

Fashioning Orlando: Fantastic Irony and Gender Performativity in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's novel, *Orlando*, offers a bold vision of the powerful effects of taking control of one's fashion and, quite literally, *trans*-gendering one's identity. The novel follows Woolf's title character through a series of shifts in gender, time, and personal identity so fluidly. The story is part fantasy, part social critique, and part ironic positivity and hope for the future. As the character Orlando moves effortlessly from male to female to androgyny and back again, stopping only where s/he chooses, and through several centuries of time and across Europe and through Asia Minor (and back again), the reader is given a sense of the power of fashioning oneself. This can and should be read, I argue, in at least two senses: in the first place, Orlando dons and doffs and changes clothing to suit his/her needs and desires for different gender identities. In the second place, we can read "fashioning" in the constructive sense: Orlando fashions Orlando as a carpenter fashions a table. By taking control of this double sense of fashioning, *Orlando* offers a powerful statement, if only through the irony of the impossibility of the whole thing, on the effect of self-agency through gender performativity and deliberate creative fashioning. Since changing one's gender identity through fashioning is impossible in real life, Woolf's text must be seen as ironic, offering a vision of life exactly opposite of reality, but a vision that is nevertheless hopeful because at least here, in her fiction, such a life is possible.

Introduction

In one of Woolf's most effective social commentaries, her title character in *Orlando* uses transgendered fashion to manipulate and subvert the patriarchal systems of gender. Woolf creates a world of fantasy where people can live without growing old (if that is what they want) or can change from man to woman with the change of their clothing, but the fantasy is not meant to be purely imaginative or comic (though it certainly is both). Rather, Woolf's fantastic world creates an opportunity for characters to transcend traditional patriarchal social and corporeal limitations and for Woolf to make an important, if ironic, comment on the reality of our own detrimentally restrictive limitations. The ease with which Orlando creates pathways between and moves among transgendered (and transsexual) identities, with only a deliberate use of fashion and clothing, is something that strikes the modern reader as a comedic fantasy, something that could not feasibly happen within the laws of nature. But by creating such a scenario, where otherwise farcical actions go unquestioned and are taken to be the normal course of events by the characters in the novel, Woolf points out the contrast between Orlando's world of fantasy and our own world of reality. Woolf uses this contrast to ironize fashion's efficacy for transgendering one's identity and to suggest that real social protocols of gender, instead of being whimsical and mutable, may be oppressively limiting.

Her social commentary is deeply ironic. Woolf presents a character who understands identity and gender to be performative in contemporary feminist philosopher Judith Butler's sense, that is, that "the body is not a self-identical or merely factic materiality...but a continual incessant *materializing* of possibilities" (Butler, 1997, 404). One of Butler's most prominent concerns in her work on our philosophical understanding of the body is the way in which we understand its identity and its connection to our own sex and gender identities. The body, for Butler, is not linked directly or biologically to a gender, nor is it a static or pure being, impervious to interactions with the world. One's identity comes about by virtue of the specific performances one gives in the world, performances which are directed by their relation to the protocols of gender. Butler says, "One is not simply a body, but, in some very key sense, one does one's body" (404). For Butler, one's identity is directly tied to one's social performances as they are viewed and interpreted by others and "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (405). One's actions, then, are always subject to the coercion inherent in our society's expectations of conformity.

But Woolf's character, Orlando, sees no need to be coerced into performing the limited protocols of gender that, as Butler suggests, his sex

demands. Instead, he takes those social aspects of himself that he is in control of, his appearance and his performances, and manipulates them to his various desirable ends. This is the idea that had been growing in Woolf's head for some time before the writing of *Orlando*. Lisa Cohen points out in her article, "Frock Consciousness: Virginia Woolf, the Open Secret, and the Language of Fashion" that Woolf had been mentioning in her journal the importance of clothing to what she called our "states of consciousness" (1). Woolf had become convinced that clothing had a significant effect on not only how we are received, but how we perceive ourselves. Though she does not go so far here in her early journal entries on the topic, Woolf would eventually show, mostly through *Orlando* itself, that clothing goes beyond influencing perception of identity and reaches as far as *constituting* identity. Our clothing, Woolf thinks, makes us visible, not just in a strictly visual sense, but in the sense that clothing allows others to see us as we present ourselves, and it allows us to create ourselves and recreate ourselves in new ways. In the 1920s this was radical and Woolf was on to a line of thinking that would allow her to expose the trappings of gender models in ways that no previous writer had language for.

