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# Thinking Back through Our Fathers: Woolf Reading Shakespeare in Orlando and a Room of One's Own

Maureen Gallagher

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THINKING BACK THROUGH OUR FATHERS:  
WOOLF READING SHAKESPEARE IN *ORLANDO* AND *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN*

by

MAUREEN GALLAGHER

Under the Direction of Dr. Randy Malamud

ABSTRACT

This thesis is a feminist interpretation of Virginia Woolf's treatment of Shakespeare in *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*. Although Woolf's admiration of Shakespeare is evident in both texts, Woolf's identification of Shakespeare as a gender-neutral or feminist-friendly writer must be qualified. Woolf presents Shakespeare as a worthy but incomplete artistic model, for his work does not explore women with adequate complexity. In these texts, Woolf partially "writes with" Shakespeare, but she also uses his literary works and his status as a cultural icon both to critique the conventional treatment of women as limited by the male perspective and to highlight the gender privilege male writers have historically had. In these two texts, Woolf presses beyond what she perceives to be Shakespeare's limited exploration of women, ultimately calling for a feminist re-evaluation of gender roles in literature and emphasizing the need for women writers to record women's experiences.

INDEX WORDS: Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando*, *A Room of One's Own*, English literature, treatment of Shakespeare, William, literary criticism, gender roles

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MAUREEN GALLAGHER

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
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## I. Introduction

In her famous essay *A Room of One's Own*, Virginia Woolf states that “we think back through our mothers if we are women. It is useless to go to the great men writers for help, however much one may go to them for pleasure” (76). And yet, Woolf spends a great deal of time exploring the literature and influence of male writers in both *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando: A Biography*, the novel she wrote at roughly the same time. In *Virginia Woolf's Renaissance*, Juliet Dusinberre observes that Woolf believed “that writers need a tradition and that tradition nourishes individual talent,” but the interaction between writers of the past and the present “was complicated by the fact that the voices of the past were predominantly male” (5). While Woolf clearly critiques some canonical male writers for their misogyny or egotism, she treats other male writers with more complexity. William Shakespeare, with his conventional status as the greatest writer of English literature, represents a significant figure both in the male-dominated canon and in Woolf's relationship with the literary past, for, as Alice Fox states, “[t]here is no question of the centrality of Shakespeare in Woolf's imagination” (19). In this thesis, I will explore Woolf's treatment of Shakespeare in both *Orlando* and *Room*, for Woolf's perspective on Shakespeare can illuminate the way she grapples with questions of gender and the English literary tradition.

Many critics have treated *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* (*Room*) as parallel projects. As early as 1932, Winifred Holtby observed that “[d]ifferent as they are in form, the two books are complementary” (161). First of all, Woolf wrote these texts at the roughly the same time, for while she published *Orlando* in 1928, *A Room of One's Own* began as two lectures that she delivered in October 1928, which she extensively rewrote the following spring, finally

publishing the revised essay in the autumn of 1929 (Gualtieri 116-17). But it is not only the timing of the books' publications that has invited critics to consider them as a pair; it is also the subject matter. Elena Gualtieri observes that "the two books share a consistent preoccupation with the question of writing English literary history from a position that is inflected by sexual difference" (116). I follow these critics in reading *Orlando* and *Room* as companion pieces in my exploration into Woolf's ideas about Shakespeare.

Shakespeare's presence in *Room* and *Orlando* has been a subject of critical inquiry. Critics such as Jane Marcus and Cary DiPietro have observed that, contrary to Woolf's own claim, William Shakespeare is a male writer she goes to for help (Marcus 172-3; DiPietro 177). Some feminist critics argue that in *Room* and *Orlando* Woolf does not consider Shakespeare as a patriarch or a literary forefather but instead as a gender-neutral figure or even feminine muse. Beth C. Schwartz uses psychoanalytic theory to link Shakespeare's appearances in *Orlando* and *Room* to Woolf's Anon, a gender-neutral archetype that embodies both a pre-industrial literary creative spirit and Freud's pre-Oedipal order. According to Freudian thought, the pre-Oedipal phase of human development corresponds to infancy prior to the development of language, when the child perceives himself as united with the mother. Schwartz identifies Anon, and thus Shakespeare, as a mothering influence, "a maternal muse" who nurtures "Woolf's creative process" and inspires "her feminist vision and agenda" (722). Schwartz reads Shakespeare as Woolf's maternal muse to explain him as nurturing figure from the literary canon rather than a threatening patriarchal presence that stifles the woman artist's creativity. Furthermore, in *Virginia Woolf's Novels and the Literary Past*, Jane de Gay argues that "in *Orlando* Woolf adopts a strategy of identifying elements in past literature which are conducive to feminist and lesbian agendas" (133). For de Gay, "Woolf sought to write *with* [Shakespeare] rather than attack



him as a canonical male writer” (148). However, although Woolf’s reverence for Shakespeare’s greatness is evident in *Room*, Woolf’s identification of Shakespeare as a gender-neutral or feminist-friendly writer must be qualified. She presents Shakespeare as a worthy but incomplete artistic model, for his work does not explore women with adequate complexity. I argue that in *Orlando* and *A Room of One’s Own*, taken together, Woolf partially “writes with” Shakespeare, but she also uses his figure both to critique the conventional treatment of women as narrowed by the male perspective and to highlight the gender privilege male writers have historically had; and, in these two texts, Woolf presses beyond what she perceives to be Shakespeare’s limited exploration of women in literature.

In *Room*, Woolf praises Shakespeare as a genius whose mind is “incandescent and undivided” (99). She goes on to describe his superb ability to create in terms of gender transcendence; she states his mind is “the type of androgynous, of the man-womanly mind” (98-99). Schwartz partly bases her argument that Woolf re-genders Shakespeare into a motherly figure for the tradition of female writers on Woolf’s description of Shakespeare as androgynous. However, in order to make the case that Woolf re-genders Shakespeare, Schwartz does not examine the larger context of Woolf’s discussion of androgyny in *Room*. Consider Woolf’s qualifications about androgyny and gender. Acknowledging that she borrows the concept of androgyny from Coleridge, Woolf states:

Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that is a mind that has any special sympathy with women; a mind that takes up their cause or devotes itself to their interpretation. . . . He meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment, that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one

goes back to Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind, though it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women. (98-99)

While Woolf claims that Shakespeare exemplifies the concept of androgyny, she explicitly distances herself from the claim that Shakespeare's androgyny led him to be a champion of women. Instead, her explanation of androgyny emphasizes what she believes to be the need for a writer to be impersonal. Woolf does not intend Shakespeare to be one of the mothers that a woman writer "thinks back through," as Schwartz claims, for Woolf explicitly denies that he, as an androgynous figure, has any special concern for women.

While in *Room*, Woolf proposes androgyny as a way out of what she perceives to be the limitation of an author's sex on his or her writing, in *Orlando* Woolf dramatizes this theory of androgyny through the use of Shakespeare as an inspirational figure whose poetry transcends sex. Shakespeare does serve as a muse-like figure for Orlando throughout his/her development as a writer, but Woolf invokes his image in terms of sexual transcendence, not femininity or maternity. The image of Shakespeare's face and large forehead, and its attendant association with the glories of his verse, serve to calm Orlando after his/her passions have been excited by the "distraction of sex," be it sexual desire or sexual identity (164). At one point while Orlando is a man, he finds his attempts to write constrained by his feelings of sexual infatuation and jealousy for the lady, Sasha, who has jilted him (79-81). Later, after Orlando has become a woman, she finds herself tormented by considering of the oppressions she will face as a woman in English society (163-164). In both cases, the image of Shakespeare's face appears, recalling for Orlando the greatness of the bard's verse and allowing Orlando to drop his/her troubling, angry, sex-conscious thoughts and re-direct his/her energies to the pursuit of literature. Whether

the anger is a man's over the loss of his love, or a woman's over the prohibition of her freedom, Woolf uses the figure of Shakespeare in *Orlando* as a muse-like inspiration to guide the aspiring writer out of the troubled waters muddied by the consciousness of one's sex. In both *Room* and *Orlando*, Woolf tries to frame Shakespeare as an androgynous figure.

Although Woolf attempts to recast Shakespeare as androgynous, she nevertheless finds aspects of his writing to be limited by his male point of view. Woolf appreciates and draws on many elements of Shakespeare's comic treatment of conventional gender roles, such as his proclivity for gender-bending and his critiques of conventional masculine behavior, particularly as it concerns conventions of chivalry and romantic love. However, despite Shakespeare's insight into the follies of men's behavior and the limitations of conventional gender expectations, Woolf finds Shakespeare lacking in his characterization of women and his exploration of women's experience. In Woolf's twin projects of *Orlando* and *Room*, she partially writes *with* Shakespeare, but she uses the figure of Shakespeare in her exploration of gender and literature to highlight the absence of the female perspective.

## II. "Satire & Wildness" in *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*

Although this thesis largely focuses on the content and themes of *Orlando*, it would be an injustice to the text to ignore its genre and tone. Clearly a text in which the title character leaps across the standard boundaries of sexes and centuries does not qualify as a realistic novel. *Orlando* crosses the conventional borders of genre, as it incorporates biography, fantasy, history, poetry, and fiction. In Woolf's diary, she records her conception of the original idea that later developed into *Orlando*, a book which she planned to call "The Jessamy Brides," which would

feature “two women, poor, solitary at the top of a house.” Although the elements of her original title and characters changed, Woolf retains the tone of her planned experiment, which she exuberantly describes: “Satire is to be the main note. Satire & wildness . . . Everything mocked” (*Diary*, 14 March 1927 3:131). The tone of *Orlando* is more essential to its incarnation than the ideas of the characters, for Woolf is determined to satisfy an instinct to play: “I want to kick up my heels & be off. I want to embody those innumerable little ideas & tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons” (3:131). Indeed, while Woolf includes moments of pointed satirical criticism in *Orlando*, she tempers any vitriol with a light-hearted playfulness. At the same time, satire has a point. According to Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody*, artists use satire to ridicule the vices or follies of humanity in a way that is “both moral and social in its focus and ameliorative in its intention” (16). In *Orlando*, Woolf explores literary history, gender, and sexuality in a whimsical fashion both to forge a closer connection with her readers and to share her “innumerable” ideas that shape a feminist critique of the English literary tradition, including her reading of Shakespeare.<sup>1</sup>

Just as *Orlando* shares many thematic concerns with *A Room of One's Own*, the two texts also exhibit a similar whimsical tone and elements of playful satire. However, the issue of Woolf's charming tone and indirect style in *Room* has been much more fiercely debated within feminist criticism. At the heart of the debate is the question of whether or not Woolf's form of capricious satire is a proper vehicle for her indignation. Feminist critics Adrienne Rich and Elaine Showalter argue that Woolf's use of a charming, detached, impersonal tone and, in Rich's

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<sup>1</sup> To include “everything” that Woolf mocks would result in a list of extensive length, but it must be mentioned that the format of *Orlando* particularly targets the Zeitgeist readings of history and the “life-and-letters” conventions of biography. See Rachel Bowlby's *Feminist Destinations and Further Essays on Virginia Woolf*, 110-124 and Karyn Z. Spores's *Desiring Women: The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*, 87-130.

words, “dogged tentativeness,” demonstrates an unhealthy inhibition of her anger against patriarchy. As a result, Rich and Showalter read Woolf’s light-hearted approach as evidence that she represses her rage and ultimately compromises her integrity and art.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, Alex Zwerdling argues that Woolf frequently expresses anger in her writing but usually avoids direct attacks on “masculinity,” finding them “too unguarded, too artless” (251-2). Instead, Woolf tends to use “the familiar devices” of satire for her persuasive techniques such as “the perspective of wide-eyed innocence, the ironic praise, the *reductio ad absurdum*” (252). Zwerdling maintains that Woolf uses a comic technique as a strategy to make “what might have been disturbing to men more tolerable” (256). Whereas Rich and Showalter criticize Woolf for speaking too indirectly out of fear of being overheard by men, Zwerdling reads Woolf’s satirical strategy as productive means of critiquing the misogyny found within such patriarchal institutions as the academy, the literary establishment, and the legal system.

