love. Orlando seems to desire possession of the princess, whom he calls “Sasha” instead of her real name because he once owned a white fox named Sasha, and I would argue that this portrays his very masculine desire to own her. When Orlando thinks to himself of Sasha, she appears to him as possessions: “Orlando, wrapped in his own dreams, thought only of the pleasures of life; of his jewel; of her rarity; of means for making her irrevocably and indissolubly his own” (*Orlando* 36). He seeks to own her, but inevitably finds her embracing a sailor, and betraying Orlando. And so, Sasha would never be his alone; he would never own her. This is another very important experience for Orlando: both his understanding of women’s place in his life and the fidelity he believes he is *owed* due to his sex are torn from his grasp. Orlando would proceed to change from the patriarch-in-training to a young man working as an ambassador in Turkey, where his life (and his sex) change, arguably, for the better. As Orlando changes, a split in the timeline forms. Woolf has plucked this story from the multitudes of the past and is weaving it into a story that will progress across the span of hundreds of years. Naturally, this will involve a few deaths.

In the previous chapter we looked at the physical change in Orlando’s sex as he sleeps soundly for seven days. This, however, was not the first time he had fallen into a supernatural slumber—he also experiences one directly after he loses Sasha. Orlando had returned to his country house and fallen asleep, and despite the
dogs [that] were set to bark under his window; cymbals, drums, bones beaten perpetually in his room; a gorse bush put under his pillow; and mustard plasters applied to his feet, still he did not wake, take food, or show any sign of life for seven whole days. (*Orlando* 50)
Orlando, it would appear, was dead to the world. On the seventh day, however, he woke and kicked everyone out of his room as if no supernatural slumber had happened. This leads Woolf, in her role as biographer, to discuss with the reader the nature of this slumber:

Has the finger of death to be laid on the tumult of life from time to time lest it rend us asunder? Are we so made that we have to take death in small doses daily or we could not go on with the business of living? And then what strange powers are these that penetrate our most secret ways and change our most treasured possessions without our willing it? Had Orlando, worn out by the extremity of his suffering, died for a week, and then come to life again? And if so, of what nature is death and of what nature is life? (*Orlando* 51)

If this supernatural slumber was indeed a form of death, I contend that it was what Burke refers to in their book as a leap into the virtual, which for the purposes of this thesis, is a form of disruption. Disruption, as I will discuss further, is key.

Here I pause to revisit something discussed previously. Burke argues that “Access to the multiplicity of the past will fissure the presence of power because that presence relies on an occlusion of the virtual” (Burke 135). Ultimately, Orlando’s “deaths” open pathways for multitudes of possible futures. The leap into the virtual enables a delay capable of disrupting normative gendered habit. For our purposes, the delay can be considered the questioning of the norms of the time that Woolf writes into Orlando’s character, such as the moments of crossdressing or other defiance of gendered social norms. Orlando is special because she has lived as a man and managed to retain her manhood as she develops her womanhood. Orlando could do this because she was able to leap into the virtual, thus disrupting what Burke calls “bodily habit.” Burke calls this kind of moment a “delay of habit”, and describes its significance:

The delay of habit interrupts a particular integration and repetition of the past in the present, and in turn requires and opens up the past. The delay *thwarts repetition* and is suggestive of potential and creativity. Moreover, inasmuch as the leap requires a turn away from the habitual present, *the leap itself is a delay*. Delay, then, not only suspends immediate action but also displaces immediate or

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54 Burke is discussing Elizabeth Gosz’s examination of Bergson’s work through a feminist lens.
habitual sensation with a feeling that something could be otherwise…The leap into the virtual is the way to open up the potential of gendered existence. Yet the habit of normative gender itself, because it is rigidly structured and directed, requires a critical interruption that enacts delay in order to affect the virtual leap. (Burke 135-36; emphasis mine)

Woolf asks the reader, “Of what nature is death, and of what nature is life?” (Orlando 51). I believe that Burke would argue life is the “habitual present,” and Orlando’s “deaths” are no death at all, they are merely delays. These delays disrupt the “habitual present,” opening wider the window for the “potential of gendered existence.” I believe the potential of gendered experience can be taken to mean a form of androgyny, particularly where Woolf’s work is concerned. As Orlando has obtained lived experience as a man and, in the second half of the novel, is obtaining lived experience as a woman, she is developing as an androgyne.

On her return to England, Orlando is considering the difference in her experiences as a woman versus when she was a man. The thought process begins with chastity:

In normal circumstances a lovely young woman alone would have thought of nothing else; the whole edifice of female government is based on that foundation stone; chastity is their jewel, their centre piece, which they run mad to protect, and die when ravished of. But if one has been a man for thirty years or so, and an Ambassador into the bargain, if one has held a Queen in one’s arms and one or two other ladies, if report be true, of less exalted rank, if one has married a Rosina Pepita, and so on, one does not perhaps give such a very great start about that. (Orlando 113-114)

Orlando benefits from a lived experience that no other woman is privy to and thus becomes something of a gender and sexual rebel. Androgyny frees her from the shackles of normative gendered habit, enabled by her small deaths, or trips into the virtual. Her life is a very special one, in ways far more adaptive than immortality alone would produce, and her life is one that is destined to disrupt the heteropatriarchy. As I will discuss, the spirit of the age represents the heteronormative “habit” that Burke has defined for us in their work, and Orlando is written as the perfect character to shatter it. We can see that this heteronormative habit was, in a way, on
Woolf’s mind as she formed her arguments for *A Room of One’s Own*, published in 1929 shortly after *Orlando*. Here Woolf discusses the patriarchy as a system of hierarchy in which men are granted power over women. This power, Woolf seems to suggest, is in the form of self-confidence:

Without self-confidence we are babes in the cradle. And how can we generate this imponderable quality, which is yet so invaluable, most quickly? By thinking that other people are inferior to oneself. By feeling that someone has some innate superiority—it may be wealth, or rank, or a straight nose, or the portrait of a grandfather by Romney—for there is no end to the pathetic devices of human imagination—over other people. Hence the enormous importance to a patriarchy who has to conquer, who has to rule, of feeling that great numbers of people, half the human race indeed, are by nature inferior to himself. It must indeed be one of the chief sources of his power.55

Perhaps Woolf’s intention when she wrote *Orlando* to be a man who changes into a woman was to tell the story of a woman who seizes the self-confidence that only a man would otherwise be granted. Moreover, Orlando’s story allows him to experience life through the eyes of both sexes (male and female) to demonstrate the absurdity that is the ongoing oppression of women, or as Burke says, heteronormative habit. If the patriarchy is a system in which men are granted power over women, surely that power is being granted by someone, and perhaps, vaguely, it is a matter of confidence in oneself. Either way, Woolf is right; it is absurd that half of the population has control over the other. Ergo, conversations of potential gendered experience will go nowhere unless we also push for a true equality.