A close reading of Orlando's deliberate control of fashion, and his ability to utilize it in his social performances of gender, contributes to the novel's ironic take on gender coercion. Four scenes feature prominently in this regard, each working didactically to teach Orlando some aspect of the power clothing has in gender performances. These four scenes culminate in a fifth scene where Orlando takes firm control over his gendered fashion and, by using it to instruct her performances, is able to coalesce her actions into whichever gender protocol she chooses and thereby become that gender, if only at that time.

In each of the five scenes, we find both fashion and performance. In the novel's opening sequence, Orlando learns of the efficacy of clothing in performing his part. When we meet Orlando, he is a sixteen-year-old boy in love with poetry and solitude. He "naturally loved solitary places, vast views, and to feel himself for ever and ever and ever alone" (Woolf 18). His temperament was that of a dilettante, one more interested in the natural world than in politics or social conventions. Orlando is sensitive to his natural environment and the beauty it presents. "Sights disturbed him, like that of his mother, a very beautiful lady in green walking out to feed the peacocks with Twitchett...sights exalted him-the birds and the trees; and made him in love with death-the evening sky, the homing rooks" (16). But amid his solitary pondering, Orlando is brought back to the reality of his social station, that he is in fact a male descendant of nobility and must play this part, by the arrival of Queen Elizabeth at his family's house. Orlando, having been playing the part

of free-spirited and passionate poet, rushes home to change his clothes, and thereby his outward identity, and works himself into the character of a young nobleman. Tossing off his more casual clothing, Orlando “thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias,” all clothing typically meant to indicate a man of nobility (20-1). Orlando selects this fashion deliberately as it signifies to those who observe him (those who can “read” his fashion) that its wearer is a particular type of person, a man of nobility in this case. That is to say, the observers of his fashion are able to extract meaning from each article they see, as each is a sign that the wearer is a follower of a certain behavioristic protocol associated with that fashion.

In the Elizabethan age, breeches would certainly signify maleness as it was not yet acceptable for women to wear pants in formal settings. The crimson coloring of the breeches would signify to Elizabethans that the wearer was not only of the nobility, but specifically localized within a handful of ranks. Queen Elizabeth herself was responsible for compartmentalizing fashions with protocols with her strict revisions of England’s Sumptuary Laws. These made clear to each citizen the rules for who was allowed to wear which type of clothing and in which colors. Such a delineation of appropriate fashion in terms of class effectively associates types of clothing with social and political rank and the Queen’s enforcement of the code would have created for all of England the same associations. Since one’s fashion is often one’s most immediate discernable characteristic, an observer would expect a certain rank to follow from an observed fashion, and from that, a certain protocol of behavior. One’s fashion, then, is tied up in one’s own self-description and the way one is experienced by others. In practice, one comes to learn, as Orlando did under Queen Elizabeth, that one’s fashion and self-description figure prominently in determining one’s identity, and that, by degrees, a conscious manipulation of fashion is effectively the same as a manipulation of identity.

Kim Worthington, in her book, *Self as Narrative*, builds on Butler’s foundational questions about the relationship between body and sex and gender. For Worthington, like Butler, the self is not an essential structure that simply *is* within our bodies, adequately accounting for who we are, but is rather an ongoing narrative, an inner text, written in part by all who come into contact with it. She says, “I suggest that the construction of a subject’s sense of selfhood should be understood as a creative narrative process achieved within a plurality of intersubjective communicative protocols” (Worthington 13). Worthington sees identity and subjecthood rooted in the creative processes of communication, memory, and performance. We are not static beings—never simply Orlando. The name “Orlando,” or any for that matter, will

never signify only one unchanging thing. We are what we appear to be. We are what we remember ourselves being. We are what others see. We are always all of these.

