

The Other Side of the Looking Glass: Women's Fantasy Writing and Woolf's *Orlando*

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Abstract

In "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side" (*This Sex Which is Not One*, Luce Irigaray's Alice inhabits a psychic space beyond the screen of patriarchal representations. Where Lewis Carroll's Alice finds things precisely inverted in her specular kingdom, Irigaray's Alice finds them in a perpetual process of displacement. Women's fantasy fictions of this century can be read as paradigmatic of the experience of otherness, of writing from within structures of representation in which, as Irigaray's Alice puts it, women are "more than half absent . . . on the other side". Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* exploits fantasy elements for this very purpose, to disrupt androcentric narratives, particularly those of history and biography. It demonstrates the strategy of masquerade or mimicry and the way in which this can, as Irigaray suggests, both expose and explode the reality of women's subordination within patriarchal discourse.

Περίληψη

Στη μελέτη της Luce Irigaray "The Looking Glass, from the Other Side" (*This Sex Which is Not One*), η Αλίκη καταλαμβάνει ένα ψυχικό χώρο πέρα από το σκηνικό των πατριαρχικών αναπαραστάσεων. Ενώ η Αλίκη του Lewis Carroll βρίσκει τα πράγματα αντεστραμμένα στο κατοπτριζόμενο βασίλειο, η Αλίκη της Irigaray τα βρίσκει σε μια συνεχή διαδικασία μετατόπισης. Ο κόσμος της γυναικείας μυθιστοριογραφίας του φανταστικού στον αιώνα μας μπορεί να διαβαστεί ως παράδειγμα της εμπειρίας του "άλλου", της γραφής από μέσα από τις ίδιες τις δομές της αναπαράστασης, στην οποία, όπως θέτει το θέμα η Αλίκη της Irigaray, οι γυναίκες είναι "περισσότερο από το ήμισυ απύσες . . . στην άλλη όψη". Ο *Orlando* της Virginia Woolf εκμεταλλεύεται τα στοιχεία του φανταστικού γι' αυτό το συγκεκριμένο λόγο, για να παρεμποδίσει τους ανδροκεντρικούς αφηγηματικούς τρόπους, συγκεκριμένα αυτούς της Ιστορίας και της βιογραφίας. Επιδεικνύει έτσι μια τεχνική μασκαρέματος ή μίμησης και τον τρόπο με τον οποίο αυτό μπορεί, όπως εισηγείται η Irigaray, να αποκαλύψει και να ανατινάξει την πραγματικότητα της υπόταξης της γυναίκας από μέσα από τον Πατριαρχικό Λόγο.

Luce Irigaray has by now become a familiar name in contemporary feminist studies, especially in her exposition of female discourse, what she calls *parler-femme* (speaking [as] woman). I want to look at her work in a slightly different context, that of women's fantasy fictions. The first and seldom-discussed chapter of *Ce sexe qui n'en est pas un* (*This Sex Which is Not One*) is a strange, lyrical piece, a philosophical treatise disrupted by cryptic narrative fragments. Its configurations, provide valuable insight into women's fantasies.

In its title, "The Looking Glass , from the Other Side", the piece announces both its indebtedness to Lewis Carroll's fantastic tale and its divergence from it. Carroll's interest is indicated in his title: *Through the Looking Glass, And What Alice Found There*, the process of discovery being at issue. With Irigaray's Alice, on the other hand, the emphasis is on her inability to articulate what lies on the other side and the opacity of the looking glass. Her quest is for a means of articulating the sensation of being a woman in a psychic and discursive space which cannot reflect her. Where Carroll's Alice finds things neatly inverted in her specular kingdom, Irigaray's Alice finds herself in a position, as she puts it, "Behind the screen of [and consequently beyond] representation" (*This Sex* 9).

Carroll's Alice soon discovers that in Looking-glass House, things are "just the same as our drawing-room, only ... the other way" (Carroll 146); what are hills for Alice are valleys for the Red Queen (Carroll 165). Like Tweedledum and Tweedledee, each side of the opposition depends on the stability of its contrary. In Irigaray's text, on the other hand, there is only one side: what is reflected in and by patriarchal discourse. The "other" side (as woman is other to the one) is indefinable—for "How can anyone measure or define, in truth, what is kept behind the plane of projections?" (*This Sex* 18) where "the limits of properties ... are, all lost, without their familiar reference points" (*This Sex* 10). The objects of representation in this tale are singled out and held up for display, often within citation marks—the lighter, the cap, the glasses—only to be displaced, both literally and figuratively, within the perpetually shifting register of Alice's consciousness. Her "violet, violated eyes" penetrate behind the glass to record its "blur of deformation" (*This Sex* 10).

