Sexual ambiguity: Narrative manifestations in adaptation
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Sexual Ambiguity: Narrative Manifestations in Adaptation

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# Table of Contents

## Introduction

**An Adaptable Questionability of Form**  
*An Transubjective Interstice: Sexually Ambiguous Bodies in Abjection -- Close Readings in Adaptation: The Chapters of My Thesis -- Concluding Thoughts: The Liminal Edge of a Heterocentric Lexicon*

## Chapter One

**From Here to Ambiguity: The Adaptation and Ambiguation of The Cumaean Sibyl**  
*A Brief Embodied Narrative: The Mysterious Case of The Shrinking Sibyl -- The Sibyl Before Satyricon: From Virgil’s Wild Haired Prophetess to Ovid’s Abject Girl -- Society of the Spectral: Petronius Plays the Trope of Ambiguation One Step Further*

## Chapter Two

**Lost in a Roman Wilderness of Latex: The Post-classical Sibyl of Fellini-Satyricon**  
*Wanted! One Albino Child with Latex Genitals: Fellini Adapts a Sibylline Oracle from Prophetess to Prophet/ess -- The Fate of His “Little Sacred Monster”: Fellini Drives the Sibylline Oracle Deep into Abject Discourse -- Pretty/Horrible: Beefcake Protagonists and The Monster of the Monster*

## Chapter Three

**The Closely Bracketed Sex-Change of Virginia Woolf’s Orlando: A Biography**  
*Just One Thing Moor: Masculinity, Abjection and Transfiguration in Orlando’s Opening Cut -- I Am Coming, Constantinople: The Zero-point of Orlando’s Sexual Transfiguration -- Ma Rose en Vie: Orlando’s Reversal and Remobilization of Recognizable Gender*

## Chapter Four

**Neither a Woman, Nor a Man,” Almost: The Questionable Premise of Sally Potter’s Orlando**  
*Did We Lose Our Head? A Decapitated Moor Hits the Adaptive Chopping Block -- Salaam, Constantinople! Orlando’s Unbelievable Transformation in Arab Land -- Shifting Orlando and Her Daughter into the Future of Feminist Filmmaking, Even*

## Chapter Five

**“Beyond the Limits of the Possible”: On the Impossible Girlhood of Camille Barbin (aka: Alexina)**  
*Camille, in Her Own Words: Disrupted Girlhood, Sexual Reverence -- Nameless, Furtive, Triumphant: A Resistant Girlhood Trumps Sexual Recognition -- A Pensive Resistance: Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Girl, Undone*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Epilogue</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>280</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgements</td>
<td>303</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Summary</td>
<td>306</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samenvatting (Dutch Summary)</td>
<td>316</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Introduction: An Adaptable Questionability of Form

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the depiction of sexually ambiguous characters in intertextual works of adaptation; specifically, the *Satyricon* of Roman statesman Gaius Petronius and Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini, the *Orlando* of novelist Virginia Woolf and filmmaker Sally Potter, and Michel Foucault’s editorial incorporation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs into a collection entitled, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. Before I offer an initial definition of sexual ambiguity and its relation to the adaptation process, however, I would like to make a few observations regarding the concept of ambiguity in general.

Although the roots of ambiguity might superficially appear to tap into the most liminal margins of the abstract and indistinct, there is nothing abstract or indistinct about the deployment of ambiguity as a semantic category for defining objects, people, or systems of representation deemed either too difficult to recognize or as possessing divergent meanings.¹ Furthermore, while corporeal ambiguity in general and sexual ambiguity per se might seem related, they are not inherently transposable, just as they are not mutually exclusive; in short, while the two qualities share some common ground, they also have the propensity to drive in different ways. As this applies to characters in narration, while some might be depicted as sexually ambiguous without being generally

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¹ The Latin roots of “ambiguity” (*ambigere*) derivate from the union of *amb-* (both ways) + *agere* (to drive); thus, its usage for indicating people, objects, actions and words that drive in more than one direction (*see: OED* and *Webster’s*). Of course, the use of the term “driving” in this context is interesting, as it infers an autonomy or agency on the part of the ambiguous subject, seeming to place a prerogative on the ambiguous agency to settle (or not) on a singular recognizable meaning or position. On an objective level, the state of ambiguity can also apply to matters that are “questionable [and] indistinct, obscure, not clearly defined,” as well as objects that admit multiple interpretations or explanations “of double meaning, or of several possible meanings.” Subjectively speaking, ambiguity denotes figures who are “wavering or uncertain as to course or conduct,” along with prophets or poets whose utterances contain mysterious “double meaning[s].”
ambiguous, others are portrayed as being corporeally ambiguous without being sexually ambiguous, and yet another class of characters is represented as both generally and sexually ambiguous.² My thesis is invested in exploring the sexual ambiguity of characters as literary meaning-devices, particularly in light of narratologist Mieke Bal’s definition of characters as “imitation, fantasy, fabricated creatures: paper people without flesh and blood” (1985: 79-80). If we are to regard the character as a meaning device, then it is part and parcel of characters to be flanked by ambiguity, and some degree of ambiguity seems inherent to the character regardless of its projected sex, shape or gender. As Bal notes, the primary quality that separates characters from other types of actors is their general resemblance to humans, regardless of the fact that characters do not have a “psyche, personality, ideology, or competence to act” (79-80). Needless to say, Bal’s use of the term “resemblance” is pivotal here – for if there is something about human characters that inevitably resembles human beings, there is also something about them that does not – an elusive, ambiguous edge that flanks and permeates the border of each character as it bleeds into other textual structures.³ This characteristic ambiguity does not merely fall on the narrative demarcation point where characters are subsumed by

² While I discuss the Orlando of Virginia Woolf and Sally Potter more thoroughly in Chapters Two and Three of this thesis, the centrality of ambiguity to depictions of fairies and ephemera deserves a brief mention; in a recent review of Regina Buccola’s Fairies, Fractious Women and the Old Faith: Fairy Lore in Early Modern British Drama and Culture (2006), Sos Bagramyan evaluates Buccola’s claims “that fairies and fairyland were most closely associated with the female gender, while fairies themselves were sexually ambiguous creatures that were considered most active in times of change and instability” (Bagramyan 2007, emphasis mine). Of course the same can be said for most sexually ambiguous characters, as the element of ambiguity is often amplified by authors into a “ripple effect” that is depicted as destabilizing the entire narrative, when in fact the narrative is unambiguously attempting to represent a time or state of instability, and is using an aesthetic of ambiguity as a narrative prop to support the claim that specific events, objects or others are unstable.

³ “It is difficult to imagine a story about Santa Claus in which the good man plays a dirty trick on a child,” writes Bal in Narratology. “Such stories, however, can and do exist” (83). According to Bal, this unpredictability is due to the character’s ambiguous edge, as characters are fabrications that can potentially say and do anything the writer desires – even things that seem completely “out of character” or contradictory to their “typical” behavioral and/or corporeal mode.
other semantic arrangements (settings, subplots, chronology, backstory), but in terms of the ambiguous shroud of possibility that flanks all characters, which merely await the flick of a writer’s pen to transform them from “good” into bad, man into woman, human into beast. An ambiguous edge of possibility enables characters to take on the appearance of transcending the bounds of material constraint: mad scientists dematerialize from the present and rematerialize light years into the future, dead kings return from their graves, aristocratic vampires evaporate into legions of rats.4 There is much to be gained from analyzing the character’s semantic relationship with this ambiguous edge, not the least of which is assaying the intertextual relationship between narrated states of ambiguity and textual interpolations of the human.

Another important distinction concerning the concept of ambiguity emerges if we closely read its secondary definition as a subject or object “that can be understood in two or more possible ways.” This general tendency towards an intersubjective split extends the quality of ambiguity beyond mere questionability; it is a kindred concept, but bears significant variations. While the questions raised by questionability might conceivably be answered at some point, the multifarious edge of ambiguity makes it likely that more than one “correct” answer is conceivable. Applied to ambiguous characters, this multifarious edge makes their “correct” interpretation highly provisional, as both character and

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4 In contemporary literature, the arbitrary resemblance of characters to human beings, and even their resemblance to other characters, has long been familiar to experimental writers, who see the aesthetic valuation of a character – including the valuation of their sex – taking place in an author’s subjective selection of pronoun, description, etc. Postmodernist Kathy Acker, for example, noted that in her early books “the characters (to the extent that they were ‘characters’) changed genders a lot: I never got “his” and “hers” right! And the dumb reason was: I just didn’t remember, I didn’t care, it meant nothing to me.” Acker notes that the reason for her ambivalent attitude towards her characters’ sex “was probably my hatred of gender … a hatred of the expectation that I had to become my womb. My hatred of being defined by the fact that I had a cunt” (1991: 177).
interpretation are negotiated at what Kaja Silverman might call “the threshold of the visible world” (Silverman 1996: 14-15).\(^5\)

This threshold or limit-device directly applies to sexual ambiguity, particularly when we are speaking of sexually ambiguous characters; namely, that their projected ambiguity stands at the discursive limit of our visible, articulateable world, shimmering at the politically fraught borderline of what constitutes a recognizable sex.\(^6\) I would like to present, therefore, a brief definition of what I do (and do not) mean by sexual ambiguity, as my own conception of this term differs widely from other definitions in medicolegal and theoretical circles.\(^7\) I do not, for example, view sexual ambiguity as an inherent quality of transsexuality, transvestism or intersexuality, just as I reject the deployment of “sexual ambiguity” to connotes genitalia that are not recognizable to their observers as

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\(^5\) In *Threshold*, Silverman follows Lacan’s efforts in The Mirror Stage to suggest our fragmented notion of bodily being can only be projected towards a cultural screen, or the “range of representational coordinates [that] are culturally available at any given moment in time” (1996: 221). It is this *melange* of cultural referents that we interpret (and misinterpret) as the visible world. Since we are speaking of characters, this corporeal ambiguity is a structural trope, and as such is quite concrete. This notion of concrete or “real” ambiguity is germane to my inquiry for many reasons. If a character’s resemblance of a human to read as sufficiently and plausibly human, for example, it can only be so ambiguous before we lose our ability to recognize it as such, thereby placing a substantial premium on our ability to recognize a character’s resemblance to humans. But the ability to recognize human-ness, particularly as this concerns humans who are interpreted as difficult to recognize, is widely considered to be a subjective call.

\(^6\) In “Shimmering Images: On Transgender Embodiment and Cinematic Aesthetics,” trans theorist Eliza Steinbock uses the metaphor of “shimmering waters” to describe “the reflecting pool of recognition” that perforates the performance of sexual subjectivation, raising the interesting point that “trans organizing and cultural work have […] made possible the ‘realness,’ or at least the viability, of qualitative transformation, of living in the movements between the grids of identity” (2011: 222).

\(^7\) Concerning my use of the term “medicolegal,” I follow Judith Butler (who in turn follows Foucault), in construing the term as a collusion of medical and political interest groups in their charge to distribute sexual recognizability among “non-normative” genders (cf. *Gender Trouble and Undoing Gender*). In his lectures at the Colleges de France in the mid-70s, and in works such as *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault often noted that the “expert medico-legal opinion” is rarely ever deployed “in a field of opposition, but in a field of gradation from the normal to the abnormal,” thereby becoming an institutionalized system of categorization and valuation (2004: 42, emphasis mine). In this paradigm, Foucault argued that marginalized sexualities become “the object not only of a collective intolerance, but of a juridical action, a medical intervention, a careful clinical examination, and an entire theoretical elaboration” (1976: 31). Like Foucault, Butler views the medicolegal liaison as operating to regulate and identify sexual norms, and she follows Foucault in addressing the “medicolegal alliance emerging in nineteenth-century Europe” as giving rise to sexualities that had, up to that point, remained obscure or unspoken (1990: 32). In other words, the medicolegal discourse that initially acts to oppress the sexual subaltern is the same apparatus that ultimately provides an opportunity for it to speak.
male or female. Genitals are what they are, whether they resemble male or female genitalia or not, and any perception of ambiguity cast in this direction by medicolegal observers is simply that: a perception. As activists from The International Intersex Society of North America (IISNA) have noted, all human beings are sexually recognizable regardless of their genital appearance (cf. Alice Dreger 1998: 24-25). This is true whether or not medicolegal practitioners perceive/diagnose one’s genitalia as male, female, or something unrecognizable within their heterocentric sexual lexicon. As Judith Butler and Michel Foucault have argued in their not altogether synchronous treatments of Camille Barbin’s memoirs (and elsewhere, too) – female and male are not the only recognizable sexes – nor are they the only recognizable interstices for sexual truth. Under those auspices, transsexuality, intersexuality and queerness can unambiguously yield as much sexual truth as hetero- or homonormative subject positions. This is a far cry from asserting that sexual ambiguity does not exist at all, however. Sexual ambiguity does exist, and not merely as a lingering classificatory term in the discomforting medicolegal legacy that produced an entire lexicon of “sexually ambiguous” types, each replete with their own culturally supported semantics, legends

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8 Although the medicolegal community originally coined the term “sexual ambiguity” to define genitalia that were not easily decipherable as male or female, figures such as Dr. William Reiner and Dr. Arlene Baratz of the IISNA argue that genitalia are not the only defining markers of sexuality (or ambiguity): fashion, mannerisms, and feelings about one’s identity are significant factors. And the medicolegal community is not the only institutional network to misuse the term “sexual ambiguity” – popular culture in the 1960s also used “sexual ambiguity” to denote a type of androgyny that was perceived as a critique of mainstream culture, as models, actors and rock stars like David Bowie or Kate Moss were seen as sexually ambiguous androgynes straddling the borders of masculinity and femininity. Obviously, this type of logic only works if we agree the states of masculinity and femininity have a set of baseline attributes and behaviors that are typical of those states, and anyone who is difficult to recognize within those norms is consciously standing in exception to them.

9 According to The International Intersex Society of North America (IISNA), sexual ambiguity is a “technically insufficient term” for two reasons: on the one hand, sexually ambiguous genitalia are not atypical of all intersex conditions, while, on the other hand, the designation of sexual ambiguity is a highly subjective call (2009). The IISNA supports clinicians placing the term “ambiguous genitalia” in quotation marks, because “no child thinks his or her own genitals are ‘ambiguous’ … they’re just their genitals … it’s the grown-ups who are feeling ambiguous” about them (Reiner 2009).
and rules. Sexual ambiguity exists as a framing device for sexual ontologies as they combine and shift in adaptation, functioning as the liminal edge for their emergence and transformation.

And still, terms like sexual ambiguity seem to have a life of their own, a semantic persistence that calls for their ongoing adaptation. One might consider how the “traditional” use of sexual ambiguity has been falling out of favor since the 1970s, and the tragic case of David Reimer, a “sexually ambiguous” boy who was pushed by his doctors and parents into submitting to an unwelcome sex change that led to his suicide. Since the time of Reimer’s death, gender activists have ramped up their struggle to de-pathologize the medicolegal deployment of sexual ambiguity as a classificatory term. But regardless of the overwhelming support for rejecting sexual ambiguity as a diagnostic term, it remains stubbornly in circulation – it has simply shifted out of the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* and into the lexicon of other fields, like contemporary genetics, in which people’s *genes* are pathologized for being sexuallyambiguous. As Duke University’s senior pediatric

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10 While the concept of sexual ambiguity has often been attributed to Harry Benjamin’s *Transsexual Phenomenon*, the truth is Benjamin only used “ambiguity” once in connection to hermaphrodism, and never used the term “sexual ambiguity” at all.

11 There is an ongoing debate over whether to include either “hermaphroditism” or “intersexual” in the American Psychiatric Association’s *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. In an IISNA article by April Herndon, entitled “Getting Rid of ‘Hermaphroditism’ Once and For All,” the author notes that a variety of recent medical studies have endorsed the elimination of “hermaphrodite” from the lexicon, as such terms “imply a kind of hierarchy of “real” and “fake” intersex people, which is unhelpful and illogical,” and because “the system of labeling intersex people according to the mere presence or absence of certain gonadal tissues (as the “pseudo/true hermaphroditism” system does) predates the modern sciences of genetics and endocrinology” (2005). If the medicolegal regime continues to psychopathologize “non-normative” sexualities in its handbooks and manuals, its adaptation of diagnostic nomenclature remains cosmetic, as the practice of sexual psychopathologization will persist as long as the institutions endorsing it allow.

12 Psychologist John Money supported a male-to-female sex change for David Reimer, a child whose doctors botched his circumcision process through the unorthodox application of cauterization (burning away the foreskin). As an adult, Reimer rejected Money’s views on the necessity of this sex change, and his subsequent nervous breakdown and suicide – along with the increasing outcries of the intersexual
urologist John Wiener M.D. explains in “Insights into Causes of Sexual Ambiguity,” the clinical understanding of sexual ambiguity has “progressed from the determination of the hormonal etiologies to defining the genetic basis of intersex disorders” (Wiener 1999: 507). Heralding the discovery of “specific genes involved in the process of sexual differentiation [that] made it possible to determine the mutations and other molecular events that result in sexual ambiguity,” Wiener boasts that such “disorders can now be diagnosed before birth and possibly even treated in utero” (507, emphases mine). Aside from Weiner’s equation of sexual ambiguity with dis-order, his approach to “solving” the problem of sexual ambiguity demonstrates how damaging attitudes move from one technical definition to another without changing the underlying root of the problem: a limited sexual lexicon. While the terminology keeps changing, and even the science, the practice of pathologizing sexual ambiguity has not ceased – it has merely changed its wardrobe.

Even though the concept of sexual ambiguity has been deployed to dubious ends in the medicolegal community, and despite the rejection of the term as technically

13 Wiener’s deployment of “disorder” and “mutation” to qualify his view of sexual ambiguity (that one ought to treat the disorder in utero, before it upsets the applecart of sexual normativity), renders into visibility the clinical perpetuation of an institutionally sanctioned psychoathologization of subjects who appear to stand outside its male/female dyadic order. Wiener’s equation of ambiguity = disorder emphasizes the extent to which mainstream medicolegal experts still regard any sexuality other than maleness or femaleness as an “abnormality” – in Wiener’s case, a malady he would be delighted to treat in utero. Further evidence (if any is necessary) of the general excitement regarding the prospect of in-utero genetic therapy can be found in an article by Dr. B.L. Tay, of the Department of Maternal Fetal Medicine at Kandang Kerbau Hospital, Singapore, entitled “Intersex and Genital Ambiguity” (1990). In this article, Dr. Tay explains that “normal sexual differentiation in males and females” is the opposite of “disorders of abnormal sexual development” such as those which produce “genital ambiguity” – a state Tay summarily divides into “disorders of gonadal development and disorders of fetal endocrinology” and “disorders of gonadal development with abnormal sex chromosome constitution [including] those with and without sexual ambiguity” (1990, emphases mine). In an effort to restore order to this apparently rampant disorder, Tay prescribes “a practical method of management of patients with ambiguous genitalia” (1990). As was the case with Wiener, we once more detect the paradigm of “disorder = ambiguity” and “normal = male-female,” with ambiguity appearing as an aggressive abnormality that Tay seeks to manage.
insufficient by gender activists, it would be premature to eject sexual ambiguity without further scrutiny. The medicolegal take on sexual ambiguity is not the only game in town, after all; it is merely the most potentially harmful. There are other ways in which we might evaluate the role sexual ambiguity plays in framing all sexuality – even the so-called normative sexes; the arbitrary yet politically-charged boundaries between man and boy, woman and girl. As if dogged by an ongoing conceptualization of individual sexes as isolated compartments of sexual subjectivity, discrete units that must be sealed off from other sexualities by a poorly defined outside, there seems to be an urgent need to protect each individual sexuality from everything it is not. In this paradigm of estrangement, an ambiguous expanse of non-sexuality is figured as the invisible encasement of each sex, as an anti-sexual veil of Thanatos enshrouds human sexuality in an ambivalent void, a projected absence of sex whose sole function, if we can call it that, lies in compartmentalizing all human sexuality, not merely folding over it, but folding it away from sexual possibilities, inhibiting it from making connections.

If we could adapt our conceptualization of the liminal edge of human sexuality so it became more sexy than sexless, more active than passive, more connective than disruptive – what would the results be? Would the liminal edge of human sexuality be activated to ontologically mingle with the sexuality of something else, and in so doing, emerge informed and even transformed from its contact? Are there possibilities for interrelating sexual ambiguation and notions of the human that might extend beyond mere diagnosticism and pathologizing debates? I am hardly the first scholar to entertain such questions. Beginning with Gender Trouble, and with greater force in Undoing Gender, Butler has observed that ambiguity enshrouds all sex, and even suggests there
can be “advantages to remaining less than intelligible” in the event that one’s “survival depends upon escaping the clutch of those norms by which recognition is conferred” (2004: 3). Yet, because the act of conferring official recognition within any dominant system of norms inevitably bears the exclusion of (an)other, Butler argues that the ambiguous “relationship between intelligibility and the human […] carries a certain theoretical urgency, precisely at those points where the human is encountered at the limits of intelligibility itself” (58). Compelled by the gendered forms that appear to stand within the projected sexual ambiguity flanking the armature/structure of any singular sex, Butler suggests such bodies have the potential to open – or in Rancièrian terms, to emancipate – discourses for human sexuality that were formerly unthinkable or unspeakable.\textsuperscript{14}

Although they pay Butler scant credit, psychoanalytic theorist Geneviève Morel, in \textit{Sexual Ambiguities}, and cultural theorist William Wilkerson, in \textit{Ambiguity and Sexuality: A Theory of Sexual Identity}, each seem to follow Butler’s lead in arguing that we should not be so hasty to purge the concept of sexual ambiguity from our cultural register; we should simply refrain from deploying sexual ambiguity as a taxonomy for human beings that seem difficult to recognize within a heteronormatized order. Focusing on how ambiguity permeates every aspect of sexual subjectivation, Wilkerson in particular remarks that “ambiguity structures sexual identity from start to finish,” as sexual

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14 In the final chapters of \textit{Undoing Gender}, Butler asks: “So what if new forms of gender are possible, how does this affect the ways that we live and the concrete needs of the human community?” (2004: 219). In what seems almost a Rancierian twist (though Butler never speaks of Rancière), she voices a hope for “producing a new future for genders that do not yet exist” (219). In a Rancièrian sense, the question is one of political, sexual and linguistic emancipation. Although Butler chuckles that such genders may have existed already for a long time, but that “the conception of politics at work here is centrally concerned with the question of survival, of how to create a world in which those who understand their gender and their desire to be nonnormative can live and thrive not only without the threat of violence from the outside, but without the pervasive sense of their own unreality” (219). Needless to say, this unreality comes with a sense of ambiguity, and the resistance is in fact a resistance to cultural and systemic ambiguation as a force to repel, disavow and distance.
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subjectivation is negotiated within an intersubjective interstice, wherein “ambiguous given desires become formed into identities through a process that is itself always uncertain and fraught with multiple possibilities” (2010: 173). Wilkerson sees this state of polymorphous (re)production as ripe with possibilities for “further and intensified forms of freedom” to arise between the ontological citadels of lived experience that Butler calls “the given and the possible,” yielding increased opportunities to “have consciousness of our self-formation and the possibilities for its transformation” (Wilkerson 2010: 173, Butler 2004: 100-101, 203). In this interstitial milieu of sexual signification, all sexes would/can influence each other, streaming across ambiguous borders to permeate, resist and renegotiate their points of purchase.

Butler’s notions of human recognizability are critical to my line of inquiry in this thesis, as the ability and inability to recognize human sexuality has a direct impact on the quality – even the survivability – of human lives. Analyzing “the question of the human, of who counts as human, and the related question of whose lives count as lives,” Butler evokes interesting questions concerning “what social norms must be honored and expressed for personhood to become allocated [and] how we do or do not recognize animate others as persons depending on whether or not we recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other” (Butler 2004: 17-18, 58). As this applies to sexual ambiguity, an interesting question gains shape; namely, at what point does a character’s resemblance to humans – and recognizable forms of human sexuality – become so questionable that it elicits no plausible answer, so ambiguous that all possible answers become either too indecipherable or interpretable in too many directions – and what is the relationship of this projected lack of recognizability to the zero point at which
characters (and by extension, humans) relinquish their recognizability as human beings altogether, thereby forefeiting their access to an equally subjective set of sexual or “human rights?” If the only contact most people have with “sexually ambiguous” others is comprised of encounters with the characters of literature, art and film, such questions take on a crucial significance, as the way in which these fictitious characters “behave” is often extended into everyday life with negative consequences. When applied carelessly or maliciously, projections of sexual ambiguity can become a weapon, a means of disavowing subjects one does not wish to recognize, or whom it is not in one’s self-interest to recognize, and this inability to recognize, couched in a projection of sexual ambiguity, is often the first step down the road to punitive enactments of socioeconomic abjection.15

This thesis will argue in favor of activating sexual ambiguity into a verb: to sexually ambiguate. Placing this power to ambiguate in the hands of the subject – as opposed to the subject’s medicolegal receivership – would arm the state of sexual ambiguity with more political tooth, perhaps enabling human beings to ambiguate beyond recognizability in order to renegotiate their sexual subject position and its meaning. This is precisely the possibility that is denied human beings who are regarded as sexually ambiguous by medicolegal experts: a diagnosis of ambiguity is projected at them, around them, marking them and pinning them down in a way separates them from humans who are viewed as sexually unambiguous within a heterocentric paradigm.

15 In Undoing Gender and Bodies That Matter, Butler argues that sexually normative cultures often socioeconomically abjectify subjects who are deemed non-normative by distancing them from money, pleasure, legitimization and power. Deriving her use of abjection from Kristeva’s conceptualization of the term in Powers of Horror (and elsewhere) to designate the experience of disavowing a substance or person as waste, filthy, profane, Although I generally concur with Butler’s general precept (that cultures of normatization abjectify their others on a socioeconomic level), I nevertheless follow Kristeva in regarding abject discourse as an event that presents an opportunity for revolt or intimacy.
A Transsubjective Interstice: Sexually Ambiguous Bodies in Abjection

While I generally concur with Wilkerson’s and Butler’s observations that transforming human ontologies of sexual self-formation might occasionally be possible, along with their view that the ambiguity of sexuality has an axiomatic role in perpetuating its ontological adaptation, I would like to add that such transformations are often reached in abject discourse, which provides a transsubjective interstices for ambiguated sexual subject positions to become unambiguously emancipated into language. Rather than using emancipation in a liberatory sense, which might entail some sort of freedom from oppression, I follow Rancière in regarding discursive emancipation as the ability to be heard, the ability to signify and to some extent negotiate one’s position in force relations through *abject discourse*. Julia Kristeva first broaches this possibility in *Powers of Horror*, expanding it into more recent studies (ck. *Intimate Revolt*). As S.K. Keltner observes in *Kristeva*, each of these works “turns on the ambiguity of metaphysical oppositions [such as] male and female,” in which the singularity of the human subject “and the ambiguity of sexual difference [is] a space of conflict, love, and dialogue between the sexes” (Keltner 2011: 102, emphasis Keltner’s). As this applies to abject discourse, the state of abjection is not merely a space in which we reject other subjects/objects: it can also be the grounds on which we become intimate with those whom we attempt to disavow. This opportunity for intimacy (and thus for adaptation) resides in abject discourse, though it does not always come to pass. That said, I would like to elaborate on the integral role ambiguity plays in both abjection and abject discourse, as this has a direct bearing on the interplay between sexual ambiguity and
sexually abject discourse. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva suggests that human beings, when coming into contact with taboo, undesirable, unsavory or unrecognizable people and/or things (Kristeva cites vomit, scat, dead people, the diseased), their first reaction is often one of violent repudiation – not simply a flat rejection, but a vehement disavowal and casting-away of the offending object: *That Thing is not me!* But if we consider the moment of abjection closely, the most discomforting aspect of the abject is not any singular quality inherent to that subject/object – the stink of shit, the decomposing flesh of the dead – but rather its ambiguity, its detumescence, its tendency towards dissipation. The proximity of the Other’s ambiguous topographies summons the facticity of our own ambiguity and potential decorporealization.

According to Kristeva, the first phase of abjection occurs during an infant’s transsubjective relocation from maternal embrace to the “failed” paternal function; the symbolic order of language. In this relocation, the speaking subject first recognizes its own abject position in relation to the order of language, which both embraces and estranges them, providing a grounds for their articulations of desire and ensuring their subsequent lack of *jouissance* (1982: 6-9). In *Reading Kristeva*, Kelly Oliver frames the infant’s abject move from mother to symbolic father as “pre-identity, presubject, preobject,” a move that opens the human being to its first awareness of the threat of subjective “disintegration” through its sudden exposure to the symbolic order (1993: 56-8). In addition to exploring the narrative engagement of abjection as a flanking device for sexually ambiguous characters, this thesis will analyze the deployment of socioeconomic abjection when it is directed as an undoing force towards “sexually ambiguous” subjects.
If Butler is correct in asserting that the ambiguousness of sexuality can function as a route of escape when one seeks to avoid being crushed by the agencies of sexual normatization, the same might be said about the ambiguity of abjection as a potential route into linguistic and ontological transformation. Like the adaptation process, abject discourse often brings the subject and its others onto an interstitial playing field wherein larger systems of transvaluation are refuted, reframed and adapted. That said, I would like to consider the process of adaptation more closely. While this concept is often taken for granted to mean one thing – particularly in literature and film studies – adaptation has a multifarious edge that can connote both object and act, both of which influence and transform one another, yet have the potential to destabilize and shift the ontological frame in which both are grounded. As this concerns the analysis of cultural objects, the adaptation concept does not simply account for one type of work; as Julie Sanders suggests in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, the adaptation process encompasses numerous modes, including revision, rehearsal, update, sequel, interpretation, reinterpretation, maladaption and *misprision*. Similarly, adaptation theorist Linda Hutcheon sees adapters approaching their sources not as “something to be reproduced, but rather something to be recreated, often in a new medium,” adding that adaptations typically regard a previous work as “a reservoir of instructions, diegetic, narrative, and axiological, that the adapter can use or ignore” – a fact that often places adapters in the crosshairs for critics who feel allegiance to the source (2006: 84).¹⁶ That said, both Hutcheon and Sanders take much

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¹⁶ This propensity for resistance on the part of an intended receivership spurs Hutcheon to ask: “What motivates adapters, knowing that their efforts will be compared to competing imagined versions in people’s heads and inevitably found wanting?” (2006: 86). According to Hutcheon, there are several possible factors, the first of which would be “economic lures” (88), as well as “personal and political motives” that inspire a director to not only “interpret (a) work but in so doing … take a position on it” (92). Herein, an adaptation might “be used to engage in a larger social or cultural critique,” and in so doing change the
for granted about the adaptation process. This is hardly surprising, as the adaptation process was largely taken for granted in the humanities until the 1990s, and Thomas Leitch’s publication of “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory.”\(^{17}\) Although Sanders and Hutcheon do not mention Leitch in their meta-theories, many adaptation scholars regard Leitch as the first to be unequivocally critique “the crippling dependence of adaptation study on concepts like fidelity and monistic claims of literature’s superiority to film” (2003: 11). As Leitch often suggests, the field-specific concepts that continue to vex adaptation studies include fidelity, originality, chronological anteriority and authorial intent – all of which raise their provocative heads throughout this thesis. Such haunting concepts are not merely unavoidable here, they are welcome; there is a good reason they have persisted for so long, after all, as the theorization of adaptation has not finished adapting.

While formal approaches to adaptation studies proper comprise one possible route for analyzing the narration of sexually ambiguous figures in adaptation, this study seeks to cultivate as many interdisciplinary connections as will bear beneficial insights. That said, my thesis owes a conceptual debt of gratitude to Teresa DeLauretis’s notion of the resistant figure as it appears in *Technologies of Gender* and *Figures of Resistance*, to Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the time image in *Cinema 2*, and to Jacques Rancière’s [political charge of the work the adapter is recasting. As Hutcheon notes, one can indeed make a tidy pile turning Spiderman, Batman, and Wonder Woman comic books into multimillion dollar blockbusters—but it seems only fair to note that films such as *Catwoman* (2004) or *Around the World in 80 Days* (2004) only returned 40 percent of their $100 million grubstakes. Another “motive” Hutcheon discusses for adaptation is the “cultural capital” that can come from basing one’s creative efforts on the work of an acknowledged classic, both as a way for the film to “gain respectability” through lip service to its source, and “the pedagogical impulse” that Hutcheon sees “behind much literary adaptation to both film and television” (Hutcheon 2006: 91-2).

\(^{17}\) Numerous works in adaptation studies have accessed the common conceptual ground between adaptation studies in the humanities and in the sciences to draw strained corollaries between genetic and cultural memes (cf. St. Jacques 2011).
treatment of the gap or blank moment in Film Fables. Also instrumental to my thesis is Rancière’s work in The Politics of Aesthetics, particularly as his notion of linguistic and political emancipation. Surfing the borders of psychoanalytic theory, film and literary theory, Slavoj Zizek’s discussion of monstrosity and otherness in The Ticklish Subject and Enjoy Your Symptom! has been axiomatic to this text, as has Homi Bhabha’s analysis of the “in-between” in The Location of Culture. Several works in narratology have also been productive, particularly Mieke Bal’s considerations of character, fabula, framing and the embedded narrative in Narratology and Traveling Concepts in The Humanities.