Was it marriage?

While Woolf wrote *Orlando* as something of a gift for a woman she loved, it was a project that was also steeped in her opposition to the reality that women are treated differently

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55 Woolf, Virginia *A Room of One’s Own* (1929) p. 35
than men. Woolf plays with the various roles that women hold in society, depicting Orlando’s sudden realization that it is the “spirit of the age,” or in Burke’s terms, habitual gendered existence that is extremely difficult to disrupt, that holds her back from completing her masterpiece, and so she should get married to protect herself and allow her to pursue her true love: poetry. In the late 19th century and into the early 20th century, marriage was an entirely different animal than it is today. In the anthology *Suffer and Be Still* (1972), Martha Vicinus leads a textual expedition to understand the attitudes held toward women by both men and women in Victorian England. In this anthology, Vicinus asks, “Why and how did attitudes toward women, held by both women and men, change?” Then she answers, exploring the idea of the “perfect” wife in Victorian England:

The perfect wife was an active participant in the family, fulfilling a number of vital tasks, the first of which was childbearing. … Before marriage a young girl was brought up to be perfectly innocent and sexually ignorant. The predominant ideology of the age insisted that she have little sexual feeling at all, although family affection and the desire for motherhood were considered innate. Morally she was left untested, and kept under the watchful eye of her mother in her father’s home…She [the perfect wife] was mother only at set times of the day, even of the year; she left the heirs in the hands of nannies and governesses. Her social and intellectual growth was confined to the family and close friends. Her status was totally dependent upon the economic position of her father and then her husband. In her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of the family hearth.56

For someone like Sackville-West, who grew up in one of the most notorious noble families in England, marriage was not likely to be a simple matter—even if she were not queer. Some of Sackville-West’s childhood, marriage, and motherhood could be aligned with the description above, but I believe that she took charge of her own social and intellectual growth alongside the pursuit of her sapphic romantic interests. Woolf’s marriage, as a childless one strengthened by a

Press the married couple owned and operated, was perhaps even more unique for their time, regardless of who in the marriage was or was not queer.

Todd G. Nordgren begins his article, “‘Was it marriage?’: Queer Relationships and Early Twentieth-Century Anti-Realism,” with the story of Lytton Strachey’s very brief engagement to Virginia Woolf: “On February 17, 1909, Virginia Stephen (not yet Woolf) accepted a marriage proposal from a panicked Lytton Strachey; it was called off before the end of their conversation.”

Strachey was a founding member of the Bloomsbury Group, and his preference for men as sexual partners was discussed by his biographer Michael Holroyd. It becomes clear, as we look at the lives and loves of many in the Bloomsbury circle, that their marriages served different purposes than what was traditional for the time, and often contained a misaligned sexuality. However, this did not seem to bother any of them. To the Bloomsbury folk, perhaps marriage meant a sort of social cover they provided each other, a safety net within which they could continue to write and challenge the repressive norms they themselves had managed to escape more-or-less unscathed. Moreover, I contend that Woolf understood the disruption of the heteronormative that hers and Sackville-West’s marriages represented and perhaps even sought to memorialize this disruption in Orlando.

While Sackville-West would marry in 1913, she was always just a bit ahead of the curve in matters of love and identity. Because of her family’s social standing, the odds were good that Sackville-West would be able to choose a man to marry that would support her financially as well as emotionally, as Nicolson did with great success. Glendinning describes the back-and-forth between Harold Nicolson and Sackville-West leading up to their marriage. Nicolson gave

Sackville-West the space that she needed to continue the relationships she had with women and did not ask questions about the nature of these relationships (Lee 482; Glendinning 185).

Glendinning describes Nicolson and Sackville-West’s letter writing as a special, and always honest, form of communication:

> They expressed more, and were equally happy, in their letters when apart, … Thus they set up, so early, this parallel relationship between their different, letter-writing selves. It was to be the chief support of their marriage, a communication unbroken when not only geography but temperament and other people came between them. Harold could write to Vita the lover-like things he could never say. (Glendinning 59)

Together Sackville-West and Nicolson would foster a different kind of love and trust, one that would not depend on an unrealistic sexual fidelity often romanticized in popular culture and the various forms of media today. Their marriage was not based on heterosexual desire, and perhaps it was easier for them to maintain as they each explored their individual interests and leaned on each other for support. Sackville-West would write poetry and garden (and romance other women), and Nicolson would travel often (and romance other men). While Nicolson’s lack of wealth initially worried Sackville-West’s mother, he was eventually accepted by both Sackville-West’s parents. They were engaged at a ball on January 18th, 1912, with the condition that they don’t speak of it or act on it for one year (Glendinning 43).

In the novel, Orlando accepts that she must marry to protect herself, and her future as a poet, from the “spirit of the age,” which places her chance meeting with Shelmerdine between 1837 and 1901 (Orlando 176). Woolf undoubtedly did this intentionally, placing a subversively queer marriage in the perfect position to be ahead of her time (in the Victorian era) in many respects while still finding a way to honor tradition, just as Sackville-West would do in her marriage. Oestreich, in her discussion of the photograph of Sackville-West used to portray “Orlando about the year 1840,” notes: “I believe that ‘Orlando about the year 1840’ conversely
dramatizes that the present is also always in the past, which is underscored by the fact that in the photograph \textit{[Orlando 181]} a bisexual woman in an open marriage in the 1920s is masquerading as a married, bisexual, transsexual woman from the 1840s.”\textsuperscript{59} The suggestion that the present is also always in the past is a critically powerful one, and for our purposes could be interpreted as a feminist vehicle with which we travel into the past and examine the ways our understanding of temporality can help us create the opportunity for a more just future. I propose we take the examination of the picture a step further and interpret it as a form of memorialization of the queer marriages of both Woolf and Sackville-West. In reality, Sackville-West and Woolf each knew their husbands more or less because of the circles they were involved in—Harold Nicolson attended a family dinner and Vita “took hold of the reins from there,” inviting him to Knole four days later, and in Woolf’s case, she met Leonard for the first time while visiting her brother Thoby at Cambridge (Glendinning 37); (Lee 291, 296-97). In the novel, Orlando meets her soulmate after a gleeful sprint through the park, in the middle of which she trips and falls, breaking her ankle. Perhaps this is meant to represent the sense of relief, or even safety, that both Woolf and Sackville-West felt after finding a partner that would offer them the safety of their normative social camouflage in the form of marriage, just as Shelmerdine saves Orlando after she has fallen and broken her foot.