This notion of self, conceived as an “incessant materializing of possibilities,” according to Butler, and one written collaboratively within a plurality of widely known social protocols for Worthington, allows for a subject to exist *without* an essential, permanent “core.” One can, and must, exist only as that personal narrative with the world develops. This notion is key in order to understand the effects Orlando’s fashion has on his identity, and therefore is key in understanding the important impact Woolf’s fiction has had on our contemporary ability to see and to experience this life without an essence of gender or sex. Our identity, such as it can be referenced by that singular noun-identity-is the entirety of the narrative of our lives. Worthington opens the door to nearly limitless possibilities, but also provides the boundaries inherent in any forms of intersubjective communication. We cannot be *anything*, she says, but are set free from the limitations of an “identity” that does not recognize that “identity” indicates the ongoing narrative being told-by ourselves and by others-about us.

One’s identity would also, it would seem, according to this model be at the mercy of one’s immediate society. If one’s narrative develops in Elizabethan England in the 16th century, one’s interactions with the world would be decidedly different than if it developed under Victoria’s rule. The story of our personal narrative constitutes our identities to others as they read and interpret the actions of our lives. If we project different facades, by dissembling our appearances, our interactions with others, and thus our narrative, changes dramatically. As the actions we perform approach with fidelity, particular and intersubjective protocols of behavior, gender for example, or class, or rank, we say with some conviction that one is a “such-and-such.” Or when we describe ourselves, as Denise Riley says, “I project myself as being a such-and-such, I tacitly envisage myself participating in the wider social scene through some new identity category” (Riley 13). For Riley, descriptive words and our own self narratives have a constitutive power. As we describe ourselves, that is who we are. If we describe ourselves differently than we usually do, or in constantly different ways, we then take control, to some degree, over our own identities. “Self-descriptions,” Riley says, “are indeed costumes” and can be worn deliberately as if they were clothing (151). As Orlando chooses to wear shoes with rosettes as big as double dahlias, or shoes with no rosettes, or even no shoes at all, he chooses to write his own narrative of identity as he continually does his body differently.

What Orlando learns in this first scene is how much his clothing becomes

a part of his social performance and alters his personal narrative of identity. The decisions he makes to wear one fashion over another, or to stay true to his social station, or not, determine his identity to himself and to others. The rewards to him are obvious, as the Queen, reading him as a young nobleman of great promise, bestows upon him gifts befitting a man of his station and political status. As he appears in front of her again, sometime later, clothed in “the very image of a noble gentleman,” she “name[s] him her Treasurer and Steward” (25). He would also ride at her carriage door as she drove in state and found himself recalled from the Polish Wars before he fought a single day. All the while, when Orlando was away from the Queen’s service, and more importantly away from her observing eye, he would return to an Orlando that bears little resemblance to the young nobleman the Queen saw. Outside of her service he had written “twenty tragedies and a dozen histories and a score of sonnets,” (24) but in her presence, he dressed the part his station demanded, and she “read him like a page” (25).

Time progresses at an unnaturally quick pace in *Orlando* and we soon find our title character under the rule of King James having aged only a few months for each decade that passed. In the ice-skating scene on the frozen Thames, Orlando has a slightly different experience with the effects of clothing on perception and identity. This time, he adds to his understanding of fashion its effects on gender identity. Orlando sees a skater of ambiguous gender who “filled him with the highest curiosity” (37). He knows only that the skater has come from the pavilion of the Muscovite Embassy, and “whether [it is a] boy’s or woman’s” figure, he knows not, “for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex” (37). Here, unlike Orlando’s experience with Queen Elizabeth, a sexual element is added which makes Orlando, and the reader, aware that there is more to this skater’s identity than social status or rank. And this element of identity, unlike Orlando’s nobility, cannot be determined through clothing alone. The unidentified skater was “dressed entirely in oyster-colored velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-colored fur,” but these observations told Orlando nothing of the skater’s gender. They “were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person” (37). With only the skater’s clothing, which communicated status but not gender, and natural physical features, “legs, hands, carriage,” Orlando “was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question” (37). It was not until the first moment of gender performance that Orlando could determine with any certainty the skater’s gender. Only when the skater was “finally coming to a stop and sweeping a curtsy with the utmost grace to the King,” was Orlando able to tell that “she was a woman” (38). Until Orlando

saw the curtsy, he had no way of knowing whether the skater was a man or woman, but immediately upon her performance of the feminine protocol, she became gendered.