As a study of sexual ambiguity in general, this thesis is not without precedent. Yet, while studies such as Judith Butler’s Gender Trouble, Jay Prosser’s Second Skins, Gayle Salamon’s Assuming a Body, Judith Halberstam’s In a Queer Time and Place, and Marjorie Garber’s Bissexuality of Everyday Life have each examined, to their own polemic ends, the ways in which “sexually ambiguous” figures are represented in literature, art and the media, no scholarship to date has traced the ways in which the aesthetic characteristics of sexual ambiguity are solidified and/or altered in the process of adaptation. My overall strategy for evaluating representations of sexually ambiguous characters in adaptation was quite straightforward, and it was my conviction that tracking

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18 Since the late 1990s, and what trans/gender theorist Susan Stryker has called “the debates and polemics thrown up during [transgender studies’] fiery formative decade,” numerous academic works have sought to analyze depictions of transgender, transsexual and queer bodies as they are represented in visual and popular culture (Stryker 2011). Among these, Prosser’s Second Skins examines the “body narratives” of transgendered people as they play out in transsexual autobiographical accounts, while John Phillips’s staid but sturdy Transgender on Screen seeks to demonstrate “that perceptions of transgender are mediated by culturally constructed images,” with the worthy aim of “reposition[ing] and redefin[ing] sexual desire against sexual fascination with transgender” (2006: 1). In a series of thoughtful case studies and essays in A Queer Time and Place, Judith Halberstam sheds light on “the potentiality of the body to morph, shift, change, and become fluid is a powerful fantasy in transmodern cinema,” while, in The Bisexuality of Everyday Life, Marjorie Garber offers many productive insights on representations of non-normative bodies, just as she does in Vested Interests (Halberstam 2005: 6). Alongside these works, I would place Foucault’s study of the memoirs of Camille Barbin, and Butler’s critical evaluation of Foucault’s efforts in Gender Trouble.
the changes authors make to the “same” character as it progresses from work to work could shed light on the aesthetic elements such authors deploy to support and/or denote notions of sexual ambiguity in general.\textsuperscript{19} Through comparing the structural shifts that take place between sets of adaptations, I felt it might be possible to trace the sexual, linguistic and political shifts that occur when key markers of sexual ambiguity are added, deleted, revised or effaced.\textsuperscript{20} While this methodology still seems sound, my conceptualization of sexual ambiguity and adaptation has become increasingly conflicted, as has my understanding of the relationship \textit{between} sexual ambiguity and adaptation; namely, that depictions of sexual ambiguity in adaptation enable the larger process of sexual subjectivation to change, thereby \textit{changing the way things change}.

\textbf{Close Readings in Adaptation: The Chapters of My Thesis}

Tracking shifts in serial adaptation will always benefit from an extremely close reading of cultural objects, particularly when such shifts involve nuances in sexually ambiguous characters.\textsuperscript{21} On the one hand, sexual ambiguity is an elusive, unstable, and politically

\textsuperscript{19} In \textit{Narratology}, Bal suggests that although character is not a human being, it is a structure that encourages us to relate to it as a human. But while the character might appear human and even behave humanely, it is not a human being.

\textsuperscript{20} Some readers may comment on the fact that I discuss only book-to-film adaptations, and remark that there are other forms of adaptation to be discussed. While I discuss the impact of intertextuality on serial adaptations in other works, it is not as if nothing can be gained by comparing films and books – there is as much to be gained from comparing books to films as comparing anything else. Book-to-film comparisons are as good as any other, so long as no singular genre is championed over another simply because of its temporal precedence or its “originality.” All that matters is that our comparisons (of any objects) are as thorough and even-handed as possible. Obviously, too much has been made of the binary constraints imposed on film to be visual and texts to be textual – in many ways, films are as textual as books; they involve scripts and lines that are written and spoken; they are inscribed, translated, relayed. Conversely, books often evoke images, deploying words to summon the visual. There is little to be gained from prioritizing a binary distinction between the visual and the textual.

\textsuperscript{21} Of course, there are many reasons for closely reading the adaptive trajectory of cultural objects in terms of sexual ambiguity and sexually ambiguous characters. Theorists in the sciences, for example, have long
fraught category with subtle differences and similarities that only a close reading can
detect, while, on the other hand, narrative attributions of sexual ambiguity often take
place within a single passage or a few frames of film. Too swift or broad a reading will
inevitably miss the structural interrelationships of narrative elements in transit. But I must
reemphasize that my study is not strictly about one type of adaptation – the adaptation of
cultural objects from one chronologically anterior source to the next – it is about the
potential of adaptive objects to influence larger ontological transformations.

That said, the chapters of my thesis focus on three sets of serial adaptation. The first
two chapters analyze the ambiguation and abjectification of sibylline prophetesses as they
progress from classic Greco-Roman literature to the hermaphroditic priestess of Federico
Fellini’s *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969). In these chapters, I hope to establish an initial
framework for my take on the interplay between adaptation, abjection and the projection
of sexual ambiguity. The second and third chapters of my thesis comprise a critical
analysis of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* and Sally Potter’s *Orlando* (1992), a
cinematic adaptation. I selected this adaptive set of works precisely because Woolf’s
novel deploys identifiable tropes of sexual ambiguation (shifts in pronoun, temporality,
and character-to-character interaction), while Potter’s film fails to produce a sexually
ambiguous character – yet nevertheless emerges as a revolutionary text. In my fourth and
final chapter, I evaluate Michel Foucault’s adaptive incorporation of Camille Barbin’s
personal memoirs into his collection, *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered
recognized that nothing ever *completely* adapts, and there is no survival of the fittest in the adaptation game
– no matter what Sanders and Hutcheon argue to the contrary – because in the final knell nothing ever
survives. Thus, any attribution of “fitness” is a strictly human valuation; thus, my reluctance to champion a
utopian or positivist view of adaptation. While some species (and even art forms) might seem to last longer
than others, adaptation is merely a series of transitive manifestations on the way to other indeterminate and
emergent points of departure.
*Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite.* Three primary reasons motivated my interest in *Herculine*. First, much of the existing scholarship on Camille Barbin glosses over a close reading of her memoirs for the sake of aiming a politicized critique at Foucault. Second, while much could be said about the significance of Camille’s girlhood, this has largely been pushed aside for the sake of overprioritizing her intersexuality, even though the category of the intersexual did not exist in the nineteenth century. Third, by positioning Camille’s memoirs in the same volume as her interlocutors’s documents, Foucault forms an intertextual discourse between Camille and the heteronormative apparatus that impelled its arbiters to project its diagnosis of her singularly sexual body, as opposed to diagnosing their systems of sexual recognition.

Focusing on The Sibyl of Cumae, Chapter One tracks the adaptation of a character who enters the cycle unambiguously female, but grows increasingly spectral as the story proceeds forward. From her first appearance in Virgil’s *Aeneid* to her emergence in the Petronian *Satyricon* more than one hundred years later, this Sibyl was never flagged as sexually ambiguous – yet her escalating corporeal ambiguity bears significant consequences concerning her overall sexual recognizability. Suggesting the Cumaean Sibyl is simultaneously ambiguated and diminished by her adapters, I evaluate the moral-ethical fabulae that emerge from the character’s increasing weakness as she moves further from human recognition. Bringing the Sibyl’s escalating ambiguation into contact with Kristeva’s take on abjection, I ask how diffuse the human body must be before it becomes vulnerable to the systems of socioeconomic abjectification leveled at dehumanized others.
Chapter Two extends my analysis of the Cumaean Sibyl from classical literature to Fellini’s addition of a hermaphroditic prophet/ess to *Fellini-Satyricon* (1965) nearly two thousand years later. Through closely reading the narrative tropes Fellini engages to enunciate the dual sexuality of his character, the Hermaphrodite, I evaluate Fellini’s mission of “restoring paganism to the pagans” via an aesthetic mise-en-scène of fragmentation and monstrosity. By prioritizing those elements throughout his adaptation, Fellini creates a facsimile of antiquity that fixes a perceptual gap between a projected audience and its projected past. Placing the Hermaphrodite squarely in this rift, the filmmaker depicts his character as a “sacred little monster.” Nevertheless, while his modifications of the Sibyl narratively *escalates* the paradigm of abjection and monstrosity that bears down on her in earlier versions, Fellini suggests the actions of his heroes are more monstrous still. Returning to my discussion of abjection from Chapter One, I evaluate Fellini’s implication that heterocentric sexual normativity is the monster of the monster, yet presents the opportunity for the monster to signify for herself.

Beginning Chapter Three with a close reading of the Moor’s head sequence that begins Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Orlando: A Biography*, I form theoretic connections between Bhaba’s conceptualization of the barbarian, Žižek’s notions of the monstrous, and Kristeva’s viewpoints on abject discourse. Suggesting that the tropes of monstrosity and barbarity that frame our initial perceptions of Woolf’s protagonist solidify his portrait as a privileged barbarian, a monster with money, I evaluate the tropes of sexual ambiguity that Woolf ultimately deploys to “change the sex” of her character, refuting the popularized claim that Orlando is significantly androgynous (cf. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, Hermione Lee, etc.). Assessing how Orlando’s initial unambiguous
masculinity makes it seem more “plausible” that an excursion through sexual ambiguity would open possibilities for him to live, not merely as a woman, but as a feminist more capable of empathizing with her political and sexual others, I trace Woolf’s linguistic indications of Orlando’s sex-change. Tracking Woolf’s narrative alignment of the “biographer’s” voice with a group of supernatural feminine characters who resist any explicit depiction of Orlando’s sex – an articulation the biographer dismisses as “odious” – I return to the topic of abjection and repulsion, bringing Kristeva’s and Butler’s insights on social marginalization and sexual recognizability into contact with Orlando to ask the following question: how ambiguous a character can be before they fall off the map of sexual recognition altogether? I conclude Chapter Three with a close evaluation of how Orlando’s legitimacy as a woman is narratively “proven” by the fact that she bears a child, examining how Orlando presents the adaptation of a man into a woman through a brief moment of ambiguity even as it comprises an adaptation of patriarchal modes of writing into a specific type of feminine writing: Woolf’s writing.

Chapter Four continues my study of Orlando-lore to evaluate Sally Potter’s adaptation of the same title (Orlando [1992]), which simultaneously functions as a revision of – and paean to – Woolf’s politically troubling text. Beginning this chapter with a critical reading of Potter’s decision to replace Woolf’s Moor’s head sequence with an opening scene that centralizes the seemingly preposterous claim that Tilda Swinton is “actually” a man, I suggest that Potter’s attempt to shift the significance of Orlando’s

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22 While much has been written about Orlando’s perceived androgyny and/or sexual ambiguity, there is little scholarship concerning the scene of Orlando’s sex change per se, particularly the fact that Woolf depicts his sex change as a mythical/magical occurrence. Yet, just as sexual ambiguity acts as the pivot for Orlando’s switch from male to female, the supernatural forces that demand his change of sex are presented as the pivot for his emergence into sexual ambiguity. Cosmetic surgery, changes in wardrobe and/or or variations in elocution are not responsible for this change of sex, as numerous scholars have indicated (cf. Lee, Gilbert and Gubar, etc.).
formerly barbarous maleness into the masculinity of a character who is visibly feminized is accomplished by the removal of the same tropes of male aggression that Potter relies on to impel the insinuation that male-on-male violence is the impetus for Orlando’s ultimate sexual transformation. Following a discussion of this interlacement of violence and masculinity, I evaluate Potter’s modifications of Orlando’s sex-change, which the filmmaker presents as a feminist response to patriarchal chauvinism. Citing Butler’s accounts of troubling sexualities in Gender Trouble, I assert that Potter’s act of distancing her protagonist from his own violent deeds does not produce a narrative that is less troubling than Woolf’s, but rather combines with her insertion of sequences prioritizing Orlando’s motherhood to emerge as troubling to a different crowd; namely, the scholars and feminists who viewed Potter’s adaptation as an anti-feminist, “de-lesbianized” travesty.\(^{23}\) Closely analyzing her decision to relocate the setting of Orlando’s sex change from Constantinople to Uzbekistan, I explore Potter’s addition of a new character (“The Khan”) to the fraternity of violence that impels Orlando’s transfiguration. Reviewing Potter’s elimination of supernatural characters and biographers from her representation of Orlando’s “in-between” stage, I assert the filmmaker removes any vestige of ambiguity from Orlando’s sexual transformation, turning it into a change of gender as opposed to a change of sex – a revision that nevertheless succeeds in summoning the protagonist into an abject discourse as productive as Woolf’s source text. Suggesting Potter’s adaptation of the protagonist into a character whose rapidly evolving feminist politics open an ontological door into her role as a queer mother, I argue that

\(^{23}\) According to Jane Marcus, Potter’s Orlando was a “travesty” that betrayed both feminist cinema and the feminist cause (1994: 11-13), while Kate Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter view Potter’s film as “suppressing the lesbian elements” of Woolf’s text, and Woolf scholar Leslie Hankins criticizes Potter for carrying out an act of “lesbian erasure” in the film (Hollinger and Winterhalter 2001: 243, Hankins 1995: 168-74).
Potter’s film opens fresh corridors for gender trouble – and for queer feminist cinema – by switching the sex of Orlando’s child to a girl instead of a boy. Concluding Chapter Four by bringing my own notions of abjection and girlhood into contact with the concept of resistance as discussed by Teresa de Lauretis in Figures of Resistance, I assert that Potter positions Orlando’s daughter as an eccentric girl who beckons us into the delightfully ambiguous future of feminist filmmaking.

Chapter Five of my thesis explores the adaptive incorporation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs into Foucault’s transdisciplinary collection of works, Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a French Hermaphrodite. Tracing Camille’s girlhood accounts of her religious upbringing in Ursuline convents and schools, I follow the progression of her lesbian sexual relations through girlhood into adolescence, at which point Camille allows her body to be medically examined, and is diagnosed as a pseudohermaphrodite.24 Clocking her subsequent mental and physical undoing at the hands of nineteenth-century medicolegal “experts,” Camille’s accounts do not reflect the experiences of a sexually ambiguous character so much as they chronicle her attempt to switch from an unambiguous state of femininity into an unambiguous state of masculinity – a transformation Camille hoped would grant her access to the patriarchal privilege of

24 An arcane term that has been widely rejected in favor of “intersexuality,” pseudohermaphroditism is defined by Webster’s as the condition “of having the gonads […] of one sex and external genitalia that is of the other sex or is ambiguous” (2013). Interestingly, although Foucault makes this case about pseudohermaphroditism in his introduction to Herculine, none of Camille’s doctors ever deploy it in their reports – perhaps because the “science” of pseudohermaphroditism had not at that point congealed. According to Foucault, the conceptualization of the pseudohermaphrodite within the scientia sexualis of the late-1800s is symptomatic of the overarching ontological imperative for all individuals “to have one and only one sex […] Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity” (viii). The methodology for this technology, Foucault notes, lay in “strip[ping] the body of its anatomical deceptions” and deciphering “the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances” (viii, emphases mine). As I argue throughout this chapter – and as Foucault points out in both Herculine and his History of Sexuality series, the ambiguity of these individual appearances was simply a claim, beneath which lay nothing less than an inability to recognize.
enjoying licit sexual relations with girls. Ironically, this transition was arrested by the very clinicians Camille turned to for support, as these medicolegal experts had more professional stakes in studying Camille’s alleged pseudohermaphrodisim than they had in empowering her life as a man, woman, or girl.

It was this latter state (girlhood) to which Camille desired to retreat once she realized masculinity held no attraction for her. This revelation was accompanied by a more dreadful shock: the medicolegal authorities to whom she turned for support could offer her no route forward or backward into girlhood. Seeing no prospects for enjoying a livable life, Camille was eventually overwhelmed by a heteronormative backlash of scandal and socioeconomic abjection, at which point committing suicide looked better than living as a failed man. Bringing Camille’s memoirs into contact with Teresa de Lauretis’s work in *Figures of Resistance*, I consider de Lauretis’s notion that “eccentric bodies” might resist the boundaries of hegemonic order. Arguing that Camille’s memoirs depict her as a resistant subject engaged in “a process of struggle and interpretation, a rewriting of self” I assert that Camille’s resistance was broken by the heteronormative culture from which (and in which) she sought shelter (De Lauretis: 2007: 180-81). I then move into exploring Camille’s memoirs as a *resistant text*. Refuting Foucault’s characterization of Camille’s writing as “turgid schoolgirl prose,” I discuss the similarities between Camille’s memoirs and the elegiac confessions of eccentric religious figures (St. Augustine, Hadewijch d’Anvers). Suggesting Camille’s girlhood was not merely some sexually ambiguous shadow of a primal dyadic pair, but was a recognizable sex with its own ambiguous edge, I advocate the resistance of Camille’s memoirs to the heteronormative imperative to fall silent, elbowing out their own discursive spaces-
between, inscribing their exception to a heteronormative rule, extending the limits of the possible.

**Concluding Thoughts: The Liminal Edge of a Heterocentric Lexicon**

As I approach the completion of this study, there still seems to be something paramountly difficult to recognize not merely about the arbitrary intersubjective borders between masculinity and femininity, but about men and women themselves, as if the liminal edge of each sexual subject position – even those long regarded as normative – is framed by an opaque edge (of incompletion, dissolution, indistinctness) that lies between each facet of the primal pair and the ambiguous horde of Other sexes whose existence calls their alleged unambiguity into question. As if each sexual subject position is surrounded by a mute ambiguity that lies fleetingly beyond and intermittently between, bearing down on individual subjects in general, the force of its pressure defines the human valuation of sexuality and its moral-ethical contours. In that light, I would like to consider one of the many critical questions raised by Homi K. Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*:

> If the differentiating force of the Other is the process of the subject’s signification in language and society’s objectification in Law, then how can the Other disappear? Can desire, the moving spirit of the subject, ever evanesce? (1994: 74)

If Bhabha is here deploying “evanesce” in the common sense of the term – “to dissipate like vapor” – then where does his question lead, if not back into the effervescent ambiguity that surrounds all materiality in a boundless terrain of voids, semblances, evaporations and double-meanings? And in articulating this question about the Other’s
dissipation, another question seems fundamentally unanswered: Why would we want the Other to dissipate? If the Other disappears, along with our apparent “need” for Otherization (that is, our need to Otherize in order to differentiate), will we finally dispense with oppressing our Others and desist from our attempts to colonize, dominate and incorporate them? While this might seem a relevant point, it is intensely problematic. The more abstract or diffuse the Other becomes, the more it evanesces into complete ambiguity – and the harder it becomes to evanesce Otherness altogether, particularly at the point that Otherness moves from being the object of our gaze into dissipating into the “nothingness” we project as surrounding us and the Other, that seemingly substanceless nothingness that is alien to both ourselves and our Others. Perhaps this is the interstices that Bhabha calls the “anxious contradictory place between the human and the non-human, between sense and non-sense” (1994: 178). While this seems to be a contradiction we need in order to signify for ourselves, I can only ask: is it?

Our brief acts of signification (sexual and otherwise) during our human lifespan seem consistently shrouded or disrupted by the fact of their eventual termination. In that sense, Bataille clocked it perfectly in Tears of Eros: sex is framed by death. But is the death of sex truly a rupture that divides, or is it simply an unfolding into everything repressed or Shouldered aside in order to maintain the notion of an “I”? When the dead king’s ghost makes its appearances in Shakespeare’s Hamlet, it rematerializes from the most liminal borders of the visible world, propelling its maelstrom of crisis and conflict.

25 Like many ambiguous characters that I study in this thesis, Shakespeare’s specter has been causing trouble in intellectual circuits for at least five hundred years, and has resurfaced in scholarly articles from Robert West’s “King Hamlet’s Ambiguous Ghost” to Riccardo Capoferro’s Empirical Wonder. But Shakespeare’s specter has also attained a second life as a principle allegory in Jacques Derrida’s Specters of Marx, wherein Derrida frames the specter’s return as an opportunity to deconstruct the notion of returning in general; specifically, the return to Marxism post-Marx (1994: xix, 10-15). Of course, Derrida’s return to
Faced with this spirit of his deceased father, Hamlet does not rejoice. Instead, he is faced with an overwhelming sense of doubt over his inability to adequately recognize the ghost as his father. Yet the diffuse corporeal frame of this ghost has an allure to it, and its “questionable shape” compels Hamlet to see more:

Be thou a spirit of health or goblin damned,
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,
Thou com’st in such a questionable shape
That I will speak with thee. (1.4.181)

Overcoming Hamlet’s fear or resistance to its uncanny appearance, the ghost’s questionable shape draws him into its vortex of death. But the dead king’s spirit is itself caught in a binary trap: sacred or damned, future or past, heaven or hell. Yet his ghostly business is with the living, and in his series of hauntings the dead king demands justice, death, retribution at any price. But for all its bluster and heat, the ghost is still a shade of its former self and its life is the shade of a former life, and as sociological theorist Avery Gordon remarks in *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, the Marxism set off its own series of returns to Derrida, many of which were gathered in an ambitious collection of essays edited by Michael Sprinker, titled *Ghostly Demarcations* (1999), which features articles by scholars from Antonio Negri to Terry Eagleton, both of whom wonder whether Derrida’s return to Marx was perhaps too ambiguous for its own good. Among the many insightful contributions to *Ghostly Demarcations*, Antonio Negri’s essay, “The Specter’s Smile,” launches an indictment of Derrida’s “sad sidestepping” in his elegant deconstruction of Marxism post-Marx, while Terry Eagleton’s “Marxism Without Marxism” staged an institutional tongue-lashing of the Derridians at UC Irvine, whose misinterpretations of Derrida apparently had the old master rolling in his grave. Then, like a restless spirit from a completely different hauntology, feminist Nancy Holland entered the largely all-boy cotillion at the turn of the millenium to ask, in “The Death of the Other/Father,” if the voice of the daughter has been silenced in our ongoing interrogation of the dead father’s ghost. Critiquing the tendency to totalize the work of all specters into one homogenized asexual agency, Holland suggested Derrida’s *Specters* perpetuates a “non-sexist language run amok, as if ghosts were interchangeably ‘his or hers’ like the towels brides used to be given, along with patronyms, as wedding gifts” (2001: 69). If we evaluate this hothouse of specterwork from a perspective of adaptation studies, the presence of so many volatile offshoots, each apparently revolving around Shakespeare’s “original” depiction of a specter – and each striving to relocate, interpret, clarify, deconstruct and devalue the “real” meanings behind Derrida’s *Specters* – provides a clear indication that the larger body of specterwork is still in a state of emergence, and even though this rictus of adaptation seems to center on the “same” character (Shakespeare’s specter), exactly what this character is purported to signify remains in a state of interpretation.
tropes of ambiguity that mark *Hamlet*'s dead king are typical of those spirits and apparitions said to “inhabit” the murky “interstices between the visible and invisible” (2008: 24). But can a ghost truly “exist,” in the sense the living exist? Or is its questionable form merely the semblance of an existence? If we deprioritize the hierarchy of living forms over dead, what makes a ghost’s existence any more a semblance than our own? Returning to Bal’s conceptualization of characters in *Narratology*, it would seem *Hamlet*’s dead king is not merely the semblance of a man, a king, a father. The duration of his existence (the semblance of a life) is predicated on the dead king’s ability to resist the semblance of his death – a resistance he must maintain if he is to succeed in the mission of vengeance that brings him to the world of the living – a mission that will culminate in the death of his loved ones. Yet no matter how diffuse the ghost’s semblance of a corpus is said to be, he is perhaps the most focused character in *Hamlet*; in fact, his use-value is dependent on his ability to focalize the fabulae of incest and revenge that drive his living son to assassinate his uncle in retribution for his father’s assassination.\(^\text{26}\)

By day’s end, the dead king’s murderous demands have sent Hamlet’s entire family into the specterworld – but the lingering question remains: Where exactly is everybody going? The only character who seems to have a clue is the very ghost who called down their destruction in the first place. Detailing the purgatory of atonement he must endure for his

\(^{26}\) Many Shakespeare scholars (cf. D.L. Ashliman and Steve Roth, among others) concur that Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* was broadly adapted from Saxo Grammaticus’s version of the tale in *The Gesta Danorum*. As Frederick York Powell notes in his 1905 editorial contributions to *The Nine Books of Danish History of Saxo Grammaticus in Two Volumes, with Some Considerations on Saxo’s Sources, Historical Methods, and Folk-Lore by Frederick York Powell*, Shakespeare took many liberties with the Grammaticus text. According to Powell, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe was “so struck by Saxo’s tale of Amleth” – and so vexed with Shakespeare’s embellishments – “that he thought of himself treating it freely, without reference to Shakspeare [sic]. For Shakspeare, reading Belleforest or his translator, rejected or changed so many traits that the story of Amleth became almost as different as his soul” (1905: 587). Of course, we cannot let Powell’s usage of the word “different” slip by here, as it indicates the “driving two or more ways” of ambiguity – in this case, the celebrated ambiguity of Hamlet’s soul.
past crimes, the dead king states he must “fast in fires” until his sins “are burnt and purged away” (185).

But the specter does not discuss his destination once his crimes have been atoned for, and his questionable form is swallowed once more by an obscurity we cannot completely see (185). And it is precisely this liminal fold of corporeal ambiguation that we must keep our eyes on while we run our fingers across the topography of those allegedly ambiguous characters and attempt to engage them in abject discourse, for this space is hardly an empty expanse. Neither is it the intertextual milieu that surrounds all discourse. It is not the terrain of forbidden moral-ethical transgressions, from whence the faintest voices herald their unspeakable pleasures – even those positions lie within the parameters of human experience; indeed, they define the moral-ethical borders of the “Thou shalt not” on which notions of the sacred and profane rely. Even the positions that appear to exist beyond our human ontologies of envisionment might seem perfectly intelligible in time.

What concerns me here, at the end of this study, are those gaps and voids that appear to house no voices at all, yet somehow repudiate all speech with a force that is neither gentle or implicit. For these are the voids that touch the liminal edge of our semblance of an existence, denying us the possibility of engaging them in even the most abject discourse, silently standing between us, surrounding us while rejecting our touch, folding away at the moment we most urgently seek to make them visible. It is precisely that discursive space – a space that is alien territory for ourselves and our Others – that comprises the dead king’s destination once his haunting is complete. Can it truly be said that this ambiguous territory is entirely absent of sex? The question is significant. By
making the ambiguity that appears to surround all sex more recognizable, we might call into question the projected borders of separation that enable and even demand us to sexually differentiate, when in fact we are intimately entangled in sexual ambiguity and abject discourse.\textsuperscript{27} While it seems we can never fully adapt to sexual ambiguity if we are to remain sexually singular, this perception may be a trick of the eye. And it is difficult to deny that sexual ambiguity is constantly \textit{adapting to us}, assenting to our advances even as it retreats into its own territory. This makes at least one fact about sexual ambiguity abundantly clear: the semblance of its mute resistance to our advances demands our closest scrutiny. My task in this thesis is to examine tropes of sexual ambiguity as they are projected onto the characters in which they are said to occur, and, through the process of close reading, to evaluate what sexual ambiguity has to say about itself.

\textsuperscript{27} In \textit{Kristeva}, S.K Keltner observes that while Kristeva presents the moment of abject discourse as a revolutionary event, her usage of \textit{revolt} “signifies a double movement,” wherein we find “the dissolution of meaning (in abjection and melancholia) and the accomplishment of meaning (the dialectical synthesis of semiotic and symbolic experienced in amatory idealization)” (2011: 83). Within this revolutionary moment of (re)cognition, Kristeva asserts it is possible to gain a new form of intimacy. “In its positive form,” Keltner observes, “intimacy is conceptualized [by Kristeva] as the process of the production of meaning and social connection” (83).
Chapter One

From Here to Ambiguity: The Adaptation and Ambiguation of The Cumaean Sibyl

But loyal Aeneas went up to the heights where Apollo
Presides, and, farther away, to the retreat of the Sibyl,
That dreadful witch, in her monstrous cave, whom the Delian
Prophet has breathed on with mind and spirit and opened
The future to her.
-Virgil, *Aeneid* 1.6.10 (Lind 105)

Long before Aeneas sought her guidance, and well before her legend was adapted into a
series of Greco-Roman myths, the prophesies of the Cumaean Sibyl influenced the
actions of kings.¹ By the time Virgil recorded her exploits in the *Aeneid* (19-29 BCE), the
Sibyl’s legend had been in circulation for at least three centuries.² According to tradition,
the Sibyl lived in a cave, scribbling her prophesies on scattered leaves and other scraps of
detritus, and she authored a series of nine books in prophetic verse, three of which she
burnt when King Tarquinius Superbus refused to pay her asking price. In this chapter, I
analyze the increasing levels of ambiguation that frame the Cumaean Sibyl’s sexuality as
she is adapted through Virgil’s *Aeneid* into Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* and the Petronian
*Satyricon*. Through tracing the changes written into the Sibyl as this character proceeds
from work to work, I argue that her prophetic power is diminished to a greater extent the
more her adapters depict her body fading into corporeal ambiguity. Virgil, who could
perhaps be considered the Cumaean Sibyl’s first adapter, does not present her as
ambiguous in the least, nor does he diminish her power; the Sibyl saves Aeneas’s mission

¹ In ancient Greek, the word *sibylla* translates as “prophetess.” It is suggested the Cumaean Sibyl was
among the first of a long lineage of sibylline prophetesses who initially appeared in the Mediterranean from
an unspecified location in the East.
² Heraclitus was perhaps the first classical historian to mention the Sibyls, while Lactantius remarks on at
least ten of the sibyls, including the Sibyl of Cumae, in *The Divine Institutes*. 
on several occasions, and blasts her prophesies from the mouth of a cave with the Trojan
soldiers quivering at her feet.\(^3\) In Ovid’s reworking of the story, however, the Sibyl’s
narrative role grows reduced as she serves the moral-ethical fabula of a larger myth,
becoming an illustration of the misfortune that befalls any girl who dares to cross the
patriarchal gods. And by the time the Cumaean Sibyl reappears in the Petronian Satyricon
nearly a century later, her existence has become the subject of derision and laughter.\(^4\)

The first section of this chapter concerns the Petronian Satyricon’s depictions of
prophesy in everyday Roman life. Closely reading an embedded narrative about the Sibyl
of Cumae that occurs at Trimalchio’s dinner party, I examine the party host’s descriptions
of the Sibyl’s ambiguated form. Following a discussion of sibylline prophetesses in
general, the second section explores different iterations of the Cumaean Sibyl as they
appear first in Heraclitus, and then in Virgil’s specific portrayal of the Sibyl of Cumae in
his Aeneid. Contrasting these antecedent interpretations of the Cumaean Sibyl to Ovid’s
description of the same character in the Metamorphoses, I suggest the sibylline
prophetesses of Ovid and Petronius are far more ambiguated than earlier accounts.
Examining the tropes of sexual diminishment and disavowal that come to bear on the
sibylline character, I evaluate how such techniques transform a powerful prophetess into

\(^3\) It is impossible to verify whether Virgil was the “original” adapter of the Cumaean Sibyl, as the historical
record from that era is so fraught with missing pieces that we cannot accurately make that claim. It might
be more plausible to claim Virgil is the first adapter of the Cumaean Sibyl into epic classical verse,
inasmuch as Virgil almost certainly adapted his accounts of the Cumaean Sibyl from Heraclitus, and from
popular lore. But there may have been other written accounts of the Sibyl that are now lost or destroyed, as
well as that legacy of oral history that was never written down in the first place. Thus, we can merely say
that Virgil is the first adapter of the Cumaean Sibyl that we know of.

\(^4\) A similar transformation can be seen taking place in the Sibyl’s corpus as she is adapted from
Michelangelo’s rendition of her on the Sistine Chapel, and Andrea del Castagno’s Sibyl of Cumae, wherein
stronger aesthetic tropes are replaced by weaker, resulting in a more submissive “feminized” character, not
quite toothless, but lacking political tooth.
a portrait of abjection – an argument to which I return in my analysis of *Fellini-Satyricon* in Chapter Two of this thesis.  

On a theoretical level, Chapter One avails itself of several noted classical scholars (e.g., Gian Biaggio Conté and J.P Sullivan), but I would like to particularly acknowledge Sophia Papaioannou’s recent study, *Epic Succession and Dissension: Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Reinvention of the Aeneid* (2005), as Papaioannou’s research was among the first to track adaptational differences between depictions of the Sibyl in Virgil and Ovid from a feminist perspective. Chapter One also sets out some initial arguments concerning the framing of sexually ambiguous characters in an aesthetic of abjection, both in the narrator’s description of the character’s corpus – and as the sexually ambiguated character is disavowed, ejected or otherwise treated as a waste-object by different characters in the story. This chapter particularly focuses on the connections of abjection to melancholia as derived from a combined reading of Julia Kristeva’s *Powers of Horror* and *Black Sun*. In the former work, Kristeva draws important distinctions between the abjection that emerges from a subject’s contact with *substances* (vomit, scat, semen), and the ways in which abject sensations are vested in a person or groups of people (the homeless, the infirm, the unclean). As Kristeva notes, abjection is an interstice for discourse, a multifarious site of denial and trans-identification, repudiation

While Papaioannou asserts that the Petronian and Ovidian Sibyls are “*victimized as humans,*” I extend Papaioannou’s notion of the victim to emphasize the Sibyl’s abjectification, as the possibility for abject discourse goes beyond paradigms of victimization to produce a more nuanced interpretation of the intersubjective relations between the Sibyl and other characters in the tale (2005: 45).  