Orlando is lying on the ground, considering her journey across genders and continents and the men and women who joined her on it. The world continues to turn around her, she hears cannons and the sound of a horse’s hoofs hammering on the ground, announcing the approach of the man who would love her enough to let her remain as she was before she met him (for she did not need a man or a woman to complete her):

\textsuperscript{59} Oestreich, \textit{‘Orlando about the year 1840’} p. 12; emphasis original.
The horse was almost on her. She sat upright. Towering dark against the yellow-sliced sky of dawn, with the plovers rising and falling about him, she saw a man on horseback. He started. The horse stopped.

‘Madam,’ the man cried, leaping to the ground, ‘you’re hurt!’

‘I’m dead, Sir!’ she replied.

A few minutes later, they became engaged. (*Orlando* 183)

It’s fascinating, when taking the inference of Orlando’s “deaths” throughout the novel as representations of what Burke has discussed as a journey into the virtual, the exclamation that Orlando makes upon Shelmerdine’s arrival. Just before his arrival, Orlando had been thinking of her long life, her many partners, even the wars that had taken place in her lifespan (*Orlando* 182-83). Burke’s suggestion that the virtual “refers to a whole past or a plurality of pasts, indicating the different rhythms of existence that can actualize or become present” would apply here as well (Burke 133-34).

Woolf’s depiction of Orlando and Shelmerdine’s marriage is a success because they can share their deepest secrets and emotions with each other, just as Nicolson and Sackville-West seemed to do in their marriage. In the novel when the two characters meet, they spend eight or nine days together as Shelmerdine awaits a change in the wind so he can leave off on another of his adventures. This mirrors Harold’s career as a diplomat, as he regularly traveled all over the world to fulfill his duties and often (at her request) left Sackville-West behind (Glendinning 37). Harold was one of the signers of the Treaty of Versailles, and despite pressure from his job for his wife to play the part of politician’s wife, Harold Nicolson was able to balance his less-than-traditional marriage with his arguably tradition-filled profession. 60

In many ways both the novel and Orlando the character were ahead of their times. The moderately fictional biography depicts a man both switching sexes and living for hundreds of years without aging past 36 (the age of Sackville-West when Woolf began writing). With the

60 Nicolson, Harold: *Peacemaking, 1919*; first published 1933.
change in sex came what, on the surface, would normatively create a change in sexuality—but a
closer reading reveals that Orlando remains attracted to women following her transformation. On
the surface, as Orlando winds up marrying someone who passes as a man, there is a lack of
explicit gender bending or depiction of homosexual relations; this is likely intentional, as many
have argued, acting as a distraction from the sapphism that is contained within the story (Lee
481). In *Desiring Women*, Sproles examines the sapphic relationship between Sackville-West and
Virginia Woolf, and *also* between Shelmerdine and Orlando, in all their gloriously multifaceted
natures. On Orlando’s sexuality, Sproles writes: “Orlando may receive the love of both sexes—
and enjoy it—but her own sexual desires seem to remain consistent: she is physically attracted to
women, whereas her relationships with men are purely ceremonial.”\(^{61}\) Describing Orlando’s
relationships with men as “ceremonial” is an accurate representation of Sackville-West’s
marriage in a way. Sproles adds, “‘love’ can perhaps be understood to describe relationships in
which climaxes occur in conversation rather than sexual activity.”\(^{62}\) This, too, is true of both
Sackville-West and Woolf’s separate marriages. Sackville-West’s marriage was one of
compromise: both Sackville-West and Nicolson preferred their own sex over the other. What, in
a more typical marriage, would be disastrous is instead a common ground, and a unifying factor,
for both.

While both Woolf and Sackville-West were happily married, which appeared odd to them
at the time, Lee suggests that Virginia and Leonard Woolf were closer, politically, and
professionally, than Sackville-West and her husband (Lee 483). Upon meeting and coming to
know Sackville-West and her husband better, Woolf may have realized that what she had with
Leonard Woolf was perhaps not so odd or dysfunctional after all. This speaks not only to the

\(^{61}\) Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 80.
\(^{62}\) Sproles, *Desiring Women*, 80.
stability of their respective marriages, but also to the empathy and understanding present in
Sackville-West and Woolf’s relationship. The relationship was never destined to be a robustly
physical one, but it did remain emotionally and lovingly binding. Woolf saw this safe,
supportive, sexless, marriage of Sackville-West’s and it must have added an additional level of
trust between them. Leonard Woolf was both editor and caretaker for his wife. He managed the
Hogarth Press and his was always a very important opinion on anything Woolf wrote (Lee 499).
In this way, their marriage meant far more than the passing of wealth between generations or
mere sexual companionship. While the Woolves never had children, they were perhaps also not
subjected to the same pressures as Sackville-West and her husband would have been due to their
station or aristocratic position.63

And Was That Not Enough?

As I discussed briefly in the opening of this chapter, Oestreich argues that the obstruction
(that blocks women from gaining true freedom of identity and purpose) originates from the
patriarchal desire to enforce social jurisdiction over women’s pre-conjugal sexuality.64 In an
eexample of the power behind the spirit of the age, Orlando finds herself accepting that she must
wear dresses and crinolines and all the proper attire for a woman of her standing in society. After
finding her manuscript once more and pondering the minimal changes her personhood has
experienced despite the change in physical sex, Orlando sits at a table and dips her quill into ink,
finding her manuscript has reignited the flame of writing. The very moment Orlando begins to
try to write in earnest, however,

the door was flung wide, and in marched Basket, the butler, followed by
Bartholomew, the housekeeper, to clear away tea. Orlando, who had just dipped

63 Lee, Hermione p. 316: “The Woolves, as they were immediately called [upon engagement].”
64 Oestreich, “‘Orlando about the year 1840,’” 7.
her pen in the ink, and was about to indite some reflection upon the eternity of all things, was much annoyed to be impeded by a blot, which spread and meandered round her pen. It was some infirmity of the quill, she supposed; it was split or dirty. She dipped it again. The blot increased...But as for writing poetry with Basket and Bartholomew in the room, it was impossible. (Orlando 173-74)

Orlando, it would appear, could not write while anyone else was in the room. In fact, earlier in the novel, Orlando had taken to covering up her manuscript if anyone else came into the room (Orlando 137). These moments, and others, connect Orlando to A Room of One’s Own, as Jane De Gay explains in Woolf’s Feminist Historiography in Orlando: “The novel demonstrates some of the constraints Orlando experiences after becoming a woman: she hides her manuscript when people come in...(an anecdote from the life of Jane Austen which Woolf cited in A Room of One’s Own).”  