Consider the arch, playful tone in the scene where Woolf introduces the controversial subject of contemporary female novelists’ depiction of women’s lesbian relationships. Woolf interrupts her discussion of *Life’s Adventure*, the invented novel by the imaginary writer Mary Carmichael, to introduce the topic of lesbian attraction with mock-delicacy:

Are there no men present? Do you promise me that behind that red curtain over there the figure of Sir Chartres Biron is not concealed? We are all women, you assure me? Then I may tell you that the very next words I read were these—‘Chloe liked Olivia . . .’ Do not start. Do not blush. Let us admit in the privacy of our

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<sup>2</sup> See Elaine Showalter’s “Virginia Woolf and the Flight into Androgyny” in *A Literature of Their Own*, 263-29; also Adrienne Rich’s essay, “When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision,” 37.

own society that these things sometimes happen. Sometimes women do like women. (82)

Rather than attacking male authorities directly and angrily, Woolf uses humor to approach the controversial issue of the literary representation of lesbian attraction. Feminist critic Jane Marcus convincingly argues that the “Chloe liked Olivia” passage must be read in its historical context to understand that Woolf is raising the topic of lesbianism while avoiding the threat of censorship. Marcus analyzes the passage in the context of the obscenity trial for Radclyffe Hall’s 1928 novel, *The Well of Loneliness*, which features a lesbian relationship. Although the Mary Carmichael and *Life’s Adventure* are fictional, Sir Chartres Biron is not; he was the presiding magistrate in the case against Hall’s novel. In fact, this passage playfully alludes to a real threat to a woman writer’s freedom of expression. Marcus reads Woolf as setting up a conspiracy of women in league together against authority (166).

While Marcus’ interpretation is rich in historical detail, she never mentions that, in the “Chloe liked Olivia” passage of *Room*, Woolf echoes a similar comic scene from *Orlando*. During her incarnation as an eighteenth-century woman, Orlando makes social calls to visit prostitutes. The women enjoy each other’s company and conversation despite the gentlemen customers who interrupt and refuse to accept the possibility of women’s fellowship:

. . . it cannot be denied that when women get together—but hist—they are always careful to see that the doors are shut and that not a word of it gets into print. All they desire is—but hist again—is that not a man’s step on the stair? All they desire, we were about to say when the gentleman took the very words out of our mouths. 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 slightest interest to anyone. (219)

Just as she later does in *Room*, Woolf draws an image of women who must gather in secrecy to hide the truths of their desires from intruding men. She uses the same playful tone; rather than attacking masculine pomposity through a diatribe, she presents this interfering male customer as a caricatured figure of hypocrisy. He is a prostitute's client who claims himself superior to all women, enlarging his own ego by trivializing what women want and what they talk about. Woolf manages to diffuse the threatening power of male authority while inviting sympathetic readers—male and female—to acknowledge the possibility of women's fellowship. In these passages, writer and reader become linked against a common enemy, but instead of joining together in common outrage, they form an intimate connection, helped along by the mutuality of a wink and a knowing smile.

While reading Woolf's use of irony as strategically cautious is valid for the elements of satire found both *Room* and *Orlando*, this interpretation does not fully address the *jeu d'esprit* that Woolf displays in *Orlando*. Some literary critics have looked to biographical reasons to uncover why Woolf produced such a light-hearted, comic text. Karyn Z. Sproles emphasizes how the character of Orlando is modeled on her lover, Vita Sackville-West, an aristocratic bisexual writer to whom Woolf dedicates the novel (70-86). As Rachel Bowlby observes, Orlando's country manor is based on Vita Sackville-West's ancestral country estate, Knole, as recorded in West's 1922 history, *Knole and the Sackvilles*, and Orlando's adoption of multiple roles throughout his/her long life is based on West's shifting identities—respectable and bohemian, aristocratic and adventurer, lesbian and wife (154-55). *Orlando* has also been read as a tribute and a symbolic gift to Vita Sackville-West. The same year Woolf was writing the novel, West

lost possession of her beloved Knole to a male cousin; she could not inherit the property because of her sex, and she experienced the dispossession as traumatic (Sproles 43, 71). In response to West's loss, Woolf gaily restores Knole to her lover in the fantasy world of *Orlando*, for despite her heroine's (eventual) female sex, she is allowed to retain her rightful property (Sproles 72).

Other critics characterize the fun and playfulness of *Orlando* as a refreshing jaunt after writing the more serious novel *To the Lighthouse* (Schlack 77; Zwerdling 57). Indeed, Woolf's diary entry for the idea of "The Jessamy Brides" reveals her desire to embrace a fun writing project: "I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered . . . it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next" (*Diary* 3:131) and later calls the process of composing *Orlando* a "writers holiday" (*Diary* 3:177). In these descriptions, *Orlando* is viewed as a respite between *Lighthouse* and the next novel she would write, *The Waves*.

This narrative of how *Orlando* came to be so different in tone than many other Woolf novels is correct as far as it goes, but it leaves *Orlando* vulnerable to being easily dismissed as a diverting interlude between Woolf's meatier novels. This explanation also focuses entirely on Woolf's psychological experience; it does not consider how Woolf uses playful satire in order to communicate to her reader. Hermione Lee observes that Woolf was a pioneer of reader-response theory with a profound interest in the "two-way dialogue between readers and writers" (91). Although Woolf bases *Orlando* on her very personal experience with Vita Sackville-West, she does not do so at the expense of her readers. She notes in her diary that "I am writing Orlando half in a mock style very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word" (3:162). The scholarly concentration on Woolf's relationship with Vita Sackville-West overshadows Woolf's consideration of her general readership.



Satire and parody provide ways to communicate serious ideas, and I would like to add to the discussion Woolf's own ideas on the reader's experience of satire from one of her essays, "Phases of Fiction," published in 1929. Woolf worked on this essay—originally intended to be a book, but ultimately published as three long essays—at the same time she was writing *Orlando* and *Room*, and it shares with them a focus on the history of literature (Lee 92). Woolf organizes "Phases of Fiction" into types of novelists by genre, but the categories are personalized by Woolf. Examples include "The Truth-tellers," "The Character-mongers and Comedians," and the one most relevant to this discussion, "The Satirists and Fantastics." Although Woolf prefaces the essay by claiming that there is no rhyme or reason to the order of the books that she discusses, and that her intent is merely to "record the impressions made upon the mind by reading a certain number of novels in succession," she includes transitions between each of the sections in which she markedly contrasts each type of author to the preceding type (*CE* 3:56). For example, Woolf writes about "Satirists and Fantastics" after a section on "The Psychologists," which is how she characterizes authors including James, Proust, and Dostoevsky: "the confused feelings which the psychologists have roused in us, the extraordinary intricacy which they have revealed to us, the network of fine and scarcely intelligible yet profoundly interesting emotions which they have involved us, set up a craving for relief" (*CE* 3:89). This craving can be sated by the satirist. Her discussion on satirists/fantastics reads largely like a description of the tone of *Orlando*. She includes an analysis of Laurence Sterne's novel, *Tristram Shandy*, which, according to Beverly Ann Schlack, Woolf heavily draws on in the creation of *Orlando* (77). Sterne is clearly one of Woolf's influences, for, at the beginning of the preface to *Orlando*, Woolf mentions her indebtedness to Sterne, among other authors, (vii) and in *Room* she names him as an androgynous writer along the lines of Shakespeare and Coleridge (103). In "Phases of Fiction,"

Woolf makes a case that satire, at least in its fantastic form, can be a great antidote both for the heaviness of psychological fiction as well as the overwhelming stress of life: satire is “even more delightful after the immensities and obscurities in which we have been living, [for] we are in a world so manageable in scale that we can take its measure, tease it and ridicule it” (CE 3:90). Indeed, her description of fantastic satire in general and *Tristram Shandy* in particular sounds very much like her description of her own writing in *Orlando*, where “[t]he satirist does not, like the psychologist, labour under the oppression of omniscience. He has leisure to play with his mind freely, ironically” (CE 3:90). Indeed, in *Orlando*, “[t]he world is so happily constituted that there is always trout for breakfast, wine in the cellar, and some amusing contretemps . . . to make us laugh” (CE 3:90) and “we get a book in which all the usual conventions are consumed and yet no ruin or catastrophe comes to pass” (CE 3:93). Despite its setting across three centuries of English history, *Orlando* somehow breezes past war, death, and anything else that might be the stuff of tragedy, which gives Woolf the license to play with freedom and irony.

Woolf perceives the use of satire and fantasy in fiction to be quite useful in its own right. Woolf argues that the “the prime distinction” between the psychologists and the satirists/fantastics “lies in the changed attitude towards reality” and provisionally claims that “perhaps all this pother about ‘reality’ is overdone. The great gain is perhaps that our relation with things is more distant. We reap the benefits of a more poetic point of view” (CE 3:90-1). The satirist, surveying the human condition from aloft, as it were, is able to take in a broader view. In *Orlando*, Woolf takes the satirical/fantastical perspective in order to survey over three centuries of English literature, culture, and history.

Most compelling is Woolf’s discussion of the satirist’s use of character in her analysis of *Tristram Shandy*. Her discussion aptly describes *Orlando*, as she explains that in fantastical

satires, “[i]nstead of being many-sided, complicated, elusive, people possess one idiosyncrasy apiece, which crystallizes them into sharp separate characters, colliding briskly when they meet” (CE 3:90). This description could nicely sum up all of the minor characters in *Orlando*, who remain in a static, one-dimensional state, such as the ludicrously named Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmardine, Orlando’s nineteenth-century adventurer-husband who is essentially a caricature of the Brontëan/Byronic Romantic hero (Schlack 94; de Gay 154). Woolf then goes on to outline the main character of *Tristram Shandy*:

There is thus built up intermittently, irregularly, an extraordinary portrait of a character—a character shown most often in a passive state, sitting still, through the quick glancing eyes of an erratic observer, who never lets his character speak more than a few words or take more than a few steps in his proper person, but is forever circling round and playing with the lapels of his coat and peering up into his face and teasing him affectionately, whimsically. (3:93)

Two aspects of this analysis of Sterne’s writing particularly apply to *Orlando*. Crucially, although Woolf uses the term “satirist” in this essay, she clearly does not refer to the more scathing extreme of satire and ridicule, as she emphasizes the affectionate and whimsical nature of the way the author/narrator makes fun of his characters. Woolf certainly does more teasing than attacking in *Orlando*, for while the title character is often the butt of Woolf’s jokes, he is never the object of outright mockery.