As I point out in my introduction, this thesis relies on a combined reading of abjection and abject discourse as treated in the work of both Kristeva and Butler. While Butler is more interested in the socioeconomic function of abjection in constraining and even punishing marginalized others (some have called this abjection’s “social function”), Kristeva seems more interested in the psychological and intersubjective possibilities of abjection and abject discourse for emancipating previously unheard and unseen subject positions into discourse. Of course, it is clear that both elements are intimately linked, as you can’t have a society without subjects, and subjects are identified as such by societies.
and illumination; in short, it is the locus of an intimate revolt wherein facets of subject have the potential to break out from being externalized and devalued into becoming differentiated and even re-valued. In this chapter, I particularly embrace the role ambiguity plays in abject discourse, as the state of abjection is stimulated or provoked by the subject’s detection of “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 1982: 4, emphasis mine).

I would like to conclude my introduction to Chapter One with some remarks on the documents I examine in this chapter – particularly the Petronian Satyricon – which often resembles works of graffiti that have been over-painted so many times that it becomes difficult to ascertain what lies beneath the layers with accuracy. Within these incomplete accounts, scraps of satyricala, curiosa, armless statues and broken vessels, we find our first accounts of sexuality in the proto-myths of classical literature and art; images that entice us, just as they enticed Georges Bataille in Tears of Eros, with their enigmatic smiles fading into the past, until time swallows them and we lose track of their contours altogether. It is precisely at this ontological zero-point, at the edge of pre-literacy and our visual and cultural lexicon, that it becomes difficult to decide whether the shapes

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7 The reaction of the subject to the abject is similar to the uncanny effect described by Freud in his essay, “The Uncanny.” In The Powers of Horror, Kristeva argues that the viewing subject’s reaction to the abject is “more violent” than its reaction to the uncanny, because the intensity of identification between subject and other is stronger and more vehement in this relation (1982: 5).

8 In Tears of Eros, Bataille begins exploring the relationship between eroticism and death by closely reading of the “painting in the pit” at Lascaux caves (Le Panneau de L’homme Blessé) – by recent estimates, perhaps eighteen thousand years old. Noting that “Today, we can only despair before the obscure image displayed on the walls of a cave: a man with a bird’s face, who asserts his being with an erect penis, but who is falling down,” Bataille calls our attention to the fact that “… something obscure, strange, sets apart this pathetic scene, to which nothing in our time can be compared […] Above this fallen man, a bird drawn in a single stroke, on the end of a stick, contrives to distract our thoughts.” But really, everything about the painting is obscure, when it comes to that. We think we recognize the shapes and contours, and something is recognizable there: a buffalo, a man, a spear, a bird. But Bataille does not emphasize the significance of the many elements that could easily be missing from the painting, (elements that were lost, chipped away, or disappeared), although he does go so far as to observe “the scene has an erotic character; this is obvious, clearly emphasized, but it is inexplicable” (1961: 52).
depicted in such works are male or female, grinning in pleasure or grimacing in pain – and the physical sex of the character plus the meaning of its sex becomes difficult to read with accuracy. But while correctly interpreting the meaning of the Venus de Milo (and to a greater extent the Venus of Willendorf) might be difficult, we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the meaning of sex and sexuality during the time of their creation was different than our own. The exact meaning of this difference is at least partially lost to us, of course, but the fact of its former presence is discernable in the object’s missing edge – those missing arms, heads, words and chapters that hint at meanings we either understand poorly or might never know.

In such gaps, the abject lurks – and with it the possibility for abject discourse, the opportunity to readapt our relationship to things that cannot readily be explained; occurrences so out of the ordinary that they are shuffled into the questionable fold of magic, mystery, enigma and ambiguity. Deep in this past, we can detect the roots of our scientia sexualis, and with it the emergence of our science of sexual ambiguation. Indeed, if we look far enough back down science’s family tree, we arrive at the moment in which science, alchemy and magic were one and the same thing, conducted by the same cadre of “experts,” for the same purpose: deciphering the meaning of the unknown. Despite the fact that magic and alchemy appear to be the abject Other that science is so desperately trying to distance itself from, science and alchemy were originally the same thing. Indeed, without alchemy the practice of science would not exist, and many of the “miracles” and atrocities of science today were prophesied by alchemists and spiritualists long ago.

Like Bataille, we might look upon the silent grin of antiquity’s remains and conclude there is a technology of eros that hinges on the relationship between death and
sex. Or perhaps we refrain from making quite that connection because it might not adequately account for the missing features we cannot see, but can detect by the fact of their missing limbs in the places they used to be. What once resided there—the missing meaning-machine and its connections—can never be accurately proven. What we can say with certainty is this: the further back we trace the relics of our sexual ontologies in time, the more ambiguous they grow, eventually fading so far into myth and magic that any meaning of sex other than its assumed reproductive function and pleasurable sensation fades into obscurity, and our technologies and economies of sex, no matter how obscure or arcane, completely disappear, leaving us with the question mark of indeterminacy. That’s where we come from.

A Brief Embodied Narrative: The Mysterious Case of The Shrinking Sibyl

As is often the case with classical relics and curiosa, the Petronian Satyricon (known in classical circles as the Satyricon Liber [Book of Satyr-like Adventures]) stands out as a substantially fractured text. Even its authorship remains in debate. While portions of its narrative seem to follow a clean line, others are fragments and interpolations punctuated by the inevitable lacunae that scar an ancient text (1986: 16-8, 26-9). The extant manuscript primarily features the exploits of Encolpius, ex-gladiator and scholasticus,

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9 While numerous scholars of adaptation (e.g., Sanders and Hutcheon) have examined adaptation across a wide swath of forms and genres, none have yet analyzed the adaptational significance of lacunae. Classical scholars, however, have been on that track for quite some time. In The Hidden Author: An Interpretation of Petronius’s Satyricon, Gian Biagio Conte observes that “one must evaluate information about lacunae, whether transmitted or not, with great caution,” and not inject the gaps with meaning that may not have been present in the original text (1997: 82).

10 Classicist J.P. Sullivan argues the commonly accepted view that the Satyricon was the work of T. Petronius Niger, the Roman statesman and courtier who was “Arbiter of Excellence” for Emperor Nero Claudius Caesar Drusus Germanicus [Nero] (1986: 11).
and his comrade Ascyltus. Both characters are romantically obsessed with Giton, their sexually precocious bath boy, and the narrative engine of the *Satyricon* is driven by Encolpius’s thwarted efforts to keep Giton away from Ascyltus (and other characters). Encolpius will turn even the most dire circumstances to his advantage if it means securing another fancy embrace from Giton – and because Encolpius and Ascyltus are streetwise rogues who have turned at times to kidnapping, thievery and murder, we find no lack of dire circumstances. In fact, it is their outlaw lifestyle – and the fear of getting caught – that keeps Encolpius, Giton and Ascyltus on the move from region to region, providing Petronius with the perfect pretext to lampoon the vicissitudes of Roman life in urban and rural settings.¹¹

But we must keep in mind that nobody can say for certain where the *Satyricon* is “going,” just as they cannot say where the story is “supposed” to begin or end, whether the story is “finished,” or what if anything the story was intended to do. There have been too many shifts in culture since the time of its writing, and the text is riddled with abrupt gaps in action, sudden switches in voice and scenery, and other disruptions and confictions that ultimately make the work “regrettably fragmented and mutilated,” as classicist J.P. Sullivan observes (1986: 26).¹² This sensation of fragmentation is compounded by the leaps in action and plot that characterize Menippean and/or Varronian satire in general, as these complex adaptive arrangements imitate the form but

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¹¹ This chapter owes a tremendous debt of gratitude to the work of *Satyricon* scholars P.G. Walsh, J.P. Sullivan, Raymond Astbury, Gilbert Bagnani, and Gian Biagio Conte. Although they approach the Roman novel from different critical angles, these scholars generally agree the Petronian *Satyricon* is a satire – though the court remains out on whether the *Satyricon* is satire in the Menippean or Varronian style – just as it remains divided on the distinction between the two forms, which are often, and perhaps incorrectly, conflated.

¹² In addition to the presence of lacunae, Conte reflects that the *Satyricon* is immediately distinguishable by an “ambiguity of language” that “leaves confrontations unresolved [and] which refuses univocality of meaning” (1997: 148).
spoof the content of earlier Greek epics. Like many *curiosa*, the extant fragments of the *Satyricon* may appear out of order and could mean something entirely different if reassembled in a different fashion. In short, the *Satyricon* is riddled with ambiguity at its most fundamental levels, producing a text that has become difficult to recognize within the parameters of our contemporary cultural order. This is not to suggest the *Satyricon* was completely recognizable within the context of its own time: this is equally impossible to say with certainty. Petronius was fond of raising eyebrows, and he may have paid for the *Satyricon* with his life.14

Because the *Satyricon* could conceivably begin anywhere, the best we can say of its beginning is that the text appears to open in mid-action, with Encolpius engaged in a rant about the poor state of scholarship in Rome. As he speech becomes framed in its context – an interjection here, a descriptive aside there – we realize Encolpius is debating with Agamemnon, a scholar of rhetoric. This might seem like an uneven competition, were it not for the fact that Encolpius, a former *scholaticus*, is equally proficient at verbal combat. Arguing that Roman students are “blockheads” who are force-fed myths, allegories and legends that make no sense in everyday life, Encolpius faults Roman teachers for referring to the convoluted injunctions of oracles during plague times to sacrifice “three or more virgins” to satisfy the Roman gods (1964: 2). This opening

13 Numerous scholars have observed the satiric relation of the *Satyricon* to earlier works, particularly the *Iliad* of Homer. In *The Roman Novel*, P.G. Walsh notes: “As in the Greek tradition of fiction, so too in the formative Roman genre; in Menippean satire also the elements of parody and literary allusions are prominent. The fragments of Varro indicate that his satires incorporated both themes and actual verses from authors” (1970: 34). Taking this notion one step further, Conte compares Encolpius’s tears over Giton’s abduction by Ascytus to Achilles’s dismay in the *Iliad*, when his female lover, Briseis, is “taken away from him” (1997: 1-2).

14 There is conjecture among some classicists that Petronius, an influential Roman courtier as well as a satiric writer, mocked his powerful rival Tigellinus by depicting him in the *Satyricon*, and that Tigellinus “turned Nero against Petronius with unfounded rumors as a means of retaliation […] Feeling somewhat hopeless in his defense, Petronius decided to commit suicide” (*Historia* 2014).
speech underscores the general skepticism with which prophesy is regarded in contemporary Roman life. If the best that prophets can do in the face of a plague is command us to sacrifice virgins (three or more) to the gods, we might as well depend on common sense.¹⁵

The Satyricon’s next mention of prophesy occurs in what is arguably its most widely read section, the Cena Trimalchionis (Trimalchio’s Dinner Party), in which a wealthy provincial merchant spends an evening entertaining visitors at his opulent Campanian estate. As Encolpius, Ascytus and Giton enter Trimalchio’s house, the artwork adorning his walls abounds with references to the supernatural. In one mural, the god Mercury lifts Trimalchio and places him next to the goddess Fortune, who offers him a cornucopia (1986: 45). Beside the mural is a silver-gilt shrine honoring several gods, along with “a large golden box, in which it was said [Trimalchio] kept the first shavings of his beard,” and an astrological tableau with auspicious dates marked with pins (45).¹⁶

Taken together, the abundance of mystical bric-a-brac crowding Trimalchio’s house suggests that magic and the occult were a staple of popular culture in first-century Rome. Yet while earlier generations held such objects in reverence, Petronius’s literary treatment of these objects as contextualized by the sardonic laughter of Trimalchio’s dinner guests demonstrates the degree to which Roman culture had “modernized,” with

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¹⁵ This skepticism of prophetic figures, along with magical characters of all types, is one of the most identifiable hallmarks of Petronius’s writing. In Arbiter of Excellence, Gilbert Bagnani notes that the Satyricon repeatedly “pokes more or less good-humored fun at astrology and divination, omens and prodigies, ghosts and werewolves,” and suggests that the debunking of magic and superstition indicate Petronius regarded himself as a modern Roman scholar (1954: 11-12).

¹⁶ In “Social Hair,” anthropologist C.R. Hallpike discusses the superstitious practice of collecting bodily hair, trimmings, and other detritus (fingernails, semen, etc.), observing that these items are often utilized as magical talismans or ingredients for magic rites and potions.
everyday Romans regarding pantheistic superstitions with skepticism. Indeed, as Gilbert Bagnani notes in *Arbiter of Excellence: A Study of the Life and Works of C. Petronius*, the *Satyricon* does not merely underscore Petronius’s disapproval “of religious innovations or aberrations; the old Roman religion is laughed at with equal impartiality” (1958: 12). In this “modern” mode, Petronius places mythical figures on the same playing field as a pagan past that seems outmoded, provincial, in much the same way that “modern” scientists speak of astrology as baseless and ridiculous – and the same way scientists one thousand years from now will regard the scientific “advancements” of our modern times.

But unlike his trendy dinner guests, Trimalchio does not dismiss magic outright; like many contemporary characters, he seeks to play both sides of the coin. While one does not get the opinion that Trimalchio cares about anything but money and power, he is superstitious on a grandiose scale. His opulent menu burgeons with boiled sow’s udders, figpeckers encased in yolk, roasted hogs with living thrushes trapped between their ribs – but each of these dishes are replete with occult references. When a servant emerges from Trimalchio’s kitchen, bearing a tray that displays the twelve signs of the zodiac, Trimalchio’s chef (Daedelus) has placed “some appropriate dainty” above each astrological sign: a beefsteak for Taurus, a pair of succulent testicles for Gemini, Libra

17 Furthermore, in distancing his (projected) contemporary Romans from their own pagan, animistic, astrological origins, Petronius engages in the “modern” mode of “disenchantment” that Andrew McCann describes in his article, “The Savage Metropolis: Animism, Aesthetics and the Pleasures of a Vanished Race” (317-54). In this mode, Petronius relation to magical objects evokes McCann’s descriptions of “a mode of readership” wherein alterities, figured as relics of another time, are “assimilated into the field of representation in direct relationship to [their] destruction within the ever-expanding field of colonization” (2003: 332). Thus, the projection of modernity always comes as an otherizing gesture, a deflection of the old away from the new, the abject away from the pure.
balancing a scale with a cheesecake on one side and a pastry on the other (1986: 57). Directing his guests’ attention to a bundle of honeycomb and herbs lumped at the center of the platter, Trimalchio remarks:

The world goes round like a little mill, and is never without its mischief; that men be either born or perish […] but for that tuft of herbs in the middle, and the honeycomb upon it, I do nothing without just reason for it: Our mother the earth is in the middle, made round like an egg, and has all good things in herself, like a honeycomb. (1964: 58).

The rationale of Trimalchio’s soliloquy is simple: we don’t need magic or prophecies to tell us the meaning of life – mother earth provides us with everything good, and we need look no further than that. But as the feast progresses, Trimalchio’s pronouncements grow increasingly extravagant. He insists that magical characters are not the stuff of myths but can be found in real life, and even claims to have personally encountered the Sibyl of Cumae during a business trip to Campania:

In fact, I actually saw with my own eyes the Sibyl at Cumae dangling in a bottle, and when the children asked her in Greek: ‘What do you want, sibyl?’ she used to answer: I want to die. (67)

Etymologically speaking, “The Sibyl of Cumae” is a linguistic portmanteau that draws together the Greek term for a job description (sibylla = prophetess) and the name of a specific location (Cumae). Aside from being Petronius’s place of birth, Cumae was the geographical region typically associated with the Cumaean Temple of Apollo and the

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18 In Greek mythology, Daedalus was a consummate inventor and conjurer – among other things, he designed the magical labyrinth of King Minos. Petronius’s choice of names is a deft one; Trimalchio’s supper is a labyrinth as well, daunting, bewildering, populated by magical creatures; witches, minotaurs, soul-stealers and Sibyls.

19 Trimalchio’s dinner party (at which he stages an elaborate funeral in honor of himself) and the location of Petronius’s actual suicide feast share a common geographical feature: they both occur in Campania, the home of the Cumaean Sibyl.
order of sibylline prophetesses who presided over Apollonian temples throughout the Roman Empire.\textsuperscript{20} By the first century, there were dozens of sibylline priestesses with a variety of magical powers – but the Cumaean Sibyl was arguably the most famous of her order. According to Virgil, the birth name of The Sibyl of Cumae was Deiphobe, and her powers included making accurate predictions of future events, reading signs and omens, and communicating with the dead.\textsuperscript{21} Yet by the first century, when Petronius wrote the Satyricon, her abilities were so renowned that she was referred to as the Sibyl or even “sibyl,” as Trimalchio’s village children call her.\textsuperscript{22}

Let us consider this manifestation of The Cumaean Sibyl as she appears within Trimalchio’s embedded narrative. As many narratologists have noted, the presence of an embedded narrative in literary work often serves to underscore a story’s central themes.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{20} In The Sibylline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism, historian John Collins details the tradition of sibylline soothsayers in the Indo-European region. Collins traces the sibylline legacy far into pre-recorded history (1974: 1-12). The most celebrated sibylline prophesies included rise (and fall) of Alexander the Great, the birth of Jesus, and the collapse of the Roman empire (1974: 2-6). According to Collins, the Sibyl was first referred to in mythology only in the singular, as the Libyan Sibyl may have been the initiator sibylline prophesy. Following the writings of Heraclides Ponticus, however, and with the continued longevity of the sibylline tradition, “the sibyls multiplied … in all we find reference to thirty or forty sibyls associated with even the most remote localities. Later, classical authors attempted to reduce these to a manageable number” (1972: 1).

\textsuperscript{21} Virgil was among the first writers to mention Deiphobe by name. In the Aeneid, he refers to Deiphobe as the daughter of Glaucus. This familial relation at once asserts Deiphobe’s magicality through hereditary association – in Greco-Roman mythology, Glaucus, “the blue man,” was a Greek fisherman and expert diver who was transformed into a merman after ingesting magical herbs. Ovid describes Glaucus in Book XVII of the Metamorphoses, noting the character’s “flowing shaggy hair” and “manly thighs,” which “abruptly merged into a fish’s tail” (1994: 279-80).

\textsuperscript{22} Biblical scholar Milton Terry, in his study, The Sibylline Oracles, details the numerous Greco-Roman scholars who write of the Sibyls’ magical powers, including Plutarch, Livy and Pausanius. Milton also details the compendium of sibylline prophesies known as The Sibylline Books (1899: 4). According to Terry, these books were stored in the Temple of Jupiter in Rome, and were referred to only in times of crisis—but the collection was partially destroyed in a fire in 83 B.C. “and finally burned by order of the Roman General Flavius Stilicho [365-408 C.E.]” (4). Terry notes that the original Sibylline Books are not to be confused with The Sibylline Oracles, a set of prophetic “forgeries” produced several centuries later (5).

\textsuperscript{23} Mieke Bal, among others, structurally evaluates the embedded narrative in Narratology, citing One Thousand and One Nights, wherein Scheheradze’s captivity and the threat of death comprises the primary narrative (1985: 142-145). Within this overarching structure, Scheheradze’s “frame narratives” become a series of mini-narrations in which “a complete story is told” (1985: 142). Ultimately, Scheheradze’s frame narratives are so beguiling that they lead to Scheheradze’s emancipation in the primary narrative, as opposed to Trimalchio’s narrative, which cements the Sibyl in a ceremonial jar.
This one is no exception. All told, the entire passage is one sentence in length, but this passage is packed with meaning, particularly as its moral-ethical fabula is bracketed by Trimalchio’s reiteration of other occult yarns. Aside from being the story of a woman shrunken so small that she fits into a ceremonial jar, the brevity of the sequence literally shrinks the Sibyl of Cumae into a footnote or appendage in Trimalchio’s lexicon of supernatural oddities: giants, witches, cyclopes and werewolves.

This brief depiction of corporeal ambiguity says much about the narrative ambiguation of a character. Indeed, if we examine this character closely, the Cumaean Sibyl shares many narrative tropes with the dead king’s ghost in Hamlet. While the author does not represent the Sibyl as sexually ambiguous per se, her corpus is presented as highly ambiguous, and its ambiguation has a significant impact on her sexuality. Yet when we read this passage, we detect an error in Trimalchio’s testimony. It is not possible he “saw” the Sibyl with his “own eyes,” as one cannot see a whisper – it would be more accurate for him to claim he heard the Sibyl’s voice, or saw a small glass vial and heard a voice emanating from it. But in this crucial move, Petronius also confuses and/or conflates the senses of hearing and seeing in a manner that seems conducive to ambiguating the corporeal form of his character in general. Not only is her physical form difficult to discern audibly or visibly; the Sibyl’s body is diminished or vaporized enough to fit into an ampulla – a vessel used for magical rites – as her strident voice is reduced to the morbid refrain: I only want to die.

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24 The use of glass or ceramic ampullae to contain magical liquids and powders is an ancient practice that dates from the earliest days of pilgrimages to holy shrines—including pilgrimages to the Sibyl’s Temple at Cumae. In “Medieval Medicine, Magic, and Water,” Michael Garcia observes that “relic water from ampullae was often used” by pilgrims “in hope of effecting cures at home” (2008: 3).
The Sibyl Before *Satyricon*: From Virgil’s Wild Haired Prophetess to Ovid’s Abject Girl

As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, the earliest reference to sibylline prophecy in Greco-Roman literature is Heraclitus’s account of The Sibyl at Delphi. According to Plutarch, Heraclitus described the Delphic Sibyl as a prophetess who, “with raving mouth utters things mirthless and unadorned and unperfumed, and her voice carries through a thousand years” (Plutarch in Kahn 2008: 45). From their earliest description, the voices of sibylline prophetesses were the central facet of such characters. In describing the Delphic Sibyl speaking with a “raving mouth,” Heraclitus does not imply the Sibyl was raving mad, but rather refers to the ecstatic form of revelation common to sibylline prophetesses, who often fell into trance-states, foaming at the mouth, writhing on the ground, crying out as if stricken. Noting the Sibyl’s utterances were “mirthless, unadorned, and unperfumed,” Heraclitus indicates the Delphic Sibyl’s prophesies were

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25 Although Heraclitus’s treatise, *On Nature*, was lost in a fire, Plutarch claimed he saw the text, and wrote about it in his *Pythian Oracles, Book VI*. Charles Kahn, who translates this fragment of Heraclitus from Plutarch in *The Art and Thought of Heraclitus*, notes that Plutarch paraphrases Heraclitus rather than quoting him (2008: 45). Kahn argues that Plutarch has “so blended the citation into his own text” that it is hard to tell where Heraclitus leaves off and Plutarch begins, but that the general content of the citation is accurate (125-6). In that sense, Heraclitus’s work exists in an even more fragmentary state than the *Satyricon*; its remaining fragments are embedded in the equally fragmented writings of Plutarch.

26 Andrew Benjamin makes a semiotic analysis of sibylline speech in “Raving Sibyls, Signifying Gods: Noise and Sense in Heraclitus Fragments 92 and 93.” Accessing Heraclitus’s description of the Sibyl as an entry point for discussing the gray areas between sheer noise and speech, Benjamin notes that “the liminal can have a decisive quality.” According to Benjamin: “A snarl, be it animal or human, is neither fully meaningful nor mere noise […] The snarl hovers at the edge […] The edge is the limit condition at which claims of sense are negotiated” (2005: 1). In Heraclitus, the Delphic Sibyl’s raving might hover at the edge of recognition, but within this ecstatic speech the unvarnished truth is detectable. By the time she reaches Petronius, however, the Sibyl no longer foams madly. Her voice is now a drone. Not a senseless drone, or a simple repetition of noises, but the pendulum click of abjection, swaying between disavower and disavowed, rejecter and rejected.
absent of sophisms, even if the unvarnished truth was unpleasant and came at great personal expense.27

As I have mentioned in this chapter, one of the earliest works containing references to the Sibyl of Cumae is Virgil’s *Aeneid*.28 Appearing decades before the publication of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, the *Aeneid* depicts The Cumaean Sibyl as outspoken, courageous, and unambiguously female.29 Spanning a series of twelve books, the *Aeneid*’s primary narrative concerns the travails of Aeneas, a Trojan prince who flees his home following the sack of Troy and the fall of King Priam. *Book VI* opens with Aeneas and his band of mariners landing at Cumae, on the shores of southern Greece, in search of the Cumaean Sibyl, whom Virgil describes as a “mad divining dame, the priestess of the god, Deiphobe her name” (1997: 150).30 Having heard of her gift for prophecy, Aeneas

27 In *The Sibyline Oracles of Egyptian Judaism*, religious scholar John Collins concludes that Heraclitus’s reference to “a thousand years” demonstrates “the sibyl was a very ancient figure even in the fifth century” (1972: 1). J.L. Lightfoot, in another book entitled *The Sibyline Oracles*, observes the Sibyl of Heraclitus’s description, “is a lone figure, without time or (apparently) place, her voice resonating throughout the ages (2007: 4). In that sense, the Sibyl’s voice, the reputation of her voice, and the lineage of hundreds of sibylline voices already stretched back thousands of years even before the first written accounts of them, becoming one common voice; the voice of the ages.

28 Classicist Sophia Papaioannou, in *Epic Succession and Dissension: Ovid’s Metamorphoses and the Reinvention of the Aeneid*, speculates the *Metamorphoses* and *Aeneid* may have been the world’s “first adaptations,” as they are clearly patterned after Homer’s *Iliad* (2005: 79). Written some fifty years following the *Aeneid*, the *Metamorphoses* also features the hero Aeneas—yet, this hero is of neither author’s manufacture; the debut of Aeneas actually took place in Homer’s *Iliad*. In fact, Aeneas’s common appearance in *The Iliad, Metamorphoses*, and *Aeneid* leads Miller to characterize the *Metamorphoses* and *Aeneid* as adaptations in the “Homeric” mode (1927: 30-4). The *Aeneid* appeared between 29 and 19 BC, preceding the *Satyricon* by at least 75 years, while Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* appeared several years before Ovid’s exile in 7 A.D. – roughly 50 years before Petronius’s text.

29 Frank Miller observes that “there have been many *Aeneids*” in his essay, “Ovid’s Aeneid and Vergil’s: A Contrast in Motivation” (1927: 33). Walsh makes a similar case in his more recent *The Roman Novel: The Satyricon of Petronius and the Metamorphoses of Apuleius* (1970). “One cannot begin to appreciate the comic versatility of Petronius;” Walsh notes, nor can they “savour the full flavour of [The Satyricon], unless one is aware that scene after scene introduces echoes of earlier literature, especially of the Augustan poets Virgil, Horace and Ovid” (36). While I concur with Walsh regarding the issue of adaptation, I believe the flavor of any work is just as “full” whether or not a reader is privy to the source materials for the adaptation.

30 Virgil’s use of the word “mad” echoes Heraclitus description of the Sibyl’s “raving,” not to indicate any incoherence on the Sibyl’s part, but rather to describe the wild passion of the Sibyl’s speech, foaming at the mouth during states of prophetic ecstasy. Virgil’s initial description of the Sibyl also endows her with a number of magical qualities. The reference to “divining” underscores Deiphobe’s prowess at prophesying
seeks to persuade Deiphobe to guide him to Hades, where he hopes to speak with the spirit of his dead father, Anchises. A powerful priestess, Deiphobe oversees a magnificent shrine, at the center of which is a cavern with one hundred entrances, from whence her voice thunders across the surrounding valleys. Hair flying in the wind, the voice of The Cumaean Sibyl swells, growing “more than human, for the power of the god is closing in,” racking the bones of the battle-hardened Trojans with “chill shuddering” (1981: 133). As her speech becomes rent with inhuman cries, Deiphobe predicts numerous dangers for Aeneas and his men, foretelling a series of wars in which the waters of the Tiber will flow red with blood (134). The reactions of Aeneas and his seasoned mariners to the Sibyl’s prophecies – their kneeling, praying, and tributary sacrifices of live animals – underscore the respect they accord her. Ultimately, Deiphobe agrees to accompany Aeneas into Hades.31 This is an enormous gift, for without Deiphobe at his side, Aeneas would never survive the journey. It is Deiphobe who possesses the remedies for each supernatural obstacle they must overcome in order for Aeneas to speak with his father on the Elysian Fields.

The first challenge they encounter is Charon the Boatman, the only character capable of ferrying Aeneas across the River Styx into the underworld. At first, Charon refuses to convey, grumbling about having to carry living souls across the water. But Deiphobe bears Charon a special gift: the golden bough of Persephone. Its fragile green
buds move Charon to relent, and he allows them to board his ship.\textsuperscript{32} The second obstacle that awaits them is Cerberus, the demon-dog, guardian of Hades’s gates. But Deiphobe sedates Cerberus with a cake dipped in opium, and he falls asleep like a hound before the fire (1981: 144). Descending into Hades, the travelers encounter the sights and sounds of the damned: cries of newborn babies who have never seen their mothers, innocent prisoners protesting their condemnation, the victims of unrequited love eternally consumed by its lack. But the Sibyl never leaves Aeneas’s side, and her command of the supernatural is precisely what enables the protagonist to enter and exit Hades unscathed (Exiting being the more impressive feat).\textsuperscript{33}

All things considered, Virgil depicts the Cumaean Sibyl as courageous, outspoken and powerful. The same cannot be said for Ovid’s representation of the “same” Sibyl in \textit{Metamorphoses}, as this character appears narratively diminished in several key aspects. First, Ovid compresses his account of the Sibyl’s journey into a fraction of Virgil’s text (from the full length of Book Six of the \textit{Aeneid} to fifty-three lines in Book 14 of \textit{Metamorphoses}). As Sophia Papaioannou notes, this literary compression figuratively shrinks the Sibyl’s story, much “to the detriment of those narrative moments emphasized

\textsuperscript{32} In Greek mythology, “the golden bough” refers to a limb of the tree sacred to Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, a bough with magical qualities of regeneration. Whenever a branch was broken off, a new one would grow in its place. It is this bough to which Sir James George Frazer paid tribute in the title of \textit{The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion} (1935). As one of the first structural studies of magical systems, this work influenced Mircea Eliade and Marcel Mauss in their structural analyses of magical acts and magicians. Of course, Frazer’s neo-Darwinistic approach to categorizing people who ascribe to magical beliefs aroused the ire of Ludwig Wittgenstein, who wrote that “Frazer is much more savage than most of [the] savages” he writes about in \textit{The Golden Bough} (1979: 131). Although the same criticism could apply to Mauss and Eliade, it would be overly reductive to set aside the observations of these “modern” scholars (to borrow McCann’s usage of the term) concerning the social role of magic.

\textsuperscript{33} In the Sibyl’s words: “The way to Hades is easy; night and day lie open the gates of death’s dark kingdom – but to retrace your steps, to find the way back to daylight – that is the task” (\textit{Aeneid} 6.125).
in the *Aeneid*” (2005: 44).\(^{34}\) Describing the Ovidian Sibyl as “a far cry from the Vergilian model,” Papaioannou asserts that “Ovid’s prophetess is meant to be seen not as supernatural communicant but as a victimized woman” (2005: 45).\(^{35}\) This victimization, Papaioannou suggests, occurs in Ovid’s temporal relocation of the story, which skirts any explicit account of Aeneas and Deiphobe journey into the underworld in favor of picking up the story shortly *after* this underworld journey has ended. Cutting to a scene in which Aeneas seeks to reward Deiphobe for her services, the protagonist promises to erect a shrine in her honor. But Deiphobe demurs. She is no goddess, she responds, nor is she worthy of worship. Then Deiphobe confides to Aeneas that Apollo once promised to fulfill her every desire if she would only allow him to have sex with her. Pointing to a pile of sand, Deiphobe asked Apollo to give her as many years of life as sand-grains in return for her virginity – but she forgets to ask for a youthful body throughout that span. When Deiphobe continues to spurn his sexual advances, Apollo forces her to live out the temporal consequences of their bargain: one year for each grain of sand. Seven hundred years have passed since then, the Sibyl sighs, and with every passing year her body grows smaller – eventually it will shrink to less than a speck of dust and weigh no more than a feather. In this diminished state, the Sibyl fears no one will believe she was lusted after by a god, and that Apollo will either fail to recognize her or deny that he ever loved her. In a final prophetic act, the Sibyl concludes that although she will be “shrunk past

\(^{34}\) According to Papaioannou: “the 53 lines of the Sibyl episode [in the *Metamorphoses*] are meant to reproduce the whole of *Aeneas VI,*” which comprises more than 1200 lines (2005: 44). Of these fifty-three lines, Ovid’s description of the Sibyl’s journey into Hades with Aeneas comprises six lines; less than one-tenth of the space this journey is given in the *Aeneid.*

\(^{35}\) As I noted in the introduction to this chapter, I concur with Papaioannou’s argument that Ovid’s treatment of the Sibyl is often demeaning, but would replace the word “victimization” with abjectification, as this allows for a more nuanced reading of the intersubjective exchange between the characters at play.
recognition of the eye,” the sound of her voice will remain, for “the fates will leave me my voice” (1921: 311).  