Orlando's identifying the skater's gender based solely on her performance of gendered actions is in line with Shannon Sullivan's transactional notion of selfhood. Like Worthington, Sullivan sees self-identity arising from one's reciprocal, "co-constitutive" relationship with others, and gender, as a substratum of a broader identity, would work the same way. As reciprocity, though, one's identity is a product of a back-and-forth relationship with an "other," typically, one's society, but in Orlando's case, out on the frozen Thames, it was between Orlando and Sasha. According to Sullivan, as one performs a certain behavioral protocol, gender for example, one would be read by others as that gender, then perceive oneself back again as that gender, and thus be caught up in what Sullivan calls a "nonviciously circular" process (Sullivan 1).

This is not the only time Woolf put two key characters together in a telling transaction. In a more literal sense Clarissa, the title character in Woolf's popular novel, *Mrs. Dalloway*, finds herself in a transaction with a shopworker as she attempts to purchase flowers. The transaction is the opening scene—indeed the opening line—of a novel that in so many ways addresses conventions of class, clothing, and identity and the tension Clarissa Dalloway feels in this transaction is a telling example of Sullivan's nonviciously circular process. The original version of this scene, which Mark Gaipa describes in his article, "Accessorizing Clarissa: How Virginia Woolf Changes the Clothes and the Character of Her Lady of Fashion," has Clarissa buying gloves, not flowers, and at one point during the transaction Clarissa imagines identifying more closely with her counterpart across the counter. But Gaipa shows that the very thing that has set them in opposition—one as the seller and one as the buyer—has also established the impasse from one to the other. "Clarissa's gloves are an 'insignia of leisure' that advertise the fact that their wearer 'consumes without producing,' and thus stands very much on one side only of the shop counter" (29). The shopkeeper sees Clarissa as the slender-handed madame who buys the costumes of the rich; Clarissa, in her turn, sees herself in the same way. And Woolf does not present this as a mere matter-of-fact, as an observation without judgment. Gaipa describes Woolf's treatment as limiting, isolating, and essentially opposite of what Clarissa's outer appearance would suggest about her own abilities: "When worn, Clarissa's gloves also limit her ability to feel the physical world immediately about her, rendering her, like Woolf, 'untouched.'" But they also symbolically insulate Clarissa within her

class universe, marking her distance (despite her errand of happiness) from the world or labor" (29).

The only way this process is not vicious, as Sullivan suggests, is that there is at least a possibility of freeing oneself from it. One's performance does not necessarily beget a concrete identity. But there is some danger. As this system becomes circuitous and ingrained in the actions of everyday life, it so easily slips into the background of one's thoughts and becomes a standard practice. Our own self-description becomes that of the cycle. "I'm steeped in the world's words already," says Riley, I "am well marinated. If there's an expectation that only my 'interiority' can bestow integrity on my self-portrayal, then in practice, this someone I painstakingly describe as me may resemble more of a Not-Me" (Riley 33-4). As with Orlando's dressing as the very image of a noble gentleman, Sasha's curtsying in front of the King is not necessarily representative of the "me" she would identify with at other times. But at that time, on the frozen Thames, in front of King James, Sasha was as much a woman as her actions were consistent with those of women. In acting like a woman, by performing the accepted protocols of gendered behavior, one becomes a woman, if only at that moment.

In this way, like identity for Worthington, gender itself is a performative action for Butler. It is a specific, recognizable interpretation of a set of actions. "In this sense," Butler says, "*gender* is not a noun, but neither is it a set of free-floating attributes" (Butler, 1990, 33). Rather, gender describes the sets of principle actions by which our own actions are compared (and judged). As our actions change, so does our relation to gender protocols. Butler suggests "it is possible to speak of a 'man' with a masculine attribute and...a 'man' with a feminine attribute, whatever that is, but still to maintain the integrity of the gender" (Butler, 1990, 32). It is our actions, in part, that constitute the gender we are to be called. And it is our immediate society that judges of their relation to protocols, and that coerces, by threat of punishment, a high fidelity of capitulation.