Second, Woolf’s description of how Sterne creates his hero sounds like the process by which she whimsically characterizes the hero/heroine of *Orlando*, who indeed says little and is often found to be passively sitting still for hours or days or even years. For example, he spends much time flinging himself under his favorite oak tree, watching the “beech tree turn golden and

the young ferns unfurl” and the “moon sickle and then circular” while spending “months and years of his life” meditating on such questions as “What is love? What truth?” (97, 99). Her description of Sterne’s hero corresponds to Woolf’s original plan for “The Jessamy Brides,” where she plans that “[n]o attempt is to made to realise the character” (*Diary* 3:131). Woolf explains that the satirists produces characters who “are a race apart among the people of fiction,” so unique because they are “closely dependent on the author” (*CE* 3:93). She creates this unique character in *Orlando*. The title character is primarily portrayed through the purple prose of a very erratic observer, the pompous, comically inadequate biographer-narrator, who zooms in to focus on intensely on Orlando and then jerkily pulls away, inexplicably shifting between an ability to rhapsodize about Orlando’s innermost thoughts and an inability to glean the most basic facts of the poet’s existence due to scanty historical evidence. Instead of a multi-dimensional, psychologically realistic character, Orlando is so unique because, in his/her immortality, sex-changing, and identity-shifting, he/she is at times two-dimensional, at times deeply reflective, and always a fantastical character who can never fully be pinned down.

Compellingly, Woolf concludes that because these characters depend so much on the author, as a result, “[i]n no other book are the writer and the reader so involved together” (*CE* 3:93). For Woolf, satire allows the writer to create an immediate connection to the reader. It is as if, in *Orlando*, Woolf talks to the reader over the heads of both Orlando and the biographer-narrator as she engages in her jocular commentary of English literary history, creating for readers the feeling that they are sharing an inside joke. The passages invoking a secret society of women from *Room* and *Orlando* in fact dramatize Woolf’s methodology of satire, for they articulate Woolf’s entire process of creating a special bond with the reader, who is “in” on both the joke and on women’s secrets. Woolf’s gift as a satirist is that, in taking a joyfully broader sweep of

English history and literature of over three centuries, she invites us as readers along to share the view, and as a result, “we sun ourselves on one of these high pinnacles” (*CE* 3:93). Woolf forges a more direct involvement for the reader through satire in order to emphasize her ideas on the English literary tradition and gender while de-emphasizing character.

In *Orlando*, Woolf employs a great deal of parody and allusion, which also forges an strong connection between author and reader. Parody is distinct from satire, for while satire often uses parody to evaluate and thereby correct moral and societal ills, parody by itself rarely limits itself to negative and evaluative intentions (Hutcheon 54). Furthermore, parodies and allusions involve a high degree of reader involvement, for, as Hutcheon explains, they rely on a high “degree of engagement of the reader in the intertextual ‘bouncing’” (32). The reader of the newer text must have read and be able to recall a background text in order to “bounce” back and forth between the texts and thus appreciate the parody or understand the allusion. For example, in the Victorian section of the novel, Orlando first encounters Shelmardine in a parody of a Brontëan scene. Orlando, now a woman, is lying helpless on a moor, after having broken her ankle, and Shelmardine, at least partly a parody of Charlotte Brontë’s Rochester, charges in on his horse from the mists, “[t]owering dark against the yellow-slashed sky of dawn, with the plovers rising and falling about him” (250). When Woolf provides this parody of Brontë’s romantic scene, she relies on the reader’s competence in a shared reading tradition. The fact that the reader must recognize the parodied text heightens the effect of writer and reader being “in” on the joke. While Marcus argues that in *Room* Woolf’s strategy is to gather women in a conspiracy against patriarchal society, Woolf’s audience may be broader for *Orlando*, although still necessarily limited. The readers with whom Woolf creates a special bond need not be women, but they must be both well-versed in the English literary tradition and sympathetic to a critique of the

misogyny within that tradition. The bond between writer and reader in *Orlando* would not result in a challenge of any specific authority but may lead to a general questioning of the conventional narrative of the English literary past.

The fact that Woolf draws on parody and allusion to re-tell the familiar story of English literary tradition from the Renaissance through the modern day demonstrates the extent to which Woolf grapples with the literary canon and its influence. While Woolf certainly does not embrace all the opinions and values of her literary forerunners, she also does not reject all of the male writers of the canon. Instead, in Woolf's use of parody, she synthesizes both conservative elements and new ideas. Hutcheon identifies parody "as a method of inscribing continuity while permitting critical distance" (20), and in *Orlando*, Woolf looks to the literary past, both conserving its importance while tweaking the narrative from a feminist perspective. When Woolf re-tells the story of English literary culture from the bawdy, hard-drinking playwrights of the Renaissance through the salon-hopping wits of the eighteenth century through the codified manners of Victorian literary critics, she not only critiques conventional descriptions of literary periods but also reinforces the very conventions she mocks, thus guaranteeing their continued existence. At the same time, however, she uses the framework of English literary history to re-tell it with a difference by zeroing in on issues of women and literature.

### III. Chivalry, Petrarchism, and Gender Roles in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

Woolf draws on Shakespeare in general throughout *Orlando* to explore issues of gender identity, romantic love, and sex. While she taps into themes, such as anti-Petrarchism, that arise

throughout Shakespeare's corpus, the androgynous heroines from Shakespeare's romantic comedies such as *Twelfth Night*, *As You Like It*, and *Merchant of Venice* particularly inspire Woolf's creation of the gender-crossing Orlando (Froula 129). The festive comedy *As You Like It* provides a rich literary resource to explore how Woolf builds on Shakespeare in *Orlando*, for the dramatic personae include the romantic hero Orlando as well as the cross-dressing Rosalind. In *Orlando*, Woolf partially writes alongside Shakespeare insofar as they both use comic heroes named Orlando to critique chivalry and Petrarchan romantic love conventions. In order to compare how Shakespeare and Woolf use comic formats to treat chivalry, Petrarchism, and gender, I include close readings of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and *Orlando*. These readings highlight how Woolf use parody and allusion to write with Shakespeare as he critiques some aspects of conventional masculine behavior.

Woolf fills *Orlando* with allusions to Renaissance literature and culture; de Gay notes that "the Renaissance forms the emotional backbone for *Orlando*," as it begins in the Elizabethan era and more than half of its action takes place in the Renaissance and Restoration (142). Significantly, as Rachel Bowlby observes, the title character's name "recalls a whole line of literary heroes—from the medieval *Chanson de Roland* (the French version of the name), through [Ludivico] Ariosto's epic *Orlando Furioso*, to Shakespeare's *As You Like It*," (163). Dusinberre particularly points to Woolf's invocation of the *Furioso*, observing that Woolf knew Ariosto's poem and it "lies in the hinterland of *Orlando*" (*Virginia Woolf's Renaissance* 206). *Orlando Furioso*, published in the vernacular in its final form in 1532, is a continuation of *Chanson de Roland*, a medieval French poem based on chivalric tales of Emperor Charlemagne and his knights, including his nephew Roland (Waldman xi). *Orlando Furioso* translates as "Orlando Maddened," a description which refers to the titular character, a chivalric knight who becomes

distracted from his military duties by his love for Angelica, a beautiful pagan princess (Ariosto 1). According to Jason Lawrence, one of the most recognizable motifs of Ariosto's poem occurs in the twenty-third canto, in an episode where Orlando learns that Angelica loves a common soldier by finding their names carved together everywhere on trees in a French forest (122). He then discovers a flowery love poem that Angelica's lover had etched into a rock wall. Orlando's discovery of the trees and the poem marks the beginning of his descent into madness, in which he tears off his armor and clothes and goes on a hyperbolically violent rampage through the countryside (Ariosto 278-82). According to Daniel Javitch, *Orlando Furioso* gained broad popular appeal throughout Europe in the sixteenth century (4). Sir John Harington translated Ariosto's poem into English verse in 1591, and largely as a result of his efforts, during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the English considered the poem a modern classic (Javitch 134).

The mad Orlando also appeared in Elizabethan England through Robert Greene's loose stage adaptation, *The History of Orlando Furioso, One of the twelve Pieres of France*, performed in 1592 and printed in 1594. Greene makes Orlando's devolution into madness in the forest, just one of the numerous episodes of Ariosto's epic, central to his drama (Lawrence 122). According to Kenneth Muir, in the comedy *As You Like It*, Shakespeare names his hero Orlando after Ariosto's famous character (131). Some critics have argued that Shakespeare drew on *Orlando Furioso* in his writing, although it has been a matter of debate whether Shakespeare draws on Ariosto's poem directly or through the mediation of Greene's tragedy. Lawrence has recently argued that Shakespeare must have known and drawn on both versions in his writing (122). Lawrence further maintains that Shakespeare used the love-sick military hero in the *Furioso* to



shape the character of Othello, who, in his jealous rage over his beloved's supposed infidelity, goes mad and wreaks terrible destruction (119-133).

Shakespeare names his romantic hero Orlando in order to draw on the chivalric tradition and the chivalric lover archetype. Shakespeare also characterizes his Orlando as a romantic hero who employs sixteenth-century Petrarchan love conventions. In *As You Like It*, although Shakespeare parodies the masculine ideal of chivalry to highlight the excesses, artifices and narcissism associated with chivalric love, particularly as expressed through Petrarchan romantic conventions, he nevertheless invokes elements of chivalry and ultimately confirms conventional gender roles.

Medieval romances depict chivalry as a highly idealized system of manner and morals in which Christian knights pledge oaths of loyalty for God, their king, and their ladies, behave with utmost courtesy, and readily serve their lady loves, the weak, and helpless victims of injustice such as damsels in distress (Harmon and Holman 94). Chivalry has a long literary history in the medieval romance form, but it was built on an actual social form rooted in European feudalism from roughly 1100-1500. Historian Maurice Keen describes chivalry as an ethos which combines three elements that knights ideally personify: the religious, in the form of Christian devotion; the martial, particularly excellence in horsemanship; and the aristocratic, which denotes not only nobility of birth but also greatness of virtue (16-17).

Arthur B. Ferguson argues that although chivalry began in medieval Europe, the tradition continued to have "vitality long after the society that had given it birth had passed away. Beginning with a revival in the later fifteenth century . . . [a] residual chivalry . . . lingered in the bloodstream of Western culture" (11). Ferguson maintains that chivalry underwent a particularly pronounced revival during Elizabeth's reign (68). While the tradition of knight-errantry had died

out, the Elizabethan revival of chivalry was, in great part, a literary phenomenon; chivalric romances “probably did more than anything else to keep current the language of chivalry and its memory green” (Ferguson 68-9). This “language of chivalry,” with its roots in medieval and Renaissance romances, informs this present inquiry into both Shakespeare’s comedy and Woolf’s novel.