Ovid’s compression of the Cumaean Sibyl into this extreme state of abjection is an adaptive shift that fundamentally alters the Sibyl’s spatial and temporal relation to the visible world. In Virgil’s epic, Aeneas and his seasoned mariners quake before the Sibyl as she towers over them, commanding them, frightening them, guiding and protecting their leader. But in Ovid’s treatment, the Sibyl’s acts of loyalty and courage are replaced with an embedded narrative that imparts a duplicity to her act of reneging on Apollo’s bargain, while centralizing her submission to Apollo’s punishment. Virgil’s sibylline prophetess takes orders from nobody and emerges from the tale more powerful than ever. Ovid’s rendition of the same character is subject to an overarching spatiotemporal bind of constraint, a punitive act that sentences the Sibyl to death by a thousand ambiguations. In retribution for not submitting to an act of prostitution, this puerile god subjects his lover’s body to eternal diminishment, until her questionable form becomes so insignificant that only her voice remains. Apollo thus enforces a horrible chastity on the Sibyl, disavowing her in an act of violent alienation. When she shrinks beyond recognition, nobody will be able to have sex with Deiphobe again, even if she desires it. His reaction is tyrannical and childlike: So you think you are big enough to mess with me? I’ll make you so small that you’ll beg for death. Just wait and see. This is the whimpering plea (for death) that Petronius focalizes in Trimalchio’s embedded narrative, underscoring how the Sibyl’s

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36 Ovid’s structural shrinking of Virgil’s story by more than one thousand lines, combined with his extended-play narration of the Sibyl’s physical shrinking, results in an adaptational shift that Papaioannou asserts leaves Ovid’s Sibyl in a less advantageous position than Virgil’s. In particular, Papaioannou cites Virgil’s depiction of the Cumaean Sibyl’s magical prophetic powers, which are rendered in a manner that “officially sanctions” her role as a revered prophetess, thereby preserving her status as sacred (2005: 45). Ovid’s representation of the same Sibyl, however, “produces an alternative reading” of Aeneid Book VI; a reading which “downplays the role of prophecy and its effect on Aeneas” (45).
modifications in Petronius and Ovid seem out oddle of synch with Virgil, reducing the character’s story from an entire book about her journey into an embedded narrative of diminishment and abjection.

**Society of the Spectral: Petronius Plays the Trope of Ambiguation One Step Further**

In the previous section, I suggest that Trimalchio’s embedded narrative in the *Satyricon* no longer features the strident, outspoken prophetess of Virgil’s *Aeneid* – nor does it depict the regretful lover of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Extending the Sibyl’s temporality several centuries further down the timeline, Petronius’s account of the Sibyl cements her into a ceremonial vial. While Ovid’s Sibyl might *foresee* her body shrinking to a grain of sand, in Petronius, her plea for death is the very manifestation of this prophesy: she has now completely shrunk.

Closely reading this embedded narrative raises several questions about corporal ambiguation as it applies to a character’s size and recognizability. If the Petronian Sibyl was already no bigger than a grain of sand when she entered her *ampulla* a century prior to Trimalchio’s arrival, how small is she now? The size of a molecule or an atom? And if she *is* that small, how do her whispers remain audible to the human ear? Perhaps the amplification of her voice is some trick of the ampulla itself; in an echo of the Sibyl’s magical cave, this ceremonial prison amplifies her voice a hundredfold. Yet while Petronius has narratively reduced the Sibyl to a sand-speck of information, the black-hole of her existence is a portal, like the mouth of the ampulla itself, opening into the ambiguous expanse of nothingness surrounding the miniscule remainder of her body: her voice. In fact, aside from Trimalchio’s word that she is the Sibyl of Cumae, there is no
corresponding information that makes this character visible on a corporeal level, and it is only her voice that provides the Sibyl with any vestige of humanity whatsoever. Trimalchio’s assertion that the voice in a jar speaks a recognizably human language suggests it is the voice of a human being, and Trimalchio’s use of the pronouns “she” and “her” serves to underscore the character’s sex as female. Combined with the fact that the children call her by her professional name – Sibyl – Trimalchio concludes the voice belongs to a specific woman, the Sibyl of Cumae. In light of Ovid’s account, wherein the Sibyl predicts: “by my voice I shall be known, for the fates will leave me my voice,” it is possible that the Sibyl’s body has long since disappeared, and only her voice remains – a disembodied voice with feminine attributes but no female sexual apparatus.37 But another possibility seems more likely: the Sibyl of Cumae has become a dust-speck of a woman with equally microscopic genitalia, and no matter how small she grows, she is still a woman in every regard. If that is the case, even though we might not be able to see her genitals, we know that they are there, she is still sexually intact. Though we can no longer recognize or even affirm her sex on a visual level, she appears to be a woman.

Two new questions about size and recognition thus arise. How miniscule can a human’s body be before they no longer considered as recognizably human? And can a body become so small that it is rendered abject by sheer dint of the inability of others to see it? If the rest of humanity cannot see you, how can they accord you the human rights that are your due? On the basis of your voice? If that is the case, what will happen when the Sibyl grows so small that nobody can hear her? Does she finally get to die, or will she still linger as a specter that nobody can hear or see, asking for (her own) death without

37 Why the Sibyl elects to remain in her ampulla, laughed at by village children and corpulent tourists like Trimalchio, is a riddle that Petronius leaves unanswered. With her small size, verging on invisibility, she could easily slip away whenever someone opens her jar, and nobody would be the wiser.
the solace of anyone hearing her voice? Can a person remain abject if human beings are no longer able to recognize their abjection?

Of course, the Sibyl’s abjectification on the level of her shrunkenness is directly attributable to the fact that she was disavowed by a specific personage (and more than a person, a sex-crazed god) whose unwanted advances she thwarted. In Petronius, the vengeful punishment inflicted by Apollo, who disdainfully casts the Sibyl away like rotten meat, is amplified by the cold disrespect the other characters display in handling her dilemma. Neither the village children nor Trimalchio express sorrow or seek to help— they are *amused* by the Sibyl’s pleas for death. In Kristevan terms, she is not a waste-body or filth-body that fills others with revulsion, she is laughable waste, laughable filth.

All told, between the adaptations of Ovid and Petronius, the Sibyl’s abjection is presented as a product of her shrinking body. Unlike Ovid, however, Petronius does not feature the Sibyl telling her story of abjection to Aeneas; instead, he follows Ovid’s version to its spatiotemporal conclusion, catching up with the Sibyl when she has become literally smaller than dirt. Not only is her imprisonment in the Petranian *ampulla* a minute compression of her many-chambered cave, it is a reflection of the underworld she circumnavigated with Aeneas in Virgil. And the Sibyl can never exit this Petronian Hell, despite all of her magical powers— if it can even be called a life, the Sibyl’s life consists primarily of deprivation, the perpetual deprivation of human touch. Not merely the touch of sexual desire, but the touch of any desire: human touch to heal, to comfort, to console. In Petronius’s adaptation, the Sibyl’s unceasing plea for death is little more than a plea for the eradication of desire, whether anyone else’s or her own: “I now desire nothing, save to desire no more.” And even this desire is enunciated in a truncated whisper, a
remote-control response rather than desire’s libidinal cries. Papaioannou reaches much
the same conclusion in remarking that the Sibyl, in Ovid’s and Petronius’s adaptation of
her story, is a “humanized victim” – a character who was once super-natural reduced to
the vestige of a human life (2005: 45). While I agree with Papaioannou in this regard, it
seems more productive to view the Sibyl as abjectified, as Kristeva’s concept of abjection
allows for more nuanced discourse on an intertextual level. In the paradigm of
victimization, the roles of oppressor and oppressed appear clearly drawn, whereas the
gradually emerging fabula of abjection that takes place in the adaptational slide between
the Aeneid, Metamorphoses and Satyricon turns on a transvaluation of rejection and
sexual desire that echoes in multiple directions, as characters reject and are dejected.
Contempt is a two-way street, after all, and we will never regard Apollo the same way
after reading this tale, from whence he emerges as corrupt, vengeful and petty. Petronius,
in particular, discards god and devotee in the same contemptuous sweep.

It also bears recalling that in taking her vow of chastity to Apollo (as all sibylline
priestesses did), Deiphobe already made Apollo a gift of her virginity through an oath of
sexual celibacy. But Apollo wants the Sibyl’s sex in a different way – an unchaste way
that the Sibyl ultimately rejects.38 Thus, while Sibyl spurns Apollo’s advances by not
accepting his unwelcome seduction, Apollo hypocritically rejects the Sibyl’s chastity: I
do not want your sex in the manner you choose to give it, I want fuck you even though
you don’t want to fuck me. Failing this, Apollo decides to touch the Sibyl in a more
sinister manner, casting her into an eternal state of untouchability, a state that spirals into
greater cycles of disavowal until she becomes sexually and even physically untouchable.

38 In The Road to Delphi: The Life and Afterlife of Oracles, Michael Wood discusses the virginity of the
Sibyls, drawing a corollary between the Delphic and Cumaean Sibyls’ vow of chastity and the strength of
will behind it; a will that remained uncompromising even when tested by Apollo (2004: 117-20).
But in Ovid’s and Petronius’s versions, rather than being indignant at her poor treatment, Deiphobe is the consummate deject, her voice growing increasingly melancholic through each passing iteration, until it manifests in Petronius’s bleak whisper. At that point, the Sibyl becomes completely subsumed in a narcissistic tape-loop of regret, not merely regretting that her godly suitor will claim he never desired her, but regretting that she cannot die, moving from the refuting counter-glance of the Abject (“I am no more shit than you”) to the melancholic’s destructive self-obsession. In examining the transidentification that occurs when the melancholic becomes subsumed by the magnitude of their own sorrow, Kristeva describes the narcissistic fits of possession that occur when the depressive becomes so immersed in the Other that the Other appears everywhere, in everything, and the loss of the Other defines their existence from every direction (1989: 33). Transfixed in the terror of this crisis, “the speech of the depressed—repetitive and monotonous” becomes a uniform pattern, uttering “sentences that are interrupted, exhausted [and] come to a standstill” (33). We hear this uniform, exhausted pattern in Sibyl’s wish to die, which remains long after her body has disappeared—indeed, her death-wish is the most recognizable vestige of her existence. The Sibyl’s identity has become “imbedded” in her obsession with a love object who rejects her as she becomes her own “tyrannical judge,” repeating the indictment of her punisher centuries after he has moved to other conquests, glorying in the everlasting youth he denies the Sibyl, whose only crime was remaining true to her vow (1989: 11). By the time she reaches the Satyricon, the Sibyl’s regret over Apollo’s rejection has become a mantra of inconsolable sorrow that turns her inside-out. She no longer resists her own abjectification and is willing to endure any humiliation simply to pass into “the land of
oblivion” (Kristeva 1989: 33, 1982: 8). Like the magical pumps in The Red Shoes, which keep dancing long after the dancer has gone, the Sibyl’s voice echoing in its ampulla is the de-humanized remnant of a human corpus that was ambiguated into oblivion. Yet this decorporealized remainder somehow retains a sex, suggesting that even the smallest or most partial trace of a human – no matter how small, abstract, or indistinct it might be – still keeps its sexual valance.

In closely examining the small embedded narrative that Petronius supplies – a strangely “complete” element framed by a larger fragmented text – we can see the most significant narrative tropes that attribute a character with its “sexuality.” This attribution takes place via the reiteration of the Sibyl’s sexuality by the characters who flank her (in this case, Trimalchio and the village children), along with the sexual pronouns used to designate her, and the references this character bears to a “real” woman whose legend was common knowledge in the context of her times. Through the deployment of these minimal but critical narrative tropes, the Sibyl retains her sex no matter how much her body has been dissolved into the confines of its prison, the sex of not just any woman, but of a specifically punished woman who was not sufficiently submissive to a lover-god who sought to dominate her body. This produces a moral-ethical fabula that underscores the foremost stricture of the classical patriarchal pantheon: submit your body or be reduced. Resisting the imperative to relinquish one’s corpus to patriarchal power will be penalized by socioeconomic abjection, the most painful outcome of which is not the absolute disappearance of one’s corpus per se, but the eradication of so many bodily

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39 For Kristeva, “the one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject,” inasmuch as abjection unmoors the speaking subject from its own symbolic order. The subject then “places (himself), separates (himself), situates (himself), and therefore strays instead of getting his bearings, desiring, belonging, or refusing” everything, except the increasing move into abjection (1982: 8, parentheticals Kristeva’s).
pleasures that only one or two signifiers of humanity remain, and death begins looking like the only real exit from the absolute diminishment of corporeal pleasure.

I began Chapter One with a discussion of the *Satyricon’s* derisively “modern” treatment of prophesy in Roman life, suggesting the fragmented ambiguity of our proto-myths of sexuality can only be reassembled or re-visioned through a melange of lacunae-riddled documents and voids where missing pieces previously signified for themselves. Following an account of the Cumaean Sibyl’s depiction in the *Cena Trimalchionis*, I trace the roots of her embedded narrative to the proto-philosophers Heraclitus and Plutarch. Performing a close reading of the ensuing adaptations of Virgil and Ovid, I assert that Virgil depicts the Cumaean Sibyl as a powerful prophetess with the ability to predict the future, influence supernatural entities, and circumnavigate the underworld. Arguing that Ovid’s narrative diminishment of the Sibyl’s powers underscores a punitive fabula that is absent in the *Aeneid*, I suggest the “same” prophetess emerges from his *Metamorphoses* as a shrunken character forecasting her own defeat by sublimation. Following this analysis of Ovid’s version, I more intensively interrogate the Sibyl’s embedded narrative in Petronius, detailing the ways in which Petronius positions the Sibyl further down the temporal line, defining her as the melancholic remainder of a corporeal punishment that renders her body untouchable. But no matter how ambiguous the character’s form becomes, her voice remains. Even though her voice is but a whisper, it retains its sex – an effect I suggest is produced through a combination of pronoun, intertextual reference and character interactions.

In Chapter Two, I extend my analysis of the sibylline prophetess to evaluate Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini’s rendition of “the Hermaphrodite,” a character he adds to his
Satyricon adaptation. Discussing Fellini’s aesthetic projection of sexual ambiguity onto his “sacred little monster,” I evaluate the Hermaphrodite’s abjection at the hands of the film’s protagonists – an abjection that ultimately lends the character a potential for political emancipation that exceeds her depictions in Virgil, Ovid and Petronius, yet plunges her deeper into abject discourse.
Chapter Two

Lost in a Roman Wilderness of Latex: A Post-classical Sibyl in *Fellini-Satyricon*

In November of 1968, Italian filmmaker Federico Fellini began production on his widely hyped feature film, *Fellini-Satyricon*. Although the film was purportedly a live-action adaptation of the *Satyricon* novel written by T. Petronius Niger nearly two thousand years earlier, Fellini emphasized his disinterest in crafting a line-by-line recapitulation of the text. Informing film critics, journalists and novelists of his wish to access the *Satyricon* as a basis for creating the “documentary of a dream,” Fellini viewed the adaptation process as an opportunity to implode Hollywood myths of a “serene, classical, statuesque, ‘clean’ antiquity” (Moravia 1970: 23). Critical of the contemporary viewers who accepted such sanitized Hollywood myths without question, Fellini declared his intention to enhance the dream-like quality of the *Satyricon*, crafting entire scenes and characters that did not appear in the text. Among the additions was a character named “the Hermaphrodite,” a dually-sexed prophet/ess whom Fellini described in the screen treatment as “the mouthpiece of the gods” (1970: 78).

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1 It is a matter of record that *Fellini-Satyricon* was not the filmmaker’s original choice of title for his film. According to A.O. Scott, writing in the *New York Times*, Fellini failed to obtain ownership of the one-word *Satyricon* appellation, because rival director Gian Luigi Polidoro had registered his own *Satyricon* (1968) just months in advance of Fellini’s projected release date. Outraged, Fellini litigated for rights to the title, but lost the battle in court. This loss prompted United Artists to enter the fray on Fellini’s behalf, and to conclude the ownership tussle by paying Polidoro one million dollars for distribution rights to his *Satyricon*. That accomplished, United Artists promptly pushed back the release of Polidoro’s film until 1969, well after *Fellini-Satyricon* hit the box office.

2 As I mentioned in Chapter One, the “official” authorship of the *Satyricon* remains a subject of debate in classical circles (Sullivan 1986: 11).

3 Alberto Moravia’s interview with Fellini, along with Fellini’s shooting script and screen treatment, was published in a collection edited by Dario Zanelli, entitled *Fellini’s Satyricon*. In these interviews, Fellini discusses his desire to develop an “alienating” filming style for *Fellini-Satyricon*, rendering all subjects “disconnected (and) fragmentary” – a trope he hoped would echo the appearance of people in dreams (27).

4 In *On The Set of Fellini Satyricon*, Elaine Lanouette Hughes emphasizes the Hermaphrodite character was “not in the Petronius,” but recalls that the scenes in The Temple of Ceres were among the first episodes Fellini placed in his script (1971: 44). According to Hughes, Fellini was particularly fond of this character,
hermaphroditic priest/ess would accept tribute of money, food and animals in return for magical healings, blessings and prophesies of the future. In response to the queries of her acolytes and supplicants, the Hermaphrodite would respond with “sibylline phrases,” or keep mysteriously silent (1970: 79).  

Fellini’s use of the term *sibylline phrases* to describe the Hermaphrodite’s speech, along with the fact that Fellini ensconced his prophet/ess in a cavernous temple (“The Temple of Ceres”), presiding over a retinue of sycophants and initiates, each of them eager to attend to her prophesies or benefit from her magical healings, are merely a few of the elements linking his character to the Cumaean Sibyl of Petronius, Ovid and Virgil.  

As I observed in Chapter One, this particular Sibyl was noteworthy for the qualities of her voice, which has remained one of the focal points on which her adaptational variations turn; the voice Heraclitus and Virgil describe as thundering, the voice Ovid diminishes to the sighs of a jilted lover, the voice Petronius shrinks into a melancholic plea for death. In the screenplay for *Fellini-Satyricon*, the filmmaker defines his sibyl’s voice hovering between enigmatic and incomprehensible:  

The Hermaphrodite signals that it wants to say something, rasping noises like a deaf mute, and gesticulating. The shepherd in attendance nods and shows he not only because “it was part of [a] pagan civilization,” but because the Hermaphrodite was “strange and magical and striking” (1971: 44). Interviewed by Zanelli in 1968, Fellini described the Hermaphrodite as one of many *creatures* in his film that would populate the “lost civilization” of ancient Rome; these creatures were non-normative human beings who would “eat and drink different things […] love in other ways, […] have different habits, thoughts, even different nervous systems” that other people (1970: 9). In short, Fellini intended from the outset to depict the Hermaphrodite and his other creatures as radically Other.

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5 In this chapter, I use the backslashed *prophet/ess* to indicate the alleged dual sexuality of *Fellini-Satyricon*’s Hermaphrodite. Like Kate Bornstein, I prefer epicene pronouns such as “hir” over the “neutral” pronoun “it,” not merely because epicene pronouns are more politically charged than “it,” but because “it” can be seen as a derogatory reference to beasts (1997: 8-10). That said, one must always be careful deploying backslashed appellations for actual people, as it can result in de-politicizing their sex (see my critique of Butler’s backslashed approach to Camille Barbin in Chapter Five).

6 Other elements linking the Hermaphrodite to the Cumaean Sibyl (and to Apollonian sibyls in general) include: 1) the character’s ability to prophesy; 2) the character’s ability to heal the sick, and; 3) the character’s acceptance of tribute and animal sacrifices in return for prophetic services.
understands, then motions to a peasant standing on the threshold, and mumbles something to him. The peasant takes the news hard; his face contorts, and he hammers his head with his fists … muttering to himself and crying, “They’re all going to die … All my beasts are going to die.” (79)

Unlike the Sibyl in the Petronian Satyricon, Fellini’s oracle cannot make herself audible without the help of trained assistants. Still, even as Fellini positions the Hermaphrodite’s voice at the limit of recognition, he makes her body twice as visible as Petronius, engaging several key tropes that emphasize the character’s dual sex.⁷ As I hope to demonstrate in this chapter, Fellini’s modifications along these lines do not simply raise questions about the specific devices that denote his character’s “hermaphrodisim” (the character was actually played by a boy) – they fundamentally alter the moral-ethical underpinnings of his Satyricon source text to open a new interstice for abject discourse. Within this interstice, his protagonists’ violent treatment of the Hermaphrodite opens up the “milieu of an event” (to borrow Amit Rai’s use of the term), summoning us to reevaluate the ambivalence, uncertainty and sexual ambiguity endemic to sexual subjectivation in a heteronormative cultural order (2004: 551).

The first section of this chapter begins by discussing Fellini’s simultaneous infidelity and fidelity to Petronius, focusing on his re-ordering of the Satyricon’s opening. By replacing Encolpius’s critique of Roman sophistry (at the beginning of the Petronian

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⁷ Because “sexually ambiguous” figures are often equated with non-normative human beings, we often find them endowed with other non-normative qualities: the mythical, supernatural, monstrous or magical. Concerning the latter, Fellini’s Hermaphrodite reads as “magical” in the sense that she is capable of magical acts: prophesy, soothsaying, and magical healings. Likewise, her station as priest/ess of The Temple of Ceres underscores her adherents’ belief that she is magical, thereby recalling Marcel Mauss’s notions, in A General Theory of Magic, that a prophet is held to be a magician “through revelation, through consecration and through tradition” (1972: 50). Mauss also notes that prophets typically receive their revelations through “one or more spirits, who place themselves at [their] service” (1972: 50). Thus, if we compare them closely, the sibyls of Greco-Roman times and Fellini’s Hermaphrodite share numerous similarities as magical and mythical figures, further linking Fellini’s “sibylline oracle” to the tradition of Greco-Roman sibyls and adding to the Hermaphrodite’s myth-like status.
Satyricon) with an indictment of effeminate masculinity, Fellini accomplishes a strange adaptive twist that prioritizes a misogynistic masculinity directed against femininity in general.\(^8\) Evaluating Fellini’s simultaneous insertion of aesthetically stylized lacunae into his film, I assert these carefully choreographed skips in temporal organization join his larger re-mix of the Satyricon content to depict the past of antiquity as a distant time peopled by strange others whose bodies and culture are difficult to recognize by contemporary standards. Turning my attention to Fellini’s deployment of two ancillary characters (Servant Girl and Old Slave) to “forecast” the Hermaphrodite’s dual sexuality, I detail the visual construction of the Hermaphrodite’s dual sex through a deployment of latex prosthetics. Evaluating Fellini’s decision to cast a young albino actor (Pasquale Baldessari) as his prophet/ess, I conclude this chapter’s first section by closely reading the scenes in which Hemaphrodite is abducted and murdered by the film’s protagonists.

The second section of the chapter continues my reading of the Hermaphrodite’s abduction, analyzing Fellini’s general move away from deploying the “gender neutral” pronoun “it” (in his film treatment) to a convoluted alternation of “he” and “she” in his screenplay. From there, I contrast Fellini’s adaptive entwinement of the Hermaphrodite with the story of the mythical character Hermaphroditos, evaluating the character’s links

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\(^8\) As I have mentioned in my introduction and elsewhere (cf. Adaptation Theories), persistent debates in adaptation studies continue questioning the centrality of semantic fidelity as a hallmark of adaptive quality. At the heart of these debates is the notion that the process of translation is integral to the adaptive process, and that fidelity to a source text can be discernable by how many elements of the text have been “properly” translated into an adaptation. In his groundbreaking article, “Twelve Fallacies in Contemporary Adaptation Theory,” adaptation theorist Thomas Leitch questions the sense of propriety that seems to arise when “deviations” from source texts arouse the ire of literary theorists whose sense of institutional fidelity to such texts leads them to dismiss perceived “departures” without further examination (2003: 149-50). When adapters promise fidelity to an original, Leitch observes, it often amounts to little more than a guarantee “that they will protect the audience from the shock of experiencing any new thought or feelings that would not have been provoked by their source texts” (2007: 6). In essays such as “Route Awakening” (2011), I discuss the value of both infidelity and fidelity, and the reasons the fidelity debate has become a hauntology that seems so difficult to dismiss, no matter how much some players wish it would go away.
to other Greco-Roman human/beast amalgamations: centaurs, harpies, satyrs, furies. Combining these mythological referents with the Hermaphrodite’s projected dual sexuality, the filmmaker positions this character (and her followers) as “monstrous” and “aberrant.” In my chapter’s third section, I closely evaluate the cinematic devices Fellini deploys to produce his prodigious galleries of monsters, comparing Fellini’s adverse treatment of his “sacred little monster” and her followers to the moral-ethical framework that binds Satan and other amalgamated or trans-formed creatures in Dante’s *Inferno*. Connecting this meaning-machine of the civilized monster vs. monstrous civilization to the legitimized framework of institutionalized violence that oppressed post-Enlightenment monsters on behalf of an overarching cultural norm, I analyze the ways in which the *Fellini-Satyricon*’s beefcake protagonists become the monsters of the monster, propelling the film into abject discourse.⁹

In trying to consolidate the most effective interdisciplinary approach to the Fellini-Satyricon, I have drawn together sources from post-feminist psychoanalytic theory, film theory, adaptation studies, post-structural theory and studies that do not rest comfortably in any specific field. Some of the most insightful thinking has emerged from the critics, journalists and writers who assessed Fellini-Satyricon at the time of its making; specifically, the work of Dario Zanelli, Elaine Lanouette Hughes and Alberto Moravia, each of whom were on the set of Fellini-Satyricon and published work on the film following its distribution. In terms of adaptation theory per se, this chapter draws on

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⁹ In his 1970s lectures on the medicolegal taxonomization of abnormality, Foucault suggests the aspersion of animality often plays a central role in cultural and juridical representations of monstrosity. I discuss this topic more closely in the next section of this chapter, but suffice it to say that Foucault draws a productive corollary between the eighteenth-century medicolegal position concerning the “abnormality” of hermaphrodites and the juridical relation to beings perceived as “half-human and half-animal” in the Middle Ages (2004: 324).
Julie Sanders’s notions concerning the re-presentation of myth in Adaptation and Appropriation, and Thomas Leitch’s critique of “extreme fidelity” in Film Adaptation and Its Discontents. But Gilles Deleuze’s work in Cinema 2: The Time-Image was also highly informative, particularly his explicit discussion of Fellini’s monstrous figures in Fellini-Satyricon, as this line of critique effectively mined by Moravia and Ugo Casiraghi in their criticisms of Fellini’s techniques. Concerning my own critique of the monstrous aesthetics that place Fellini’s Hermaphrodite – and all those who contact her – in abject discourse, this chapter owes much to Luc Brisson, a scholar of ancient philosophy, along with cultural critic Marina Warner, whose work in Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self produces a close reading of amalgamated monsters and hybrids in literature and the arts. Along those lines, postcolonial theorist Amit Rai’s notion of “the milieu of the event” has proven vital for viewing the types of morality tales that shift the narrative projection of monstrosity from the body of the monster to the protagonists and cultures that seek the monster’s eradication – as this objective is often depicted as a punitive retribution for the monster’s perceived affront to compulsory heteronormativity.

Bringing all of these theoretical strands into contact with Kristeva’s notions on abject discourse – particularly her research on the sacred and profane in Powers of Horror – I assert Fellini-Satyricon opens a transtextual interstice wherein the barbarous acts committed against his “sacred little monster” shift the force relations between the Hermaphrodite and other characters in the film. This adaptive shift provides a venue for discussing the ambiguous playing field of sexual subjectivation, on which all players are rendered abject before the cultural symbolic.
Wanted! One Albino Child with Latex Genitalia: Fellini Adapts the Sibylline Oracle from Prophetess to Prophet/ess

While the *Fellini-Satyricon* is no paean to fidelity, the film is not completely unfaithful, either. Despite his reluctance to create a scene-by-scene recapitulation of the Petronian text, Fellini presents entire chapters in sequence with verbatim extracts of dialogue. Yet, just as often, he reunites other scenes in a different sequential order, or drives them to different moral-ethical conclusions, swerving the already disjointed storyline with all manner of contrivances that do not exist in the source. A partial list of such *clinamen* includes: the relocation and reprioritization of Encolpius’s opening monologue, a long panorama of other-worldly subjects populating a network of subterranean apartments beneath Rome, a sudden earthquake that crumples Encolpius’s apartment into blocks of Styrofoam, an erotically-charged battle between Encolpius and a sex-starved minotaur – and each of the sequences featuring his diaphanous Hermaphrodite. The disruptive potential of these adaptive embellishments is accelerated by Fellini’s highly stylized aesthetic of fragmentation: jump cuts, sudden shifts in location, actors intentionally running against the fourth wall.10

From a slow series of white credits on a black background, the filmmaker suddenly jolts our gaze into a courtyard so brightly overlit that its peripheries are completely overexposed, searing into white. The heat of this sudden cut strikes our eye

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10 Moravia remarks that Petronius’s *Satyricon* is “mysterious first and foremost because it is fragmentary,” but adds that this “fragmentariness is, in a certain sense, symbolic—of the general fragmentariness of the ancient world as it appears to us today” (1970: 25). Comparing this fragmentary sensation one gets when viewing artifacts from the past to a “mistiness” that clears now and then to reveal a portion of its contents, Moravia emphasizes that *Fellini-Satyricon* can never be fragmentary in the same way as the *Satyricon*; it can only perform a scripted gesture in that direction (25).
with hostility, as if we have stepped from the chambers of a villa into a surly Mediterranean afternoon. Panning back from the courtyard into a shady portcullis, the light shifts again, revealing Encolpius, ranting at his misfortunes, blonde, blue-eyed, naked from his waist up. Condemning his best friend Ascytus for seducing Giton, their promiscuous boy-lover, Encolpius vows to murder Ascytus, decrying him as a shameless opportunist who sold himself as a woman “even when he was approached for a man.” He next rails at Giton, calling him a treacherous “tart” whose mother pimped him as a female prostitute from the time he was a child. Then Encolpius folds into the tears of a jilted lover.

Recalling the details of the Satyricon’s opening from Chapter One, Fellini’s initial scene comprises the type of radical editorial shift that adaptation theorist Thomas Leitch terms “extreme infidelity.” Gone is Petronius’s original opening (Encolpius ranting against the quality of Roman education), which has been replaced with a rant against Encolpius’s friends. This adaptive change heightens the accusations of betrayal Encolpius levels against Ascytus and Giton, who (according to Encolpius) have broken faith with both Encolpius and their own masculinity. Succinctly put, these alterations grant

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11 In Film Adaptation and Its Discontents, Thomas Leitch notes that numerous “adaptation theorists have persisted in treating fidelity to the source material as a norm from which unfaithful adaptations depart at their peril” (2007: 127). But Leitch quickly observes that “adaptation studies would be better advised to ask the question: ‘Why does this particular adaptation aim to be faithful?’” (127). More specifically, one might ask: what does this being-faithful emphasize or underscore, other than a desire to make money by reproducing a work in a different medium, a different language, or a different time? Is it possible to be faithful to the moral-ethical brunt of a work while being utterly unfaithful to its dialogue, action, or the sexuality of its characters? And is it possible to be faithful to specific scraps of a source – to bits and pieces of dialogue and action – while reprioritizing the work on a moral-ethical level, and embellishing on its structural contents? This last question seems particularly relevant in light of this study, for it is precisely what Fellini-Satyricon does.

12 In Petronius, Encolpius’s indictment of Ascytus and Giton appears after the Cena Trimalchionis, as Ascytus and Encolpius bicker over the affections of Giton. In the heat of the argument, Encolpius denounces Ascytus as “an adolescent wallowing in every possible filth,” and accuses him of being “hired as a girl even by someone who thought he was a male.” Reproaching Giton for “putting on women’s
Encolpius’s rant against the effeninate masculinity of his comrades a sequential pride of place, as Encolpius begins the story by condemning Ascytus for posing as a woman in order to prostitute himself to males and indicts Giton for being a promiscuous transvestite whose affections belong to the highest bidder (Encolpius fails to mention he has accomplished each of these infractions himself).

But there is another way in which *Fellini-Satyricon*’s opening rant represents a departure from the source text, and this concerns the film’s depiction of the protagonist’s alienation. No longer surrounded by a crowd of onlookers in a crowded square, Fellini’s Encolpius is fastened in a tight frame of light, like an exotic bug trapped under a glass. This new Encolpius stands alone – there is no Agamemnon to argue with, no rival scholars to egg him on (or shut him up) – in a reoriented opening that accentuates the tropes of alienation and infidelity Fellini will echo throughout his adaptation, thereby heightening our awareness of the distance between ourselves and our past. This trope gels in a stylistic motif that positions the Others of our past as temporally distanced, peering back at us from a time impossible to recognize from our “contemporary” perspective.