In her earlier work, especially *Spéculum de l'autre femme* (*Speculum of the Other Woman*), Irigaray had called for the “déconcertation” (disconcerting or disruption) of the language and logic of the hegemonic culture (*Spéculum* 178). In *Ce Sexe*, especially in “The Looking Glass from the Other Side”, we get an enactment of this very process, a playing out of the unrepresentability of the other side (Burke 289). Although deeply indebted to Derrida here (as well as to Lacan, from whose *École freudienne* she had been expelled after the publication of *Spéculum*), Irigaray’s focus on woman’s subject position in discourse put her in a dissident relation to her “masters”. Lewis Carroll’s Alice, cited by Irigaray in her epigraph, asks “who am I?” (*This Sex* 9), and for Irigaray this becomes a specifically gendered question. The Victorian Alice, of course, asks the question on entering the wood where things temporarily lose their names. For Irigaray, codes of representation are dismantled permanently and irrevocably as “characters” slide between one pronoun/name/identity and another. Alice (possibly a play on “A-Luce”, as Grosz suggests [173]) becomes Ann becomes “he” becomes Lucien becomes Leon, and so on. On *this* side of the mirror, Alice is man’s other, his mirror image, silenced by what Irigaray calls “his specular imprisonment” (*Spéculum* 170)¹ Alice asks:

How can I be distinguished from her? Only if I keep on pushing through to the other side. If I’m always beyond, because on this side of the screen of their projections, on this plane of their presentations, I can’t live. I’m stuck, paralyzed, by all those images, words, fantasies. Frozen (*This Sex* 17).

Beyond the mirror, as fleetingly attempted in Irigaray’s Alice narrative, lies the possibility of different discursive forms corresponding to Irigaray’s conception of the female imagination—in one interpreter’s words “plurality, non-linearity, fluid identity” (Whitford 54)—forms which, as contemporary readers of *écriture féminine* have learnt, requires new reading strategies. But with Irigaray, to a greater extent than Hélène Cixous, *parler-femme* is as much a matter of disrupting the masculine as it is of inscribing the feminine. As she writes in a later chapter of *Ce Sexe*, “The Power of Discourse and the Subordination of Woman”: “woman does not have access to language, except through recourse to ‘masculine’ systems of representation which disappropriate her” (*This Sex* 85). It is here that she elaborates her theory of

masquerade whereby women mime their subordination: "One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (*This Sex* 76). This, as an initial step, is one phase of her radical challenge to "phallocratism". For, "The issue is not one of elaborating a new theory of which woman would be the *subject* or the *object*, but of jamming the theoretical machinery itself" (*This Sex* 78).

From the "other side" of the mirror, then, the attempt is to deconstruct patriarchal practices—such as, for example, the "dichotomizing" (*This Sex* 79) of self and other which has relegated woman to the object position (and along with the self/other go the I/you, I/she, he/she oppositions as well). But in spite of Alice's immersion in the "underworld", she always faces the mirror, registering its control, remembering that "*she has no right to a public existence except in the protective custody of the name of Mister X*" (*This Sex* 22), "frozen", "paralyzed" (17) in her otherness.

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Deliberately to adopt the position of "otherness", even if it means what Irigaray terms an "Irreducible expropriation of desire" (16), places woman in special relation to the genre of fantasy, to which Irigaray points by her very appropriation of Lewis Carroll's text. Alice's particular qualities are emphasised from the beginning: "*She knows more than anyone about fabulous, fantastic, unbelievable things ...*" (12). Fantasy, as Rosemary Jackson points out in her book on the subject, resists the self/other distinction, often playing out the eruption of "otherness" into the carefully-guarded world of "reality" (Jackson 52-60). If realism as a literary genre purports to "hold up a mirror to nature", with the mirror as a transparent medium, fantasy on the contrary reflects the "underside" of reality, employing, in the words of one of its major contemporary exponents, "a system of imagery derived from subterranean areas behind everyday experience" (Carter 122).