Orlando learns with this experience that clothes alone are not the only way to fashion a performance. His crimson breeches and waistcoat of taffeta were enough to make his performance of an Elizabethan nobleman effective, but Sasha's Russian trousers and loose tunic are symbols only of her Russianness, and of her apparent rank. They alone do not communicate to Orlando other important aspects of her identity. Sasha's identity is fashioned completely when her actions capitulate to a recognizable protocol of gender. To his understanding of clothing's effects on one's identity, Orlando adds the importance of one's actions, specifically actions that are readable as manifestations of one performative protocol or another. Each behavior, then, is a way

of doing one's body, of participating in an intersubjective protocol by which one transacts with one's immediate society. One's identity, as Orlando sees, is fashioned in several ways. His relationship with Queen Elizabeth showed him the efficacy of deliberate dressing to masquerade as whomever he wants or needs to be, and his experience on the ice with Sasha added to this understanding the additional effects of deliberate, prescribed bodily actions. Both of these Orlando will ultimately develop into an effective solution to what Sullivan calls the 'nonvicious cycle' of transactional identity.

A curious thing happens to Orlando next. When, during his time as Ambassador in Constantinople, Orlando slips into a deep sleep and awakes as a woman, we find his identity has not changed. "Orlando had become a woman-there is no denying it," our narrator tells us, "but in every other respect Orlando remained precisely as he had been" (138). Orlando himself adjusted to the change quickly and without perturbation. His (now her, really) life seemed largely the same as it had been: her memory "went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle," and the change of sex, "though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (138). Orlando's transsexualization in itself changed neither her fashion nor her actions. If she chose to dress herself in the same masculine fashion in which she dressed before, and otherwise continued to adhere to her previous protocols of behavior, Orlando would have maintained her identity, despite her change of sex. Her circuitous transactions with her society would have gone on and she could have continued to do her body in the very same ways. As it happened, though, Orlando left; left Constantinople, left her masculine transactional relationships, and left gender altogether for some time.

Orlando then "dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex," and, with the ability to go whichever direction she wanted, she "was forced to consider her position" (139). For the time being Orlando chooses nothing. She stays among the gypsies, dressed in clothing of ambiguous gender. Nor do her actions do much to signify her gender. For some time Orlando is truly intersexual, without any identifying symbol or characteristic to locate her gender identity or her social station. This scene in the novel can be read as an escape from the social trappings of Orlando's previous life. She removes herself from the immediacy of her society as if to place it in relief, to contrast it with the simplicity and naturalness of her genderless and intersexual life. Our narrator says "let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can" (139). Life among the gypsies demands none of the ceremony of social performance that life in society did. The narrator tells us:

The pleasure of having no documents to seal or sign, no flourishes to make, no calls to pay, was enough. The gypsies followed the grass; when it was grazed down, on they moved again... no boxes, red, blue, or green, were presented to her; there was not a key, let alone a golden key, in the whole camp; as for 'visiting', the word was unknown. She milked the goats; she collected brushwood...she herded cattle; she stripped vines; she trod the grape; she filled the goat-skin and drank from it; 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, cut herself another hunch of bread, and begged for a puff from old Rustum's pipe, filled though it was with cow dung. (141)

Orlando's fashion is of no relation to recognizable or readable protocols of behavior and her day to day actions say nothing of which gender or rank she belongs to. Without her Elizabethan garb, or ambassadorial ceremonies, she has no way to describe herself other than as ungendered. She is between genders and armed now with the knowledge that her fashion controls her transactions with others and that she controls her fashion. In her Turkish pants of ambiguous gender she is a blank slate. Her immediate society, the gypsies, expects no capitulation to any social performances of rank or gender and this absence of expectation contrasts for her the ceremonied and prescribed existence she had lived previously, with the freer life she has now.

This detachment also brings into focus the irony of Orlando's situation. With her previous life set into relief by this curious gender middle ground, we are able to see the impossibility of Orlando ever being truly free from society's expectations of her conformity to social protocols. From her perspective we see what life could be like without gender protocols and a ubiquitous coercion, but we also see the fantasy that it takes to produce such a perspective. By showing the answer to the problems of gender, Woolf also shows, by virtue of contrast, the enormity of the problem. Still, she can not let go of her ways of thinking. She had "contracted in England some of the customs or diseases (whatever you choose to consider them) which cannot, it seems, be expelled" (142). The only way to be a part of modern society without being constantly coerced into adhering to particular protocols of behavior, would be to take control of those methods of determining one's identity. From her standpoint on gender-neutral ground, and with her knowledge of the effects of her masculine clothing, and of Sasha's female actions, Orlando is in a position to return to British society performing a very different self-description, with a very different wardrobe. As it was, Orlando left England a man, and after refashion-

ing his body, which then refashioned his identity by changing the intersubjective protocols by which he is judged, Orlando returns to England as a woman.