Fellini’s attachment to this fragmented/fragmenting aesthetic becomes tangible in his interview with Dario Zanelli, which occurred during the making of *Fellini-Satyricon*. Citing his use of disruptive editing techniques to establish “a continuous breaking of […] internal, visual rhythms,” Fellini sought to create an “alienated” cinematic terrain that would provide the optimal visual environment for disassociated “creatures” from the Greco-Roman past. Reflecting that “the creatures in *Fellini-Satyricon* have to move, behave, do things, live in things,” Fellini expressed his desire to place his characters “in a

clothes the day he became a man,” he claims that Giton was “talked into effeminacy by his mother” and decries Giton for only doing “women’s work in the slave pen” (1986: 94).
vital dimension that is new, remote, unknown; unknown, but at the same time vital enough to make these creatures more than symbols” (1970: 9). But as Alberto Moravia points out, Fellini-as-filmmaker is distinctly different than Petronius, inasmuch as the filmmaker is consciously producing an approximation of the Satyricon’s brokenness and distantiation through a palette of match cuts, jump cuts and axials, editorial techniques that strategically disrupt the film’s continuity. Re-ordering and reprioritizing large chunks of content, breaching the fourth wall via actors who speak directly to the camera; such cinematic effects deploy “modern” techniques of cinematography to convey a highly subjective interpretation of “ancient Rome” to an abstract receivership in an equally arbitrary present.\(^\text{13}\) Pointing out that first-century Romans did not view themselves living in a “misty” or alienated past, Moravia astutely surmised they also did not view the culture of their times as hedonistic, savage, or inordinately homoerotic.\(^\text{14}\)

The scenes following Encolpius’s rant depict several tableaus of first-century Roman life. In the bowels of an ancient theater, Encolpius discovers Giton and rescues him from a lascivious actor (Vernacchio). The lovers journey through a series of subterranean apartments that house an assemblage of “pagan” figures, joking about them, marveling at them, as if taking a trip through a time-tunnel zoo. Yet these “creatures” somehow seem familiar from other Fellini films: those galleries of buxom women in see-

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\(^\text{13}\) In his interview with journalist Dario Zanelli, Fellini told Zanelli that producing “a film made up of static shots—no tracks, no camera movements whatsoever” would result in “a wholly contemplatory film, like a dream: and you’ll emerge from it hypnotized” (1970: 9). Of course, Fellini’s camerawork in Fellini-Satyricon was far from static, and the numerous editorial disruptions he deploys result not so much in the static vision of a dream, but the avant-garde ’60s pastiche of a dream, bursting with sweeping Panavision dioramas of acrylic fabric and skin.nice!

\(^\text{14}\) Works of Varronian and/or Menippean satire, such as the Petronian Satyricon, demonstrate that first-century Romans viewed their culture at the apex of civilization, from whence they regarded the artifacts of their own cultural heritage (the epic tales of Homer and Horace) as benighted and quaint. Like other Varronians, Petronius regarded himself as a modern Roman with effete sensibilities (see, eg: Bagnani 1954).
through chiffon, naked bathers with jiggling breasts, a topless priestess with a golden headdress. It almost seems as if, no matter how extreme his infidelities, and no matter how disjunctured he makes his aesthetic, the main thing preventing Fellini from reaching deeply into the past is his own compulsion to repeat these tropes.

But the most faithful scenes in *Fellini-Satyricon* – and by far the most elaborate – concern Fellini’s interpretation of the *Cena Trimalchionis*. Carefully preserving the *Cena*’s largesse, Fellini devotes lavish attention to the bantering of the guests, the endless flow of food, the ironic humor of the mock funeral Trimalchio stages for himself. Yet Fellini’s Trimalchio never makes any mention of the Cumaean Sibyl – or any type of prophetess for that matter, even in passing. Instead, following the conclusion of Trimalchio’s party, Fellini splices in a scene in which Encolpius and Agamemnon wander drunkenly in a field as dawn is breaking. Lying down in the stubbled furrows, Agamemnon speaks to Encolpius in a poem, telling him that when he dies, he has nothing to give him but the wind and stars. The two friends fall asleep in the field as the camera fades to black.

There is a beat, and suddenly the scene opens on a lean-to in the middle of a howling sand-storm. Winds buffet the canvas walls of the tent in all directions as Encolpius and Ascytus huddle among a group of servants before a sputtering campfire. In broken Italian, a dark-haired girl confides to Encolpius that her master’s wife suffers from “nymphomania.” She whispers that her master will soon bring them to a hermaphroditic oracle who can magically heal her mistress. “Do you know Hermaphrodite, child of gods?” she asks. “He little girl, but boy, too. Make many magics. People with plague cured. See our future.”
Needless to say, this servant girl did not appear in Petronius’s text – nor did she appear in Fellini’s screen treatment or script. Instead, she was cast during the filming of *Fellini-Satyricon*, and Fellini coached her through her lines on camera. In the original version of the screenplay, a male character named “Old Servant” had been scripted to speak with Encolpius in a “rustic” rural dialect:

Our hopes are in the oracle. They speak highly of this Hermaphrodite. Yes, a ‘morphodite! A little girl really, but with a trigger this big … like the pisser of a newborn babe. They say he does a lot of magic. Cures people with the plague, can tell you the future better than Apollo. (1970: 219)

Aside from being another allusion to the Sibyl (she can tell the future “better than Apollo”), Old Servant’s description forecasts the Hermaphrodite’s sexuality in advance of her scenes. Like Old Servant’s reference to the Hermaphrodite as a ‘morphodite’, which imparts the character with a magical power to transmorph her shape, Servant Girl’s observation that the character can “make many magics” combines with her recollection, to Encolpius, of a neighboring village that displeased the Hermaphrodite so much that she turned the villagers into a flock of chickens. Old Servant’s description prioritizes the appearance of the Hermaphrodite’s genitalia by focusing on the appearance of the character’s “pisser,” which he compares to an ineffective weapon, a gun with a miniscule trigger – just as his comparison of the Hermaphrodite’s penis to the pisser “of a newborn babe” suggests the penis is infantile or only partially developed. But the childlike quality of the Hermaphrodite’s genitalia is emphasized by Servant Girl, who observes: “He little girl, but boy, too.” Although this character’s speech is less chauvinistic than Old Servant’s, Servant Girl’s interactions with Encolpius forecast our initial encounter with the Hermaphrodite, indicating that she not only dually sexed, but
magical, endowed with the ability to curse – and to heal. Following Servant Girl’s observations, Encolpius leaves the tent to join Asclytus, who is in the middle of having sex with the Nymphomaniac in her sedan. As her hands writhe against her bonds, the camera fades to black, and only the desert wind remains.

The sounds of wind linger for several seconds. Then, the film slowly fades up beside a dark pool of water. An old man’s face is reflected in its gentle ripples. Above his face rises the dome of an underground temple, and he murmurs softly into the water: “Child of Aphrodite and Hermes … Hermaphroditos.” A quick match cut shifts our gaze across the water to a young woman kneeling, speaking in the darkness, bowing her head to the floor. “I beg you, demi-god, he’s my only child,” she says. “Don’t let him die.” As the young woman begs for her child’s life, she looks slowly up, and her eyes meet the camera. A cross cut whips our perspective back across the pool to a wall full of crystals. Before the wall, two old men stoop over a wicker bier. From the basket, a delicate white knee protrudes.

This pearlescent limb is our first glimpse of the Hermaphrodite. She makes no sound, no gesture – yet the two old men inform the hooded woman that her son is saved, and the camera swings back across its axis into the furthest recesses of the temple. Now, the entire cavern opens before us, filled with toppled columns and a host of infirm characters gathering to supplicate before the prophet/ess: a one-legged man hobbles down a set of stairs on a crutch, followed by a half-naked figure wrapped in bandages. A man draped in yellow gowns sits nearby; his swollen limbs indicate not so much obesity as disease: diabetes or elephantiasis. As the supplicants approach the Hermaphrodite, the camera swings back to rest upon her reclining form, separated from her followers by a
pool of water. The Old Man bathes the Hermaphrodite with a dripping sponge. Bending in unison, the servants lift the Hermaphrodite from her wicker bier, displaying her to the suppliants. The camera lingers on her cherubic breasts and penis, letting the audience absorb the fact that male and female genitals are present on the same body. It’s what Fellini wants us to see, to register, so the camera sticks around for a while.

But the actor Fellini chose to play the part of the Hermaphrodite was not intersexual, he was a boy. Up until the moment of shooting, Fellini was undecided whether the Hermaphrodite should be played by a boy or a girl. For that reason, he had instructed Rino Carboni, his head makeup man, to sculpt two sets of breasts for the Hermaphrodite out of latex several days in advance. In addition to these breasts, Carboni crafted a prosthetic penis and stored it on the set, in case Fellini decided to use a girl for the part. Although Fellini never explained such choices to Carboni, the makeup expert recalled the decision taking place at the last possible moment, as Fellini wanted to see both a boy and a girl perform the Hermaphrodite’s part before making a final call (Hughes 1971: 52-3). “I had to have a little penis ready,” Carboni reflected, “in case [Fellini] selected the five-year-old girl albino,” and he needed to create latex breasts “for the boy and also for the girl” (53).

According to Carboni, selecting a boy or girl for the part of the Hermaphrodite did not matter half as much to Fellini as obtaining an albino. Armed with a set of male and female latex genitalia, Fellini was confident he could make his character read as dually sexed no matter what the sex of the actor “actually” was. But finding a young albino actor or actress proved more difficult than her anticipated, and the filmmaker resorted to asking his casting agent in Naples to scour the barracks of Italy’s alpini, the national ski
corps, for the whitest boys they could find (the search was abandoned when Fellini discovered the alpini did not recruit boys that young). Following a lengthy search, Fellini auditioned a 14-year-old albino boy (Pasquali Baldassarre) and an unknown five-year-old albino girl for the part. Although he ultimately gave the role to Baldassarre, Fellini persuaded the girl to remain on the set, claiming her presence during the shoot would bring out Baldassarre’s competitive instincts (Hughes 1971: 52-3).

Lingering over the Hermaphrodite’s delicate frame, Fellini underscores the significance of the character’s dual sexuality, giving the viewer a long look at Carboni’s prosthetic breasts and the boy’s “real” penis. Fellini’s focus on these visual signifiers of his character’s “hermaphrodism” was given an additional erotic charge by the wardrober’s decision to drape Baldassarre’s frame in filmy veils and garlands of golden coins. Displaying the Hermaphrodite’s genitalia to her supplicants (and the film’s viewers), the Old Man and his assistant hold open her scanty vestments like the aperture of a peep-show booth (while shooting the scene, Fellini reportedly adjured the Old Man to show the character’s “breasts and pissetino”). At the sight of the Hermaphrodite’s dual sex, her supplicants gasp with delight, as if emboldened by the display, and renew their appeals to the prophet/ess to heal them.

But the Hermaphrodite is quickly wearied. She is laid down to rest. According to journalists on the set, when the Old Man and his Assistant lowered the Hermaphrodite into her bier, Fellini urged him them to “put him down slowly, slowly,” and “cover him with the veil like two mamas” (Hughes 1971: 56). Aside from Fellini’s reference to the

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15 Hughes recalls Pasquali Baldassarre taking great delight in having his penis filmed. Upon completion of the scene, Baldassare cried: “adesso tutto il mondo ha visto mio pesce!” [“now all the world has seen my pisser!”] (1971: 56). At Baldassare’s exclamation, the photojournalists documenting the scene began snapping so many flash-shots that Fellini snapped: “You’ve already got forty million shots! Why do you want more?” (56).
character as “him,” which perhaps underscores Fellini’s knowledge that Baldessarre is not a hermaphrodite but a boy, his instructions for the actors to behave “like two mamas” initially point to some degree of tenderness for the character. Fellini’s gentle treatment of the Hermaphrodite does not last long, however. Panning across the crowd of supplicants and onlookers, the camera comes to rest on the faces of Encolpius and Ascyltus. Leering at the proceedings from the wings, the two friends munch roasted pumpkin seeds and laugh, entertaining themselves at the surrounding spectacle. Loitering around the cavern, they are conscripted by a thief who proposes to kidnap the Hermaphrodite for ransom. “Chickens, calves, pigs,” he growls, staring at the tribute offerings and glaring at the assistants. “Why is he so fortunate? It’s wrong for him to benefit from it all!” Whether this “he” refers to the Hermaphrodite or his protectors is unclear, but one thing is certain: The Robber does not mean them well. As night closes in, the conspirators steal from the shadows. The Robber stomps out the fire, advancing on the Hermaphrodite’s retinue. Waking the Old Man’s assistant from his sleep, The Robber grabs him by the neck and strangles him. Encolpius slays the Old Man with a knife, and Ascyltus lifts the Hermaphrodite from her bier. Scooping her into his arms, Ascyltus smiles – the Hermaphrodite is a delicate treasure. The topazes in her headdress flicker as the scene fades to black.

Cut to a thorny desert road. Again, the scorching light. Encolpius, Ascyltus and The Robber are hauling a ramshackle cart through gullies and washes at breakneck speeds. Inside the cart, the Hermaphrodite is jolted from side-to-side, helpless, struggling for life. Minus her watery cave, hauled into the blistering sun, the Hermaphrodite is a fish out of water, a liquid splash of translucent skin and hair; in the absence of water, desiccation
spells her death. She smacks her lips, eyes glazed and cracking.16 “He’s not well,” Encolpius frets. “His mouth is dried up!” Prying open the sedan’s curtains, the protagonists peer into its shadows. Ascyltus anxiously replies: “The sun is killing him! The sun!”

This death is not easy. Gasping for air, the Hermaphrodite arches her back, eyes transfixed, mouth quivering as if struggling to articulate a silent scream. In a mad search for water, the kidnappers drag the hearse into a crater, and Encolpius scrabbles in the sun-baked mud, hoping to squeeze moisture from its cracks. But it’s no good. As the exhausted kidnappers lay sleeping, the prophet/ess gives her final death rattle, and a deadly fight erupts. Accusing Ascyltus and Encolpius of “letting” the prophet/ess die, The Robber assaults Encolpius with a knife, chasing him into the crater. Ascyltus follows in pursuit, hanging back at first, then dedicating himself to the battle. As the three kidnappers wrestle on the cater’s rim, there is a glitch in the filmmaking Fellini decided to keep – a purple lens flare hovering over the shoulders of the combatants appears like the lilac eyes of the prophet/ess boring into the skin of her assassins. Thrashing across the crater, their lives balanced on the head of a pin, Ascyltus finally bashes out The Robber’s brains with a rotten post. The Hermaphrodite never appears again. No mention is made of her for the remainder of the film.

In this section of the chapter, I evaluated the aesthetic toolkit Fellini uses to denote the dual sexuality of the Hermaphrodite, a character who did not exist in Petronius’s text.

16 On the set of the kidnap scene, Hughes noted that “the albino demigod oracle must be kept constantly wet or he will die” (1971: 44). Mythically speaking, the repetition of water images in Fellini’s Hermaphrodite sequences evokes the myth of Hermaphroditos twined in his magical sex-changing kiss with Salamacis in her sacred fountain; a mythic scene that also appears in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, to which I return in a moment.
In the chapter’s next section, I will evaluate Fellini’s use of the pronoun “it” as means of indicating the animality of his prophet/ess, and the way in which Fellini combines this bestialization with inter-character interactions, gendered pronouns, and the mythological trajectory of the Hermaphrodite’s name to emphasize her ancient magicality. After discussing the Hermaphrodite’s relationship to other mythical-magical creatures from the distant past, I return to my comparison of the Fellini-Satyricon prophet/ess to the sibyline prophetesses found in Petronius, Virgil and Ovid, arguing that while Fellini depicts his Hermaphrodite as a half-human monster, his protagonists’ barbaric crimes suggest they are more monstrous still.

The Fate of His “Little Sacred Monster”: Fellini Drives the Sibylline Oracle Deep into Abject Discourse

I would like to begin this section by analyzing two other systems of representation Fellini uses to project sexual ambiguity on the Hermaphrodite. The first system concerns his script’s juxtaposition of gendered and “gender neutral” pronouns to demarcate the prophet/ess’ sexuality. The second involves his deployment of the Hermaphrodite’s name, which emphasizes the mythical roots of her projected sexual ambiguity. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, Fellini alternates his deployment of gendered pronouns throughout various stages in scripting the Fellini-Satyricon – in his screen treatment, for example, the filmmaker predominantly refers to the Hermaphrodite as “it” (twenty-six times), as opposed to “he” or “him” (which he uses only four times). In his script, however, Fellini shifts that paradigm, and refers to the Hermaphrodite as “it” only once. And by the time the character reaches his film, the term “it” has disappeared altogether.
Rather than referring to the Hermaphrodite as “it,” they fluctuate their use of gendered pronouns, as in Servant Girl’s giggling remark: “he little girl but boy too.” Perhaps this is because there is little necessity to use the word “it” in a film; in the treatment and script, Fellini can shorthand his projection of sexual ambiguity by designating the character as “it” – but in the film, Fellini must mark his character’s “itness” on a visual level.

Although the pronoun “it” at one time connoted human children, this usage had been widely discarded by the 1960s, when Fellini began filming Fellini-Satyricon. At that point, “it” was primarily used to designate beasts, inanimate objects and abstract concepts. Of those connotations, Fellini seems primarily interested in the bestial. In both his screen treatment and script, for example, the filmmaker repeatedly underscores the fact that his prophet/ess speaks “in grunts,” like a domestic animal. In addition, he scripts her to predict the future for herds of sheep. She turns her doubters into flocks of chickens, lives in a Temple full of sacrificial animals, and is cared for by a “fawn-like” attendant dressed as a shepherd (this attendant is incidentally the only human being who can interpret the Hermaphrodite’s speech [1970: 78]). In this manner, it would seem Fellini has turned the thundering voice of the Sibyl into the bleating of a goat. Furthermore, Fellini does not refer to any other characters as “it” – indeed, the only “it” Fellini mentions in his screen treatment other than the prophet/ess is the mule flogged mercilessly by Encolpius as “it” hauls the Hermaphrodite’s hearse across the desert (1970: 80).

Taken together, then, the combination of the Hermaphrodite’s “amphibian” mannerisms, her unintelligible speech, the retinue of shepherd/guardians that populate her Temple, and Fellini’s liberal usage of “it” in reference to his priest/ess – all these effects
serve to position the Hermaphrodite on the ambiguous divide between the animal and the human. Like those half-human-half-animal hybrids of Greco-Roman lore (centaurs, satyrs, minotaurs and harpies), Fellini envisions his Hermaphrodite as a quasi-human amalgamation. This position is further reinforced by the function of the character’s name, which serves as a linguistic portmanteau in three primary senses: it comprises the character’s only known name; it is a nod to her medicolegal category (a hermaphrodite), and; it comprises a reference to the myth of Hermaphroditos, the cautionary tale of a boy bound into dual sexuality by circumstances beyond his control. This latter reference is further underscored in the opening scene in the Temple of Ceres, as the Hermaphrodite’s caretaker, Old Man, peers into a rippling pool and whispers: “Child of Aphrodite and Hermes […] Hermaphroditos.”

As those familiar with popular mythology recall, Hermaphroditos was the progeny of Hermes, the god of magic and transmutation, and Aphrodite, goddess of eroticism and fertility. If we consider these gods not merely as individuals, but as stand-ins for larger ideological economies, the linguistic and sexual coupling of hermes + aphrodite produces hermaphroditos not merely as the offspring of those two specific personages, but as a product of the union between magic and sex. According to this mythological tradition, young Hermaphroditos, walking about in the world, decides to bathe in the Fountain of Salmacis, called after a water naiad of the same name. Witnessing the lovely youth naked in her fountain, Salmacis is smitten with his beauty – but Hermaphroditos does not return her affections. So the obsessed Salmacis ensnares him in a magical kiss, the heat of which melds their bodies into one (Ovid 2004: 402-33). Following this transformation/amalgamation, Hermaphroditos becomes the newly forged god/dess of
hermaphrodites and effeminate men, doomed to wander the earth forever, seeking to transform young boys into hermaphrodites. Like other mythical amalgamations (whether human/god or animal/human), the oral traditions of these stories extend far beyond the pagan Greco-Roman past indicated by the fables of any Satyricon, yielding glimpses into an even more remote past – that past Fellini describes as “an unknown landscape wrapped in a thick mist that clears now here, now there, and always only for a short time” (1970: 25).17 Linking the Hermaphrodite to these mythological traditions, Fellini contacts a network of representational systems whose meanings are unclear even to trained experts. In addition, sweeping together the myth of Hermaphroditos and the myth of the Cumaean Sibyl into the rekindled shards of a broken Satyricon, Fellini’s adaptation produces a complex entwinement of three sets of lore, thereby yielding a new transfigurative amalgamation: *the sibylline hermaphrodite*. His sweeping adaptive move in this regard evokes Sanders’s observation, in *Adaptation and Appropriation*, that “myth is continuously evoked, altered, and reworked, across cultures, and across generations” (2006: 64).

Fellini’s references to ancient myths and tales are deftly analysed by Millicent Marcus, in *Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptation*, wherein Marcus suggests that while “Fellini’s gospel of cinematic purity has led him rigorously to

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17 The intertextual role of myth as template in contemporary literature and theory cannot be overstated. In *Adaptation and Appropriation*, Sanders, following Barthes, explains that “each new generation of story-makers [has] adopted familiar mythic templates and outlines for their storytelling purposes,” resulting in an ongoing emergence of myth, wherein “a myth is never transported wholesale into its new context; it undergoes its own metamorphoses in the process” (2006: 64). One hallmark of “modernism” is the consistent distatination from the formative myths the further that they travel back towards our pre-linguistic past, evoking Anna Smith’s notion, in *Julia Kristeva: Readings of Exile and Estrangement*, that “for modernity, whatever exists outside language is inexplicable and life threatening” (1996: 185). By returning to examine “unspeakable” or taboo texts, Smith argues, Kristeva “advocates a subjectivity always already bounded by languages, but she is just as drawn to examine states where language fails: in fact, she is fascinated by them” (186).
oppose literary adaptations in favor of original screenplays, his practice has led him time and again to adapt classical works” (1992: 205). Among Fellini’s numerous text-to-film adaptations, Marcus lists *Toby Dammit* (1967), based on Edgar Allen Poe’s short story “Never Bet the Devil Your Head”; the *Fellini-Satyricon*, which Marcus diplomatically suggests Fellini “derived” from Petronius, and; *La Voce Della Luna* (1989), an adaptation Fellini extracted, with much artistic license, from Ermanno Cavazzoni’s *Poema dei lunatici* (trans.: *Poem of the Lunatics*). According to Marcus, the adaptive potential that “inspire[d]” Fellini in each of these works involved “the loopholes and breaches in the text, the vacuums that invite the work of Fellinian ‘in-fill’” (206).

If Marcus is correct, the lacunae already inherent to the Petronian *Satyricon* must have seemed ripe for Fellinian “in-fill” – but as I mentioned, the filmmaker also made sure to insert a few gaps of his own in order to emphasize the film’s aesthetic sensations of rupture. As Linda Hutcheon remarks in *Theory of Adaptation*, when adapters make large-scale alterations to their source texts, they typically do so in order to sharpen their articulations of a character or theme. In text-to-film adaptations (and other intertextual or transtextual interpretations), large-scale revisions are also executed when elements that might have worked in the source’s medium are perceived as too difficult, boring, superfluous, old-fashioned or politically contentious to articulate in another. Fellini’s adaptive insertion of the Hermaphrodite into the *Satyricon* serves both purposes. The character is Fellini’s fabrication, utterly and completely, and her appearance radically swerves the action and meaning of the source. In purist terms, this type of disruption and addition might be seen as a *maladaption*, an adaptational move of extreme infidelity that the “original” author of a work would not approve of. Obviously, some of the best works
of adaptation fall into this category – and this very act of infidelity marks *Fellini-Satyricon* as distinct from numerous other text-to-film adaptations of Greco-Roman lore, inasmuch as the filmmaker has absolutely no allegiance to any aesthetic system in his source text save those that please him – and even those elements can be juggled, defaced, broken into and transformed at his pleasure, so long as they underscore the key moral-ethical premises Fellini seeks to emphasize in the film; namely, the sexually promiscuous lifestyle of pagan Rome in a remote past that is difficult to recognize within the cultural ontology of our times – yet somehow resembles Fellini’s view of Haight-Ashbury in the sixties, with its hedonistic long-haired boys, naked skinny-dippers and free love.

As Fellini began envisioning, strategizing and executing his adaptation, *Fellini-Satyricon* progressed through several phases in concept, screen treatment, script and film. As these phases unfolded, Fellini began regarding the Hermaphrodite as a central character. The scenes in the Temple of Ceres were among the first he scripted, and according to Hughes, his attention to detail in her scenes bordered on manic. But as Fellini crafted his representations of the Hermaphrodite, one specific aesthetic element was at first designated in the screen treatment, verbally deleted in the script, and then carefully underscored in the film; namely, Fellini’s designation of the Hermaphrodite as monstrous and sacred. Before evaluating this fact thoroughly, we must recall that an aesthetic couture of monstrosity does not come to bear on The Cumaean Sibyl in any of *Fellini-Satyricon’s* precursor texts. The Sibyl of Cumae might be sacred, and she might be depicted as corporeally diminished – but she is never presented as a monster.

In the *Aeneid*, the Sibyl is entirely sacred, a figure to be respected and honored. This sacredness is diminished in the *Metamorphoses*, but Ovid still never describes the
Sibyl as monstrous; she is simply a depressed lover who suffers the consequences of a bad sex bargain. And although Petronius certainly depicts his Sibyl as an utter deject – and even spectral or wraithlike to some degree – it is difficult to regard her as monstrous. She poses no threat, she doesn’t seek to overthrow any human system, and her doleful voice hasn’t the power to harm or frighten anyone. Needless to say, Fellini’s projection of an aesthetics of monstrousness onto the Hermaphrodite affects the outcomes of this character and any characters who contact her along the way. Fellini’s initial projection of monstrousness on the Hermaphrodite occurs in his first description of the character in the screen treatment, in which he notes:

[The Hermaphrodite] is very young, with a gently feminine face, but for one horrifying, monstrous feature: it has lightless eyes. They are as opaque as those of a statue. (1970: 79, emphasis mine)

In this passage, Fellini projects an aesthetic toolkit of monstrousness towards the Hermaphrodite’s eyes. Through three key adjectives, her occular monstrousness is detailed: lightless, horrifying, opaque. Each of these qualities is construed as indicative of occular monstrousness, and combined with Fellini’s attribution of “it-ness” onto his character, the Hermaphrodite’s initial depiction gells as childlike, opaque, animalistic and monstrous. This monstrousness is given velocity by the adjective horrifying; a monstrousness that produces terror: her monstrous eyes resemble ancient statuary, horrifying stone eyes that gaze at us blankly from a distant past.

By the time Fellini adapts the Hermaphrodite into his script, another shift has taken place: his description of the Hermaphrodite’s eyes changes. Now, the filmmaker replaces the word “it” with “he” and “his,” begins to negate the “gentle femininity” of the
character’s face, and adds an element of bestiality to her voice, which resembles a puppy’s whimper. This shift can be traced in the following text:

[The Hermaphrodite] is a delicate little creature with an expression of suffering on his wrinkled face. His eyes are almost monstrously light, they seem as white as those of a statue. He whimpers slightly, like a puppy. (221)

By replacing the word “it” with “he,” Fellini begins to shift the character’s gently feminine features into those of a diminutive masculine figure whose wrinkled face is marked by suffering. The character’s eyes remain monstrous, but they are monstrously full of light instead of monstrously vacant. And now the affect of monstrosity becomes enmeshed with that of bestiality and weakness: the whimpering cries of a puppy. But when the film reaches its final cut, neither the words “monstrous” or “it” are uttered, and the character’s eyes appear no different than other eyes. It is difficult, of course, to say why this shift of monstrosity from occular to oral happened – perhaps making the Hermaphrodite’s eyes appear monstrously lit would have been expensive or technically difficult – or perhaps Fellini decided to replace the Hermaphrodite’s pale white eyes with her pale white skin.

It doesn’t matter, because the tropes of monstrosity and bestiality Fellini deployed to represent the Hermaphrodite’s other-worldliness have been extended from the character’s eyes to the rest of her body, and from there to the bodies of the film’s protagonists, as if monstrosity is an alien contagion that will not rest until all bodies are infected. The last shimmer of the Hermaphrodite’s translucent eyes can be traced in the purple lens flare that hovers over the shoulders of her killers as they fight about who is at fault for her murder, their lingering lilac opacity persistant in the absence of her face,
silently judging her assassins before sputtering out when The Robber’s brains are spilled. But even when the Hermaphrodite’s eyes have disappeared and her alienated form lies utterly extinguished, the sensations of monstrosity remain, as if contacting this character’s monstrosity unleashes it to permeate the rest of the film, and all characters must carry the fabula of monstrosity to its end.

In point of fact, Fellini escalated his prioritization of the Hermaphrodite’s monstrosity as he proceeded through each stage of his adaptation. His screen treatment, for example, only deploys the word “monster” once. The shooting script deploys allegations of monstrosity in every scene, however; in five separate descriptions, the Hermaphrodite is depicted as having “monstrously light eyes,” and is designated as a “poor monster” and “little sacred monster” (219-228). This increasing escalation of monstrosity is accompanied by another focal shift: the specific area of the Hermaphrodite’s anatomy the filmmaker chooses to centralize. In short, Fellini moves from prioritizing the significance of the Hermaphrodite’s eyes to underscoring the facticity of her genitalia, which Fellini’s shooting script refers to as “the little creature’s aberrant sex” (1970: 221).

In point of fact, the word “aberrant” bears several semantic parallels with the word “ambiguous,” inasmuch as aberrant also defines subjects or objects that “deviat[e] from the usual or natural type” or “stray[…] from the right or normal way” – a usage derived from the word’s Latin roots: ab- (incorrect) + errare (to go); to wander, or take an errant course” (Merriam-Webster 1994: 2). In the context of Fellini-Satyricon, the normative route from which the Hermaphrodite’s genitalia strays, like an errant puppy, is the binary

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18 Although the word “monstrous” appears only once in his screen treatment, Fellini often describes the Hermaphrodite as “strange,” calling her a “strange creature,” a “sick beast,” and “a plant, or some strange amphibian” (1970: 78-81).
mode that positions unambiguously male or female genitalia as a non-aberrant or “natural” type. This tendency to stray from the norm is also the zero-point at which aberrancy shares a semantic edge with monstrosity, as the word “monstrous” is typically configured as either “deviating greatly from the natural form or character” or “shockingly wrong” (754). In short, both aberrancy and monstrosity are modifiers that deonte subjects who deviate wrongly, not merely straying from but threatening normalcy.

While the words “monster” or “aberrant” do not appear in the dialogue of any of Fellini’s characters (the words are not spoken in his film), the fact that Fellini transferred them into his visual lexicon is bolstered not only by the monstrous treatment the Hermaphrodite experiences at the hands of her abductors, who treat her like a monster or beast, but by Fellini’s casting choices for the troupe of acolytes who worship in The Temple of Ceres. Most of these actors had little or no acting experience and were hired by Fellini strictly on the basis of their physiognomy; more precisely, because Fellini felt his audiences would regard them as aberrant or monstrous – a visual trope that was familiar fare for Fellini by the time he made Fellini-Satyricon, and which has not gone unrecognized by film critics and scholars. In Cinema 2: The Time Image, Gilles Deleuze specifically observes that: “Fellini is the author who was able to produce the most prodigious galleries of monsters” (1989: 91, emphasis mine). According to Deleuze, Fellini meticulously framed his monsters, then followed them as if stalking exotic prey: “a tracking shot surveys them, stopping at one or another, but they are always caught in the present, birds of prey disturbed by the camera” (91).

When questioned about selecting actors for their specific physical traits, Fellini responded that such actors reinforced a framework of “alienness” in his film, a “strangeness” he felt was his only shield against “the danger of a dialectic relationship with a vertiginously remote and unknown reality” (1970: 12). By
Satyricon debuted in theaters, Ugo Casiraghi of L'Unita described the film as swarming with “physical monstrosities, abnormality and cynicism, dreary skies and imminent apocalypses.” But perhaps the most incisive assessment of Fellini-Satyricon’s monsters came from Alberto Moravia, the novelist and film critic. In his interview with Fellini, Moravia remarked:

All these monsters, whether hideous or beautiful, that you’ve crammed into your film, all these albino hermaphrodites, these hairy dwarfs, these elephantine prostitutes, these lascivious Gitons, these paralytic, maimed, dropsical, truncated, blind, halt, and lame et cetera people, reveal, besides your own baroque temperament with its inclination to wildly unrestrained imagination, the idea that antiquity signified nature without soul, sunk in the depths of irremediable corruption. (1970: 28)

Moravia’s use of the phrase “whether hideous or beautiful” in his description of Fellini’s monsters occurs on the same linguistic plane as the “little sacred monster” in Fellini’s shooting script. But in the film, Fellini’s alignment does not equate “beautiful” with sacred, nor does it equate hideousness with monstrosity. Instead, Fellini binds these qualities into the same aesthetic bundle, attempting to suggest the Hermaphrodite is an amalgamation of beauty, sacredness, horror and monstrosity. This bundle is depicted as somehow attracting the paradigm of violent attraction and repulsion that catastrophically impacts the Hermaphrodite. On the attraction side, Fellini attempts to present his Hermaphrodite as beautiful enough to admire, sacred enough to attract the hundreds of supplicants who worship in The Temple of Ceres. Likewise, the guardians who serve the Hermaphrodite worship her and care for her; not only do they interpret the character’s

keeping himself “estranged from the characters, to look at them with a detached eye,” Fellini believed he could avoid any pretense of entertaining an overly intimate relation with the past (10).