In A Room, Woolf describes Jane Austen’s hiding her manuscript whenever someone walks in, thus the argument that in order to have the chance to succeed at writing poetry, women must have a pension or salary of at minimum £500 and a room of their own with a door that locks. Resuming writing, Orlando manages to get some words onto paper, but they’re not very good. She dips her quill a second time and something verging on erotic flows out of her:

Again she dipped her pen and off it went—

She was so changed, the soft carnation cloud
Once mantling o’er her cheek like that which eve
Hangs o’er the sky, glowing with roseate hue,
Had faded into paleness, broken by
Bright burning blushes, torches of the tomb,

but here, by an abrupt movement she spilt the ink over the page and blotted it from human sight she hoped for ever. She was all of a quiver, all of a stew. Nothing more repulsive could be imagined than to feel the ink flowing in cascades of involuntary inspiration. What had happened to her? (Orlando 174-5)

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65 De Gay, Jane Woolf’s Feminist Historiography, 65.
66 DiBattista points out in the notes for this scene that both quoted poems were written by Letitia Elizabeth London and from “D.E. Enfield’s L.E.L., A Mystery of the Thirties, published by the Hogarth Press in 1928” (Orlando 298).
I would argue that Woolf is showing us that despite the gender and sexual repression Orlando is experiencing, the words find their way out of her eventually *anyway* in the form of “involuntary inspiration.” Orlando intentionally spills ink over her own words, as she hates what she has written, suggesting that even when she is able to write, she hates the result. Perhaps this is Woolf suggesting that what is written while under duress in this way is nothing of quality.

Unfortunately, the act of writing these words was indeed enough to seize the attention of the ever-diligent spirit of the age. Shortly after, she begins to feel…something:

She had the queerest sensations about the thigh bones. Her hairs seemed to erect themselves. Her arms sang and twanged. … But all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand, and then finally to contract itself so that it made a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand. And when she raised it to see what caused this agitation, she saw nothing—nothing but the vast solitary emerald which Queen Elizabeth had given her. And was that not enough? she asked. *(Orlando 175)*

Orlando wonders why she cannot write, and she is answered. She cannot write because she has not conformed to society’s heteronormative demands and married a man. Moreover, she has completed the unthinkable: she has experienced sexual feelings (and had sex) before she was married. Returning to Burke, we may examine her inclusion of the feminist movements like “Time’s Up” and “Me Too” which aim to disrupt the “normal operation of things as well as the normative order and structure of existence, namely the reality and concealment of sexual domination in girls’ and women’s lives.”

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67 The Time’s Up movement focuses on preventing sexual harassment and sexual assault in the workplace. This movement began as a non-profit organization created by celebrity women in response to the Harvey Weinstein sexual abuse lawsuits and the expansion of the “Me Too” movement, that raised money to support victims of workplace sexual harassment or violence. In January 2023, they announced that they were ceasing operations and shifting focus to their legal defense fund site. For more information, visit [https://timesupnow.org](https://timesupnow.org).

68 The “Me Too” movement, founded in 2006 by Tarana Burke, a sexual assault survivor and activist, seeks to combat sexual harassment and sexual assault focusing primarily on women. In 2017 actress Alyssa Milano urged victims of sexual harassment/assault to share their stories on social media, causing the #metoo hashtag to go viral. For more information, visit [https://metoomvmt.org](https://metoomvmt.org).

69 Burke, Megan *When Time Warps* (2019) p. 128
and assault and strive to break the silence imposed on conversations about sexual violence, which is a form of disrupting this hegemonic patriarchy that obscures and silences the voices of victims today. Burke shows us that when the quiet, or the invisible, normalization of sexual violence is disturbed, and the acts of violence are universally recognized for the crime that they are, disruption has been achieved. When Orlando asks herself if a ring given to her by Queen Elizabeth herself is not enough, I would argue that Woolf herself is actually asking why a woman cannot just be independent and pursue a career as a writer without the need to include a man simply to fulfill a gendered, socially constructed, role that is imposed on her the moment she is assigned a sex (at birth, or halfway through the novel). Thus, Orlando understands that she must marry if she is to be permitted to write poetry and go on with her life. But how, if she is not sexually attracted to most men and she has already established that a traditional marriage is not in her best interest?

After several forays into London society, Orlando unfortunately finds that she no longer cares to immerse herself in the deluge of society as she did when she was a man. Following a spree of parties and time spent with various Lords (briefly listed off for the reader: Lord O., Lord A., The Marquis of C., Mr. M.), Orlando finds herself exhausted, frustrated, and feeling a misalignment of herself and the harsh gendered standards placed upon her by the dominant order:

Since Orlando had won the praise of Queen Elizabeth for the way she handled a bowl of rose water as a boy, it must be supposed that she was sufficiently expert to pass muster. Yet it is true that there was an absent mindedness about her which sometimes made her clumsy; she was apt to think of poetry when she should have been thinking of taffeta; her walk was a little too much of a stride for a woman, perhaps, and her gestures, being abrupt, might endanger a cup of tea on occasion. … Lovers she had in plenty, but life, which is after all of some importance in its way, escaped her. (Orlando 143)
Orlando finds lovers a plenty, not that they are seeking anything more than a pulse from her, but at this point it is life that seems to be escaping her grasp. She sits in the company of men and women alternatively, seeking a glimmer of love or a glimmer of life. In the company of upper-class women, she is bored to tears by vapid conversation at parties or events. In the company of most men, she is bored because they do not speak to her about anything she is interested in. I would argue that these scenes are meant to invoke a sense of personal growth. Orlando goes through the motions of a proper Victorian woman, and it is nowhere near fulfilling. She does not, however, seem to be aware of this fact right away. One night, though, Orlando attends a party with Alexander Pope, and everything changes.

Pope’s role in the novel appears to be as a representative of middle ground between the typical, even neurotypical, society and the metaphorical community of “great” poets, along with Joseph Addison and Jonathan Swift. While they are poets, and thus perhaps better company for Orlando than the less-than-memorable “Lord O., Lord A., The Marquis of C., [and] Mr. M.,” whom she socialized with before, men they are still. De Gay suggests that this is Woolf’s way of “cutting them down to size”: “Canonical authors are viewed through Orlando’s eyes, and this perspective is often used to cut them down to size: quite literally so, in the case of Pope, who (perhaps in a direct riposte to [Woolf’s father] Stephen) is described as a ‘little gentleman’, and rendered silent.”