Orlando's identity is by now clearly something ever-changing. It metamorphoses with each culture's different reactions and transactions with her. And while Orlando is not free to be literally anything, she is here deep in a whirlwind of possibilities. R.S. Koppen, in his essay "Virginia Woolf, Fashion, and Literary Modernity" says, "the relationship between sex, gender and sexuality is shown as capable of near- endless permutations; so is the relationship between people and their clothes" (8). He says clothes can be "depended on" to "explore and assert these fundamentally unstable and mutable relationships" (8). Orlando has learned to utilize this fact and seems to have found the confidence to fashion herself as she desires herself to be.

During the boat scene, on her trip back to England, we see Orlando take a decided step toward a communicative protocol, and toward a newly gendered identity. Our narrator tells us her "Turkish trousers, which she had hitherto worn, had done something to distract her thoughts" from her new gender, but her experience onboard the *Enamored Lady* with Captain Bartolus would quickly bring her back to the society where identities are still transactionally based and her notion of self is still an ongoing narrative being written, in part, by each transaction she has. Recently, Orlando had been dressed as a gypsy woman who, "except in one or two important particulars, differ little from the gipsy men" (153). But now she decides on the fashion "of a young Englishwoman of rank" and soon finds herself amid an entirely new plurality of communicative protocols and finds her identity materializing in ways substantially different than when she was a male. Immediately upon boarding, "the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck" (153). At dinner that night, he asks quite condescendingly, "A little of the fat, Ma'am?...Let me cut you just the tiniest little slice the size of your finger nail" (155). Until then, benumbed by her genderless Turkish fashion and the lack of need for performances of gender, Orlando "had scarcely given her sex a thought" (153). But now, with the Captain condescending, and the feeling of "the coil of skirts about her legs," she becomes, once again, well aware of the "penalties and privileges of her position" (153). Orlando struggles at first to decide which is the proper protocol of behavior for her if she is to become a respected lady of rank, and not something else.

At first she is ambivalent about her new fashion, bemoaning the restrictiveness of the lady's skirt, but then admiring the flattering look of the fabric. "Skirts are plague things to have about one's heels," she says, "yet the stuff (flowered paduasoy) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own

skin...look to such advantage as now" (154). This particular fashion has a direct impact on Orlando's active performances as well. She wonders if she could ever "leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of a blue-jacket" (154). Orlando quickly learns the proper protocols. Women who indulged the desire to be saved by a blue-jacket were held outside the role of a lady of rank, "(but we must omit that word; it was disrespectful in the extreme...)" (156). Her staying onboard, despite what desires she may have, is a particular way of transacting with those around her which provides others with a way of understanding her identity. Based on the clothing she wears, Orlando must keep to only a limited protocol of behavior in order that others can rely on the associations they have with that protocol, and come to understand her identity. This understanding, according to Sullivan, is then projected back to Orlando, who reads the protocol she is expected to adhere to, and thus continuously arranges her actions to keep them in line with that code of behavior.

The narrator does little to hide the irony of this situation. Orlando "remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste scented, and exquisitely appareled," and realizes, now that she has become a woman, that she "shall have to pay in [her] own person for those desires" (156). Having to perform the very role she once prescribed to others makes her realize how much a performance it really is. "[W]omen are not," as she says, "obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline" (156-57). A discipline the narrator hyperbolizes by implying the hair dressing "alone will take an hour...there's the 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 from lace to paduasoy; and there's being chaste year in and year out" (157). Though it is exaggerated, Orlando clearly understands the tediousness of adhering strictly and deliberately to a code of behavior. But she is also well aware of the punishments, as Butler says, of incorrectly performing her gender. So she stays true to the protocol and experiences the benefits of her sex as well. Our narrator says, "for example, when Captain Bartolus saw Orlando's skirt, he had an awning stretched for her immediately, pressed her to take another slice of beef, and invited her to go ashore with him in the long boat" (187). Again, the narrator's suggestion that the interaction between Orlando and the captain would be quite different if not for Orlando's particular (female) way of dressing is hyperbolized for the sake of irony. Though real life, outside of Woolf's fiction, might never see such dramatic swings in behavior based on gendered fashion, we do realize that the difference is only by

degrees and the easy effects Orlando's clothing creates present a stark contrast to real life.