From the time of Ellen Moers' section on the Female Gothic in *Literary Women* (1977), there has been an increasing amount of discussion about women's affinity for fantasy modes, both as producers and consumers.² Indeed the Gothic novel can be said to have gained hold in the late 18th century because of the rapid expansion of the readership of

novels to women (Sage 12). More recent feminist criticism is now beginning to look at some of the possible reasons for this affinity. Above all, there has been a challenge to the claim that romance reading, from 18th-century Gothic to Mills and Boon romances, is indicative either of women's "escapism" or their masochism (Kaplan 117-46).³ A recent article in *Signs* uses Freud's formulation of "repetition-compulsion" in his "The Uncanny" to analyse the image of the trapped, passive heroine and her attraction for the female reader. "The Gothic plot", writes Michelle Massé, is "not an escape from the real world but a repetition and exploration of the traumatic denial of identity found there." In the escape and inevitable capture of the heroine, particularly as embodied in the Ann Radcliffe model, Massé sees "Transgression, regression, repetition—the stuff of analysis itself and of the Gothic" (Massé 688 & 683). In repeating images of female repression over and over, she argues, female readers are attempting to gain mastery over it.

Massé's subject was 19th-century Gothic, from Ann Radcliffe's *The Mysteries of Udolpho* to Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*. What I think we notice when moving on to 20th-century fantasy fictions is that women writers, within a context of Modernist self-consciousness about their writerly practices, begin to foreground their position as subjects within masculine discourse. The experimental attempts of Woolf, Stein and Richardson to formulate a new female "style" are well known. In focusing next on Woolf's *Orlando*, however, I want to draw attention to the way it too engages in a process of repetition, repetition not simply of women's entrapment within rooms or castles or dungeons, but of their entrapment within patriarchal discourse, specifically within the narratives of biography and history which disinherit them. To masquerade as other, as we have seen in connection with Irigaray's Alice narrative, is to pass *through* the mirror of masculine representation so that it is not simply repeated, but (at least partially) dismantled. A recent essay on cultural ideology entitled "The Beauty System" argues that our perception of woman's place in our culture is dependent upon the distinction that if men are "real", women are "made up" (MacCannell et al 212). Women's fantasy fictions of this century, I want to argue, can be read as elaborations upon the very artifice of female subjectivity.

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To sum up our argument from Irigaray so far. Given their position outside masculine discourse, women have two options. One is to remain outside entirely (what she calls "elsewhere"), and thus communicate in incomprehensible babble. And the other is to remain inside (or perhaps on the "underside" of) masculine discourse and imitate it.

"To play with mimesis", Irigaray argues, is "for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it." "One must assume the feminine role deliberately", she continues, "Which means already to convert a form of subordination into an affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it" (*This Sex* 76). It is in these terms that mimicry takes on a specifically subversive role: "Is not the 'first' stake in mimesis that of re-producing (from) nature? Of giving it form in order to appropriate it for oneself?" (77)

Irigaray's theory of mimicry or masquerade is a useful one when examining all women's writing, but is particularly so with fantasy. If fantasy (by both men and women) works to release otherness, to articulate what Ursula Le Guin has called "The Language of the Night", then clearly women, by their identification as other, are in a special position to be able to mime this condition or language. Fantasy has been used by women, in other words, to play out or re-enact their relation to the discourse of the one. Judging from the number of women's fantasies which have emerged in the past two centuries, this masquerade has performed a vital function in women's attempt to situate themselves within patriarchal discourse.

Discourse, Irigaray argues, needs to be shaken "away from its mooring in the value of presence" (75). The challenge to the master narratives of Western discourse may itself have become part of a new cultural orthodoxy, but it has had, I think, a particular urgency for women as muted subjects. When reading the masquerade of women's writing we discover, as Toril Moi puts it, that "the feminine can... only be read in the blank spaces left between the signs and lines of her own mimicry" (Moi 140).

Fantasy is to do with apprehension, in both senses of the word, both unease and the act of perception (Jackson 49). Firstly, all fantasy evokes unease in its commitment to the breakdown of barriers between life and death, its unleashing of taboos of sexual behaviour, and its readiness to embody the "other". Women, as I have said, have not had a stake in the assertion of hegemonic definitions of reality, and are always in