Although the Orlando in Shakespeare’s comedy never devolves into madness like his namesake in *Orlando Furioso*, his name connects him to a long chivalric tradition with which Elizabethans were very familiar (Dusinberre 48). “Orlando” is the Italian form of the French name Roland, and in the First Folio edition of *As You Like It*, the name of Orlando’s father, Sir Rowland, is spelled “Roland” three times (Dusinberre 48). Moreover, as Marjorie Garber observes, the hero from the Charlemagne romances has a friend and adviser, with whom he once fought in single combat, named Oliver, the name of Orlando’s eldest brother in Shakespeare’s play (*Shakespeare* 440). The tension between Orlando and Oliver established in the opening scene of *As You Like It* stems from the English legal structure of primogeniture, a circumstance which leaves Orlando relatively powerless. However firmly established Oliver’s legal rights may be, Orlando, as Garber argues, “because of his signifying name . . . is thus in some sense the true heir of Sir Rowland, even though he is the youngest of three brothers” (*Shakespeare* 440). Because the name Orlando has so many chivalric associations, Elizabethan audiences would have expected his character to embody the traits of a conventional chivalric hero.

As Woolf later does in *Orlando*, Shakespeare creates a hero who represents chivalric qualities. Tapping into the literary associations of his hero’s name, early in the play Shakespeare alludes to Orlando as the embodiment of his father’s chivalric legacy. During the brothers’ quarrel in the opening scene, Orlando invokes his patrilineal connection when he declares “The

spirit of my father grows strong in me” (1.1.66).<sup>3</sup> Adam, the family’s long-time servant, also links Orlando to his father’s spirit by calling him “you memory / Of old Sir Rowland!” (2.3.3-4) and attributes to Orlando traditionally chivalric qualities, calling him “virtuous,” and “gentle, strong, and valiant” (2.3.5,6). Later in the play, when Orlando tells Duke Senior that he is Sir Rowland’s son, the Duke responds by remarking on Orlando’s likeness to his father: “mine eye doth [Sir Rowland’s] effigies witness, / Most truly limned and living in your face” (2.7.197-198). Shakespeare’s Orlando embodies the physical traits and spirit of Rowland/Roland, thus representing the character of the chivalric knight.

As Woolf does in the Renaissance section of *Orlando*, Shakespeare characterizes his Orlando with qualities and behaviors expected of a chivalric knight and lover, but he also gently mocks him by associating him with chivalric conventions that signify defeat. When he risks his life by entering a wrestling match and defeating Charles, a formidable opponent, Orlando demonstrates his strength and courage. But afterwards, when Rosalind gives Orlando her necklace and he finds himself unable to reply, he describes himself in the terms of losing chivalric contests: “Can I not say, thank you? My better parts / Are all thrown down, and that which here stands up / Is but a quintain, a mere lifeless block” (1.2.238-240). Shortly afterwards he laments, “O poor Orlando, thou art overthrown! / Or Charles or something weaker masters thee” (1.2.48-49). He thus compares himself to both a defeated wrestler and a quintain, the post used as a dummy opponent in jousting (Dusinberre 175n). Rosalind’s cousin Celia also describes him in terms of defeated chivalry. First spotting Orlando in the forest under a tree, she describes the scene in terms of

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<sup>3</sup> All quotes from *As You Like It* are taken from The Arden Shakespeare edition, Juliet Dusinberre, ed. London: Arden, 2006.

defeat: “There lay he stretched along like a wounded / knight,” (3.2.233-34). Later, when Orlando arrives late to meet Rosalind/Ganymede, Celia paints an unflattering portrait of him, for he “writers brave verse / speaks brave words, swears brave oaths and breaks them” like “a puny tilter, that spurs his horse but on one side, /breaks his staff like a noble goose” (3.4.36-7; 39-40). Celia sarcastically calls Orlando’s courage into question by contrasting his “brave” words to his clumsy actions, likening him to a “puny tilter” or novice jousting who gallops in a lop-sided way and handles his lance awkwardly (Dusinberre 275n). Celia deflates the grandeur of the chivalric hero with the comical oxymoron, “noble goose.”

Shakespeare draws humor from not only Orlando’s chivalric ineffectuality but also from the excessiveness of his chivalric performance. When he first encounters Duke Senior and his men, Orlando charges into the forest with his sword drawn, shouting, “Forbear and eat no more!” (2.7.87). Jacques, one of the Duke’s men, comically undermines Orlando’s show of manly aggression by replying “Why, I have ate none yet” and calling Orlando a cock for crowing so much (2.7.88,90). Orlando continues to threaten, “But forbear, I say! / He dies that touches any of this fruit / Till I and my affairs are answered”(2.7.98- 100). Shakespeare highlights the silliness of Orlando’s misplaced heroism, for he remains on the offensive although no one challenges him with any force. After he understands that Duke Senior intends to welcome him, Orlando apologizes: “I thought that all things had been savage here / And therefore put I on the countenance / Of stern commandment” (2.7.108-110). He thus admits that his show of aggression was a performance, one that appears ridiculous as it is unnecessary because of the Duke’s graciousness. In this scene Shakespeare parodies the chivalric tradition, thus undermining the grandeur of Orlando’s manly heroism and revealing that at least part of his hero’s masculinity is mere performance—a theme that Woolf takes up in *Orlando* as well.

Throughout *As You Like It*, Shakespeare both invokes and parodies literary conventions associated with chivalric romance and its Renaissance offshoot, Petrarchan love poetry. The suffering of the mad Orlando exemplifies Petrarchan love in both Ariosto's and Greene's incarnations of *Orlando Furioso*; as Marion A. Wells observes, the romance quest of Ariosto's poem centers on "the collapse of Orlando's bittersweet Petrarchan dream of Angelica" and results in the hero's *furor* (96). Shakespeare also shapes much of his hero's outlook towards love according to Petrarchan doctrines. As we will later see, Woolf also invokes and parodies Petrarchan love conventions at the beginning of *Orlando*.

Petrarchan conventions derive from Petrarch's love poems to Laura, first published in the *Canzoniere* in Venice in 1470. According to Maurice Charney, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Italian and English poets developed love formulae following Petrarch's example (9). These conventions include the use of the blason, or the catalogue of the beloved's features, the use of paradox to describe the lover's feelings, love at first sight, love as visually engendered by a woman's beauty, and love melancholy (Charney 9,17,22). Love melancholy "is either one of the signs of falling in love or a symptom of a love that has been repelled or rejected. In the love game it was assumed, as in the school of courtly love, that a mistress should resist the amorous advances of her lover in order to build up the intensity of his passion" (Charney 22). In typical Petrarchan fashion, the aristocratic male lover idealizes and worships his lady through the use of exaggerated comparisons, thus putting his lady on a pedestal. Meanwhile, the lover laments his own suffering and often attributes great cruelty to his lady for not requiting his love. A male lover following Petrarchan conventions would typically express his love in literary form by writing poetry devoted to his lady, particularly in the form of sonnets (Harmon and Holman 390).

Shakespeare's parody of romantic love conventions highlights the self-centered tendency of young male lovers, particularly as they express themselves through the form of the Petrarchan love. Chivalric romance and Petrarchan love poetry present a one-sided view of romance. They exclusively focus on male love; according to the conventions, men actively woo women who play a more passive role, either resisting or yielding to lover's advances. While the male lover supposedly channels all his energies on his beloved, he is actually more narcissistically focused on his own sufferings. I agree with Garber's observation that, as a Petrarchan lover-type, Orlando exhibits a "state of self-absorption" akin to adolescent infatuation. He obsesses over his own feelings while claiming to think only of his lady, Rosalind. Orlando's indulgence in Petrarchan conventions, particularly the writing of love verse, "indicates a lack of maturity and a failure of other-directedness" ("Education" 106). Shakespeare emphasizes the how absurdity, artifice, and narcissism permeates the conventions of chivalric love, particularly in its Petrarchan form.

As Woolf does for Orlando in his male incarnation, Shakespeare refers to Petrarchan love throughout *As You Like It* by creating Orlando as the embodiment of the Petrarchan lover. Meanwhile the other characters in the comedy mock the Petrarchan profession of love for being excessive and artificial. Jacques calls Orlando "Signior Love," (3.2.284) and, in his famous Seven Ages of Man speech, he characterizes the lover as "Sighing like a furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow," thus satirizing the self-dramatizing tendencies of young men who employ Petrarchan conceits such as composing blasons (2.7.148-150).

Rosalind, the object of Orlando's affections, also ridicules the hero's profession of love. With Rosalind, the intelligent and insightful heroine, Shakespeare adds a third dimension to the typically two-dimensional lady of Petrarchan verse. Although in love with Orlando, Rosalind

sees right through the love conventions he employs. When Orlando says he will die if Rosalind does not have him, Rosalind, disguised as the boy Ganymede, points out the falseness of this claim: “Men have / died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but / not for love” (4.1.97-99). However, Rosalind does not convince Orlando, for he answers “I protest her frown might kill me” in true exaggerated Petrarchan fashion (4.1.101). Above all, Rosalind points to the narcissism of Orlando’s romantic pursuits. Ganymede/Rosalind accuses Orlando of being more guilty of “loving yourself / than seeming the lover of any other,” thus criticizing the self-absorption of his supposedly profound love (3.2.368-69). Through Rosalind, Shakespeare voices the strongest skepticism the artificial and narcissistic tendencies of Petrarchan conventions. Shakespeare also incorporates other Petrarchan conventions in the Silvius-Phoebe subplot. When Silvius claims that love is to be made of “All adoration, duty and observance, / All humbleness, all patience and impatience, / All purity, all trial, all obedience” he employs the Petrarchan conceit of the worship of the beloved (5.2.92-94). When Phoebe falls in love at first sight with Rosalind, whom she believes to be the boy Ganymede, she delivers a blason, first remarking on his complexion and his leg, then moving to his face:

There was a pretty redness in his lip,  
 A little riper and more lusty red  
 Than that mixed in his cheek. ’Twas just the difference  
 Betwixt the constant red and mingled damask. (3.5.120-24)

Shakespeare parodies the conventional blason that the male poet would make of his lady by inverting and unsettling the traditional gender roles: the shepherdess who had been the unattainable lady has become the Petrarchan lover, although the audience knows that her object of affection is a woman in men’s clothing.

Shakespeare also parodies the Petrarchan convention of the lover's penning poetry to his lady by making Orlando's verse the butt of many jokes; likewise, Woolf draws on her hero's terrible verse as a source of humor in *Orlando*. Touchstone, the fool, summarizes the artifice of Petrarchan love poetry: "lovers are given to poetry, and what they / swear in poetry may be said, as lovers, they do feign" (3.3.18-19). This feigning becomes apparent when Orlando's poetry has more to do with the assumption of a chivalric lover's outward behavior than it has to do with Rosalind. Garber observes that Orlando's poems "are one-sided, monovocal" and that "they announce an emotion but fail to go further than that; they do not attain the condition of discourse" ("Education" 106). While claiming to be dedicated to Rosalind, they really center on Orlando's own feelings. Orlando fills his verse with idealized, conventional comparisons and Petrarchan hyperbole. Using generic poetic constructions, his verses in no way resemble Rosalind. Riddled with clichés, vague enough to describe any lady, and more focused on his own obsession than his proclaimed object of desire, Orlando's poems merely copy Petrarchan conceits without originality.