Woolf includes Addison’s opinion on the clothes that women should be permitted to wear, having him read it aloud to Orlando as he visits with her:

I consider woman as a beautiful, romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks. The lynx shall cast its skin at her feet to make her a tippet, the peacock, parrot and swan shall pay contributions to her muff; the sea shall be searched for shells, and the rocks for gems, and every part of nature furnish out its share towards the embellishment of a creature that is

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70 De Gay, Woolf’s Feminist Historiography, 64.
71 A note from DiBattista informs us that this was not published in Addison’s Spectator, but in fact from the Tatler, no. 116, January 5, 1710 (Orlando 291).
the most consummate work of it. All this, I shall indulge them in, but as for the
petticoat I have been speaking of, I neither can, nor will allow it. (Orlando 153-
54)

That Addison would sooner have a woman roam the streets covered in shells and rocks than
permit her to wear a petticoat is laughable. Oestreich points out for us that Woolf intentionally
leaves out Addison’s explanation that:

his dislike of the petticoat arises from, ‘the great temptation it might give to
virgins of acting in security like married women and by that means give a check
to matrimony, an institution always encouraged by wise societies” (5). Because
petticoats and crinolines were used to disguise women’s expanding wombs,
Addison’s condemnation of the garments reveals the patriarchal desire to enforce
social jurisdiction over women’s pre-conjugal sexuality.72

Almost as if in retaliation, or arguably in reaction to, an expansion of women’s sexual identities,
men like Addison decide that crinolines and petticoats will give women the freedoms that they
enjoy and thus cannot be permitted. Unsurprisingly Orlando is not impressed, for

intellect, divine as it is, and all worshipful, has a habit of lodging in the most
seedy of carcases. … A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his
poems, praises her judgement, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no
means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding, or will
refuse, though the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen.
(Orlando 156)

At this point in her journey, she has come to understand that not even a man who can match her
wit is likely to support her gender or sexual freedoms, for often it is the mind makes them that
much more untrustworthy, as Orlando learned when she invited Nick Greene over the first time.
The mention of “[running] her through the body with his pen” seems to suggest that despite these
men seeking her praises and criticism, he will nevertheless betray her eventually. As Orlando
gives up on her pursuit of society and the dull, unfulfilled time spent with most notorious poets,
she promptly decides to dress as a man and flee her home (and, I would argue, her gender) for
the night. Orlando dresses herself in a black velvet suit trimmed with Venetian lace, which

72 Oestreich, “‘Orlando about the year 1840,’” 11.
effectively transforms her into a nobleman once more. The moment that Orlando cross-dresses, she has rebelled against the dominant order. She appears to understand that her actions could anger the spirit: “She took a turn or two before the mirror to make sure that her petticoats had not lost her the freedom of her legs, and then let herself secretly out of doors” (*Orlando* 157). Her legs work fine, and no spirit came to dissuade her, so off she went into the night. Once again, we see the clothes that Orlando wears, this time an outfit from her male past, designate her role in society, and thus the perhaps presence or lack of a type of self-determination. The next part of the novel offers us the perspective of other women living in England in the Victorian era, that of the sex worker.

Orlando soon happens upon a sex worker named Nell whom she is intrigued by (as well as attracted to, it could be argued) and they depart for Nell’s studio together. In the safety of Nell’s room, Orlando flings off her lordly clothing and reveals the truth of her gender. Nell accepts Orlando with a laugh, quite preferring the company of another lady over that of a lord or customer. Nell’s transformation upon learning that Orlando was not a normative male is remarkable: “It was remarkable how soon on discovering they were of the same sex, [Nell’s] manner changed and she dropped her plaintive, appealing ways” (*Orlando* 159). Not only does Orlando feel immediately relieved to share with Nell that she is a woman, Nell is also immediately relieved to learn that Orlando is a woman.

Orlando had found the life she was looking for, both in the company of Nell and her community, and in crossdressing and thus subverting the heteropatriarchy. While Orlando is there speaking with her new friends Prue, Prue Kitty, and Kitty Rose, men come and go. Woolf uses the passing customers to inject discourse, and disruption, of the sort of nonsense that men seem to have spouted at the time regarding women and their extra-marital (that is, anything not
having to do with their marriage, motherhood, or relationship with a man) affairs: “Women have no desires, says this gentleman, coming into Nell’s parlour; only affectations. Without desires (she has served him and he is gone) their conversation cannot be of the slighted interest to anyone.” Another man comes and says, “It is well known…that when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk; they scratch” (Orlando 160). Here Woolf seems to argue that perhaps the opinion of these men is that women are mere chickens, and when they are not busy laying eggs they are otherwise mindlessly pecking or scratching. This is a community of women who are at the mercy of the patriarchy, which is a predicament they share with Orlando, but Orlando would never be one of them. As the novel observes to pointed satirical effect, they attempt conversation but are interrupted too often to form a coherent sentence. In this instance, a room of their own would have benefited them greatly and afforded them the privacy necessary to converse.

So, as Orlando finally finds her rhythm in life, and plenty of lovers, the Nineteenth century crashes down upon her. The times begin to change, and women are pushed further away from independence and equality. Whereas before Orlando could leave her home dressed as a man, soon she is forced by the spirit of the age to conform and wear a dress. This happens after an outing where Orlando accidentally wears breeches in public as she rides past Buckingham Palace on her horse. She realizes her folly and runs straight home, blushing all the way (Orlando 170-71). Orlando wears pants, and so has challenged the heteronormative patriarchy, or, to return to Burke, the habit of normative gender.

Immediately following this challenge, however, comes oppression at the hands of the spirit of the age. If neither Queen Victoria nor Orlando herself can withstand the oppression of the spirit of the age, it is hard to imagine anyone being able to do so. So, as Oestreich points out,
“Orlando, the as yet unmarried, nineteenth-century woman, has had, as some critics try to deny, heterosexual intercourse in the recent past—and plans to have more in the future—so that the purchasing of multiple crinolines must become part of her sartorial inventory.”73 This is an incredible connection that Oestreich makes. Orlando does appear to be acknowledging the power that the spirit holds over women, but she is no mere woman. Even Orlando, someone who has leapt into the virtual and created a new path to gendered existence, must succumb to the social pressures of her age. And so, it is during the reign of Queen Victoria that we see Orlando give in to the spirit and seek a husband.

Fortunately, the man that she marries is, in fact, not simply a man at all! Woolf finds a way for Orlando to subvert the suppressive demands of the heteropatriarchy while marrying someone whom she genuinely loves. Just as Orlando finds herself feeling that she is both a man and a woman, depending on the clothes she wears or the activity she is performing, Orlando marries a man who is also a woman. Orlando’s subversion of the heteronormative spirit of the Victorian era goes even further: she marries someone whom she does not need to rely on to take care of her or her estate. As we will discuss, Orlando and her new husband Shelmerdine are perfectly independent, and each simply complements and enhances the other—just as the case was not only for Sackville-West and her husband, but for Woolf and her husband as well.

“In all of London, you and I alone like being married”

The person that Woolf’s protagonist would wind up marrying was a man (and a woman) with an adventurer’s heart. Just as Harold Nicolson would travel the world for his work with the British government, Shelmerdine is often off on adventures and sailing the seas. We encounter

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73 Oestreich, “‘Orlando about the year 1840,’” 12.
Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire for the first time as he nearly steers his horse into Orlando where she lies on the ground with an injured ankle.