a sense “in wonderland” (or “elsewhere”). Secondly, all fantasy, again, is about apprehension in the second sense, that of perception, in its movement towards a realm of non-signification. If realism focuses on what the mirror reflects, fantasy foregrounds the reflecting process, is always in a sense a meta-commentary, drawing attention to the fragility of our structures of representation. As Carter says, the style of fantasy “will tend to be ornate, unnatural—and thus operate against the perennial human desire to believe the world as fact.” “It retains”, she continues, “a singular moral function—that of provoking unease” (Carter 122). And thirdly, *women’s* fantasies evoke apprehension in a particular kind of way. As texts to be read “in the blank spaces left between the lines and signs” of a mimicked male discourse, they can only arouse unease in unsettling expectations as to their femininity. Apparently masculine structures of signification, they demand an extra receptivity to these interstices to be made sense of as women’s texts at all. (The extent to which many feminist readers continue to deplore women authors’ complicity with masculine structures of meaning or their failure to convey an explicitly feminist message is indicative of this unease.) Woolf’s *Orlando* is a prominent case of how this kind of unease can be aroused, as I want to argue now.

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Orlando (1928) is one of the most interesting paradigms of women’s fantasy fiction in the early decades of this century, not least for the ways in which it both invites yet challenges its very definition as fantasy. In strict terms, according, at least, to those laid down by Todorov, it fits the genre of “the marvelous” rather than “the fantastic”, for it leaves no ambiguity about whether its fantastic moments actually happened or not, as the truly fantastic must do (Todorov). There is (at least finally) no ambivalence about whether Orlando changes from a man into a woman: he does, and the sex change is even endorsed by the law. Nor is there any ambivalence about the “supernatural” time scheme, whereby Orlando lives, and remains youthful, from the late sixteenth to the early twentieth century.⁴ So it should, in these terms, be bracketed with other “marvelous” genres like fairy tales or science fiction where it is clear that we are dealing with “otherworldly” matters.

But in stark antithesis *Orlando* also purports, according to its subtitle, to be “A Biography”, and Woolf was explicit in

her intention to suggest the life of Vita Sackville-West (Bell II, 131). The first edition even contained photographs of Vita captioned "Orlando", an aspect which Arnold Bennett called "the oddest of all the book's oddities" (Bennett 232). Bennett was not the only contemporary reviewer to express unease about what it was they were supposed to be reading. The book shows "too little affection or respect for the reader", complained one; reviewers, complained another, "have not known quite how to take it" (Majumdar et al 229 & 234).

If fantasy cannot be biography, can it then be history? *Orlando* makes a claim for itself as a kind of history, judging from the paraphernalia of period detail used to authenticate the descriptions of these passing centuries, the sources of which are painstakingly acknowledged in the Preface with references to various archives. And on the face of it, the book is a conventional (indeed a disconcertingly conventional) historical survey in the grand patrician or heraldic manner: the endurance of country estates, royal courts, and "the arts", all interspersed with broad philosophical reflections and moral observations in the armchair manner of old-fashioned historical narrative. Here, it would seem, Virginia Woolf is at her most mimetic of or complicitous with the "master" narratives of history.

But the element of spoof or other intentions, sensed uneasily by most readers, leaves the historical narrative on shaky ground. For one thing, the book seems also to invite interpretation as a lesbian reading of history, whereby Orlando's change to a woman allows her to continue her passion for other women with less conspicuous impropriety.⁵ (In this respect, *Orlando* participates in a more general attempt to inscribe lesbian discourse into fiction in the early decades of the twentieth century; I am thinking here of names like Radclyffe Hall, Djuna Barnes, Colette, Gertrude Stein, Renée Vivien etc.)⁶ Elaine Showalter dealt with her unease about the book by dismissing it in 1977 as "tedious high camp" (Showalter 291). The lesbian emphasis, I think, is part of a more general aim which I see as Virginia Woolf's attempt to rehearse the whole question of gender in relation to discourse and in particular to foreground the patriarchal nature of biographical and historical codes of narrative. As masquerade of patriarchal practices *Orlando* certainly unsettles narrative expectations. But by its use of fantasy it also does more than this: the sex change provides access to "the other side" of representation. Through fantasy, in other words, the text takes upon itself a function similar to that of Irigaray's Alice narrative: that of jamming the discursive machinery and

thus exposing patriarchal biographical and historical practices for what they are.

As a woman in the 19th century, Orlando finds herself, of all the centuries she has lived in, least in sympathy with "the spirit of the age", above all for what the narrator calls its "evasions and concealments" (*Orlando* 161). As a child of the Victorian age herself, Virginia Woolf knew all about subterfuge. It became, in fact, a potent weapon in her writing, however much she resented it. One of her main writing strategies was a form of playfulness which is particularly evident in her work at this time, not only in *Orlando* of 1928 but also in *A Room of One's Own* the following year. Woolf referred to *Orlando* variously in her diary as "a joke", "a farce", and "an escapade", and as one critic points out, this playfulness in Woolf is more often than not a cover for rage (Minow-Pinkney 117),⁷ rage about the specifically female concerns that patriarchy deemed unmentionable.