Shakespeare broadens the comedy by making Orlando's verse not only hackneyed, but also excruciatingly bad. After finding a lyric by an anonymous poet hanging on a tree in the forest, Touchstone, the fool, relentlessly satirizes the poem, remarking that "the tree yields bad fruit" (3.2.113). Rosalind, the object of the poem, appears less flattered by the poems than appalled by their lack of quality. She comments on the ineffective meter, saying "the feet were lame" (3.2.165) and that the content is no better: "what tedious homily / of love you have wearied your parishioners withal" (3.2.152-53). By making Orlando's skills at poetry writing so terrible, Shakespeare highlights the silliness of the Petrarchan lover convention. Orlando writes poetry not because he has any talent or anything original to express, but because he believes he



should follow the fashion for young men to express their deep and abiding love through Petrarchan love poetry.

The medium on which Orlando records his terrible poetry links him to the earlier literary Orlandos. Entering the Forest of Arden soon after falling in love with Rosalind, he plans to carve his poetry on the trees (3.3.5-10). Here Shakespeare follows Lodge's novel, for Rosader also carves poems in trees (Muir 129). However, by naming his hero Orlando, Shakespeare alludes to the heroes in Ariosto's and Greene's texts and the well-known scenes of their madness in the forest when finding the beloved Angelica's name carved on trees. Shakespeare plays off that scene to comically highlight the excessive, narcissistic suffering of conventional romantic heroes.

Despite the parody of chivalric masculinity and formulaic Petrarchan conventions that runs throughout *As You Like It*, Shakespeare does not produce Orlando just to ridicule him; like Woolf in her novel, Shakespeare displays more affectionate teasing than outright mockery. He does not create Orlando as a buffoon but as a self-indulgent young man who needs to be molded—largely by Rosalind—into a proper suitor. Although Shakespeare fills *As You Like It* with cross-dressing and highlights some aspects of gender as artifice, it is necessary to read the play in terms of its entire narrative arc. Unlike Stephen J. Lynch, who argues that the comedy “continually deconstructs the very concept of . . . natural gender” and only “lapses into moments of conservatism,” (21) I maintain that the play follows a trajectory that moves from jokes at the expense of chivalric masculine behavior to a restoration of conventional gender roles, including chivalric masculinity. I concur with Garber's reading that Rosalind/Ganymede helps Orlando by educating him; during the course of the play Orlando transforms himself from a youth who “has immersed himself in a pseudo-Petrarchan fantasy world” (“Education” 106) to a maturing young man who, in his own words, “can no longer live by thinking” (5.2.49). Although Rosalind wittily

runs circles around Orlando, Shakespeare gives him qualities throughout the play that show his potential to demonstrate the virtues of chivalry. At the beginning of the play, not only does Orlando display his masculinity and physical prowess in the wrestling match, but also his nobility of character is evident when contrasted to his brother Oliver's pettiness. Also, Orlando remains loyal to the old family servant, Adam, and generously carries him on his back when he grows weak from hunger (2.7.168).

Shakespeare ultimately allows Orlando to fulfill his potential as a chivalric hero. All of Orlando's promise comes to fruition in Act 4, albeit off-stage, when he rescues his brother Oliver, who has conveniently changed his wicked ways. Oliver, bearing a napkin stained with his brother's blood, describes Orlando's feat to Rosalind and Celia. Orlando happens upon a "wretched ragged man" sleeping under an oak tree, unaware that he is about to be attacked by a snake and a lioness (4.3.107-117). The snake, clearly a symbol of evil from the biblical Garden of Eden story, retreats at Orlando's approach, an event which indicates that the nobility of his spirit alone suffices to scare off the threat of evil and impending doom. Moreover, as Dunsinville observes, the iconography of the lion and the serpent, taken together, alludes to a biblical image from the book of Psalms and commonly served as symbols in medieval romance tales, thus establishing Orlando as a "romantic hero and Christian knight" (310, 113n). After spotting the lioness, Orlando recognizes the man of the forest to be his treacherous brother Oliver. Although Orlando twice considers leaving his brother to fate, Oliver reports that he ultimately changes his mind, choosing "kindness, nobler ever than revenge" although he would have been justified in seeking vengeance (4.3.127); this noble kindness "Made him give battle to the lioness / Which quickly fell before him" (4.3.129-130). In this action, Orlando saves Oliver from his death, demonstrating his ability to forgive and to risk his life for a brother who had banished him while

fulfilling his duty as a chivalric hero. To complete his chivalric deed, he sustains a flesh wound, crying out for his lady love Rosalind while fainting from the loss of blood (4.3.145-148).

The episode with the lioness and the snake serves to restore conventional gender roles. While Orlando demonstrates his masculinity and chivalric heroism, Rosalind, still disguised as the clever and composed youth Ganymede, femininely swoons at the sight of Orlando's blood. Although she tries to pretend that her swoon was mere "counterfeit," Oliver remains skeptical as he comments "This was not counterfeit . . . it was a passion of earnest" (4.3.168-170) and questions Ganymede's masculinity, asking, "You a man? / You lack a man's heart" (4.3.163-4). Oliver ultimately advises Ganymede to "counterfeit to / be a man" (4.3.171-2). Of course, the joke is that Rosalind has been counterfeiting to be a man all along, but this event reveals that her act cannot last much longer. Rosalind's ability to continue with her masculine disguise is unraveling.

Through much of the comedy, Shakespeare has allowed Rosalind to succeed in her enactment of masculinity and has highlighted Orlando's masculinity as performance, but as the play heads towards its conclusion, the lovers fulfill conventional gender roles, pointing to innate gender difference beneath the layers of masquerade and irony. Although Shakespeare satirizes the displays of manliness that abound in traditional chivalry and the idealization of femininity in Petrarchan love poetry, he ultimately sustains conservative gender roles. Shakespeare's Orlando transforms from a flawed chivalric lover into a true chivalric hero who embodies the qualities of courage, loyalty, and honor while, with the help of Rosalind, he successfully shrugs off his grandiose Petrarchan love sentiments.

#### IV. Woolf Writing With Shakespeare

In *Orlando*, Woolf draws on many elements found in Shakespeare's cross-dressing comedies like *As You Like It*. Like Shakespeare, Woolf alludes to the hero of Aristotle's epic in her choice of Orlando's name and chivalric lineage. Woolf writes with Shakespeare as she affectionately teases her Orlando to critique the excesses of chivalry and the artifice and narcissism of Petrarchan romantic love conventions. Moreover, Woolf draws on the Shakespearean motifs of gender-bending and cross-dressing to create an androgynous hero/heroine who benefits from the experience of living as a man and a woman. Using parody and allusion to Shakespeare, Woolf highlights comic elements that point to the limitations of conventional masculinity.

Woolf begins the novel *Orlando* in the Elizabethan era and also characterizes her Orlando, like Shakespeare's, as an heir to a chivalric tradition. The first sentence introduces Orlando in an act of solitary pseudo-military training, for he "was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from its rafters" (13). Orlando had acquired the Moor's head through ancestral chivalric pursuits: "Orlando's father, or perhaps his grandfather, had struck it from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa" (13). Indeed, Woolf initially indicates that Orlando intends to fulfill the chivalric heritage of his forefathers: "Orlando's fathers had ridden in fields of asphodel, and stony fields, and fields watered by strange rivers, and they had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters. So too would Orlando, he vowed" (13). Because Orlando is too young to fight, he instead likes to "go to his attic room and there lunge and plunge and slice the air with his blade. Sometimes he cut the cord so that the skull bumped on the floor and he had to string it up again, fastening it with some chivalry almost out of reach so that his

enemy grinned at him though shrunk, black lips triumphantly” (13-14). Woolf ironically uses the term *chivalry* to deflate its pretensions of justice and honor, as if Orlando battling a grotesque severed head “almost out of reach” constitutes a fair fight.

Orlando’s chivalric lineage is underscored by his aristocratic status. “His fathers had been noble since they had been at all. They came out of the northern mists wearing coronets on their heads” (14). The attic has “the stained glass of a vast coat of arms in the window. Orlando stood now in the midst of the yellow body of an heraldic leopard,” thus showing Orlando to be a character whose chivalric qualities are projected upon him by his rank, and not emanating from within himself (14).

While Woolf paints Orlando’s lineage as noble, she particularly situates his current chivalric status as dependent on the patronage of Queen Elizabeth I. Thus Woolf draws on what Ferguson characterizes as the Elizabethan neo-chivalric revival, which “owed much of its peculiar character to its association with the monarchy, more particularly to the fantastic cult that grew up around the person of the queen” (75). According to Ferguson, Elizabeth emphasized “the courtly aspect of the chivalric tradition. Her courtiers were her knights, and she the royal mistress, unattainable yet at once the object of the purest devotion and the inspiration for knightly deeds” (76). She also revived the Order of the Garter, an old medieval knightly order “calculated to bring the higher aristocracy together in a common brotherhood of chivalry, united in allegiance to the ruler” (76). In *Orlando*, Elizabeth gives Orlando’s father the country manor that serves as a constant fixture throughout Orlando’s long life, an event which alludes to Queen Elizabeth’s bestowal of Vita Sackville-West’s family estate, Knole, to her aristocratic ancestors, as recorded in *Knole and the Sackvilles* (Bowlby 154). Woolf fancifully invents Orlando as a favorite of the Virgin Queen. Elizabeth immediately sizes Orlando up as “the very image of a

noble gentleman” (24) and “[w]hen she drove in state he rode at the carriage door. She sent him to Scotland on a sad embassy to the unhappy Queen” (25). She bestows upon him highest offices and neo-chivalric rank, for she named him her “Treasurer and Steward; next hung about him chains of office; and bidding him bend his knee, tied round it at the slenderest part the jewelled order of the Garter” (25). The Elizabethan revival of neo-chivalry that Woolf jocularly invokes in *Orlando* rests on ritual rather than substance.