In the first scene we examined, in Elizabethan England, Orlando learned of the efficacy of clothing and fashion in determining his identity. In the second, on the frozen Thames, he added to this the understanding that gendered actions also play a role in fashioning his identity. In the third, among the gypsies, Orlando learned that without gendered clothing or gendered actions, she is not gendered. In the fourth scene, aboard the *Enamored Lady*, Orlando saw precisely how deliberately-gendered clothing, and appropriately matched gendered actions create her gender identity for others, who then in turn, create it for herself. As these scenes work toward a climax in the novel, we find Orlando in possession of knowledge representing the sum of these experiences. She now has the ability to use this knowledge to her advantage and break free, if she chooses, from being coerced into capitulating to prescribed protocols. Her experiences have taught her that "there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them: we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (Woolf 188). This is certainly true with Orlando. Her deliberate fashioning of herself as a 'young Englishwoman of rank' had noticeable effects on those around her, and, our narrator would say, on her as well: "Having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found even in her face" (188). The narrator compares for us two paintings of Orlando, one of him as a man, the other as a female, and suggests, "Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same" (188). And since Orlando's fashion has much to do with her identity at a given time, and since Orlando is the one in control of her fashion, Orlando, then, has great power to control her transactions with others with her choice of dress.

Orlando effectively frees herself from the typically coercive and circuitous nature of identity transactions by realizing the level of control inherent in manipulating the way she dresses. Her realization is similar to what Sullivan calls "Hypothetical Construction," which is where someone (I) becomes aware of one's own ignorance to the difficulties of communicating identity, and (II) reconfigures the "non-reflective habits" which have kept us contained within this circuitous system (Sullivan 75). Orlando reconfigures her non-reflective habits, and those of others, by beginning to dress and re-dress variously as male or as female as she chooses. Sullivan says a reconfiguration of old habits extricates one from the circuitous relationship as, once in control of one's performances, she says, "the preliminary meaning I [now] offer is an invitation presented to others, which they can choose to accept,

reject, revise, or supplement as part of our negotiation” (Sullivan 76). Our narrator tells us, some time after Orlando returns to England as a woman, she “opened a cupboard in which hung still many of the clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion” (215). Each new combination of these clothes represents to her a new identity she can become. As her face and body look no different than they did when she *was* a young man of fashion, these clothes, and her performances of wearing them, are the only way Orlando would be doing her body. These performances would be her transactions, and her self-awareness of these performances as transactional frees her from the necessarily circuitous nature of social transaction.

“From among [these clothes] she chose a black velvet suit...and dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble Lord,” much as she did in front of the great Queen many years ago (Woolf 215). With a self-aware control of her social performances, and closets full of clothes for both genders, Orlando begins offering herself as a preliminary invitation instead of as a concretely gendered person. She does not intend to fool others entirely by dissembling herself as a man, or as anything else, but rather to dress as she so desires and allow them to ‘accept, reject, revise, or supplement’ their initial impressions as their transactions continue. With this attitude, Orlando refuses to be coerced into a singular concrete identity, or a singular gender. Her new plurality of protocols, as Worthington would say, is twice as expansive and as enabling as it was before. Now she has the freedom to choose among disparate identities as she sees fit. The narrator tells us that at this point Orlando’s “sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied” (221). She had the advantages of each sex available to her and attainable through a change of clothes and a new set of (now non-circuitous) transactions. As time moves forward, Orlando hones her performances and switches between genders as she needs:

one may sketch her spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender... then she would take a turn in the garden and clip the nut trees-for which knee breeches were convenient; then she would change into a flowered taffeta which best suited a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman; and so back again to town, where she would don a snuff-colored gown like a lawyer’s and visit the courts... and so, finally, when night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of adventure. (221)