Casiraghi’s comments appear in On The Set of Fellini-Satyricon, wherein Hughes presents a compendium of critical responses to Fellini’s film (1971: 242).
garbled sayings, they collect tributary offerings on her behalf.

It is precisely this tribute that the film’s protagonists, Encolpius and Ascyltus, monstrously seek to corrupt to their advantage. Combined with the aesthetic of rare, delicate beauty, Fellini depicts his Hermaphrodite as repulsive, bestial, at turns a whimpering puppy, a gasping fish, a “strange amphibian”—in short, a lovely, bestial monster whose errant deviation from the right or normal path has caused the symbolic order to erupt in a chaos of misshapen supplicants, profiteering hierophants and murderous abductors, all of whom seek the supernatural powers of the Hermaphrodite for their own avaristic ends.

Obviously, Kristeva’s work on the sacred and profane is central to this discussion of the Hermaphrodite’s sacred monstrosity as it plays out in abject discourse. In analysing the religious laws that prohibit the violation of corpses (and Fellini depicts the pallid, limp body of the Hermaphrodite as defiled corpse and corpus delecti), Kristeva evaluates the reification of sacred subjects and objects in religious dogma. Evaluating religion’s reiterated preservation of unblemished sacredness as unassailable through the expulsion or exclusion of those Others it positions as blemished, deficient and/or unclean, Kristeva asserts that “outside of the sacred, the abject is written” (1982: 17). The abject other is brought into the symbolic order of language, Kristeva notes, precisely through the liminal edges of its projected abomination – the monstrosity that sycophants of the sacred ardently seek to reject. Godless, filthy, hedonistic, an abominable horde of inhuman others – by attempting to impose sacred order on these orderless subjects reduced to objects, an interstitial rift is opened in which monsters might engage with the officiants of the sacred in discourse. But this much is abundantly clear: simply because the
inhumanely treated monster is standing in the interstice of abject discourse, desperately trying to signify and justify its own existence, it does not mean the representatives of the sacred will listen to what the monster is trying to say, or alter their agenda in response to what was said. Just because there is abject discourse does not mean both parties are in communion. Listening, responding and adapting to the message of the abjectified is only one of many possible outcomes.

In Kristeva’s view, the first stage of abjection in human beings occurs in the moment an infant realizes there is more to its existence than infant-mother oneness. At that point, the infant is sundered into the house of language, wherein desire is articulated and (sometimes) fulfilled. Thus, the first moment of abjection occurs when the mother’s desire for something other than the infant is recognized by the infant for the first time. The infant then begins to perceive itself as a separate being from its mother, recognizing itself as a self – with its own desire and lack, completion and incompleteness – for the very first time. In that sense, abjection is not merely a narcissistic function. It is the “precondition of narcissism,” the state preceding the formation-perception of an “I” (1982: 13).21 By that rationale, an abject reaction – revulsion, sickness, violent denial and ejection – appears whenever the self-realizing subject comes into contact with subjects or objects it does not recognize within the parameters of its normative order. This is particularly true of those subjects and/or objects we have been trained to reject outright:

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21 In Kristeva’s view, the ambiguous and ambivalent fulcrum in which this narcissistic crisis takes place is in the move from pre-linguistic infancy into the subject’s participation in language. Following Kristeva, Sylvie Gambaudo explains that when a subject leaves “its unity with the maternal,” wherein the desire of the mother to please herself denies the infant their own pleasure, the subject must configure their own identity in the order of language, the symbolic order of the stranger (2007: 127). This places the subject in an uncertain double-bind, which assures both its jouissance and abjection. While the linguistic order provides the venue for the subject’s libidinal gratification, language is owned by none and does not own itself; it is shaped, validated and negated by its practitioners, who are shaped, validated and estranged by it, rendered ambiguous by it, yet rendering the outer edge of language as equally ambiguous.
the vile, taboo, monstrous, hellbound, etc. Yet in this abject moment, this interstice of extreme differentiation, when the subject seeks to distance itself from profane others utterly and with extreme prejudice, the subject is forced to recognize the Other, and to acknowledge that the Other’s alienation is at least a reflection of their own alienated position in the symbolic order, the order of language, which normatizes and drives assunder, threatenning to split the subject into the dis-ease they were forced to recognize when they detached themselves from the warm embrasure of mother-infant oneness.22

Kristeva stresses that the source of the subject’s repulsion is not produced by any specific trace of the Other (its pallor, its stench, its fragmentation, its monstrosity), but by the unrecognizability of the Other’s ambiguous outer edge, the fact of which throws the subject into “a sort of narcissistic crisis,” wherein the implicit return to “self-contemplative, conservative, self-sufficient haven” of mother-infant oneness is disrupted by sensations that “bring forth everything that, by not becoming integrated with a given system of signs,” signifies the subject’s own abjection in the face of the symbolic order (1982: 14, emphasis Kristeva’s).

If Kristeva is correct, the most disturbing aspect of the abject Other is its ambiguity, which, once detected, invokes the subject to recall its own ambiguity within the larger scheme of subjectivation, a playing ground that is precariously balanced and constantly shifting, within which the subject attempts to safeguard what Noelle McAfee defines as “an always tenuous ‘I’” (2004: 57). According to McAfee, “abjection haunts subjectivity, threatening to unravel what has been constructed; one’s own sense of self is never settled

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22 In Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture, Gambaudo explains that, for Kristeva, “the other is that which threatens the subject in its [own] identification” with the symbolic order (2007: 126).
and unshaken” (57).\textsuperscript{23} Performed within the unstable, shifting topography of the symbolic order, the act of sexual subjectivation – and the act of subjectivation in general – is rife with ambiguity and abjection, as everything sayable and seeable is backdropped at its most liminal edge by the unsayable and unseeable, within which a subject is called to differentiate from others, and into which the subject can stumble whenever it seeks to re-vision itself. Split and splitting, the performance of sexual subjectivation takes place in the house of language, as the ambiguous edge of everything outside the symbolic order seems to hold language in place; but the same ambiguity also calls into question the subject’s own coherence as it strives to perpetuate its narcissistic self-image in the cultural symbolic.\textsuperscript{24} Recalling my earlier definitions of \textit{ambiguity} as subjects and objects that are “doubtful or uncertain especially from obscurity or indistinctness,” the site of sexual subjectivation is not so much an amorphous nothingness as a catalytic blur of mutable systems of sexual differentiation, all of which are caught in a process of constant adaptation and revision.

Without the catalyst of ambiguity, the subject would not be able to re-\textit{vision} itself, as the ambiguous edge of sexual subjectivation affords the possibility for sexual \textit{adaptation} – the ability to shift, change, revise and transform one’s sexual meaning. Yet, as I have indicated, re-\textit{visioning} will only proceed unimpeded if one’s newly adapted

\textsuperscript{23} Cecilia Sjöholm, in \textit{Kristeva and the Political}, observes that the act of abjectification marks “the symbolic treatment of rejection, at the limit between inner and outer, a remainder that has to be cut off in order for the self to be kept ‘pure,’ the persecutory other” (2005: 98). Sjöholm emphasizes that the power of the abject lies in its attraction as well as its repulsion, its positive and negative charge, and the “incessant and repetitive return” to the corporeal boundary is also “productive of the \textit{jouissance} that marks the singular quality of human life” (120).

\textsuperscript{24} According to Kristeva, the abjectification of the Other summons the subject back to its own unstable relation with \textit{the failed patriarchal function}; the symbolic order, the order of language (1982: 50-3). Following Lacan, Kristeva asserts the symbolic order frames abjection and is abject itself; it contextualizes the lack, yet is perpetually lacking. This leads her to remark that there is always something “alien” about language, something strange yet familiar; language comes from what the subject perceives as their most intimate interior, yet emerges estranged, unwieldy and inadequate (1982: 50).
sexuality is immediately recognizable to the others who view it. If not, the transformed subject is erradicated outright, like Fellini’s Hermaphrodite – or, like her persecutors (the film’s protagonists), are called back into the venue of abject discourse to account for themselves again.

**Pretty/Horrible: Beefcake Protagonists and The Monsters of The Monster**

As I have mentioned, the abjection of the Hermaphrodite in *Fellini-Satyricon* was not without basis in history or culture, as the social question of hermaphrodisim had already been called into question repeatedly in ancient Greece and Rome centuries before Petronius wrote the *Satyricon*. In first-century Rome, the subject of hermaphrodisim and hermaphrodites had long been a divisive argument, and the abjectification of hermaphrodites and hermaphrodisim had intensified over time. But the argument was never completely settled. In fact, it is the provisionality of this argument that provides the turning point on which the arbitrary and ambiguous treatment of non-normative sexualities hinges. In this section of the chapter, I continue my exploration of the monstrous aesthetic framework that positions Fellini’s Hermaphrodite in abject discourse, asserting the monstrous actions constraining the Hermaphrodite are similar to the tropes of monstrosity that bedevil post-Enlightenment monsters like Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, wherein the actions of violent men on behalf of an overarching phallogocentric norm are depicted as more monstrous than the oppressed monsters they seek to destroy. It is precisely this discourse of monstrosity that radiates sacredness and profanity across *Fellini-Satyricon*, as Fellini’s protagonists become the monsters of the
Beginning with Theophrastus, and to a more detailed extent in Book Four of Diodoros Siculus’s *Library of History*, Greek historians already detected a division between those who regarded Hermaphroditos as a sacred god and those who believed he was a profane monster. According to Siculus, the Greeks of his time viewed Hermaphroditos as a god who was “born with a physical body which is a combination of that of a man and that of a woman, in that he has a body which is beautiful and delicate like that of a woman, but has the masculine quality and vigour of a man” (Siculus in Oldfather 1953: 361). Other Greeks, Siculus adds, were not so enlightened or compassionate. According to him, this faction “declare[s] that such creatures of two sexes are *monstrosities*, and coming rarely into the world as they do they have the quality of presaging the future, sometimes for evil and sometimes for good” (361). Thus, as early as Siculus, we find the general regard of hermaphroditism and the character of Hermaphroditos split into two diametrically opposed camps: those who regard hermaphroditism as beautiful and godly, and those who find it monstrous and profane.

Numerous scholars such as Luc Brisson, Marina Warner and Amit Rai have closely explored the cultural ambivalence and even hostility directed throughout history towards the bodies of intersexuals and other dually-sexed human beings. “In both Greek and Roman antiquity,” Brisson notes in *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphrodisn in Graeco-Roman Antiquity*, “people seem to have scanned their newborn children for signs that might indicate that the human race was no longer as it should be and was on the way to extinction” (2002: 7) According to Brisson, “no mutation was more radical than dual sexuality […] For the possession of both sexes at once rendered all sexual
reproduction impossible and undermined all life as a couple and a family” (2002: 7). Although there may have been isolated instances of intersexed children being accepted, Brisson argues that “there can be no doubt that, in antiquity, dual sexuality was, in truth, only marginally tolerated” (7). Citing the myth of Polycritus, that legendary Greek citizen who died and then returned as a ghost only to eat his intersexual child alive, Brisson analyzes the public disavowal of Polycritus’s child, who, like the Hermaphrodite of *Fellini-Satyricon*, has *no real name*, and, like Fellini’s Hermaphrodite, not only served as a prophet/ess, but ended up on the socionormative chopping block for destruction.

Reflecting on Aristotle’s studies in Book IV of *Generation of Animals*, Brisson argues that Polycritus’s child falls into Aristotle’s definition of a monster inasmuch as “it is a ‘monster’ (*teras*) [...] in a biological context,” thereby embodying Aristotle’s notion that: “Anyone who does not take after his parents is really in a way a *monstrosity*, since in these cases Nature has in a way strayed from the generic type” (13, from Aristotle’s *Generation IV* (2) 767b, emphases mine). Killing dually-sexed monsters was common practice in Greece until the first century, as Brisson meticulously chronicles in his *Table of Sixteen Prodigies Related to Dual-Sexed Beings* (26-27). Concerning the social treatment of dually-sexed individuals, Brisson concludes:

> Any uncertainty that affected the clear biological differentiation between the sexes was seen as threatening. It was to be a long time before the fear provoked by such uncertainty ceased to lead to the destruction of beings considered to possess both male and female sexual organs. (40)

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25 In *Sexual Ambivalence*, Brisson draws an interesting distinction between children who are born with two sexes (he calls these children “dually sexed”) and individuals like the mythical Tiresias, who changed sex from male-to-female-to male (2002: 2). This distinction will come into play once more in Chapter Three of this thesis, in my analysis of Orlando, the protagonist of Virginia Woolf’s book of the same name, who undergoes a mystical from-to sex change at the middle of the story.
Warner also considers the slowly evolving social relation to dually-sexed human beings in *Fantastic Metamorphoses, Other Worlds: Ways of Telling the Self*. Examining the hostility directed towards the bodies of hermaphrodites in the first century, Warner suggests this aggression was deeply intensified by the time such figures reached Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* nearly fifteen hundred years later. Drawing a parallel between Dante’s general condemnation of sexual transformation and hermaphrodisism, Warner argues that Dante extends the Hermaphroditos metaphor into his depictions of Satan and the damned, each of whom are trapped in a state of *everlasting transformation*. According to Warner, Dante adapts this transformational leitmotif “from the celebrated sexual dynamics of Salmacis and Hermaphroditus as they fuse in Book IV of [Ovid’s] *Metamorphoses*” – but he re-invests these stories with a moral-ethical injunction specifically directed against *sexual* transformation (2004: 37):

… whereas Ovid dramatizes the generation of a new being through Salmacis’s ardour, and dwells on her total incorporation of her love object, instituting metamorphosis as the origin of the marvellous phenomena nature gives birth to. Dante stages an inverted transubstantiation, making the claim that, in the afterlife of the damned, morphing utterly reduces identity and integrity. (2004: 37)

Depicting transformation as inherently malign and undesirable, Dante positions the states of hybridity and amalgamation as separation devices for distinguishing good from evil, thereby laying the groundwork for his amalgamated representations of Satan, that profane Other of the sacred Judeo-Christian God.26 Locked in an irreconcilable battle of disgust and disavowal, the binary good vs. evil deadlock of God and Satan is the epitome of the

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26 Eliphas Levi’s 1854 illustrations in *Dogme et Rituel de la Haute Magie* (The Dogma and Rituals of High Magic) depict Baphomet as both trans-species and hermaphroditic, a supernatural amalgamation of cloven feet, goat’s horns, women’s breasts and a penis, an ambiguity emphasized by the Latin words *slove* (dissolve) and *coagula* (congeal), engraved on the figure’s arms.
sacred and profane as extruded through abject discourse. We see this motif echoed in countless works of religious art, which consistently feature God as unambiguously male and Satan as a corrupt amalgamation of beast, woman and man. In point of fact, this brand of religious iconography is derivative of earlier depictions of *Baphomet*, the multi-sexed demon associated with Theistic Satanism. Hermaphroditic depictions of Satan in religious art gained increasing polemic traction as a referrent to idols whose bestialized forms appeared to rise from the mist of a barbaric, pagan past that held sway before Christianity supplanted it. Not only was the hermaphroditic Satan positioned as the most distanced, liminal edge of God – s/he was God’s photo-negative. While God was solid and immutable, Satan was the perpetually mutating/mutable staging grounds for disrupting the sacred moral-ethical heterodoxy of phallogocentrism.27

But unlike Dante-eque depictions of Satan, which clearly position this ever-morphing character in a bite-sized binary battle of good vs. evil with an unchanging God, the meaning machine engendered by Fellini’s Hermaphrodite is highly conflicted. Clearly, Fellini deploys the body of his Hermaphrodite as a referrent to the precedent representational systems of Dante and Ovid; specifically, their ambisexual renditions of Hermaphroditos, Baphomet, Satan and other characters whose amalgamated bodies recall the monsters of pagan times. Yet, Fellini differs from previous adapters, inasmuch as he does not impart the Hermaphrodite with malign characteristics or aims. As I have suggested, Fellini considers the form of his Hermaphrodite to be monstrous *and* beautiful, sacred *and* profane. Unlike Satan and other monsters of the phallogocentric inferno,

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27 The representation of sexual ambiguity and transformation, notes Warner, is typically the demarcation zone between good and evil is endemic of Christianity’s influence on Western literature: “In the Christian heaven, nothing is mutable, whereas in hell, everything combines and recombines in terrible amalgams, compounds, breeding hybrids, monsters—and mutants” (36).
Fellini’s Hermaphrodite does not disrupt order; indeed, it is her order that is disrupted by the intrusion of violent men, whose actions towards the Hermaphrodite seem monstrous.

In that sense, there is much moral-ethical traction between Fellini’s Hermaphrodite and the monster of Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*. Both characters are amalgams of extraneous body parts grafted together by their creators. Both are depicted as having more integrity, humaneness, and, for lack of a better term, *more soul* than their protagonistic persecutors. Moreover, each of these characters is essentially locked out of discourse with their persecutors, inasmuch as the protagonists either do not listen to what their monster is saying (in the case of *Frankenstein*), or cannot comprehend what the monster is saying (in *Fellini-Satyricon*). We must consider the meaning of this latter paradigm, particularly in terms of the injustice that results from the protagonists’ failure to comprehend the Hermaphrodite’s speech. While the hero of *Frankenstein* (Victor) acknowledges his monster speaks in a human tongue, and although Victor recognizes the monster’s language enough to make out his creation’s desire, the protagonist does not credit either the content or the rhetoric of the monster’s speech enough to justify compassion: he will not let him live, not if he can help it. By contrast, the protagonists of *Fellini-Satyricon* do not understand the Hermaphrodite’s utterances at all. This is not because her speech is incomprehensible – her utterances are correctly understood and interpreted by her followers (the Old Man and his Assistant) – but rather because Encolpius and Ascyltus lack the ability to recognize what the Hermaphrodite is saying.

Nevertheless, Fellini’s Hermaphrodite and *Frankenstein*’s monster share a common moral-ethical edge, particularly as the projected monstrosity of both “creatures” is overshadowed by a greater monstrosity projected towards them by the “civilized”
characters who persecute them. In his provocative essay, “Of Monsters: Biopower, Terrorism and Excess in Genealogies of Monstrosity,” Amit Rai argues that many monstrous characters of the Enlightenment era were not depicted on the same level of horror or repulsiveness as the acts directed towards them by others. Critiquing the monstrous vengeance acts of villagers and mobs against amalgamated creatures, Rai evaluates the punishments typically executed on the behalf of overarching social norms. In narratives of this type, the phobic impulses of civilized men are often depicted as more monstrous than the story’s “monsters,” suggesting the truly monstrous fact is not merely the immoral social order that makes such acts possible, as the unreasonable pressures of conforming to the phallogocentric order of “modern” civilization seems to perpetuate such acts. Observing that monsters actually “gave birth to modernity: those unmistakable figures of horror and fascination shadow civilization as its constitutive and abjected discontent,” Rai (following Kristeva) suggests that acknowledging the monster’s vocalization of desire in abject discourse can call the larger act of social rejection into question by implicating all its participants in “the milieu of the event” (2004: 538-551).

Clearly, the event of abject discourse is always a milieu of transsubjective crisis.

I would like to return for a moment to Fellini’s projection of an aesthetic of sexual ambiguity onto the body of his sacred little monster. As I have noted, this aesthetic primarily consists of the deployment of a set of latex prosthetic breasts in conjunction with the albino actor’s existing penis and Fellini’s stage directions to depict the Hermaphrodite as not merely sickly, lovely and monstrous – but *as a specific type of male*, inasmuch as the Hermaphrodite gains shape as the most extreme form of feminized masculinity that Encolpius rails against in the film’s first scene. The message implicit in
this aesthetic milieu is conflictedly misogynistic, suggesting the presence of female sex organs on a male body simultaneously beautifies and weakens the subject, rendering them vulnerable to the monstrous force of the phallogocentric order as enacted by those nubile muscleboys Fellini casts as protagonists. 28

In addition, the Hermaphrodite is not the only character Fellini places on the monstrous side of the discourse. The entire cotillion of her supplicants, those wretched others who come to worship in her Temple, are included in this couture of weakened monsters. In the film’s shooting script, Fellini (or his editor) placed an editorial asterisk next to the words “the Old Man dips his sponge and bathes the face of the little sacred monster*” (1970: 223). The notation corresponding to this asterisk reads: “The scene [in the Hermaphrodite’s grotto] was enriched with other figures of the ill and unfortunate, including an armless and legless hero of the battle of Quadrageismo” (223). In point of fact, the legless Hero of Quadrageismo is asking the Hermaphrodite to perform an act of reverse transubstantiation: he wants his legs back, to be restored to his former state. When the Hero of Quadrageismo presents this impossible request, a cloaked figure hobbles past on legs bent backwards like a chicken’s, followed by a stuttering madman. These are a few of the “ill and unfortunate” characters who populate the Temple of Ceres, seeking the care of the grotto’s sacred centerpiece. These supplicants come to the Hermaphrodite on a daily basis seeking care, just as the Hermaphrodite is cared for by her servants and attendants. But the trinity of men who abduct the Hermaphrodite are fundamentally, deplorably careless – not only are they totally unequipped to care for the

28 Of Fellini-Satyricon’s three protagonists, none were native Italians. The blue-eyed Martin Potter (Encolpius) and curly-haired Max Born (Giton) were citizens of England, while Hiram Walker (Ascytus) hailed from Moody Field, Georgia, in the United States. Walker, who had been nicknamed “The Face” for his glamorous features, was renowned as a runway model of 14 years, while Potter would move on to play starring roles on television, in series such as The Legend of Robin Hood (Davidson, 1975).
Hermaphrodite – they cannot even take care of themselves. Lawless drifters living on the fringe of a phallogocentric culture gone insane, Fellini’s bissexual hedonists travel through their world without forming any lasting connections.

It would be a mistake, however, to claim that Fellini does not care for his Hermaphrodite. At first blush, the Hermaphrodite’s pale body hanging languidly from its wicker bier is endowed with so many death-like attributes that it reads as “waste body, corpse body” (to borrow a concept from Kristeva) – a body reduced to a totem of death and decomposition (1982: 108). But there is something about the Hermaphrodite that also seems dear to Fellini, despite all the death and treachery that frames her, as if her delicate little corpse reminds Fellini of the death of someone close, the remains of a beloved ancestor. This is precisely what makes the milieu of Fellini’s Hermaphrodite read as abject: he stresses her powers of attraction and repulsion by emphasizing the character’s sacredness and monstrosity, juxtaposing the reverence of her supplicants and the devotion of her caretakers against the skepticism and carelessness of her abductors. And we must not forget the erotic allure he lends to the Hermaphrodite, dressing her in filmy garlands and golden veils, exposing and framing her delicate features before she collapses into repose. The way Fellini’s camera lingers on her breasts and penis does not suggest he finds them repulsive – he is captivated by them, and he wants us to be captivated by them, too. Instead of making the monstrous deeds of her abductors seem acceptable (or even plausible), this eroticization of the monster further destabilizes the entire milieu, suggesting we regard the destruction of the prophet/ess in the way we would regard the death of a long-lost lover.

29 Discussing the system of taboos on the treatment of corpses as these are found in biblical literature, Kristeva observes that “a religion of abomination overlays a religion of the sacred,” thereby forming a transposition that marks the “exit of religion and the unfolding of morals” (1982: 111).
The same complexity is nuanced into Fellini’s protagonists. Just as he does not paint these characters without blemish, neither does he reject them outright. Instead, he seems to empathize with their struggles and jealousies, their debauchery, chaos and alienation. Even their destruction of the Hermaphrodite he paints as a careless act against a form of effeminacy that captivates him, but he does not understand. And Fellini also eroticizes his protagonists’ forms: his camera lingers on their muscled bodies as they writhe in wrestling tournaments, in torment, in ecstasy. Of course, one must recall that each of Fellini’s protagonists are men, and that the characters who align with the cruel heterocentric norms to undo the Hermaphrodite’s body are strictly masculine. In that sense, the outrages perpetrated against Fellini’s sacred little monster come off as an extension of a general hostility directed by Fellini-Satyricon protagonists towards women in general, who are at turns used, abused and discarded. This Roman world is a man’s world – or that’s how Fellini paints it, at any rate. At the very least, his Satyricon (like the Satyricon of Petronius before him) is a man’s story, inasmuch as none of the primary and even secondary characters are female.

Recalling Encolpius’s rant, and his condemnation of Ascyltus and Giton, whom he assaults for turning tricks as females in exchange for money, the scorn Encolpius directs towards his boyfriends’ femininity implies that nothing is less desirable than being an effeminate man. While Giton might “appear” effeminate and even pose as a woman in return for cash, Fellini suggests the Hermaphrodite is both woman and man in one body – and thus is even more effeminate than Giton. But how do we know the Hermaphrodite is truly more woman than man? And what about the alignment of the Hermaphrodite with animals, both sacrificial and domestic? Is Fellini lacing the Hermaphrodite’s “female
side” to her animal side, indicating that women are either sacrificial creatures or stupid beasts who need protection if they are not to be senselessly slaughtered by predatorial males?

While his film seems to lean in this direction, we must take care not to jump to conclusions as to the meaning of Fellini’s male/female milieu, particularly when we consider his eroticization of the feminized male. The effeminate Giton, for example, is the source of his protagonists’ desire: Encolpius and Ascytus desire no other male with equal fervor, and each wants to possess Giton all to himself. Thus, while Encolpius claims to regard effeminate males with scorn, an effeminate male is his most coveted love object. Similarly, it would be inaccurate to suggest Encolpius and Ascytus do not want the Hermaphrodite all to themselves. They do desire the Hermaphrodite, and they do want to keep her all for themselves – they simply desire her for purposes other than sexual pleasure. If the two protagonists were not so bissexual, this would appear to indicate the Hermaphrodite is too female for them to desire. But Encolpius seek women and boys with equal abandon. They simply desire Giton more, leaving one with the conclusion that while the protagonists desire an effeminate boy more than they desire “real” women, there is only so effeminate a boy can be before they desire him no longer.

That said, while the differences between Fellini’s treatment of the Hermaphrodite and Giton might seem to position the Hermaphrodite as the least sexually desirable of the pair, this is clearly not the case. It could be argued that she is more sexually charged than Giton, so highly charged with her own unambiguously sacred sexuality that none of the lascivious protagonists of Fellini-Satyricon dare to touch her (and they would dare to touch just about anything). Recalling Chapter One, the Hermaphrodite’s dilemma in
*Fellini-Satyricon* bears some uncanny similarities to the relationship between Apollo and the Cumaean Sibyl in the *Metamorphoses*. Just as Ovid’s Apollo does not want the Cumaean Sibyl in “the right way” (the sacred way, the morally honorable way, which would honor his priestess’s sexual chastity) the prettyboys of *Fellini-Satyricon* desire the Hermaphrodite for their personal enrichment at the expense of her own, resulting in the un-doing not merely of the Hermaphrodite, but of her entire ontology, which, compared to the chaos of the protagonist’s phallogocentric order, is a holistic socioeconomic system of worship, tribute and healing. This holistic system is overturned when Encolpius and Ascyltus sack the Temple of Ceres for its precious centerpiece – an act that propels an unfolding of morality in general, as protagonists become antagonists, committing acts of monstrosity against the Hermaphrodite and The Temple of Ceres, where adherents come to pray and heal. This is the “pagan” moral-ethical order that Fellini’s protagonists are successful in unseating with their barbarous acts; a pagan order presented as still more pagan and distant than the one that alienates *them*: the patriarchal order. At the moment the Hermaphrodite lies dying, it becomes evident that men are *the central protagonists and antagonists* of Fellini’s *Satyricon*, and his film was never truly “about” the Hermaphrodite in the first place. Yet while Fellini positions men at the center of his pagan past, he makes it abundantly clear that the patriarchal order of Rome displaced an even earlier pagan past whose cultural symbolic might not have been phallogocentric. It is the indistinct grin of this more deeply pagan past that Roman paganism crushed out of existence.

That said, *Fellini-Satyricon* most clearly crystallizes phallogocentric order – the order of men – as moral *disorder* precisely at the moment his protagonists become
profane, abducting and despoiling the Hermaphrodite, his sacred little monster. Breaking into the sacred order of her watery temple, Encolpius and Ascyltys carry the Hermaphrodite into a cruelly arbitrary wasteland that seems to surround and oppress everything it is not. This bleak environment is nothing less than the phallogocentric system they support, but which does not appear to support them. It is to sustain their own survival within this brutal system that they kidnap the Hermaphrodite for profit. Yet, while it could be said that when Encolpius and Ascyltus allow the Hermaphrodite to die, her death makes them outlaws to a greater extent than they were before, deepening their alienation from any moral-ethical order. Yet despite the fact that the Hermaphrodite’s abductors cruelly oppress her, they are desperate to keep her alive; in fact, they are risking their own lives by stealing her from the temple of the primal mother.

And while it is true that we never completely know Fellini’s sacred little monster (she undergoes no character development, save her development towards death), we never really know his protagonists, either. With their chaotic gestures, arcane dialects and ambivalent stares, Fellini’s aesthetically broken story presents Encolpius, Ascyltus and Giton as simultaneously familiar and unknowable. There is a fundamental ambiguity not merely to these characters and their interactions, but a vast and ethereal ambiguity that enshrouds their entire sociosexual milieu, the milieu of their temporal event. While we might not know what it meant to be a Hermaphrodite during that time, Fellini suggests we do not know what it meant to be a man or a woman, either. The meaning of their sexuality was different – but just how different we will never know, precisely because so many portions of our distant past are closed to us. In that sense, something of abject discourse seems inherent to any attempt to decipher our ancient past. Like the Sibyl
reappearing from antiquity (whether faithfully or unfaithfully restored), Fellini’s prophet/ess seems to suggest there is something about the abject other we can never completely know, no matter how hard we look – or how much we force ourselves to look.

Still, although the past is a closed door, something occasionally beckons us from there, smiling enigmatically. Like Lacan’s *objet petit a*, the thing behind this smile retreats from view as if suddenly startled, evoking Kristeva’s notion that as soon as we contact the Other in abject discourse, “it shades off like a mirage and permeates all words of language with nonexistence, with a hallucinatory, ghostly glimmer” (1982: 6). Like the works of Dostoyevsky or Celine, the *Fellini-Satyricon* “decks itself out in the sacred power of horror,” emerging as “not an ultimate resistance to but an unveiling of the abject” (1982: 208). 30 Within its abject discourse, Fellini’s treatment of the Hermaphroditic prophet/ess offers possibilities for analyzing an intersubjective transvaluation from which the Hermaphrodite emerges less monstrous than her abductors. 31 Retaining a vestige of ambiguity in her silence, behind her smile, within the things she never said or was never allowed to say, Fellini’s hermaphroditic sibyl

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30 In *The Powers of Horror*, Kristeva makes a detailed analysis of the ways in which Dostoyevsky, Kafka and Celine give voice to the abject. Noelle McAfee notes that such literature, for Kristeva, “helps the author and the reader work through some of the maladies that afflict their souls” (2004: 50). She adds that Kristeva regards “much literary creation” as a “catharsis and purging of what is deemed other or abject,” adding that “often these literary products show a dark side of humanity, the side that finds foreigners ‘unclean’ and wants to banish anything that is either unfamiliar, or, more often, uncannily too familiar” (2004: 57). Yet Sara Beardsworth sees art as having a further adaptive function, inasmuch as “art must also transform art” (2005: 47). Hence, Beardsworth argues, “Kristeva emphasizes new technique and ‘surprising imagination’ when she selects her artworks” (47). These artworks are “revolutionary,” Beardsworth asserts, in that they give “form to drives and affects so that these emerge from the psychic prison of individual suffering and gain meaning for, and in support of” social groups (49). In *The Colonization of Psychic Space*, Kelly Oliver adds the writings of Frantz Fanon to this category, but from a different perspective, noting that “Fanon’s analysis of shifting power relations in his essays on the radio and the veil vividly illustrates the shifting positions of resistance and domination and their effects on the psyche, particularly the sense of agency of the oppressed” (2004: 73).

31 Like Butler’s view that qualities counting as “recognizably human” are always in negotiation, bearing the possibility for new, expanded forms of being and understanding, Wilkerson sees “further and intensified forms of freedom” arise within the ambiguous demarcations between “the given and the possible,” in which there are opportunities to “have consciousness of our self-formation and the possibilities for its transformation” (Wilkerson, 2007: 173)
recaptures something of her autonomy, calling the phallogocentric order of her times back into interrogation.