In *Orlando*, Woolf also writes along Shakespeare with her critique of Petrarchism. Rebecca Laroche argues that in *Room* Woolf “presents an overtly anti-Petrarchan position,” (192) and I would like to add to her argument with an exploration of Woolf’s anti-Petrarchism in *Orlando*. Woolf characterizes Orlando as a Petrarchan lover during his experience with Sasha, the Russian princess, in King James’ court during the Great Freeze of the early seventeenth century. Woolf comically intertwines Orlando’s experience of love with his poetic pursuits. When seeing Sasha skating on the ice, he experiences love at first sight with Petrarchan exaggeration: “Orlando stared; trembled; turned hot; turned cold; longed to hurl himself through the summer air; to crush acorns beneath his feet; to toss his arms with the beech trees and the oaks” (38). His feelings cause him to wax poetical: “Images, metaphors of the most extreme and extravagant twined and twisted in his mind. He called her a melon, a pineapple, an olive tree, an emerald, a fox in the snow all in the space of three seconds” (37). However, the narrator intervenes to point out that Orlando’s images in fact “were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy” (37). Woolf thus parodies the Petrarchan conceit of comparing the beloved to idealize images, pointing out, as Shakespeare had, that the lover is more narcissistically focused on his own feelings rather than his supposed object of affection. When Orlando gets to know the Russian princess he nicknames her Sasha, not because it is connected to her name but “because it

was the name of a white Russian fox he had had as a boy” (44). All of his references for the beloved lady actually refer back to him.

Woolf affectionately laughs at Orlando’s ineffectuality as a lover and a poet just as Shakespeare does for his own Orlando. At the banquet where Orlando and Sasha first converse, Woolf provides a comic illustration of Orlando’s pitiful attempt at poetry:

For as he looked the thickness of his blood melted; the ice turned to wine in his veins; he heard the waters flowing and the birds singing; spring broke over the hard wintry landscape; his manhood woke; he grasped a sword in his hand; he charged a more daring foe than Pole or Moor; he dived in deep water; he saw the flower of danger growing in a crevice; he stretched his hand—in fact he was rattling off one of his most impassioned sonnets when the Princess addressed him, “Would you have the goodness to pass the salt?” (40)

By using clichéd nature and military metaphors that typically invoke sexual intercourse, and then using the Princess to defer climax and deflate the grandiosity of his passions, Woolf playfully teases Orlando’s foray as a chivalric lover and poet.

Although Woolf allows Orlando to consummate his relationship with Sasha, they ultimately lack a deeper connection. Although Orlando has plenty to say, telling “her that she was a fox, an olive tree, or a green hill-top, and had given her the whole history of his family,” Sasha responds with silence. Rather than thinking he may be at fault, Orlando instead suspects that Sasha is to blame, perhaps because her birth is lower than she admits. His suspicions reveals his real loathing for her, and how much his love is based on his visual experience of her beauty, for he imagines with horror how she will look in the future, “at forty grown unwieldy though she was now slim as a reed, and lethargic though she was now blithe as a lark” (53). Woolf creates a

comically narcissistic would-be male poet who obsesses over his own feelings while ignoring the actual feeling of the woman he supposedly loves desperately.

Another dimension of Orlando's self-obsessed experience with love for Sasha is his devolution into jealousy which fulfills the *furioso* qualities of his namesake. Like Ariosto's Orlando, who, crying and howling, falls into a fit of murderous rage after discovering that his beloved lady has fallen in love with a common soldier, Orlando thinks he sees Sasha lying "in the arms of a common seaman" (52). Also like Ariosto's hero, his jealousy manifests itself in hyperbolic proportions, for after seeing a vision of Sasha and the sailor in an embrace, "the light was blotted out in a red cloud by his rage. He blazed into such a howl of anguish that the whole ship echoed. Sasha threw herself between them, or the sailor would have been stifled before he could draw his cutlass. Then a deadly sickness came over Orlando, and they had to lay him on the floor and give him brandy to drink before he revived" (51). With Orlando's rage, then stupor, Woolf parodies the jealous frenzy of his character's literary forerunner.

In constructing Orlando's envy, Woolf also alludes to Shakespeare's *furioso* lover, Othello. After Sasha denies having any dalliance with the sailor and soothes Orlando's suspicions, the lovers head back towards the Royal court which is on one end of the frozen Thames River. However, the entrance is barred by a crowd of London's "riff-raff" watching a production of *Othello*, and Orlando happens upon it during the scene in which the Moor kills Desdemona. Orlando identifies with Othello: "The frenzy of the Moor seemed to him his own frenzy, and when the Moor suffocated the woman in her bed it was Sasha he killed with his own hands" (57). His fantasy of murdering Sasha plunges him first into despair, then desperate passion. While it is ambiguous whether Sasha's infidelity is real or only in Orlando's imagination, the allusion to *Othello* suggests that Orlando's suspicions are actually based on



nothing but jealous fantasy. Woolf configures Orlando's jealousy as another feature of his self-centered experience of love.

Sasha's abandonment plunges Orlando into a deep, long-lasting melancholy. Woolf parodies the love-melancholy that was so fashionable in the Renaissance, highlighting Orlando's love as narcissistic. Thus Woolf further writes alongside Shakespeare; according to de Gay, Orlando plays the role of "the Shakespearean tragic hero in his period of dejection after losing Sasha" in his visits to his family's crypt and indulging in a Hamlet-like obsession about mortality while pondering the skeletal remains of his ancestors. Orlando, handling some ancient bones, asks "Whose hand was it? . . . The hand of man or woman, of age or youth? Had it urged the war horse, or plied the needle? Had it plucked the rose or grasped cold steel?" (69) echoing Hamlet's ruminations "in the grave-digging scene at the opening of Act V, where he speculates whether a skull (which turns out to be Yorick's) had belonged to a politician, a courtier or a lawyer" (de Gay 149). Woolf writes alongside Shakespeare throughout the entire Sasha episode and its aftermath by parodically framing Orlando as flawed chivalric heir, Petrarchan lover, terrible poet and self-indulgent melancholic.

Woolf finds inspiration from Shakespeare's motif of cross-dressing and gender ambiguity as she creates an androgynous character who is able to experience life from the perspective of both sexes. During the Renaissance section of the novel, Orlando is a man, but while living abroad in Turkey as a diplomat for Charles II, he becomes a woman. Orlando, now a she, re-enters England during the reign of Queen Anne. During the eighteenth century, Orlando experiences life as an English lady, yet retains a good bit of freedom by frequently cross-dressing. Woolf transforms her hero from a would-be chivalric lover to an androgynous hero/heroine of unstable gender identity. Woolf draws on the literary tradition not only of the chivalric Orlando,

but also of Shakespeare's Rosalind, a female character who dresses as a boy and then pretends to be a girl so her suitor can practice courtship—all gender permutations, of course, played on the Renaissance stage by a boy. Woolf summarizes this kind of gender-bending confusion after Orlando's transformation to a woman: "In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above" (189). Although, as DiPietro observes, Woolf never resolves the question of whether or not gender is completely a sociocultural construct (188), she does play, as Shakespeare does, with transvestism to create an androgynous character who "takes on" the perspective of both sexes.

#### V. "Women and the fiction that is written about them": Woolf Presses Beyond Shakespeare

In her creation of Orlando early in the novel as a comically conventional figure who embodies ersatz chivalric qualities, practices Petrarchan love conceits, devolves into a jealous frenzy, and sinks into self-absorbed love-melancholy, Woolf writes with Shakespeare. However, with her transformation of Orlando into a woman, Woolf departs from Shakespeare, for she never restores her hero's chivalric potential, but in fact inverts Shakespeare's usual cross-dressing formula in which the comic heroines such as Rosalind and Viola from *Twelfth Night* who temporarily take on men's clothing and the male perspective. As Froula argues, "Woolf goes . . . Rosalind and Viola one better by changing Orlando's sex *in media ras*," for "where Shakespeare, a man, creates Rosalind, a woman, who becomes Ganymede, a man of sorts who yet resembles a woman, Woolf, a woman, appropriates Shakespeare's Orlando and recreates him as a man who becomes a woman who sometimes dresses as a man and yet gives birth to a baby"

(130). Woolf transforms Shakespeare's Orlando into Shakespeare's Rosalind. Rather than merely getting her character to cross-dress—which Orlando does frequently during the eighteenth century—Woolf also gets her male hero to experience the woman's point of view,<sup>4</sup> including women's interactions with other women, an area where Woolf criticizes Shakespeare for falling short. Whereas Shakespeare's Orlando gets educated by Rosalind dressed in boy's clothing, Woolf's Orlando gets an education by transforming into a woman, thus learning how her early experience had all been from the perspective of the male lover. Orlando, the former boy, is able to gain a woman's perspective, from which she reflects on how conventional romantic love and conventional gender roles can be harmful to women.

Before Orlando transforms into a woman, he first experiences heartbreak as a man with the Sasha affair. In Orlando's experience after Sasha, Woolf depicts how one source of misogyny in literature can be traced to male poets' experiences as jilted lovers. When Sasha jilts Orlando, leaving London without any explanation, Orlando flies into a rage, unleashing his misogyny: "he hurled at the faithless woman all the insults that have ever been the lot of her sex. Faithless, mutable, fickle, he called her; devil, adulteress, deceiver" (64). Woolf emphasizes that these monikers do not accurately describe women as they are but as they are seen by embittered lovers. When Orlando, in his melancholy, turns again to writing, he pictures "the mocking face of the Princess and asked himself a million questions instantly which were as arrows dipped in gall . . . All of which so drove their venom into him that, as if to vent his agony somewhere, he plunged

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<sup>4</sup> My reading of Orlando's sex change differs from that of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (*No Man's Land, Vol. 2: Sexchanges* 344-346), who read Orlando's trans-sexualism as mere transvestism. I argue that transvestism is only one aspect of Orlando's experience, and that Woolf's title character changes her anatomy as well as her wardrobe.

his quill so deep into the inkhorn that the ink spirted into the table” (79). Woolf depicts Orlando in his heartache as too bitter to be able to create effectively. In this sexualized image, Woolf compares the writer’s ink to spilled semen, suggesting that the lover is too skewed by sexual passion to present the beloved with any objectivity.

In *Room*, Woolf theorizes the multifarious sources of misogyny and includes in her discussion the idea that male sexual desire plays an influential role in the misogynous representations of female characters in literature. She argues that as a result of their desire for women, male authors have created “the peculiar nature of women in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity—for so a lover would see her as his love rose or sank, was prosperous or unhappy” (83). Woolf underscores the need to recognize that all ideas come from a certain point of view—women have been both over-idealized and demonized so often in literature because most literature has been written by men. As long as a writer is trapped in his own subjectivity—as Orlando is when ruminating on Sasha—he cannot hope to write with greater insight. For Woolf, a writer’s sex and sexual desire often tends to limit his or her ability to write about the opposite sex, for “a man is terribly hampered and partial in his knowledge of women, as a woman in her knowledge of men” (83). Of course, practically everyone is confined to just one sex; in *Room* Woolf attempts to address this limitation with her appropriation of Coleridge’s theory of androgyny, and in *Orlando* she dramatizes this theory by having Orlando change sex.

Orlando’s transformation into a woman leads her to a growing awareness of how her life as a man had limited her understanding of women. After becoming a woman while living abroad, Orlando takes a trip back to England on a ship called the *Enamoured Lady* and reflects on her new gender. She learns what it is like to be a woman, on the receiving end of gallantry. After the

ship's captain helps her to dinner with the utmost courtesy, she experiences a thrill, and it "recalled the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha . . . then she had pursued, now she fled" (155). Orlando realizes that she is now experiencing the other side of conventional male-female relations, which at first excites her. But her excitement turns into dismay when she realizes she must face "the sacred responsibilities of womanhood" (157), including the expectation that she must care how men think of her, just as she had done as a man: "She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that a woman be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled" (156). She then vacillates between her horror at how limited she will be as a woman, and her delight in womanhood as freedom from ambition and desire for power.