Following their fateful meeting, Orlando and Shelmerdine dine together and begin the process of falling in love. As part of this process, they discover that each of them is more or less not necessarily the gender that they appear to be on the outside. Shelmerdine first explains to Orlando that he will be leaving as soon as the wind changes, and this prompts her to look outside the window of where they are eating and check the weathervane:

Orlando looked hastily out of the breakfast room window at the gilt leopard on the weather vane. Mercifully his tail pointed due east and was steady as a rock. ‘Oh! Shel, don’t leave me!’ she cried. ‘I’m passionately in love with you,’ she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously.

‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried.

‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried. Never was there such a scene of protestation and demonstration as then took place since the world began. (Orlando 185)

This is an incredibly important moment in the novel, I would argue. Orlando guesses that Shelmerdine is a woman based on gestures, the way he may phrase something, or the fact that he seems to greatly enjoy sweets, despite what his appearance suggests. I think this is a great example of Woolf’s intentional inclusion of things that bring two people together as character. These are things about Shelmerdine that mean absolutely nothing to the heteronormative tradition, but they are intended to be traits that represent Shelmerdine’s character, which is both masculine and feminine. This is also a very intentional move by Woolf to represent Harold Nicolson’s queerness, a very important part of why he and Sackville-West could love each other the way that they did. They kept each other safe from the harsh eye of the oppressive spirit of their age.

Shelmerdine says things “sheepishly,” and enjoys “great spoonfuls of strawberry jam,” each seeming to code as feminine traits. In Chapter One, we discussed the evolution, in line with
the progression of the story, of Orlando as he changes from man to woman and then, as someone who presents feminine but is also a man, to a more perfect form of androgyny. In this moment, as Orlando finds a man (who is also a woman), she has found someone who is as close to being the same as her, or understanding and appreciating her as Nicolson did Sackville-West, as is likely to be possible. The fact that Orlando is a man, but she is also a woman, can be taken to mean that she is androgynous. The fact that Shelmerdine is a woman, but he is also a man, means that he, too, is androgynous; he is just like her. Together, Orlando and Shelmerdine are a form of perfect androgyny; man and woman (woman and man) working together and balancing each other perfectly.

From there, Orlando and Shelmerdine fall into a happy and compassionate romance as they continue to talk, learning more and more what they apparently had already known about each other. They talk for hours and hours, sit together and read separate books, and take turns telling each other stories. After a story, Orlando would again ask Shelmerdine if it were possible that he’s not a woman, to which he would reply with a similarly gendered question in response. Woolf as biographer jumps in and explains for the reader: “For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman that they had to put the matter to the proof at once” (Orlando 189). While the conversation was riveting and full of sympathy and intelligence, it was just as easy for Orlando to slip away and have time to herself. Shelmerdine busied himself making models of Cape Horn, where his fascinations lie, while Orlando strolled through the woods and enjoyed time alone. These moments of “death” as Woolf writes them are perhaps establishing the ease with which these two exist while together as well as while they are apart (Orlando 190).
It is also worth returning to the observation of Orlando’s previous experience with temporary death and my interpretation that these deaths are a form of jumping into the “virtual,” a space in which, as Burke defines it, is a “past, or a plurality of pasts, indicating the different rhythms of existence” (Burke 133-34). So, as Orlando and Shelmerdine are complementary enough to each other that they can, in fact, exist while separated, this also permits Orlando to return to the virtual, albeit for shorter bursts.

To sum up, Woolf shows us that Shelmerdine and Orlando fall in love because they are two people who can truly know each other and still love each other. They each, in a way, have something to hide from the world (and society) at large, but when they are together, they can safely be themselves. More importantly, they complement each other perfectly because, as Susan Gubar writes in her introduction to the Harcourt edition of *A Room of One’s Own*, a marriage of the mind (and thus perhaps a marriage not *solely* based on assigned sex at birth or the desire to pass a mass sum of wealth onto one’s heir), is a form of transcendence:

>a marriage of true minds admitting no impediment, a consummation between complementary masculine and feminine features, the joining of a man and a woman in a taxi—the lyrical solution proposed in *A Room* looks like an ideal related to an effort throughout to transcend the partiality and competition of binary terms (like male and female) so as to arrive at liberating moments of resonant being available to men and women. (*A Room* lviii)

This kind of transcendence was there for both Woolf and Sackville-West, and I would argue, Lorraine Hansberry and Bettina Aptheker, and it provided for each of them, as Gubar writes, “liberating moments of resonant being available to men and women.” 74 This was true for Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, as Sackville-West knew of Harold Nicolson’s homosexual partnerships (just as he knew of hers) but loved him more for his understanding and kindness.

74 We discussed in Chapter One the heterosexual marriages of queer women, including Lorraine Hansberry and Bettina Aptheker.
rather than a sexual devotion to her. Woolf likely understood this and intentionally created this loving and accepting relationship between two incredible figures based on Sackville-West’s and her own marriages. Orlando and Shelmerdine even, essentially, finish each other’s sentences, speaking a sort of secret language that they are both fluent in:

For they knew each other so well that they could say anything they liked. … For it has come about, by the wise economy of nature, that our modern spirit can almost dispense with language; the commonest expressions do, since no expressions do; hence the most ordinary conversation is often the most poetic, and the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down. (Orlando 186)

This is an extremely romantic sentiment! Thinking about two people who communicate so well with each other that even the most ordinary conversation is poetic is a beautiful thing. The line at the end, “the most poetic is precisely that which cannot be written down,” could be a nod to the fear of censure for people writing about queer experiences, which was discussed in Chapter One.

With the ease of communication and the feelings of safety with one another, it seems Woolf is setting Shelmerdine and Orlando (and thus perhaps Sackville-West and her husband) up for a truly queerly fortunate life. Each of them has their passions that they pursue, as well as some gender nonconformance, but most importantly the time that they spend together is filled with ease and enjoyment. This, it could be argued, is what most people desire in their relationships today—the ease of enjoying a person’s company in a natural and happy way. I contend that Woolf understood that, for the time, both hers and Sackville-West’s relationships with their husbands were unique. If a spouse is an ideal match of wits and gendered experience, so too would a marriage to this person be.

As an example of this mutual appreciation for their marriages, in a letter to Sackville-West on November 16, 1925, Woolf writes, “I am very sorry for you—really—how I should hate Leonard to be in Persia! But then, in all of London, you and I alone like being married.” (Letters
III 221). Written in response to learning that Nicolson would be relocating to Persia for work for several years, this short passage beautifully captures the odd sense of peace within their own marriages, particularly when compared to stories they may have heard from others or seen for themselves. Lee describes this sentiment as a “complicated remark, part joke, part boast, part warning. The joke about the unconventionality of their circles, where any stable marriage looked eccentric, and the boast that within that context they had both evolved a form of marriage they could ‘like’” (Lee 483). So, perhaps Woolf wrote a novel-length love letter to Sackville-West, but wrapped up inside it was also the message that she ultimately wished that they remain in their respective marriages while continuing to see each other, as friends or other.