Take, for example, the following passage at the beginning of the book. What occurs here seems to me characteristic of a particular ambivalence of effect which prevails throughout: a half-teasing investigation of a more-than-half-serious philosophical point. In this case, what has been raised is the whole question of representation, the relationship between an object and its representability in language. Orlando is writing a "Tragedy in Five Acts" which sounds, from its description, like straight Gothic in dramatic verse. "Vice, Crime, [and] Misery" are its subject. Its characters are "Kings and Queens of impossible territories" who have been "confounded" by "horrid plots". And as for the style, "there was never a word said as he [Orlando, the author] himself would have said it". In this context of "unreality", Orlando as author attempts a piece of mimetic realism.

He was describing, as all young poets are for ever describing, nature, and in order to match the shade of green precisely he looked (and here he showed more audacity than most) at the thing itself, which happened to be a laurel bush growing beneath the window. After that, of course, he could write no more. Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces. The shade of green Orlando now saw spoilt his rhyme and split his metre (*Orlando* 11-12).

The different elements of this passage seem to be pulling in all directions. First there is the slightly playful condescension of the narrator (“young poets”), one that is always lurking behind even the most seemingly sympathetic description of Orlando. Then there is the confusing mention of the “audacity” of the artist in looking at the object to be described. Surely this is a joke at the expense of writers who ignore “nature”? Woolf did, after all, accuse Charlotte Brontë’s portrait of Rochester of being “drawn in the dark” the following year (*A Room of One’s Own* 70). Or does it rather suggest the absurdity of the attempt to “match” nature “precisely” with words, as at least one critic has suggested (Roe 94). The rest of the passage certainly seems to endorse this interpretation, and this second reading can be reinforced by reference to Woolf’s other statements of scepticism about the “materialist” project of representing things accurately in words.⁸ (Here it could be speculated that Woolf was reacting against not only Arnold Bennett and other male Edwardian novelists, but also against her father Leslie Stephen as critic in his defence of Balzac, French realism and the privileging of “accuracy” as a fictional criterion.)⁹ And yet given the narrator’s gentle condescension, are Orlando’s musings to be taken seriously anyway? Woolf wrote in her *Diary* that one of her intentions in *Orlando* was that “[her] own lyric vein is to be satirised” (Roe 92). Such literary or philosophical enquiries as this one are surely characteristic of Woolf’s “lyric vein”. This reading would certainly seem to be endorsed by the end of the paragraph in which this passage occurs where Orlando, in despair at his attempt, “drops the pen, takes one’s cloak, strides out of the room, and catches one’s foot on a painted chest as one does so. For Orlando was a trifle clumsy” (12). Are the passions and preoccupations of this clumsy youth part of a serious discursive investigation?

The problem, I think, has to do with the narrator who hovers over Orlando’s mental processes. In the passage just quoted, the pronoun confusion is Woolf’s, not mine. “One”, that class arrogant word that Woolf often used to evade the personal emphasis, here substituted suddenly for “he”, suggests the narrator’s complicity with Orlando’s thoughts. But to sustain this complicity over the 230 pages of the book, particularly when the narrative verges on self-mockery throughout, proves something of a strain (to the narrator as well as to the reader).¹⁰ The effect is one of profound ambivalence, as if the narrative cannot decide between complicity with the patriarchal modes it mimes or ironic

distance from them. It is as if, we might say, *Orlando* is operating on both sides of the looking glass.

This playful ambivalence is at its most centrally problematic when it comes to the direct discussions of gender in *Orlando*. Here, it seems, the "evasions and concealments" were at their most imperative. On the face of it, the book would seem to be (and indeed has often been read as) a straightforward argument for androgyny (see Marder 110). Orlando's story, after all, is about the interchangeability of her/his experience as woman and man. "Different though the sexes are", it is argued, "they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place" (*Orlando* 133). Gender distinctions are only held up in order to be knocked down. So we get passages such as this, that work towards an ironic climax: "But Orlando was a woman—Lord Palmerston had just proved it. And when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman's whole existence" (*Orlando* 189).