Her transformation of sex gives Orlando new insight into her former beloved lady, for she is able to break out of the one-sidedness of conventional romantic love. She manages to see Sasha afresh: "At last, she cried, she knew Sasha as she was" (161). Formerly, as a man, Orlando could only see Sasha as he had wanted her to be, in his own terms. But as Orlando approaches the sight of the cliffs of her native land, she not only knows Sasha for who she is but also identifies with Sasha. She again begins to worry that her arrival in England as a woman might mean unbearable conventionality, slavery, deceit, and oppression, and she felt, "scampering up and down within her, like some derisive ghost who, in another instant will pick up her skirts and flaunt out of sight, Sasha the lost, Sasha the memory, whose reality she had proved just now so surprisingly" (163). In contrast to the previous identification with Othello and his fantasy of strangling Sasha, Orlando now knows how Sasha felt in both her anger at England and her hunger for freedom. Orlando, by changing from a male hero to a woman, is able to recast his/her beloved lady; she sees Sasha no longer either as a fox in the snow or a devil, but as she is.

In *Orlando*, Woolf uses cross-dressing and gender ambiguity, motifs found in several Shakespearean comedies, to introduce same-sex attraction, but in a way that presses beyond Shakespeare. De Gay argues that Woolf's use of transvestism alludes to *Twelfth Night*, for Orlando, as a woman, dresses as a man to enable "same-sex encounters under the cover of their appearing heterosexual," just as Viola in *Twelfth Night* dresses as a man and causes the attraction of Olivia. De Gay concludes that "the gender ambiguities of the Renaissance stage allow Woolf to validate same-sex attraction while escaping the attention of the censors" (152-3). De Gay makes a worthwhile observation, yet I suggest that Woolf uses the motifs of cross-dressing and lesbian attraction in *Orlando* to significantly invert Shakespeare's comic formula. *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It* both feature a subplot wherein female characters, Olivia and the shepherdess Phoebe, respectively, become attracted to the heroines while dressed as boys. The masculine clothing that the heroines wear effectively dupes Phoebe and Olivia into being unwittingly attracted to women for comic effect, a ruse which ends when Viola and Rosalind reveal their female gender identity. The cross-dressed ladies Viola and Rosalind do not return the love of the enamored ladies but stay focused on the men they are trying to pursue. However, Woolf uses transvestism to enable a knowing lesbian attraction on behalf of the woman dressed as a man. During the eighteenth century, Orlando begins to go out in public dressed as a man, once again experiencing the "freedom of her legs" while in breeches, temporarily released from her petticoats (215). She encounters Nell, a prostitute, and re-enacts the chivalry that she had formerly exercised as a man: "Orlando swept her hat off to her in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public place" (216). This enactment of courtship rites in fact results in Orlando's sexual attraction: "To feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man" (216-7). The lesbian desire is

experienced by the heroine in masculine disguise, not by Nell, who does not appear to reciprocate Orlando's desire at all. After Orlando reveals her gender as actually female, Nell bursts out laughing and admits, "I'm by no means sorry to hear it . . . I'm not in the mood for the society of the other sex to-night" (218). There is comedy in this scene, but not at the expense of Orlando's attraction for another woman. Woolf allows her heroine, if only momentarily, to like another woman, just as in *Room* Chloe is able, for "perhaps the first time in literature," to like Olivia openly (*Room* 82). Woolf's creates a scenario that unfolds as if Rosalind, in her masculine disguise, falls for Phoebe, rather than the other way around. Woolf uses the Shakespearean motif of transvestism to introduce same-sex attraction, but she inverts Shakespeare's formula to present Orlando's conscious lesbian desire.

In both *Room* and *Orlando* Woolf questions the portrayal of women in literature, not only insofar as they are skewed by the perspective of the lover, but also how they have rarely been explored in relation to each other. It is on the subject of women's relations to each other that Woolf most strongly critiques Shakespeare's writings, for, she argues that in the literary tradition women are "not only seen by the other sex, but seen only in relation to the other sex" (82). In the "Chloe liked Olivia" passage in *Room*, Woolf begins by pointing to a lesbian relationship. She then expands her interpretation, highlighting the scarcity of all kinds of women's relationships in literature, both sexual and non-sexual. She contrasts Chloe and Olivia's relationship to the one portrayed in *Antony and Cleopatra*. "Chloe liked Olivia perhaps for the first time in literature. Cleopatra did not like Octavia . . . the whole thing is simplified, conventionalised, if one dared say it, absurdly. Cleopatra's only feeling about Octavia is one of jealousy. . . . But how interesting it would have been if the relationship between the two women had been more complicated" (82). For Woolf, Shakespeare is guilty of reducing the relationships between women to rivalry—even to

absurdly simplified extremes. The depiction of women as rivals is essentially an extension of the male writer's perspective as lover, for it only represents the relationship between two women when a third, necessarily male character is present to complete a love triangle. Woolf implies that male authors have not been able to imagine significant relations between two women without any man involved.

Just as, for Woolf, the stance of the chivalric/Petrarchan lover damages women, the male-lover-as-writer limits the portrayal of women, allowing only simple characterizations. She uses Shakespearean characters to contrast great male heroes who are portrayed in their fullness, as opposed to Cleopatra and Octavia:

Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer! We might perhaps have most of Othello; and a good deal of Antony; but no Caesar, no Brutus, no Hamlet, no Lear, no Jaques—literature would be incredibly impoverished, as indeed literature is impoverished beyond our counting by the doors that have been shut upon women. (85)

Woolf implicates Shakespeare, who presents male characters whole and entire but female characters only as beloved by men and romantic rivals to other women. At an earlier point in the essay, Woolf downplays Shakespearean heroines, saying, "Cleopatra must have had a way with her; Lady Macbeth, one would suppose, had a will of her own; Rosalind, one might conclude, was an attractive girl" (42). Thus, Woolf portrays Shakespeare, despite his greatness and achievement of androgyny, as guilty of privileging males over females in literary characterization. Although Shakespeare's works have greatly enriched literature, he has



contributed to a greater literary tradition that has remained “impoverished” by its relative neglect of women. Woolf addresses the literary portrayal of women’s relationships in *Orlando*. During the Augustan Age, Orlando’s cross-dressing expeditions lead to a platonic rapport with a prostitute, Nell, and her fellow street-walking companions. Woolf presents the encounter as a challenge to misogynist ideas that limit women’s relations to each other by pretending to confide in her readers only after ensuring men are out of earshot, a device she echoes in *Room*. As noted in Section 2, gentlemen clients visiting the prostitute’s quarters make pronouncements on the nature of women’s relations to each other. One claims, ““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”” (219). Another gentleman adds, ““women are incapable of any feeling of affection for their own sex and hold each other in the greatest aversion”” (220). The pronouncements of the prostitutes’ customers summarize the men’s supposed expertise on women. According to patriarchal thinking, women’s relations are impossible. Thus, women’s relationships have been largely absent in canonical literature written by men.

Woolf highlights the missing exploration of women’s lives in Shakespeare’s art. Froula observes that Woolf makes Shakespeare an exemplary but incomplete model, for his “art manifests poetic power at its fullest and freest, but he still leaves half the cultural canvas blank for women’s representations, potentially equally full and free, but different, because of women’s different perspectives” (136). Woolf claims Shakespeare as a powerful influence but notes the cracks in his writing regarding the representation of women in general, and women’s relations to one another in particular. Gender complicates Woolf’s response to Shakespeare, for although she maintains that he transmits his ideas through his art better than any other artist, because of his sex he still is “hampered and partial in his knowledge of women” (*Room* 83). For Woolf, only

women writers and scholars can truly explore the as of yet unrecorded experiences of women alone, “unlit by the capricious and colored light of the other sex” (*Room* 84).

## VI. The Possibility of Women Writing: Nick Greene, Orlando, and Judith Shakespeare

To this point I have considered Woolf’s reading of Shakespeare regarding his treatment of gender roles and the characterization of women in his plays. However, a study of Woolf’s thoughts on Shakespeare, gender roles, and literary inheritance would be incomplete without a consideration of how Woolf uses the figure of Shakespeare to explore the role of women writers—or their relative absence—within English literary history. For, as Woolf says on the opening page of *Room*, the topic of women and fiction might mean “women and what they are like; or it might mean women and the fiction they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together” (3). In *Room*, Woolf considers questions of literary representation, intellectual history, and women’s socio-cultural status in order to explore the particular challenges that women writers and thinkers meet. For Woolf, literary representations of women have had a strong cultural influence on women in general, but the predominantly male literary and intellectual traditions have presented particular obstacles for women writers. It is necessary to explore how Woolf uses the figure of Shakespeare to explore the obstacles that women writers have faced—and continue to face—in their attempts to create art.

In *Room*, Woolf famously creates the fable of Shakespeare’s sister Judith, who possesses all the literary “genius” of her brother but finds herself thwarted in her attempt to exercise her writing abilities because of her sex. Woolf thus employs the figure of Shakespeare to construct the unknown history of would-be women writers, using his presence to highlight the absence of

contemporary women writers in the annals of literary history.<sup>5</sup> I would like to add to the discussion an exploration of the character of Nick Greene, who appears in both *Orlando* and *Room* as an insidious contemporary of Shakespeare. Woolf uses Greene's malignant presence to highlight the role that sexual difference has made for writers in English literary history: whereas male writers such as Shakespeare have benefitted from gender privilege, women writers have faced particular obstacles that have often crushed their attempts at artistic creation.

Perhaps the most concrete link between *Orlando* and *Room* goes through Shakespeare: the character of Nick Greene appears in both texts. Alice Fox observes that Nick Greene in *Orlando* is "modelled in part on Robert Greene" (166). Briggs describes Shakespeare's "rival playwright and pamphleteer Robert Greene as the 'Salieri to his Amadeus'" (16). Later generations know of Greene's envy of Shakespeare because, in his posthumously published pamphlet *Greene's Groatsworth of Wit*, 1594, he attacked the bard by calling him "an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers" (84). According to Charles W. Crupi, Greene's reputation has been largely founded on this attack as well his reputation "as the most prolific and most shameless of Elizabethan literary hacks" who lived in depravity and died in poverty ("Preface").