In this chapter, my primary aim was to evaluate the aesthetic stylization and deployment of the Hermaphrodite in *Fellini-Satyricon*, particularly as it produces a transvaluative discourse of abjection. In the next chapter, I return to the multifarious interplay of abjection and sexual ambiguation as evoked in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*. As an adaptation and a parody (of eighteenth-century biographies and other masculine literary traditions), *Orlando* shares much common ground with the *Satyricon*, which was also a satire of epic classical works. Yet, while *Orlando* and the *Satyricon* can both be seen as “modern” parodies of earlier literary forms, Woolf’s modernist approach engages language in a more nuanced fashion, not merely breaking with but breaking into the biographical form it parodies to initiate different modes of writing and being. In closely reading *Orlando’s* magical change of sex, I bring Woolf’s novel into contact with Judith Butler’s discussion of abjection in the juridical administration of sexual recognition – and the lack thereof.
Chapter Three

The Closely Bracketed Sex-Change of Virginia Woolf’s Orlando: A Biography

Unambiguously male. That is the sex of Virginia Woolf’s protagonist for the first eighty-three pages of Orlando: A Biography. Following a sex-change sequence of five pages in length, Orlando becomes unambiguously female for the next one hundred twenty-eight pages of the novel.¹ A similar structural effect marks Orlando’s narrated lifespan: the brief instant the protagonist spends as a sexually ambiguous character is bookended between the male and female halves of Orlando’s 400-year lifespan. Although the precise moment when Woolf aesthetically frames her protagonist in sexual ambiguity is quite brief, it remains pivotal to the novel, as this sequence attempts to “explain” the process of transforming from a man into a woman. Structurally speaking, the moment of Orlando’s sex change is a key transition point, as the character moves from being a man through a position of sexual ambiguity, and from there into “being” a woman on every level: ideologically, politically, biologically.

But Orlando begins the tale as a man, and there are several good reasons to come down hard on this distinction. The meaning of the story would be radically different, for example, if Orlando began the story as a woman, then moved through a brief state of sexual ambiguity into being a man – or if Orlando began the narrative as a man, moved

¹ Like the Petronian Satyricon, Virginia Woolf’s Orlando: A Biography has proven difficult for scholars to categorize. I do not concur with DiBattista’s notion, for example, in Virginia Woolf's Major Novels, that “Orlando’s mischievous first line … is conventionally allied to the transvestism common to comic Shakespearean romances” (1980: 117). While there might be some accuracy to DiBattista’s speculations on transvestism and Shakespeare, her assertions do not adequately summarize the novel’s opening sentence, which, if anything, evokes the tragic elements of Shakespeare’s Othello. And if Woolf’s opening line is mischievous, it can only be so in light of an ancillary reading of her correspondence or the novel’s critical interpretation. Taken on its own, with no prior or parallel knowledge about what makes the line comical (the cultural context for the joke), there is nothing mischievous about it.
into a state of sexual ambiguity and stayed there. But Orlando does none of those things.

Consider the opening sentence of Orlando, and its emphasis on the protagonist’s masculinity:

HE—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters (3).

Orlando’s initiatory HE is emphatic, all caps, uncompromising. Far more than a male pronoun made explicit, it is a HE of biblical proportions, the imperative HE of a masculine epic: the eulogy, the homage, the treatise, the eighteenth-century biography. This opening HE is a shout, a command, a caution, and Woolf pounds down so emphatically on this note that I do not comprehend how scholars like Hermione Lee and others have arrived at the conclusion that Orlando “is the same whether she is a man or a woman” (1977: 149, emphasis mine). Because Lee will argue Woolf’s novel is prioritizing a politics of “androgyny,” this assertion is meant to bolster her position that Orlando’s feminine and masculine characteristics overlap. But the only thing the first line of Orlando truly “makes evident” is the protagonist’s masculinity. And even when Orlando changes into a woman at the mid-point of Woolf’s novel, the protagonist is still

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2 In The Novels of Virginia Woolf, Lee is quite critical of “Orlando’s natural androgyyn,” as well as Woolf’s alleged attachment to making the character “the same,” whether male or female (1977: 149). Other scholars who centralize Orlando’s androgyyn at the expense of closely reading the character’s masculinity and femininity include Elaine Showalter, in A Literature of Their Own (1977), Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, in The Madwoman in the Attic (1979), and Maria DiBattista, in Virginia Woolf's Major Novels: The Fables of Anon (1980). I remain skeptical of Lee’s efforts to “prove” Woolf centralized androgyyn in Orlando, particularly as Lee’s methodology for arriving at her findings involves engaging in a posthumous back-reading of Woolf’s correspondence and ancillary writings. Showalter, in particular, along with Gilbert and Gubar, argue that Woolf’s writing (particularly in Orlando) was not womanly enough to be politically effective. While I concur with none of those viewpoints, I particularly object – as does Toril Moi in Sexual/Textual Politics – to Showalter’s notion that “androgyyn was the myth that helped (Woolf) evade confrontation with her own painful femaleness and enabled her to choke and repress her anger and ambition” (Moi 1985: 2, Showalter 1977: 262). The fact that Woolf does not project her critique in the style (or the gendered aesthetic) that Showalter prefers does not make Woolf’s critique any less powerful. Could not the opposite be argued, as her critique of gender systems is more open ended?
depicted as a singular individual *despite* his or her explicit sex – not due to any inherent overlap, as Lee would have it. Succinctly put, the frame of Orlando’s masculinity portrays him as a white, aristocratic teenager hungry for experience, sex and patriarchal power; indeed, it is precisely this patriarchal arrangement of race, class and sex that Orlando runs up against after his sex change, when HE turns into a woman.

In this chapter, I will trace Orlando’s progression from manhood into sexual ambiguity and out “the other side” into a specific type of femininity. As I have suggested, my analysis will take a different theoretical route than those scholars who have suggested *Orlando* (and its author) are inherently *androgy nous*, as the prioritization those researchers have placed on both the reputed “androgy ny” of Woolf’s protagonist and the so-called androgyny of her writing falls short in several ways. Not only does this speculative prioritization of androgyny downplay the significance of Orlando’s initial masculinity – it is often deployed to dismiss or defer the novel’s feminist objectives, which do not synch up with second-wave value systems. In bracketing Orlando’s moment of sexual ambiguity between recognizable states of masculinity and femininity, Woolf rhetorically frames the projected state of Orlando’s sexual ambiguity as an intersubjective predecessor for the “final phase” of her life, when the state of femininity (and first wave feminism) liberates Orlando from centuries of patriarchal oppression. Not only does this fact encourage me to take a stronger stance in refuting any lingering notions that *Orlando* is a poor example of “women’s writing,” it presents a strong argument against the persistent back-readings of scholars who seem hell-bent on “proving” Virginia Woolf was mad, autistic, not feminist enough, or the victim of sex abuse as a child (1977: 49).
In a worst-case scenario, such arguments have a way of perpetuating exclusive intellectual “traditions” based on the conclusions of dubious research practices. A substantial case in point—and there are many—can be traced in the influence of Louise DeSalvo’s work in *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1990) on Claire Hanson’s biography, *Virginia Woolf* (1994). Tapping into DeSalvo’s speculative back-reading of Woolf’s fiction as the theoretical underpinning for her analysis of Woolf’s life and writing, Hanson suggests it “is difficult in [Woolf’s] case to practice the kind of critical hygiene urged by the New Critics, and to treat her work as a free-standing, autonomous entity—most obviously because the widespread knowledge of her ‘madness’ and her suicide casts an inescapable shadow over her writing” (1, emphasis mine).3 In the first place, it has never been proven to anyone’s satisfaction that Woolf was “mad”; indeed, based on the integrity of her fiction and her politics, Woolf seems more sane than many of her contemporaries, and the only thing her suicide “proves” is the fact that she was deeply unhappy. Hanson’s acceptance of DeSalvo’s sketchy speculations as the wellspring of “widespread knowledge” only serves to increase the “inescapable” theoretical shadows that surround Woolf’s work. It certainly does not dispel them. By hammering away at the unverifiable significance of Woolf’s “madness,” both DeSalvo and Hanson reduce her highly experimental novels into “proofs” of an elegant but unverifiable theory, squelching the novel’s most incendiary political potential.

Similarly, something valuable is lost if we categorize *Orlando* as “the longest and most charming lesbian feminist love letter in literature,” or insist it is “a portrait of Vita

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[Sackville West]” – as if any other type of reading is illegitimate or unenlightened (Hankins 1997, DiBattista 2012: xlv). While I would be the first to admit Woolf may have been exploring these themes in *Orlando*, she does not centralize or prioritize any of them – in fact, it is precisely her skill at illuminating several sexual subject positions at once that lends Woolf’s novels their baroque thematic richness, even as her modernist prose deftly runs against Western epistemologies of sexual subjectivation. Shakespeare also wrote about different sorts of men and women, and men often played female parts in his plays – but he could hardly be seen as promoting a “politics of androgyny.”

My corpus of study in this chapter concerns two primary scenes. The first is *Orlando’s* opening sequence, which depicts the protagonist striking at the disembodied head of a decapitated Moor. The second concerns the moment of Orlando’s sexual transfiguration in Constantinople, as this transformation is depicted as preceding Orlando’s femininity. Moving through sexual ambiguity into femininity, Orlando is not released from abjection, but is in fact plunged into abject discourse to a greater degree than ever before.

Concerning *Orlando’s* opening cut against a Moor’s head, I suggest the protagonist’s barbaric act does not initiate the novel with a cutting-away so much it draws the reader into a specific intersection of race, sex and class.4 I access the work of Homi K. Bhabha’s studies of barbarism in *The Location of Culture* and Slavoj Žižek’s notions of the monster in *Enjoy Your Symptom!* to discuss Orlando’s interaction with the Moor’s head as an abject performance, in which Woolf’s “biographer” describes the Other as a

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4 I return to the political charge of the Moor’s head sequence in Chapter Three, particularly as this applies to filmmaker Sally Potter’s omission of the Moor’s head sequence from her film adaptation. While Fellini’s deliberate deployment of albinos, dwarves and hermaphrodites in *Fellini-Satyricon* serves to visibly underscore a specular aesthetic of monstrosity, Potter’s omission of the Moor’s head sequence from her film visibly illuminates the novel’s racist and colonialist implications, rather than eliminate or defer them.
barbarian even as the monstrosity of the protagonist’s act calls the ontologies of both players into question. Arguing that this abject interstice embraces both Orlando and his dark-skinned Other, I analyze their narrative cut as a structural move that disrupts all points of the symbolic order.

In my chapter’s second section, I explicitly explore Orlando’s sex change sequence. In Constantinople, the land of Orlando’s dark-skinned other, the tables turn on the protagonist, who attempts to become his Moorish other, but instead becomes a woman. In closely reading the vicissitudes of Orlando’s mythical/magical sex change, I interrogate Woolf’s linguistic indications of Orlando’s specific moment of sexual ambiguity. As I have noted, much has been written about Orlando’s perceived androgyny, but few scholars have closely analyzed the protagonist’s sex change per se, particularly as this sexual transfiguration is presented as a magical occurrence. Instead of manifesting through a “change in wardrobe,” as Lee and others have indicated, Orlando’s sexual transfiguration is presented as a biological-anatomical change that occurs when HE falls into a magical slumber and emerges as “she.” Bringing Kristeva’s notions on abjection into contact with Judith Butler’s viewpoint on the power relations of cultural marginalization and recognizability, I explore the zero-point at which a human being’s sex might be regarded as too ambiguous to recognize, or even dismissed as exceeding recognition.

In the third section of this chapter, I discuss Orlando’s emergence as a woman who is more capable of dealing with her own abjection than before – not so much because she was once a man, but because she became a woman through a moment of sexual ambiguity that followed her manhood. Examining Woolf’s “proof” of Orlando’s
legitimacy as a woman (via the biographer’s testimony that she bears a child), I suggest Woolf’s work in *Orlando* does not merely adapt male forms of writing into feminine and/or feminist writing. It adapts masculine escriture into a specific woman’s writing: Woolf’s writing. And in this process – a process of adapting masculine escriture into something distinctly Woolfian – her character, Orlando, is adapted as a sexual human being, moving from HIS life as a privileged barbarian into her life as a woman. Not merely a ravishing, intellectual woman who was formerly an aristocratic man, but into a woman who is unafraid of abjection, a woman who linguistically emancipates herself onto the field of political discourse *on her own terms*.

As has been the case with the chapters of my thesis thus far, the theoretical underpinnings of this chapter attempt to create interdisciplinary traction between some scholars not typically brought together, scholars whose work is considered either divergent or contradictory because they handle similar concepts to different ends, or because they have drawn unnecessary distinctions between “their own” theories and those of their competitors. Concerning the former, I draw a theoretical connection between Homi Bhabha and Slavoj Žižek concerning their critique of colonial paradigms of barbarism and aesthetic markers of darkness (a take Bhabha adapts from Frantz Fanon). An instance of the latter type can be found in my theorization of abjection as extrapolated from a dual reading of Kristeva and Butler, particularly as a dual reading of

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5 The double-sided role that barbarism, blackness and whiteness play in boy-Orlando’s interaction with the Moor’s head toy evokes Bhabha’s analysis of Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*, particularly the “subversive turn of a familiar term” that Bhabha sees in Fanon’s statement: *The Negro is not. Any more than the white man* (1994: 40-41, quoting Fanon 1967: 231). In Bhabha’s view, this statement produces a “silent rupture” that simultaneously engages, illuminates and unsettles “the narcissistic myths of negritude or white cultural supremacy” that lie at the heart of the transvaluative and abject interstices “of colonial dislocation” that occurs along “the shifting boundaries between barbarism and civility; the insatiable fear and desire for the Negro” (1994: 40-41, emphasis mine). I argue that the same type of disjuncture is produced by the Moor’s head sequence in *Orlando*.
both scholars presents a far deeper reading of abjection at large. In *Undoing Gender*, Butler emphasizes that the punitive distribution of socioeconomic abjection often revolves around the nexus of intersubjective *recognition*, in which the act of deciding who counts as “visibly human” has a direct bearing on how allegedly non-normative human beings “are criminalized and pathologized, how subjects who cross gender risk internment and imprisonment, why violence against transgendered subjects is not recognized as violence, and why this violence is sometimes inflicted by the very states that should be offering such subjects protection from violence” (2004: 30). As this involves *Orlando*, socioeconomic abjection becomes immediately visible as soon as the protagonist’s sex change unsettles his relation to the cultural order of white, colonial patriarchy, which is irrevocably altered from the moment Orlando changes into a woman.

My approach to modernist literary scholarship, and Woolf scholarship in particular, also brings together strange bedfellows. Although my findings do not always concur with the work of Maria DiBattista, Hermione Lee, Elaine Showalter and others, DiBattista has made productive studies of Woolf’s life and work – I simply disagree with her prioritization of androgyny in *Orlando*. That said, my chapter owes a debt of gratitude to Makiko Minow-Pinkney’s analysis of the aesthetically stylized lacunae that

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6 The threat of violence is always implicit in the state’s claims to not recognize specific elements of its citizenry, thereby eschewing its obligation to protect them (from discrimination, segregation, hate crimes and so forth). In that sense, the liminal edge of the state’s inability or refusal to recognize is cultural violence. As Butler notes, particularly in * Undoing Gender*, the possibility of being deemed culturally unrecognizable (by the state, the media, society, etc.) entails at the very least some sort of social deprivation; the relinquishment of one’s right to speak without arbitration, the denial of liberty or leisure time, the censorship of visible pleasures. In that sense, the refusal of the state to recognize ultimately results in articulations of violence that constantly bear down on all sexes deemed untouchable, unreachable, deviant or defiant.

7 According to Bhabha, it is nothing less than “the language of national collectivity and cohesiveness [that] is at stake” in the abject discourse of nationality, which must inevitably disassociate others in order to maintain traction (1990: 304). Yet, Bhabha adds that “Kristeva speaks perhaps too hastily of the pleasures of the exile — ‘How can one avoid sinking into the mire of common sense, if not by becoming a stranger to one's own country, language, sex and identity?’ — without realizing how fully the shadow of the nation falls on the condition of the exile” (304).
mark Orlando’s third chapter, along with her close reading of Orlando’s “fantastic transgression of the boundary of sex,” which Minow-Pinkney’s describes as taking place “in surroundings of radical otherness” (1987: 124). But because Orlando is clearly a satire of patriarchal systems of sexual subjectivation and a parody of various styles of “men’s” writing, it has been advantageous to use adaptation theories in addition to literary scholarship proper. As I have suggested, Woolf’s novel is not merely a work of adaptation; it is an examination of the process of adaptation itself. The novel positions the inability of the protagonist to adapt to life as a chauvinistic Elizabethan male as the impetus for a sex change that serves as the intermediary transition point for her triumphant ascension into life as a woman. In forming my analysis of this transition, the work of Leitch and Sanders in adaptation studies continues to play a vital role.

As I have suggested, the moment of Orlando’s sex change is a turbulent milieu of disavowal, recognition, transfiguration and adaptation. One recurring thread in Orlando is the novel’s premise that states of alienation or secrecy must be attained before any major transformational shift can occur. These states of reclusion are depicted as making the subject’s spatiotemporal moments of transformation highly vulnerable, whether the transformation at hand is sexual or otherwise (and Orlando makes many transformations).

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8 As Jahan Ramazani writes in A Transnational Politics, “Despite modernism’s vaunted internationalism, disciplinary boundaries between postcolonial and modernist studies have tended to veil the overlap, circulation and friction between postcolonialism and modernism” (2009: xii). Ramazani goes on to note that within definitions of modernism, “‘alienation’ is one of the most frequently invoked categories of experience” (2009: xii, 130). I would only add that where alienation is found, the abject is sure to follow.

9 In addition to being a parody of men’s writing, Woolf’s novel also visibly appropriates Shakespeare’s play Othello (which appears as a frame narrative in Chapter Two, when Orlando fantasizes about murdering Sasha), as well as Handel’s operatic Orlando and the poetry of Alexander Pope.

10 Obviously, this cultural turbulence and intersubjective volatility is a characteristic milieu concerning many of Woolf’s characters, in novels from Orlando, The Waves and The Hours to A Room of One’s Own. But it is also characteristic of Woolf’s ontological position in relationship to intellectual discourses of the time. Although Woolf’s modernist prose was certainly written during colonial times, the novel also occurs at the ideological and political juncture in which postcolonial discourse was born – and in that sense, Woolf’s work in Orlando hovers between and around the modernist, postmodernist and postcolonial movements.
In that sense, Woolf portrays Orlando’s transformations as precarious points of purchase, from which the nascent subject bears a potential to slip out of the normative sexual order altogether, falling from sexual ambiguity into complete ambiguity. It is this point of purchase I wish to analyze as Orlando is impelled from a state of unambiguous masculinity through a brief moment of sexual ambiguity and into her adaptation as a woman.

Just One Thing Moor: Masculinity, Abjection and Transfiguration in Orlando’s Opening Cut

Following its ekphrastic, scriptural HE, Orlando’s opening sentence propels us over an initial long dash, into a brief description of the protagonist’s sex and over a second long dash into the protagonist’s monstrous act, Orlando slashing at the head of a decapitated Moor. Before we examine the implications of Orlando’s grotesque cut – as if we could possibly tear our gaze away from it – I would like to take a moment to analyze Woolf’s deft compartmentalization of the protagonist’s temporality, class and sex on the inside of two French dashes. Within this tight grammatical bracket, Orlando’s “biographer,” in the role of narrator, notes there can “be no doubt of [Orlando’s] sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it.” The sequence of Woolf’s opening sentence thus runs from an emphatic pronoun (HE) into a brief description (of Orlando’s time, sex and

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11 The biographer will return to the Moor’s head sequence immediately before Orlando’s sex change sequence, describing Orlando as “strangely compounded of many humours—of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude, to say nothing of all of those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on [the novel’s] first page, when he slashed at a dead nigger’s head; cut it down; hung it chivalrously out of his reach again and then betook himself to the window-seat with a book.” (43). The sarcastic use of the word “chivalrous” in this context is an implicit critique of the chauvinist and duplicitous systems of chivalry that were reiterated by British noblemen of the Elizabethan era.
fashion), and from there, into action (hacking at the head of a Moor). Thus, the narrator’s interjection about Orlando’s fashion occurs in advance of the protagonist’s opening cut, as Orlando slashes at the head of “a Moor.” Closely examined, the phrase “the fashion of the time” acts as an axiomatic pivot, snapping the corpus of the protagonist quickly into focus before impelling the reader into the vortex of his action, ratifying the reiteration of Orlando’s masculinity before moving into the rest of the story. In this move, the biographer already conjoins the masculine pronoun twice in the same sentence (HE/his), supporting the “facticity” of the character’s masculinity by observing that, despite the feminizing tendencies of the character’s wardrobe, there is no doubt HE is a man.

In point of fact, Orlando’s garments (like the attire of any sixteenth century aristocrat), would have been regulated by the Elizabethan “sumptuary laws” that restricted, under penalty of incarceration and fines, the luxuriousness or “sumptuousness” of men’s and women’s clothing. According to medieval scholar Maggie Secara, Queen Elizabeth sharpened the British clergy’s preexisting sumptuary laws “to curb extravagance, protect fortunes, and make clear the necessary and appropriate distinctions between levels of society” in sixteenth-century England (2009). In short, the fashion of aristocrats during the Elizabethan era was required to visibly distinguish the wearer’s

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12 In “The ‘Extremities’ of Sumptuary Law in Robert Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay,” Kirk Melnikoff discusses the edicts of thirteenth century sumptuary codes. Melnikoff writes that Queen Elizabeth’s “anxiety over the sumptuary excesses of the lower classes” prompted her to levy increasingly inordinate fines and penalties on the vendors and manufacturers of forbidden apparel (2006: 229). These edicts determined, for example, that “no one under the rank of a knight could wear fur in their clothing,” lest their wardrobe appear overly sumptuous (2006: 229). As time went on, Melnikoff notes, Queen Elizabeth “exhibited more initiative and ingenuity” in her fashion strictures, requiring for the first time in the history of England “the creation of new positions both in court and in the City of London for the surveillance of [fashion] offenders.” In her zeal to regulate fashion, Elizabeth exceeded all previous British monarchs in meting out punishments on merchants and producers of finery that had been banned (229).

13 In Elizabethan Sumptuary Statutes, Secara notes that Queen Elizabeth’s wardrobe restrictions underscored her concerns that “letting anyone wear just anything must lead inexorably to moral decline […] If you couldn’t tell a milkmaid from a countess at a glance, the very fabric of society might unravel” (2009: online text).
social group and sex – but such distinctions were enunciated by eliminating distinctive garments, as opposed to adding ornate accessories.\footnote{According to Secara, among others, typical staples of the Elizabethan wardrobe included (for both men and women) a variety of hosiery, garters, corsets and ruffs, as well as an elaborate arsenal of undergarments intended to shield one’s sex from view. Hence, Woolf’s assertion that the feminizing aspects of Orlando’s clothes did not camouflage his masculinity in any serious way.} A person’s social status was therefore made visible through elements of clothing that were deleted, obscured or removed. But behind Queen Elizabeth’s indictment of lavish fashions lurked an older and deeper anxiety regarding the infiltration of England by Eastern intruders and impostors. These regulations were an offshoot of thirteenth-century laws engaged by the European clergy to physically mark the Jewish and Muslim interlopers who sought to infiltrate Western aristocracy by garbing themselves in extravagant fashions.\footnote{In “Dress and Social Status in England before the Sumptuary Laws,” Frédérique Lachaud notes these thirteenth century laws underscored the Church’s concern “to mark visually some marginal categories, such as the Jews” (2003: 110).} According to Kirk Melnikoff, this ecclesiastic fear was characterized by “the obligation for Jews to wear a specific mark that had been decided by the Fourth Lateran Council” in response to the fact that “their outside appearance did not [adequately] differentiate them from the Christian population” (2006: 110). Although fashion devices such as yellow stars, \textit{Judenhuts} (Jew’s Hats), and cloth “tablets” devised by King Edward I to identify foreigners were not deployed by Queen Elizabeth, this was because she didn’t have to use them; King Edward had either banished or murdered all the Muslims and Jews who lived in England prior to 1290.\footnote{These “tablets,” designed by King Edward I, consisted of overlapping rectangles of white cloth that Jews wore on the chest of their outer garments (cf. Melnikoff 2006).} Yet, the fear of Eastern others who might attempt to use fashion to infiltrate Society did not dissipate following King Edward’s ethnic cleansing; instead, it persisted beneath Queen Elizabeth’s sumptuary zeal, and in fact was precisely the anxiety that culminated in her strategy of engaging fashion to make individuals
appear more recognizably British by presenting themselves as recognizably less sumptuous. The cut of Elizabethan fashion, therefore, epitomized a multifaceted desire: true British citizens must bind themselves to their comrades through similarities in dress in order to dissociate themselves from any pretenders, particularly those who would ascend the ranks of privilege through a tailor’s interventions.

The biographer’s use of “the fashion of the time” in this sense does not only delineate the initial Orlando’s sex as male and his class as aristocratic – the phrase also establishes the chronological difference between Orlando’s times (the Elizabethan era) and “our own times.” In so doing, it also establishes an indeterminate temporal rift between the reader, the biographer, and Orlando. The protagonist’s fashion is depicted as emblematic of the Elizabethan era, while the novel’s readers are positioned in a “present” that is increasingly further from that time (at least 500 years and counting). In addition, “the fashion of the time” infers that Elizabethan fashion is substantially different from our own, but leaving it to readers to ascertain what this difference means. Then there is the matter of the biographer’s time, as Woolf positions her biographer standing somewhere between Orlando’s timespan and our own, facilitating comparisons between our times and the Elizabethan era without giving away many clues about their own temporal location. This is the same tripartite chronological arrangement that Woolf deploys for the majority of Orlando, reiterating a temporal division between Orlando, the biographer, and ourselves. But there is another time zone that often goes unremarked in analyses of this sentence, and that is the time of the Moor’s head, which the ensuing paragraph positions as preceding Orlando’s lifetime by several generations.
That said, the *active cut* of Orlando’s first gesture is prefigured by a series of spatiotemporal slashes between protagonist/reader, protagonist/biographer, and biographer/reader. Following this quick series of linguistic cuts, Orlando’s aims an active cut at his Moorish other. At first blush, this cut seems to be focused towards a specific object – a single cut against a single Moor – but this gesture, much like the “fashion of the time” that demarcates Orlando’s sex, can also be viewed as a larger reflection of Elizabethan culture; specifically, Queen Elizabeth’s mandate to excise all remaining Moors from England, which culminated in the 1596 charter to slavers to purge the British isles of the “Negars and Blackamoors” (Bartels 2006). In this usage, “blackamoor” serves as a “double dark” portmanteau, lacing together the words “black” and “Moor” – an archaic derivation that stems from the Greek *mauros*, meaning “black” or “very dark.” In addition to its racial connotations, the 16th-century definition of “blackamoor” bore a religious reference to practitioners of Islam, particularly North Africans and Berbers.

Structurally speaking, the opening of *Orlando’s* first sentence belongs to the protagonist – his fashion, his times – then cuts towards the territory of the Moor. Recalling the *Fellini-Satyricon* at the point Encolpius and Asculytus emerge from the Hermaphrodite’s temple as lawless monsters capable of the most heinous deeds,

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17 In *Black Lives in the English Archives, 1500-1677*, Imtiaz Habib reflects on the reluctance of contemporary historians to analyze the conditions for black subjects during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, often on the grounds that the *amount* of blacks living in fifteenth-century England was too “tiny” to afford a reasonable analysis. But the aggression demonstrated towards blacks by Queen Elizabeth’s 1601 Charter of Expulsion suggests the population of blacks during the sixteenth century was large enough to be taken seriously by the policymakers of the time (2008: 1). According to historian Peter Fryer, the Pronouncement of 1601 depicted the Queen as “highly discontented to understand the great numbers of negars and Blackamoors which […] are crept into this realm… who are fostered and relieved […] to the great annoyance of her own liege people, that want the relief [i.e. food], which those people consume, as also for that the most of them are infidels, having no understanding of Christ or his Gospel” (Fryer 1984: 12). Habib also notes that the multiplicity of terms deployed to denote fifteenth century black subjects far exceeded the number of terms used to describe whites, and, aside from the ubiquitous “Moor” or “blackamoor,” included words such as “negor,” “nyger,” “nygor,” “nigor,” and “negrowe” (2008: 213).
Orlando’s initiatory cut is not a binary slice that separates protagonist from antagonist so much as it draws many binary elements into discourse as the distribution of power turns. In that sense, Orlando’s slashing gesture comprises an enfoldment that draws together the reader, Orlando, and the decapitated Moor’s head in a crucible of male-on-male violence. The fulcrum of this contact is a collision of binary opposites: white Christian colonizer strikes vs. black Muslim colonized. Furthermore, the body of the white colonizer is depicted as whole and alive, while the black colonized is rendered as a partial object, a body in fragments, dead. As Woolf scholar Margaret Reynolds has noted in her introduction to Orlando: A Biography, the Moor’s head sequence comprises “the first of many references in Orlando that set up a pattern of race, difference, conquest and power” (2000: xiv). Within these sequences, Reynolds suggests the turbulent quality of Woolf’s prose “estranges that which is known, and makes recognizable that which is foreign” (xviii). While I concur with Reynolds that Woolf seems to position seemingly disparate elements “against” each other, there is far more at play in her Moor’s head sequence than a simple paradigm of estrangement and opposition; it is in fact the collusion between these disparate elements that ushers the passage into abject discourse, and this entanglement is initiated by the sweep of Orlando’s cut – a sweep that visually and literally binds the reader, Orlando, and the Moor’s head, closing the gap between them even as it sets out a clear temporal demarcation between the times of the protagonist, his Other, the biographer and “ourselves.”

In Enjoy Your Symptom! Žižek argues that the monstrous act is not reducible to a “reversal of objective into subjective,” but is conversely “a place of impossible subjectivity, a subjectivity that taints the very objectivity with a flavor of unspeakable,
monstrous evil [...] An entire heretic theology is discernible here” (2001: 204-205).

Considering the initial burst of abjection that binds Orlando in a discourse of disruption, the traditional structure of the masculine epic biography is quickly brought into focus before snapping it asunder, as the sanctity of Orlando’s cultural order – which by extension is emblematic of the patriarchal order that demands epic biographies – becomes discernable as the monstrous hoax it is, a civilized cloak for disguising the barbarity of colonizing culture. Like Fellini-Satyricon’s double-edged monstrosity, which implicated the film’s protagonists as still more monstrous than their aberrant others, the Moor’s head sequence draws together the monstrous and the barbarian in an interstice of abject discourse.18

The barbarity of civilized men comes more deeply into play following Orlando’s opening cut, when the biographer informs us the Moor’s head is swinging from the rafters of Orlando’s ancestral home. According to the biographer, “Orlando’s father, or perhaps his grandfather” sliced the head “from the shoulders of a vast Pagan who had started up under the moon in the barbarian fields of Africa” (3). Thus, by the end of

18 There is much resonance to be traced between Bhabha’s notion of barbarism in The Location of Culture and Žižek’s conceptualization of the monster in Enjoy Your Symptom!, particularly in the way abject discourse snaps an entire broken teleology into view. Bhabha, for example, analyzes the “silent rupture” that occurs within the dyadic paradigm of civilized vs. barbarian, a rupture that illuminates the narcissistic myths that underscore the desire of the white colonist to possess their barbaric others. Žižek speaks often of the narcissistic obsession with “the Thing” – the “foreign body within the social texture” that is apparent in films about monsters, madwomen, eyeless corpses, and disfigured individuals (Žižek 2001: 113-146). Arguing that films such as Ridley Scott’s Alien and Alfred Hitchcock’s The Birds illuminate The Thing not simply as “a foreign body, an intruder which disturbs the harmony of the social bond,” Žižek indicates that the presence of the Thing “is what ‘holds together’ the social edifice by means of guaranteeing its fantasmatic consistency” (2001: 122-23). In Žižek’s view, “This empty form, this black stain in the very heart of reality, is ultimately the ‘objective correlative’ of the subject himself,” wherein “the empty surface on which phantasmagorical monsters appear is strictly correlative to” the position in which the subject can no longer be bound to his projected cultural symbolic (134). When this subject-object transvaluation occurs, Žižek observes, it illuminates the ambiguation implicit in the state of subjectivation itself, as “the ill-famed problem of the ‘death of the subject’: the ‘eclipse’ of the subject in front of the Thing – what one (mis)perceives as his ‘death’ – is strictly equal to his emergence, i.e., the ‘subject’ is precisely the void which remains after the entire substantial content is taken away” (2001: 134).
Orlando’s first paragraph, a portrait has materialized of an unambiguously masculine Orlando engaged in a long-established tradition of colonial violence, suggesting that while Orlando’s head-slashing might be dislocated from our own moral-ethical frame, the same act was not considered barbaric by the standards of His times, within the patriarchal order of British colonization. That accomplished, the biographer notes the Moor’s head was “the colour of an old football, and more or less the shape of one,” and was topped by a scalp of “coarse, dry hair, like the hair on a cocoanut” (3). In this move, the biographer suggests Orlando has enough leisure time to make a sport of stabbing at Moors’ heads, placing this act on the same playing field as “gentleman’s sports,” like cricket and golf.