Except, as we are soon told, Orlando the woman does not fit the mould. Such moments give Woolf the opportunity to indulge in the ironic play that is so characteristic of *A Room of One's Own*: "love—as the male novelists define it—and who, after all, speak with greater authority?—has nothing whatever to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity, or poetry" (*Orlando* 190)—and so, the reader is encouraged to retort, nothing to do with Orlando.

And yet, in the last resort, Orlando as a woman *does* stake all her hopes in love for a man (Shelmerdine), along with the traditional feminine concerns of motherhood (we see her at the end buying boys' boots in a department store).

And this leads to the other dominant argument, one which directly conflicts with the androgyny thesis, and which is summed up in this statement: "when we write of a woman ... the accent never falls where it does with a man" (*Orlando* 220). The cause of this difference seems to be social, or rather, as the narrator suggests, sartorial. "There is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them" (132); as Orlando discovers, dressed as a woman she is constituted in quite different ways than she had been as a man.

This, at least, is what the narrator calls "the view of some philosophers and wise ones" (133). Its detailed explication certainly gives it emphasis in the work. But once more, it is countered by another view, one which "we incline to", as the narrator puts it, in a characteristically evasive plural.

This is that “the difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath” (133). What these profound differences are, however, is not revealed, as the argument now returns to androgyny again, and we are back full circle. *Orlando*, I think, is playing out the central conflict in Virginia Woolf herself between her dedication to the ideal of androgyny and her consciousness of the specificity of women’s position as muted subjects in history, a conflict evident in *A Room of One’s Own* as well as in her criticism on fiction.

What is happening here is paradigmatic of *Orlando*’s discursive method as a whole. The hegemonic patriarchal line on this subject is that of the “profound” (i.e. essential) differences between the sexes, and *Orlando* mimes this (“on the whole we incline”, etc.). Yet the “machinery” of this is “jammed”, to use Irigaray’s words, by the two counter arguments: the sexual difference is not “profound” but rather a matter of clothes or cultural conditioning, and the related idea that “different though the sexes are, they intermix”, the idea of androgyny. Woolf’s masquerade as androcentric narrator (and I am coming on to discuss him next), what we could call the images of this side of the mirror, are destabilized by the images from the other side, and the effect is what Irigaray terms a “blur of deformation”.

To finish my discussion of *Orlando*, I want now to look at another passage, this time one which directly raises the question of the gender of the narrator. This is a key issue, as it is through his mediation (and a very opaque medium he is too) that the whole confusion arises. The book opened with unequivocal assertions of the masculinity of Orlando’s “biographer”,¹¹ and any doubt as to whether this may merely be a generic “he” is quickly dispelled by the authoritatively patriarchal tone of all his pronouncements. The passage I want to investigate comes about two thirds of the way through the book, after Orlando, as a woman, has been enjoying the company of the women prostitutes. At this point the narrator quotes the “proof” of various men (“Mr S.W., Mr T.R.”) that women “hold each other in the greatest aversion”. He then continues with the following one-sentence paragraph:

As that is not a question that can engage the attention of a sensible man, let us, who enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever, pass it over, and merely state that Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex, and leave it to

the gentlemen to prove, as they are very fond of doing, that this is impossible (*Orlando* 155).

Here again, there is a clash of interest of three different discourses. The sentence begins with the patriarchal, with the “sensible man” and the boundaries of his attention (which of course exclude female matters). Moving on, it seems that the relation between the “sensible man” and “us”, the biographer/historian/narrator is direct and one-to-one, except that as the sentence progresses at this point, a second strand of orientation takes over, that of the necessary androgyny of any writer (“let us, who enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever, pass it over”), with which position the narrator (“us”) is again directly linked. The rest of the sentence (from “and merely state ...” onwards) is clearly an alignment with a feminist position, that of the narrator of *A Room of One's Own* again, the narrator who can capitalise so playfully on the exposure of male arrogance, doing so here by the blunt confrontation of “facts” (*Orlando does* enjoy the company of women) with patriarchal opinion (it is “impossible” that she should).

If we look for clues as to the dominant emphasis of the sentence in its grammatical structure we find that the main clause, “let us... pass it over”, is of little help. Or is it? Perhaps this is the point, that to read *Orlando* is to “pass over” not only the patriarchal position (which must be exposed), but also alternatives or challenges to it, which cannot possibly (given patriarchy) be given full endorsement. This, the passing over, is the site of female discourse and constitutes, in my view, Woolf's particular contribution to the inscription of the female subject into fiction.