In *Orlando*, Woolf vilifies Nick Greene, the "scurrilous penny-a-liner," who, like Robert Greene, is a Renaissance hack writer, lives in squalor, and delivers diatribes against Shakespeare. Woolf portrays him as unpleasant as his envious namesake is reputed to have been, for Nick Greene "seemed as if he were more used to scold than to flatter; to quarrel than to coo; to

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<sup>5</sup> That is, the history of women's writing was unknown to Woolf at the time. In *Writing Women's Literary History* (1993) Margaret Ezell critiques Woolf's insistence in *Room* that women's writing began with Aphra Behn in the eighteenth century, a claim which excises numerous Renaissance women writers from history.

scramble than to ride; to struggle than to rest; to hate than to love” (85). Greene denounces the idea that the Elizabethan was an age of great literature and that Shakespeare was the most important poet of the era (89-90). He also accuses Shakespeare of stealing from Marlowe as well as ironically making the charges that Shakespeare is a hack writer and a reckless libertine (88-91). Woolf has great fun with Greene’s hypocrisy. He claims to live for great literature of the ancients, which captures “La Gloire” (clumsily pronounced “Glawr”), and lambasts other Elizabethan writers for their commercial ambitions, especially Shakespeare, who would “pour out any trash that would sell” (89). Meanwhile, however, his comments on literature consistently turn towards the commercial. About the nature of poetry, Greene merely comments that it is “harder to sell than prose, and though the lines were shorter took longer in the writing” (87). Moreover, Greene pointedly taps into the aristocratic Orlando as a financial resource by talking him into subsidizing his literary efforts with a quarterly pension.

Orlando, like his beloved Shakespeare, falls victim to Nick Greene’s disdain. Despite Orlando’s agreement to pay the writer’s pension, Greene treacherously publishes a satirical pamphlet lampooning his patron’s character and attempt at verse (95). For Orlando, Greene becomes a force that stifles creativity, for, as a result of this encounter, he burns all but one of his poems and enters a period of seclusion. Of course, unlike Shakespeare, Orlando at this point is an awful writer. Woolf pokes fun of Orlando’s derivative juvenilia, such as “The Death of Hercules,” which all tend to contain “some mythological personage at a crisis of his career” (76). As such, the destruction of these early plays cannot be considered tragic. Nevertheless, Orlando internalizes Nick Greene’s criticism, “as if that sardonic loose-lipped man, treacherous as he had proved himself, were the Muse in person, and it was to him that Orlando must do homage” (103). Interestingly, Woolf casts Greene as the “Muse,” but one who is unkind and hostile rather than

inspirational. Greene, with his nay-saying sneer, represents an obstacle that Orlando must overcome in order to continue to write, which he does: “‘I’ll be blasted,’ he said, ‘if I ever write another word, or try to write another word to please Nick Greene or the Muse. Bad, good, or indifferent, I’ll write, from this day forward, to please myself’” (103). Although his criticism holds much more power over Orlando, Nick Greene represents an oppositional force for both him and Shakespeare, for he attacks the writing of both.

During the nineteenth-century section of *Orlando*, Nick Greene appears again, and, while no longer on the attack, he still serves as a force to thwart the creative spirit. At their later meeting, Orlando is now a woman, and Nick has become Sir Nicholas, a wealthy gentleman, knight, professor, and “the most influential critic of the Victorian age” (277). Although his spirit remains the same, his opinions about both Shakespeare’s and Orlando’s verse have completely changed: he now considers Shakespeare a literary giant, and he eagerly publishes Orlando’s poem, *The Oak Tree*, which earns her a literary prize. And yet, Greene still serves to thwart Orlando’s creative production. His Victorian incarnation symbolizes the nineteenth-century literary establishment, which Orlando finds disappointing, for she had considered literature “as something wild as the wind, hot as fire, swift as lightning; something errant, incalculable, abrupt, and behold, literature was an elderly gentleman in a grey suit talking about duchesses” (279-80). He introduces Orlando to the world of literary scholarship, which stifles her creativity, for, upon reading Greene and fellow critics, “they made one feel—it was an extremely uncomfortable feeling—one must never, never say what one thought . . . one must always, always, write like somebody else. (The tears formed themselves in her eyes)” (285). Despite his continued claims of writing poetry for “La Gloire,” Greene in his Victorian incarnation represents the preoccupation with fame, wealth, and status, values that Orlando finds inimical to true literature.

Significantly, Greene is the only other character in *Orlando* besides its hero/ine to experience immortality. Woolf creates the undying character of Greene to represent a synthesis of cynical but ever-present forces in the literary world. Greene's immortality demonstrates that writers will always face obstacles in the literary world in the form of those who will meet their creative efforts with petty jealousy, destructive criticism, commercial opportunism, or soul-deadening appropriation into the conventional literary mainstream.

While Nick Greene in *Orlando* is a kind of anti-muse who stifles originality, attacks fellow-poets, and reduces literature to its monetary worth, he appears in an even more insidious form in *Room*. Woolf creates the fable of Judith Shakespeare, the bard's imaginary sister, to invent a history to address the charge by an unnamed bishop (a figure of patriarchal authority) who claims that "[w]omen cannot write the plays of Shakespeare" (46). In the fable, Judith, equally as talented as her poetic brother, attempts to practice her art, only to encounter Nick Greene, an actor-manager who is openly misogynist, initially joking that "a woman acting put him in mind of a dog dancing" and that no woman "could possibly be an actress" (54, 48). He then seduces and impregnates Judith, a turn of events that leads her to commit suicide, thus silencing her voice, and, by implication, all potential women writers of Shakespeare's time. Woolf recounts the Judith Shakespeare narrative like a fable, and in doing so, both Judith and Nick Greene are drawn in only a few broad strokes. Woolf gives no other characterization of Greene than his misogynous comments and his seduction of Judith, and so his character is much sparer than in *Orlando*. But Woolf, writing these texts at roughly the same time, significantly retained the character's name from the novel with its allusion to the notorious profligate, Robert Greene. Accordingly, it is reasonable to compare the two manifestations of Nick Greene across the two texts. Like Robert Greene attacking Shakespeare in print, the Renaissance-era Nick

Greene in *Orlando* satirizes Orlando as a male writer, thus embarrassing him and temporarily silencing his writing. However, Greene in *Room* has vastly more power over Judith, the female writer, and through his seduction of her, and is able to forestall the possibility of her writing at all. This comparison between the power of the Greene character over the male Orlando and the female Judith amplifies the more overt contrast Woolf makes between William and Judith. The Robert/Nick Greenes of the world may be spiteful and antagonistic towards other male writers, but they have the power to silence women writers completely.

In *Room*, Woolf creates Nick Greene as a continued malignant presence, for he represents the oppressive forces of patriarchy that target women's attempts to create. Shortly after concluding the fable of Judith Shakespeare, Woolf connects Greene's sexist comment about women's acting and dog's dancing with actual men from history and contemporary life. First, she says that "Johnson repeated the phrase two hundred years later of women preaching," then she refers to a variation of that quote referring to women's (in)ability to compose music made by the contemporary musicologist Cecil Gray in 1928: "'Sir, a woman's composing is like a dog's walking on his hind legs. It is not done well, but you are surprised to find it done at all'" (54). Woolf conflates the fictional story she had invented with real-life figures and actual citations, saying "So accurately does history repeat itself," (54) except, of course, that the figure of Nick Greene does not actually stem from history. Instead, Woolf creates him to be a character like Judith Shakespeare, a composite misogynist figure who stands for the various ways that men have stifled women's freedom to write—both in material reality, through impregnation, which leads to child-birth and child-rearing and therefore, in Woolf's account in *Room*, curtailed freedom for women; and psychologically, through criticism that diminishes the possibility that women can create. The misogyny that Greene voices in *Room* is as eternal as his immortal

counterpart in *Orlando*. While Woolf creates the myth of Judith Shakespeare to explain the absence of women writers in Renaissance England, she extrapolates Judith's experience to the conditions that contemporary women artists face. Woolf extends the repetition of Nick Greene's misogynous comments to the present day to demonstrate that women artists and thinkers have inherited the same obstacle that Shakespeare's sister would have had to face—namely, the persistent belief that women are intellectually inferior to men.

Woolf uses the figure of Shakespeare indirectly to comment on the obstacles that women writers continue to face. She does not indict Shakespeare as being an agent of oppression against women writers, but uses his culturally celebrated figure to create a fable with the invented characters of Judith Shakespeare and Nick Greene. In *Room*, Greene is a potent anti-muse as in *Orlando*, but in *Room* he re-appears as a specifically misogynist agent who contributes to a social structure which insists, as Charles Tansley does to Lily Briscoe in *To the Lighthouse*, that “women can't paint, women can't write” (86). As a result, compared to the damage Nick Greene does to Judith Shakespeare, the attack on Shakespeare made by Robert Greene seems paltry in contrast; thus, Woolf highlights gender privilege enjoyed by male writers. The character of Nick Greene embodies the argument that she makes in *Room* about the difference between male and female writers: whereas the man must work against the world's indifference to his work, the woman faces “not indifference but hostility” (52). The fable of Judith Shakespeare and the character of Nick Greene represent how Woolf uses the figure of Shakespeare to highlight his privileged male position in contrast to the limitations that his female counterpart would necessarily face.

In the myth of Judith Shakespeare, just as in her discussion of Shakespeare's androgyny, Woolf takes Shakespeare as an ally. She also preserves Shakespeare's iconic role as greatest poet



in English literature. Yet at the same time, she uses his familiar biography and revered cultural status to tell the untold story of the female artists who have been missing from literary history. The story of Judith Shakespeare's absence from the annals of literary history parallels the absence of fully realized women's experience in Shakespeare's art. Just as, in her description of Shakespeare's literature, she exposes his—and all male canonical authors'—limited exploration of women's characters and relationships, she invents Shakespeare's sister to demonstrate the limitations imposed on women writers throughout much of English history. Just as she cites *Antony and Cleopatra* to argue that half of human experience has yet to be recorded in art, she re-creates the figure of one of Shakespeare's famous contemporary rivals to emphasize how patriarchy has actively worked to silence women writers.

For Woolf, only women artists and intellectuals can begin to fill in the empty half of the canvas and tell the untold lives of countless women. Shakespeare may be an exemplary model of artistry, but only his sister can tell her story. Woolf concludes *Room* by placing her hope in women's ability to resurrect Judith Shakespeare, the dead poet who, “alas, . . . never wrote a word” (113). She invokes Judith's spirit in her audience and, by extension, to potentially all women: “She lives in you and me, and in many other women who are not here tonight, for they are washing up the dishes and putting the children to bed” (113). Nodding both to the misogyny of the predominantly male literary past (exemplified by the overly “masculine” Milton), and the need for women writers to overcome that past, Woolf urges her female audience to continue writing in the hopes that Shakespeare's silenced sister will one day be allowed to recover her voice:

if we have the habit of freedom and the courage to write exactly what we think ...

if we look past Milton's bogey, for no human being should shut out the view; if

we face the fact, for it is a fact, that there is no arm to cling to, but that we go alone ... then the opportunity will come and the dead poet who was Shakespeare's sister will put on the body which she has so often laid down ... [and] she will be born. 113-14

Unlike Milton, or the imaginary Nick Greene, Shakespeare does not represent an evil spirit that women must look past in order to create. Nevertheless, while Woolf finds inspiration in his incandescent artistry and androgynous spirit, Woolf recognizes that Shakespeare's poetry still comes from a place of male experience. She presses beyond Shakespeare's limitations, and identifies the absence of the yet-untold stories of women by his silenced female counterpart. In calling for Judith Shakespeare's resurrection, Woolf calls for women artists to "light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has been," to record the innumerable lives, thoughts, and conditions of women's experience (84).

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