In the mornings, when she has no need to be one gender or another, her

clothing can be androgynous. As she learned during her time with the gypsies, when there is no benefit or punishment based on the fidelity of her performances, she can remain on gender-neutral ground and simply act as she wishes. A robe of ambiguous gender has no significance either way. Later, as she enters the view of her society, she can take control of her gender. However, instead of being coerced into performing a certain protocol, having learned from her experiences with various fashions, she can now choose her gender based on its utility. For trimming nut trees, where knee breeches are convenient, she is free to don the more masculine attire, and thereby become more masculine. As she is interested in something more feminine, such as a proposal of marriage, she becomes the desirable female by changing into the flowered taffeta. Conversely, should she want to be taken seriously in (what was then) a strictly masculine profession, a lawyerly gown would have the right effect. Perhaps most importantly (because it represents the most drastic change from her biological sex) she is still able to become the very image of a nobleman. In much the same way as the Orlando whom we met as the book opened, this Orlando is able to become a nobleman by controlling her dress from head to toe. Though they might be out of current fashion, she could even wear the same crimson breeches, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes as big as double dahlias that she wore for Queen Elizabeth.

These examples are exaggerated, fantastic even, but they make an important point about gender performativity and the efficacy of fashion in controlling one's identity. The fantastic structure is noticeable, and meant to be that way. It points out that it really means the opposite of what the story says. Orlando is able to recognize the coercion of society's associations of sex with gender and after a few lessons on how clothes and actions can combine to become performances of gender, she is able to take control of the entire system that others find coercive. The modern reader will recognize the coercion, and the seemingly obvious solution to the problem, but the irony is that real people, in the world outside of Woolf's fiction, are not able to manipulate fashion as easily, at such whims, or to such effects. But Woolf's social commentary is still valid, if not more so because of the effectiveness of the irony. Orlando learns that a self-awareness brings a level of control over her actions that otherwise would not have been available to her. She learns, as Riley says, that one's falsely authentic adherence to particular protocols is no longer needed. "One can wear one's social being lightly, avowing its contingency," for how could we ever "inhabit a self-description 'authentically' if the thing is really only picked out like a fashion item?" (Riley 151).

Pragmatically, Orlando also learns that the true self may not be as fluctuating as the many wardrobe changes imply. Over the years of her life

she had variously sought her true self, through her attempts to write poetry, through her changes in fashion, and through her willingness to adapt to the spirit of the times (if that would allow her to focus on the things she wanted instead of on maintaining an adherence to an artificial, presubscribed protocol). But it may not have been until she put these various lessons together that she discovered that she is not limited to one particular role, or one particular identity. Instead, Orlando *is* what she *does*. As she does her body differently with deliberately chosen fashions, her personal narrative of self-identity is always changing. As the novel closes, Orlando discovers, after all her travels and changes and lessons learned, that only now, and with this, “the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord” (Woolf 313-14). The self she was looking for turned out to be the total product of her disparate interests, an amalgam of her unfettered performances. No longer does she have to be limited to certain protocols of behavior. She found the true Orlando not in particular actions, but in the freedom of actions. And “with the addition of this Orlando,” she became, finally, “a single self, a real self” (314).

Notes

- 1 - Tzvetan Todorov, in his book *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre*, defines the fantastic as the following: “In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know...there occurs an event which can not be explained by the laws of this same familiar world.” And later, “the fantastic is that hesitation experienced by a person who knows only the laws of nature, confronting an apparently supernatural event” (25). In *Orlando*’s case, the reader remains in this hesitant space over the course of reading the novel as it is never quite clear whether the events that take place are meant to be taken seriously, as in Woolf’s other novels, or as comedy.
- 2 - To contextualize the span of Orlando’s life, this period of his life was under the rule of Queen Elizabeth, who ruled from 1558-1603.
- 3 - Queen Elizabeth’s revision of England’s Sumptuary Statue (15 June 1574) reads, in part, “None shall wear in this attire: Woolen cloth made out of the realm, but in caps only; velvet, crimson, or scarlet; furs, black genets, lucernes; embroidery or tailor’s work having gold or silver or pearl therein: except dukes, marquises, earls, and their children, viscounts, barons, and knights being companions of the Garter, or any person being of the Privy Council”.
- 4 - King James I ruled England from 1602-1625.

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