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As the subject of fantasy, *Orlando* may transgress temporal and gender boundaries, but in the transgression he/she frustrates expectation of a rewrit[ing of] history”, a project that Woolf called for (even if it was “ambitious beyond my daring”) in *A Room of One's Own* (44-45). Inserting women into history is not a matter of a fantasy reversal in the Lewis Carroll manner. As Irigaray puts it, “It is not a matter of toppling that [phallographic] order so as to replace it—that amounts to the same thing in the end—but of disrupting and modifying it, starting from an ‘outside’ that is exempt, in part, from phallographic law” (*This Sex* 68).

The genre of fantasy for Woolf does, however, provide the atmosphere of otherness (an "outside") which admits the disruption and modification of phallographic law. Perhaps this is what the narrator of *Orlando* means when he says that "Life is a dream. 'Tis waking that kills us" (143).

One last aspect of *Orlando* which needs mentioning is Orlando's writing of the poem, which runs concurrently with his/her life for over three centuries. "The Oak Tree: A Poem" never actually gets written, for, "as he scratched out as many lines as he wrote in, the sum of them was often, at the end of the year, rather less than at the beginning, and it looked as if in the process of writing the poem would be completely unwritten" (79).

The poem survives the most hazardous of Orlando's experiences—the sacking of his Embassy in Constantinople, the time with the gypsies—and becomes not only a record of but synonymous with her/his life (as Woolf clearly intended to suggest with the opening and closing scenes of the book depicting Orlando lying on the roots of the old oak tree on the estate). By the end, after "the straits she had been in for writing-paper when with the gypsies [which] had forced her to over-score the margins and cross the lines ... the manuscript looked like a piece of darning most conscientiously carried out" (166).

This piece of darning, this "unwritten" text can, I think, be read as an image of *Orlando* itself, of its endlessly over-scored discourses and finally, its "unwritten" female sub-text. To put it another way we could say that, in attempting to rewrite history, all the woman writer can do is jam the machinery. Incursions into the other side, into alternative histories, must inevitably be "immeasurable" or "indefinable", to use Irigaray's terms again, when she writes: "*How can anyone measure or define, in truth, what is kept behind the plane of projections?*" (*This Sex* 18)

Notes

¹ For an analysis of Irigaray's exploitation of the Latin word "speculum" meaning "mirror" (from *specere*, to look), see Moi 130.

² This is not to say that the contrary has not been argued. Leslie Fiedler, in *Love and Death in the American Novel*

(1962), reads Gothic fiction as an enactment of male desire and anxiety. For a feminist critique of Fiedler's Gothic, see Restuccia, 245-66.

³ Kaplan writes of "the stigmatizing moralism that taints most accounts of romantic fantasy and gender, representing romance as a 'social disease' that affects the weaker constitution of the female psyche" (Kaplan 125).

⁴ A contemporary reviewer, Conrad Aiken, compared *Orlando* with *Alice in Wonderland* as fantasies, calling the former "a kind of inspired dream" (Aiken 235). According to Todorov, *Alice* would fit the genre of the fantastic while *Orlando* would not.

⁵ See, for example, the following passage in Ch. 4: "as all Orlando's loves [as a man] had been women, now [as a woman], 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" (*Orlando* 113).

⁶ For a fuller exploration of lesbian discourse at the beginning of the century, see Benstock. Benstock cites from Susan Gubar's "Sapphistries" where it is argued that lesbian women writers "replac[ed] the schizophrenic doubling Sandra Gilbert and I have traced throughout Victorian women's literature with euphoric coupling [between women] in which the other is bound to the self as a lover" (455 n.2).

⁷ The phrases from Woolf's *A Writer's Diary* are cited in Minow-Pinkney 117. The whole of Minow-Pinkney's chapter on *Orlando* (117-151) is an excellent discussion of the significance of play in Woolf's work.

⁸ The most well-known example is her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" which was read as a paper in Cambridge in May, 1924.

⁹ For Leslie Stephen's interest in "realism", see Parkin-Gounelas 167-68 n.35.

¹⁰ Woolf wrote in her *Diary* that though *Orlando* was begun "as a joke", it became "rather too long for my liking. It may fall between stools, be too long for a joke, and too frivolous for a serious book" (Minow-Pinkney 118).

¹¹ See the early description of *Orlando*: "Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet" (*Orlando* 10).

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