The Oak Tree

   Now that Orlando has found herself a male prospect, she finds herself feeling like a “real woman” at last. As if the spirit of the age is informing Orlando that she is on the correct (for her gender) path, Orlando receives the verdict on her various lawsuits while at home with Shelmerdine. Orlando’s previous marriage, when she was a man, to a Spanish woman named Rosina Pepita75, has officially been annulled. Additionally, Orlando’s sex is finally legally defined as female. This is the moment where Orlando, representing Sackville-West, is given everything she couldn’t have in her life as it was:

   Whereupon she appended her own signature beneath Lord Palmerston’s and entered from that moment into the undisturbed possession of her titles, her house, and her estate. … When the result of the lawsuit was made known (and rumour flew much faster than the telegraph which has supplanted it), the whole town was filled with rejoicings. (Orlando 187)

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75 A reference to Sackville-West’s grandmother, the Spanish dancer Pepita.
After Orlando’s legal victory (which took a few hundred years to achieve), she and Shelmerdine spend their last few days together before the wind inevitably changes and carries Shelmerdine away with it. On the fateful day in which the wind returns, Orlando and Shelmerdine know that he must leave and pursue his adventure, so they sprint to the Chapel and are married immediately. Outside, a storm rages as they kneel to take their vows:

And they knelt down, and now they were bright and now they were dark and as the light and shadow came flying helter skelter through the painted windows; and among the banging of innumerable doors and a sound like brass pots beating, the organ sounded…and now a bird was dashed against the pane, and now there was a clap of thunder, so that no one heard the word Obey spoken or saw, except as a golden flash, ring pass from hand to hand. (Orlando 187, emphasis mine)

Already destined to be an unusual marriage, as was Woolf’s and Sackville-West’s, the bond between Orlando and Shelmerdine being tightened seems to conjure a violent storm. This is perhaps one of the ways in which Woolf has memorialized her own marriage within the novel. Woolf’s wedding, much like Orlando’s, took place in the middle of a thunderstorm (Lee 317). Woolf pushes it further into untraditional waters by omitting the word Obey from the equation entirely, indicating that Orlando would never be forced to obey any man, woman, or spirit ever again. This is a lovely contrast to the last time Orlando thought of “serving” a man on the night she invited Alexander Pope home. At that time, Orlando was thankful of Pope, as he had helped to affirm her growing disillusionment with society and those she had been associating herself with before then. Following the walk home with Pope, Orlando would begin to hang out with intellectuals, rather than social elites (Orlando 151).

When Orlando became a woman, she found herself flung into a system of power that would not have affected her the same way if she were a man. Once a woman, her actions were under far more scrutiny and living her life meant adhering to a system put in place to maintain a dominance of heterosexuality. It is this system, the heteropatriarchy or habit of normative gender
as Burke calls it, that Woolf subverts in *Orlando*. By marrying Orlando to a man like Shelmerdine, she has both portrayed Sackville-West’s genuine love for her husband (despite their differing sexualities) as well as displayed an act of defiance by Orlando in marrying someone just as different as herself, and thus outside of the normative tradition. Once again, Woolf is working on two levels, employing both context and subtext. The context in Orlando’s marriage is just that–she gets married to a man that she seems to love. And within the context lies another motive: turning the concept of “traditional” marriage on its head. Unfortunately, Shelmerdine’s time with Orlando draws to a close as he must seek out his adventure across the world and leave Orlando to her work.

And so, Shelmerdine jumps onto his horse and gallops toward his next adventure.

Orlando ponders what it really means to be married, as it was more or less forced upon her by the “spirit of the age,” but what does marriage really matter?

[Orlando] was extremely anxious to be informed whether the steps she had taken in the matter of getting engaged to Shelmerdine and marrying him met with [the spirit of the age’s] approval. She was certainly feeling more herself. Her finger had not tingled once, or nothing to count, since that night on the moor [when she got engaged to Shelmerdine]. Yet, she could not deny that she had her doubts. (*Orlando* 195)

That she was feeling more herself is certainly a good start. Moving inside and pondering her new status, she finds herself sitting in front of her quill, ink, and paper. Could something as silly as spoken words, which no one heard anyway, and a ring changing hands represent something so important that the spirit forced it upon her? The last time she tried to write poetry, the spirit of the age swept in and caused great chaos in the form of blotted pages and broken quills. This time, the novel emphasizes that the spirit of the age does not stop Orlando from penning her poetry, indicated by the lack of any strange sensation anywhere in her body as she begins to write.
Orlando takes this in stride, but does find herself examining her experiences and continuing to ask herself what marriage really was:

She was married, true; but if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (Orlando 195)

Once again, Woolf weaves subtext into her narrative: Orlando is wondering if her marriage to Shelmerdine is real in the story, but Woolf is also asking these questions about marriage in her own way. When discussing Woolf’s marriage, and her lack of children, Lee takes her time approaching it from every angle. On Leonard’s opinion of a sexless marriage, she quotes Gerald Brenan: “So Leonard, though I should say a strongly sexed man, had to give up all idea of ever having any sort of sexual satisfaction. He told me that he was ready to do this ‘because she was a genius’” (Lee 326). Lee herself then steps in to say, “But the simple view of the Woolfs’ marriage as a-sexual and over-controlled, the product of child abuse and madness, with all her erotic feeling directed toward women and all his compensated for by work and pets, doesn’t incorporate, or is embarrassed by, the deep tenderness of those references to ‘my inviolable centre’” (Lee 326). While it was true that Leonard and Virginia Woolf did not have sex, likely because of her traumatic experiences in the past, and thus would not have children, it was indeed still marriage because they loved and supported each other as a priority. Perhaps this is another example of the memorialization of a happy and loving marriage in the novel.

In Sackville-West’s case, if her husband is regularly traveling across the world without her, is it marriage? If one still wished, more than anything (even bearing children), to write poetry, was it marriage? In Woolf’s case, I suggest, she could be asking questions about her own marriage: if one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, like Sackville-West, was it marriage? It is easy to suggest that Leonard Woolf would support her writing poetry, as well as
literature and critical pieces, as he helped her publish her work regularly, but what about the deep (and arguably physically passionate) love she felt for Sackville-West?

While married to Harold Nicolson and pursuing other women (often other married women), Sackville-West cultivated her theory of dual personality/gender in the journal she began in 1920. Because Sackville-West had freed herself from thinking about her own gender in terms of a binary, she was free to understand her marriage as being free from those restraints as well. Both Sackville-West and Woolf had uniquely engaging, productive, and respectful marriages—and neither Sackville-West nor Woolf had sex with their husbands on a regular basis. They loved them intimately, though, and each saw their husband as their partner in everything. Ultimately, Woolf’s employment of Sackville-West’s life, marriage, and theories of gender have set the stage for Woolf to explore these themes in her own way. Woolf examines the way that the clothes we wear demonstrate our internalized gender identity. Sackville-West and Woolf both seem to laugh in the face of normative gender roles, and Woolf’s toying with the representation of time passing and historically prominent figures and events in *Orlando* conveys the flexibility of the past in its use to redefine the present.
[I]f they ask me my identity
What can I say but
I am the androgyne
I am the living mind you fail to describe
in your dead language
the lost noun, the verb surviving
only in the infinitive
- Adrienne Rich, “The Stranger” (1972).\textsuperscript{77}

As I begin to conclude this thesis, I would like to examine a poem written by another writer who I believe is inspirational, and whose poetry has helped to guide me in my explorations of gender plurality, neutrality, and androgyny. Adrienne Rich’s poem “The Stranger” stuck with me for a long time after my first reading: I had to think about it for a while. The connection of a revolutionary gender identity to the concept of a person you do not know works to generate unease. On the other hand, the “verb surviving /only in the infinitive” summons the idea of an identity that contains pure, unbridled, potential. A gender identity that changes with the person or the day or the weather. An identity that is reactive, and exciting. An identity with the capability to express both masculine and feminine, regardless of normative constraints. I believe that a society without heteronormative constraints, particularly those against women, as imagined in this poem is also something Woolf worked to promote.

Even from the very beginning of thinking about Orlando, Woolf knew two things. First, Orlando would more or less be Sackville-West. Second, the character would experience a change in their biological sex. Maria DiBattista discusses this, quoting Woolf’s diary: “write a semi

mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time will be utterly obliterated” in her introduction to the novel (Orlando xxxvi). Megan Burke’s book When Time Warps would come out ninety-one years after the publication of Orlando, but it feels to me that they seek to achieve (or simply contemplate) similar things. Burke writes, in the introduction, that they seek to answer questions of “how particular structures of time constitute gendered subjectivities, how gendered subjects live time, or how the temporal existence of gendered subjects is changed through particular experiences” (Burke 8). Woolf sought to tell the story of a woman who, because of the nature of her sex and her lived experience, challenges and subverts the oppressive, habitual, societal norms that began to repress women most severely in the Victorian era. Burke’s book seeks to understand the lived experience of gender and its relation to other hierarchical systems of power like race and sexual assault. Sexual assault is, unfortunately, still very much a tool of gendered oppression. Whereas perceptions of chastity in the Victorian era may have temporarily held women back from pursuing their gender and sexual freedoms, today there is a very real threat to women’s safety that continues this sexist tradition: the myth of the stranger rape.

In today’s political climate, discussion of these forms of hierarchical dominance are key to understanding the mechanisms that continue to work, oiling the wheels of both settler-colonialism and capitalism, pitting humans against each other to the extent that we condemn each other based on things like skin color and gender. Burke’s discussion of the myth of the stranger rape and its weaponization by people like Donald Trump is disturbing and important. This myth is one that is told to frighten men and women into thinking that some sort of racialized savage is always out there, waiting in the bushes to steal women’s chastity or purity. Angela
Davis, in her landmark piece first presented at Florida State University in 1985, “We Do Not Consent,” said:

Rape bears a direct relationship to all of the existing power structures in a given society. This relationship is not a simple, mechanical one, but rather involves complex structures reflecting the interconnectedness of the race, gender, and class oppression that characterize the society. If we do not comprehend the nature of sexual violence as it is mediated by racial, class, and governmental violence and power, we cannot hope to develop strategies that will allow us eventually to purge our society of oppressive misogynist violence.\(^7^8\)

Woolf does not tackle this issue of violence against women in *Orlando*, but she lived it, and so have I. These traumas are extremely formative, and if we allow our truths to fall away, to remain unsaid, we are lost. As Burke has discussed an invisibility that eases the existence within a heteronormative society, the silencing of victims of sexual assault is also part of this invisibility. As I have discussed, there are movements beginning to happen that enable, and encourage, those who have experienced sexual assault to share their experiences with the world. This is, arguably, extremely difficult. It is also extremely important, in my opinion. This is why I shared my experience at the beginning of this thesis.

I believe Woolf did important work to develop the strategies that Davis calls for, particularly when it comes to an examination of the relationship that women have with other women. In Chapter One I discussed a theory of the spectrum of gender, and I argued that the binary is unrealistic in representation of identity for both men and women. Sackville-West was one of these women for whom a gender identity that could only have been one of two things was not adequate. Chapter One also discussed Sackville-West’s potential experience of gender dysphoria. In response to Sackville-West’s masculine desires, Woolf made her a man. Woolf used

\(^{78}\) Davis, Angela *Women, Culture, Politics* (1990) p. 47.
biography with intentionality to explore a gender fluid woman whom she loved, and she seemed to have a good time doing it.

Chapter Two began with an examination of the art of Drag. So much of Orlando’s experiences in the novel revolves around what they are wearing at any given time as either sex. When she is a woman, she prefers to dress for comfort and often changes her garb to fit the activity she is enjoying. Woolf said that clothes offer us a change in perspective, and RuPaul said that clothes can “both start a revolution” and allow you to “be whoever the hell you want to be.” Orlando dared to wear pants in the Victorian era, when other women were wearing petticoats and crinolines to hide signs of pregnancy, and thus the fact that they had engaged in sexual activity before marriage. In response to this change in fashion for women, men like Addison declared that they didn’t like it, and believed women should be more concerned with the maintenance of their purity until their marriage. The spirit of the age flourishes in men like him, but fortunately the chainmail armor of the feminist toolkit grows stronger with each chain linked by those who seek to block the gendered machine from continuing to devour us all. I hope that I have contributed my own link to this armor, and I look forward to many more opportunities to do so as well.

This thesis examined Orlando’s questioning of normative gender roles, such as marriage and gender identity, and has also placed the novel under a temporal feminist lens. In future endeavors, I would be pleased to be able to dig deeper into Burke’s ideas about temporality and particularly the concept of the virtual in relation to the novel. I would more actively pursue the threads of time in Orlando, searching for indicators of just how malleable Woolf intended time to be in her novel. Additionally, I would love to spend more time visiting the humor in the novel. The wit in Woolf’s work is charming and sharp. It often hides between sentences, demanding
that we slow down when we read and pay very close attention to the words she so intentionally chooses. I believe that the humor found in *Orlando* and *A Room of One’s Own* are particularly interesting portrayals of this aspect of Woolf’s writing.
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