But there is a significant difference between hacking up Moors on a field of battle and batte their heads around your grandfather’s attic. The former is a public display of masculinity, and it might cost you your life, as the Moor’s head once had a body to go with it: his own hands held a sword, and he might prove the better fighter. But Orlando’s cutting game is private, safe, predictable; the type of hijinx a boy gets up to when his parents aren’t looking. The scene emerges as a critical parody of colonialism; because the Moor’s head has no chance of striking back without its arms and legs, Orlando’s cut comprises a reenactment of colonial power, the offshoot of a patriarchal power-structure established long before Orlando was born. But the swaying pendulum of the Moor’s head indicates the intersubjective positions in this power structure can turn on a dime: colonial power relations are never completely stable. As Bhabha notes in The Location of Culture, one cannot maintain the role of fearsome conqueror without being terrified of the reprisal.

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19 According to heraldic scholar Daniel Schmalz, the decapitation of Moorish heads in British heraldry is used to signify the cultural clash between Christianity and Islam. Schmalz suggests that “the Moor's head ... is generally a sign of law, authority, and power,” and notes that cutting off “the head of a Muslim ‘Moor’ was a particularly potent symbol of triumph in the days when Islam and Christianity battled in Europe and the Holy Land” (2005: 39).
of the conquered in their turn (61-70). In this unstable arrangement, even the smallest relic of the colonized’s former power (a Moor’s head dangling from a rope) seems replete with hidden threats, as the colonial rights of ownership must constantly be reasserted in order to keep the shrunken remnant from slipping off on its own, where it bears the potential to regain its former power and reemerge to do harm.

As an object of ownership, I have suggested the Moor’s disembodied head serves as a condensation of an entire population of Moors’ heads, just as it is symbolic of the larger colonial telos that dictates their constraint and disavowal. A similar condensation takes place on a linguistic level when the colonizer attempts to subsume or assimilate the conquered into their own corpus, and references to colonized subjects become shrunken into animalistic references that attempt to disenfranchise and/or constrain the Other. Referring to such expressions as “delusional references,” Homi Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, describes how such referents (Turkish dog, Western pig, Nazi rat) totalize and disavow an entire race or culture in a single demeaning cut (1994: 166). The presence of delusional references in the speech of colonizers, notes Bhabha, invariably belies deeply ingrained societal fears concerning the return of the colonized as a return of the animal, in which “racist language [is confronted] with its own alterity,” both obscuring and underscoring the colonizer’s most unspeakable fears – that the colonized, that repressed animal, will revolt and turn on its master, attacking, pillaging, and even dominating in their turn (166).

While the Moor’s head is clearly a delusional reference on both a visual and linguistic level, it is not the only element in this opening sequence that compresses many
subjects into a singular form. Orlando, the character, is also symbolic of an entire lineage of colonial sires who “struck many heads off many shoulders” and hung them from the rafters of their ancestral home (3). In other words, just as the Moor’s head extends back into a conquered army of severed barbarian heads, Orlando’s cut against the head is emblematic of a long tradition of British colonizers who return to their ancestral halls with the monstrous spoils of war to use as toys. This is the inheritance of colonialism Orlando seeks to continue, as he vows to join his uncles in decapitating Moors and Frenchmen alike:

   But since he was sixteen only, and too young to ride with [his uncles] to Africa or France, he would steal away from his mother and the peacocks in the garden and go to his attic room and there lunge and plunge and slice the air. 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 through shrunk, black lips triumphantly. (3)

As I have mentioned, the first sentence of Orlando comprises a description of the protagonist along the four cardinal points of normative order – sex, class, time, and place – all of which are placed in contradistinction with our own cultural order by the biographer’s use of “the fashion of the time.” That accomplished, the reader is plunged into a face-to-face encounter with the Moor’s head, caught in mid-act with Orlando, as the head spins around like a pendulum, gazing back at Orlando and grinning triumphantly. Then, as if anticipating our arrival, the Moor’s head and Orlando silently turn towards us, like Fellini’s silent Romans, as if to say: “This is not your time or place –

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20 In the delusional reference, the other is objectified and dehumanized in a generalized sweep of disavowal that comprises a willful misrecognition of the other’s humanness, a steadfast refusal to recognize the other’s cultural primacy as the other is cut off from the rest of humanity by reducing him or her into a thing. By transforming the barbarous subject into a barbarous object, the colonizer is morally enabled to perform monstrous acts against him or her without fracturing the ethical mandates of civilized culture.
you think you know us, but you do not – we are more like each other, and more like you, than you may care to recognize.”

But let us examine more closely the shrunken black lips of the Moor’s triumphantly grinning head, particularly as this triumphant grin sweeps towards an impossible limit of excess, an ambiguous interstitial turning point wherein the Moor’s head swivels in abjection to become more powerful than its captor, even \textit{sans} arms and legs. There is an interesting spatiotemporal disparity between these two actants. At the age of sixteen, Orlando is still a child, and possesses the Moor’s head primarily through the rights of filial tradition. He must “steal away from his mother” in order to play his Moor’s head games, lunging and plunging in a quiet corner where nobody else will see. But the Moor, who formerly owned his head and raised his own hell on “the barbarian plains of Africa” was a fully-grown warrior who pillaged, copulated, and was feared in his own right – and although it is too early in the narrative to establish this, the Moor’s head, with its triumphant grin, knows something else that Orlando, with his/her superhuman lifespan, may \textit{never} know: \textit{Death (3)}.

In that sense, Orlando’s opening passage not only presages the “facticity” of Orlando’s superhuman lifespan, it initiates a spatiotemporal split, as the Moor’s head figuratively extends back into the traditions of patriarchal colonization and the genocide of Western expansion, while Orlando’s without-a-doubt masculinity extends forward into his future sex change and everlasting life as a woman. In addition, at the moment Orlando’s blade strikes the Moor’s head, a recalibration occurs as Orlando’s

\footnote{Because the conclusion of \textit{Orlando} is written in the present progressive, it is difficult to say conclusively whether or not Orlando is immortal, or just lives a very, very long time – a superhuman lifespan. If Orlando was born approximately 16 years before the death of Elizabeth I (1603), this would make him at least 337 years of age at the time Woolf penned Orlando (1920), and 427 years old at the time of this writing (2010). Based on the average lifespan of the Elizabethan male (33 years), this would mean Orlando has now surpassed his allotted span by nearly 400 years, perhaps more.}
violent cut zeroes out the civility of his fashion, class and time, and the Moor’s head becomes an active player in the sequence, a prescient force that threatens, to borrow a notion from Žižek, to “decenter” the subject, destabilizing both “his consistency and self-control” (2001: 113). At the moment Orlando’s sword makes contact, the Moor’s head threatens to overwhelm the entire narrative with its silent grin, which triumphantly reflects the protagonist’s most negative attributes, calling the entirety of his “noble” heritage into question while grinningly distributing xenophobic aggression as a characteristic attribute of all men in all cultures throughout all time.22

Like the silent gaze of Žižek’s monsters, the triumphant grin of this decapitated barbarian undermines our image of Orlando as a nobleman who exists in a station above his monster, positioning each of these actants squarely on the intersubjective field of abject discourse (14). In Powers of Horror, Kristeva describes the moment of abjection as a “narcissistic crisis” that forces the subject to acknowledge its own potential disavowal and ejection from its cultural order:

> It is precisely at the moment of narcissistic perturbation (all things considered, the permanent state of the speaking being, if he would only hear himself speak) that secondary repression, with its reserve of symbolic means, attempts to transfer to its own account, which has thus been overdrawn, the resources of primal repression. The archaic economy is brought into the full light of day, signified, verbalized. Its strategies (rejecting, separating, repeating/abjecting) hence find a symbolic existence, and the very logic of the symbolic – arguments, demonstrations, proofs, etc. – must conform to it. It is then that the object ceases to be circumscribed, reasoned with, thrust aside: it appears as abject. (15)

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22 As Žižek notes, the void presented by the silence of The Thing is equivalent to “the very negativity that defines the subject,” indicating through its tacit leer that the subject is a “nonsubstance [who] ex-ists only as nonsubstantial self-relating which maintains its distance from inner-worldly objects” (Žižek 2001: 137). As such, the monster “is the subject himself, conceived as Thing” (137). The Moor’s head calls to mind Žižek’s conceptualizations of “the Thing,” particularly his suggestion that the power of the monster’s mute, menacing, persistent presence lies in its most unspeaking, unspeakable qualities. In his analysis of Edvard Munch’s 1910 painting, Der Schrei der Natur (aka: The Scream), Žižek notes the most critical aspect of the painting is the fact that “the scream is not heard,” which enables the cry to echo louder in the fantasy of the viewer. The silence of the Moor’s head elevates this object to Thing status.
Reading Kristeva closely, I detect substantial traction between her notions of abject discourse as a transsubjective site of power exchange and Žižek’s theorization of the monster’s gaze in “The Grimace of The Real,” as well as Kaja Silverman’s meticulous study of the transidentifications between subject and its other(s), which she takes up in *The Threshold of the Visible World*. Specifically, Silverman’s theorizations of *the gaze* as a permeable site, in which transactions of power are negotiated and exchanged, suggests that while “the gaze is always external to every subject in his or her capacity as spectacle, and always radically in excess of every eye, nevertheless the subject’s look is often a provisional signifier of the gaze for that other who occupies the position of the object in relation to him or her” (1996: 223). Seen in this light, one can trace a volatile turning point in the moment Orlando gazes at the Thing and the Thing gazes back at Orlando – and when the biographer transfers both of their gazes back at “us,” the projected readers in this fluid “now.” Viewed in conjunction with Kristeva’s analyses of abject discourse, the interstitial moment of abjection not only results in the subject’s narcissistic perturbation – it forces the subject to *negotiate* with its Other(s) and the pressures of abjection that radiate towards it from its own cultural order.²³

When it comes down to it, any discourse of abjection conducted along the nodes of civilized vs. monster occasionally seems to lend the monster a certain tactical superiority, as some monsters are inherently more familiar with its terrain, having lived there most of the time, becoming proficient at countering strategies of abjection with tactics to turn the

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²³ Primary and secondary repression is pivotal in Kristeva’s conceptualization of subjective differentiation, as primary repression sets up the paradigm of difference that enables the subject to regard itself as a sustainable whole and to break away from its mother, while secondary repression enables the subject to differentiate itself from other subjects/objects. In *Sacrificed Lives: Kristeva on Women and Violence*, Martha Reineke asserts that tracking the layers of repression inherent in the state of abjection is precisely what allows us to trace our “visceral instances of fascination and repulsion, life and death” (1997: 46).
tables in their favor. In Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein*, for example, Victor Frankenstein’s “creature” appears more emotionally sophisticated and erudite than his protagonist-adversary. The creature possesses an elevated sense of fair play, a capability for irony, even an ability to love – and although his existence is harsh, this monster’s “triumph,” such as it is, lies in the fact of its continued survival at the end of the (original) tale. Indeed, when it comes to disavowing the culture of his creator, the creature knows exactly what to say, and while young Victor verbalizes little else than his own shame, rage, and fear over his imminent ejection from his cultural order, the creature elegantly articulates an indictment of its creator and patriarchal civilization, arguing that “God in pity made man beautiful and alluring, after his own image; but my form is a filthy type of yours” (154). Within the abject crucible of their contact – a contact between the abject creature and the monstrous source of his abjection – the rhetorically skilled creature repudiates Victor as a monstrous enactor of oppression: “I am malicious because I am miserable. You, my creator, would tear me to pieces, and triumph; remember that, and tell me why I should pity man more than he pities me?” (173, emphasis mine).

Although the two characters have numerous aesthetic differences, there are several important similarities between Frankenstein’s creature and the head of Orlando’s Moor. While Frankenstein’s creature is an amalgamation of body parts sewn into an animate whole (a monstrous amalgam Victor shapes from the detritus of dead humanity), the Moor’s head is an inanimate partial object severed from its original whole. Furthermore, while the Moor’s head is neither erudite nor even animate in the most obvious sense (it cannot speak, open and shut its eyes, or move about at will), its triumphant grin nevertheless operates along the same parameters as Žižek’s monsters, as its silent grin
threatens to reverse the sanctity of Orlando’s cultural order with its own “primal”
facticity, as the decapitated head bears its own indictment of the monstrous and barbaric
deeds of Orlando’s stately forebears, who severed human heads from human shoulders
and carried them safely home. In that sense, the triumphant grin of the Moor’s head
stubbornly resists its own abjection, and, resonating with the sharp \textit{crack} of Orlando’s
sword, its grin radiates with power as its skull resounds with the implications of
Orlando’s labor, suggesting that no matter how many times Orlando lashes out, drops it
to the floor, picks it up, takes another whack, the Moor’s head retains its potential to
destabilize the order of British aristocracy, the inherited basis of Orlando’s existence.\footnote{Preceding the triumphant grin of the Moor’s head, Orlando \textquoteleft\textquoteleft vows\textquoteright\textquoteright\ to be like his uncles, to ride with
them to Africa or France, to take part in their head-chopping missions, returning with trophies, regenerating
their order. Yet, as the rest of \textit{Orlando} underscores, such paternal vows are open to preemption and/or
disruption, and in fact have their own disruption built into their ideological and linguistic contours. In
\textit{Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture}, Sylvie Gambaudo explains that the abject turns on the subject at the
moment \textquoteleft\textquoteleft the paternal function is failing, or if the contemporary subject’s ability for containment is failing\textquoteright\textquoteright\ (2007: 140). As Orlando’s blade sweeps towards the Moor’s head and makes contact, in the silent but
overwhelming crack of metal on skull, the entire hegemony of Orlando’s patriarchal order is thrown into
question, and the containment of Orlando’s subject position is exposed, thrown out, thrown open.}

In \textit{Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture}, Sylvie Gambaudo explains that, for the
speaking subject, the sudden appearance of the abject \textquoteleft\textquoteleft represents the boundary between
nature and culture that the subject crosses in the process of symbolization [and] reminds
the subject of its natural origins,\textquoteright\textquoteright\ which the subject must then repress in order to
participate in culture (2007: 140). Within this transidentificational interchange, the
abjection of the Other gestures towards the fragility and arbitrariness of the subject’s
cultural symbolic, as well as the instability of the subject’s contract with it. Drawing
together Orlando and the Moor’s head in a common abject knot, Orlando’s cut intimately
\textit{connects} the two characters as the Moor’s head summons the legitimacy of Orlando’s
lineage into question with its silent glare. In a Rancierian sense, Orlando’s cut has an
emancipatory effect, snapping the head – along with the framework of its oppression (its language, its culture, its diacritics of power) – into focus, thereby providing an interstitial opening through which we can assess its potential meanings. Cleaving out the type of “in between space” Bhabha describes as a “sudden disjunction of the present,” the impact of this blow opens a structural interstice in which we see the intercalated machinations of a “vaster and unrepresentable totality which is the ensemble of society’s structures as a whole” (Bhabha 2004: 217).

Within this interstice, the unstable concept of barbarism in colonial subject relations reemerges with axiomatic force. Even as the Moor’s head sequence attempts to position the Moor’s head in the domain of the barbarian (as the head of a vast barbarian who “started up” under pagan moons), the defining trope of barbarity tacitly underscores the fact that Orlando’s civilization springs from the same type of barbarity that colonial culture so violently, vehemently rejects. Within their strategies of civility, patriarchal males can always resort to tapping barbarity, drinking from the primal wellspring of barbarism they must draw from in order to bring their uncivilized others to heel. Confronted with barbarity, colonizing forces entitle themselves to respond with vicious, inhuman force, claiming that overwhelming aggression (cf. “shock and awe”) is the only language that barbarous Others understand. Ironically, civilized males must also protect themselves from becoming too decadent or effete – in other words, against becoming too civilized (often depicted as becoming too effeminate) – if they are to keep their barbarians in check. Otherwise, those barbarian hordes might rise up to claim civilization for their
own. If civilized males become too barbarian, however, civilization will be “lost,” and barbarism will prevail once more.

In addition to the double-edged element of barbarism, which appears to cut both ways at once, there is an element of blackness the biographer underscores in their description of the “shrunk, black lips” of the Moor’s triumphant grin. In his treatment of Frantz Fanon’s work in “The Fact of Blackness,” Bhabha effectively deconstructs the literary and theoretical contextualization of blackness, which, like the element of barbarism, often functions as a prival, pre-white location device to highlight the superiority of Western colonial culture. In this mode, blackness is positioned as “a primordial facticity” that underscores the white, patriarchal paradigm of being “not only a nigger but a member of the marginalized, the displaced, the diasporic” (1994: 236). Observing that the black man “refuses to occupy the past of which the white man is the future,” Bhabha cites the deployment of blackness by white patriarchal culture as “a space of being that is wrought from the interruptive, interrogative, tragic experience of blackness, of discrimination, of despair” – in other words, the space of blackness as/is abjection (238). Yet, even as Orlando’s opening passage cuts against the Moor’s black

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25 In contemporary religion, the matter of precisely who is the barbarian and who is the civilized is often a matter of conjecture, as Christian and Muslim alike point to their Other as godless, demonic, unclean. This abject paradigm also plays out between colonizer and colonized in the attribution of magicality – in A General Theory of Magic, Mauss often observes that “when two cultures come into contact, magic is usually attributed to the lesser developed” (2001: 39, emphasis mine). Citing the Finnish attribution of magic to northern Laplanders, or the commonly held Hindu belief that all Daysus are sorcerers, or the widespread view held by African tribes of the plains and coasts that all forest dwellers practice magic, Mauss notes that in these configurations, the attribution of magicality to a culture or race is often accompanied by disavowal, derision and stigmatization on the part of the “more advanced” culture, which expresses a narcissistic pride in overcoming the superstitious beliefs of their barbaric other(s).

26 In Chapter Two of Orlando: A Biography, Woolf returns to the Moor’s head and the novel’s opening sequence, describing Orlando as a person “strangely compounded of many humors – of melancholy, of passion, of love of solitude, to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on the first page, when he slashed at a dead nigger’s head; cut it down; hung it chivalrously out of his reach again and then betook himself to the window-seat with a book” (43, emphasis mine). Here, Woolf does not shy away from having her protagonist do a monstrous thing, a thing that places him in a more monstrous light than the human-object against which his act is directed.
skull, emancipating the grin of its shrunken black lips, it places all players in the narrative (Orlando, the Moor’s head, biographer, writer, reader) squarely in the interstitial negotiation of barbarism and civilization, purity and monstrosity, colonizer and colonized, whiteness and blackness – opening the potential for transvaluation and the renegotiation of power across every point of contact. But just when this fraught interstices becomes visible, it just as quickly seals off, and is surrounded by a framework of *sheer ambiguity*, signified as everything that stands outside the cultural transvaluation of blackness and whiteness. This ambiguity is typically figured as neither white nor black, yet it appears at the liminal edge of blackness and whiteness as the opaque edge of subjectivation within an abject negotiation of cultural order. As I have indicated in the introduction to this thesis, this framing ambiguity is more than a negative void or intangible veil; it is the palpable ambiguity that can be traced at the interstitial flank between our unspeakable, unknowable past and the birth of human language and time, just as it flanks the farthest edges of our constantly advancing “now,” accelerating towards our most unknowable and even unspeakable future. In that sense, on either end of the spatiotemporal spectrum, when pushed to its ultimate abstraction, the absolute ambiguity that frames human ontology is like something timeless, tireless and silent, something that appears to contain black and white, but itself is neither, with a liminal edge that appears to retreat from our ontological grasp when we most urgently attempt to apprehend it. At that point, grinning, this timeless ambiguity reassures us of its presence, suggesting we are somehow indelibly *here*, existing in its grasp, when we know beyond the shadow of a doubt that our personal existence is impermanent. So we move out again, perhaps with greater force, to identify what lies beyond that ambiguous shroud. But at the
apex of our thrust, ambiguity begins to settles around us once more, silently, effortlessly, enveloping yet demurring from our most urgent efforts to visualize it, know it, connect with it. When Orlando smites at the Moor’s head for all he’s worth, slashing against its skull with the greatest strength he can muster, the Moor’s head both yields and resists, grinning at us, welcoming us, for behind its grin lies our future. We just cannot be sure what (or whose) future it is welcoming us to.

In this section of the chapter, I suggest a close reading of Orlando’s opening chapter of Orlando can only support the conclusion that its protagonist is male – not an androgyne or sexually ambiguous character. I then discuss the ways in which the expression “the fashion of the times” forms a spatiotemporal cut that defines Orlando’s particular brand of masculinity, and, through its association with Elizabethan sumptuary laws, denotes the cultural imperative of the Elizabethan aristocracy to cut their Moorish others out of England. Closely reading the interplay between Orlando and his Moor’s head, I suggest that Orlando is not simply the inheritor of a Moor’s head; he is the inheritor of its colonial, magical, disruptive vortex; heir to both the Thing and the colonial tradition of owning Things. Following Kristeva, Žižek, Fanon and Bhabha, I assert that Orlando’s relation with the Moor’s head initiates Woolf’s story in a dyadic discourse of civilized vs. barbarian, a discourse that is significantly abject, a discourse which unsettles Orlando’s relation to his own symbolic order; a colonial order of class, race and sex that is positioned as prefiguring the disruption of Orlando’s masculinity later in the story.

27 Perhaps it is the world of magic and myth, for the Moor’s head has many magical aspects. First and foremost, it clearly functions as a totem object, resembling the tsantsas (shrunken heads) of the Achuar, Huambisa, and Shuar tribes. In these cultures, shrunken heads are said to possess the power to repel the vengeful spirits of their former owners. Possessing the head of one’s enemy will also reputedly garner the blessings of one’s ancestors, who will be proud of one’s conquests and bestow them with good fortune. This latter belief appears to apply to the Moor’s head in Orlando, as the novel seems to imply that Orlando’s ancestors would be proud of his vow to continue their head-keeping traditions.
Suggesting the triumphant grin of the Moor’s head initiates the story with a critical turning point that unsettles the discourse of power, I evaluate the role ambiguity plays as a flanking device for subjectivation and the ontology of the human in general.

As a concluding thought, I would like to return to my original premise that Orlando begins the story as unambiguously male, and the notion that Orlando’s opening cut does not split Orlando and his black Other apart so much as it brings them together in abject discourse. My objective in the next section of this chapter is to analyze the precise moment of sexual ambiguity that stands between Orlando’s life as a man and her life as a woman, and the abjection that ensues as Orlando moves out of recognizable masculinity. Rather than visualize this sequence as a moment in which Orlando is irrevocably severed from masculinity, Woolf positions Orlando-as-woman as benefitting from her lived experience as a male.

I Am Coming, Constantinople: The Zero-point of Orlando’s Sexual Transfiguration

Following the rupture of the Moor’s head sequence, Orlando’s protagonist lunges forward into a romantic tryst with Queen Elizabeth, who takes him on as her protégé and lover. But the masculine Orlando is a fickle character, and he ultimately spurns her affections. Following the aging Queen’s death, Orlando falls in love with a Muscovite princess, Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch (Sasha), who betrays him and leaves him heartbroken. Seeking to distance himself from the site of his rejection, Orlando petitions another monarch, King Charles I, to send him to Constantinople as “Ambassador Extraordinary” to open channels for trade with the Turks.
Orlando’s appearance in the Ottoman Empire takes place in a tumultuous blur, as if the protagonist suddenly dematerializes and rematerializes in Constantinople. There are no descriptions of the points between. This blurry transition is compounded by the cosmetic gaps and fissures Woolf works into the text. Drawing our attention to these narrated structural lacunae, the biographer sighs that the state of their archives is “deplorable,” lamenting that their records are “scorched a deep brown in the middle of the most important sentence just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years” (74). Exactly what this secret might be – Orlando’s immanent sex change, or his affair with a “gipsy” dancer – the biographer does not say. But on a structural level, the lacunae that mark Orlando’s third chapter serve at least three narrative functions, positioning the rupture of Orlando’s sex change within the framework of a “broken” time period, forecasting the end-point of Orlando’s masculinity, and alluding to the temporal that stands between Western civilization and those superstitious forebears who believed in magic and miraculous changes. Much like the aesthetically produced lacunae of Fellini-Satyricon, these aesthetic gaps and fissures frame Constantinople as a remote, mysterious place – and as a plausible backdrop for Orlando’s mystical transfiguration into a woman.28

During a typical day in Constantinople, Orlando opens his eyes, stretches his limbs, and listens to the city rise. He wraps himself in a Turkish cloak and smokes a cigar, then

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28 In Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject, Makiko Minow-Pinkney describes the lacunae of Orlando’s third chapter as “textual delays and resistances, naturalized by the editorial inconvenience of burnt holes in the document” (1987: 126). This description is accurate enough, but Minow-Pinkney follows it by asserting that Orlando’s sex-change act occurs despite such delays. “When Orlando wakes,” says Minow-Pinkney, he wakes as a woman in a sentence “as ungrammatical as the transformation it records is bizarre” (1987:125). In my view, it is the ambiguity engendered by these lacunae that frame and enable Orlando’s magical transformation; a transfiguration whose “bizarreness” is merely in the eye of the beholder. The fact that Orlando emerges from her transformation nonplussed seems enough to indicate the transformation – for Orlando at least – is not bizarre.
stands by the window delighting in the smells of baking bread and the activities of the “strident multi-colored and barbaric population” (74-75, emphasis mine). In this new setting, the singular barbarian Moor’s head of Chapter I is suddenly expanded into a boisterous populace of Moors’ heads. Not one of them is pared from their shoulders. In fact, these heads are perfectly at home in their cultural body, the owners of their cultural context. It is within this context that Orlando attempts to embed himself. Dressing in Turkish fashions, observing Turkish customs, eating Turkish food, copulating with Turkish women, Orlando dislocates himself from his own system of ownership – his ancestral halls, servants, mansions – and seeks to assimilate with the Moors in their ancestral homeland.29 Following the series of melancholy romances that left Orlando in an abject position, along with his growing dissatisfaction with patriarchal British culture, the protagonist welcomes his isolation in Constantinople, whose parapets and minarets seem less restrictive than the sanctity of his ancestral halls.

So Orlando completes paperwork each day, playing games with sealing wax, and nominally executing his role as Ambassador Extraordinary. But under cover of the night, Orlando is his own ambassador – and not in a way that his peerage might condone. Disguising himself in Turkish raiment, Orlando wanders the streets as an ordinary citizen, knocking about courtyards and bazaars where he is known to “throw aside his shoes and join the worshippers in the Mosques” (78). Fantasizing that he might even be of Moorish

29 Minow-Pinkney suggests that Orlando’s “fantastic transgression of the boundary of sex actually takes place in surroundings of radical otherness—an Eastern world of Constantinople” (1987: 124). While I concur with Minow-Pinkney’s argument in this regard, I take exception with literary theorist David Roessel’s assertions in “The Significance of Constantinople in Orlando,” wherein Roessel eschews explicitly discussing Orlando’s sex change in Constantinople, instead suggesting that Woolf uses Constantinople as a “multivalent symbol” to encompass, among other things, her “latent Sapphism” (1992: 398-415). Roessel’s article is yet another example of posthumously back-reading an author’s personal correspondence and biographic details in order to “correctly” prioritize Orlando’s “misty” inferences about a lesbianism the novel never explicitly explores or discusses – as opposed to the interactions of masculinity and femininity that it explicitly does (Roessel 398-415).
extraction, Orlando wonders if one of his forebears had sex with a Circassian peasant woman (Orlando “thought it possible; fancied a certain darkness in his complexion; and, going indoors again, withdrew to his bath” [75]). Whether this bath is an attempt to scrub out his Circassian ancestry, or comprises a pagan pleasure in itself, the biographer does not say – and although Orlando mingles intimately with the dark-skinned residents of Constantinople, his efforts to meld with his mauros are incomplete. In addition to making no real friendships, he grows increasingly aloof and secretive, eventually threatening to withdraw from humanity altogether.

It is the intensity of the protagonist’s alienation in Constantinople that seems to produce the structural latitude for the mythical/magical sex-change act that precedes Orlando’s femininity. Prior to this event, the protagonist is depicted not merely as a man, but as a man apart – a singular subject who only makes intimate contact with the Other in concealment. Then, like a radio program interrupted by static, the structure of Woolf’s text grows increasingly destabilized by interruptions and interjections, as the narrator’s point of view swings from what Orlando sees to refocus on how Orlando is

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30 In “The Circassians – A Forgotten Genocide?” Stephen Shenfield describes the Circassians as a group of diasporic tribes who formerly lived on the northeastern shore of the Black Sea and in the high peaks beyond (1999: 149). These tribes shared attributes of Greek, Cossack and Turkish culture, save for one important feature – they had no written language. Following a period of genocide and persecution in the former Soviet Union, Circassian communities still exist today in Jordan, Syria and Israel.

31 The biographer hints at Orlando’s increasing alienation when they note that “Orlando seems to have made no friends [and] As far as is known, he formed no attachments” (79).

32 In Orlando’s search for seclusion and withdrawal from intimate contact with humanity in general, I detect the reclusion of a magician preparing for a secret rite. As a prelude to the magicality of Orlando’s sex-change, this sequestering act evokes Mauss’s notion that “isolation and secrecy are two almost perfect signs of the intimate character of a magical rite” (2001: 29).

33 The covertness of Orlando’s actions in this portion of the story evoke Mauss’s observations that magicians are often perceived as “being[s] set apart” due to their “uncertain and troublesome natures” – and that “even when magic is licit, it is done in secret, as if performing some maleficent deed” (2001: 29). According to Mauss, magic is a performance in which “both the act and the actor are shrouded in mystery” (2001: 29), and in Mauss’s view, the very “idea of secrecy and mystery with which magic is imbued” is what enables the magician to transgress the normative borders of time and space in a non-normative fashion, which I argue Orlando proceeds to do in the sex-change sequence of the story (158).
seen, until Woolf drops the voice of the biographer altogether.\textsuperscript{34} When King Charles officially promotes Orlando to “the highest rank in the peerage,” the account of Orlando’s ducal coronation ceremony is narrated by an English naval officer, John Fenner Brigge, who spies on the coronation party from a tree. But this crowning moment, which comprises the apex of Orlando’s life as a man and his ascription to the patriarchal order, is disrupted by several mystic occurrences. Confiding that a “rumour had got about among the natives […] that some kind of miracle was to be performed,” Brigge recalls: \textsuperscript{35}

A shower of gold was prophesied to fall from the skies—which did not happen, or this was the signal chosen for the attack to begin; nobody seems to know; but as the coronet settled on Orlando’s brows a great uproar rose. Bells began ringing; the harsh cries of the prophets were heard above the shouts of the people; many Turks fell flat to the ground and touched the earth with their foreheads. (82)

In \textit{A General Theory of Magic}, Marcel Mauss notes that public displays of magic and prophesy often forecast disruptions of the cultural norm, from whence unexpected transformations arise. Although it is difficult to say whether the unexpected transformation in this case concerns Orlando’s conversion into a duke or his transfiguration into a woman, the clanging of the Turkish bells, “the harsh cries of the prophets,” the rumors of raining gold and the crowds falling in prayer serve to

\textsuperscript{34} Among the transtextual snippets that displace the biographer in describing Orlando are a group of courtiers gossiping about Orlando’s handsome legs, and accounts of his activities in a local newspaper. But all of these scraps and traces of conversation are nevertheless part of the biographer’s “record.”

\textsuperscript{35} Whether Brigge’s account of these rumors of magic among the Turkish residents are a slap against their own superstitions or a premonition of Orlando’s impending sex change is difficult to say. Margaret Wiener makes the excellent point that “like superstition (its occasional synonym),” accounts of magic are “often used by those in some position of authority to speak of what is foreign, strange, troubling, dangerous, wrong, threatening, false” (2003: 130). In other words, aspersions of magic often correlate to troubling acts that run outside the purview of the normative order, which in this case is the patriarchal order Captain Brigge represents.
structurally forecast an impending crack in the cultural order. Following Orlando’s coronation, the cultivated tenor of Captain Brigge fades into the murmurs of a “toothless washer woman” who discloses the fact that Orlando spent the remainder of his coronation night entwined with “a woman, much muffled, but apparently of the peasant class” (83). The next morning, as light dispels darkness, Orlando’s servants discover him deep in post-coital slumber, accompanied by a deed of marriage between the protagonist and “Rosina Pepita, a dancer, father unknown, but reputed a gipsy [sic]” (83).

Orlando’s affair with Rosina Pepita is both an intimate entanglement and emancipatory gesture. As the peasant girl rides up in her basket to enter Orlando’s bedroom, she is elevated to his level, where she breaches the defenses of the protagonist’s patriarchal systems of privilege. This clandestine affair exceeds each of Orlando’s previous liaisons as a hyperbolic act that is multifariously trans- and inter-: transcultural, interracial, transclass. His tryst with Rosina Pepita is so profound (or unsettling) that he falls asleep for seven days and nights. Even when bandits enter his chambers to steal his new crown, he does not wake. On the final day of this magical slumber, six supernatural entities enter Orlando’s room. Truth, Honesty and Candor are depicted as male “Gods”

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36 Whether or not a person – or their acts – are magical is often in the eye of the beholder. Bailey extends this notion in “The Meaning of Magic,” pointing out that “within a given society not all people who engage in magic will necessarily see their actions as part of a single coherent system, or accept all (or indeed any) other elements of that system” (2006: 2). There are numerous cases of people who “have engaged in acts that their culture as a whole, or at least certain cultural authorities, would categorize as magical without considering themselves to be performing magic” (2).

37 Technically speaking, the word “gypsy” – which, in Europe at least, has predominantly been replaced by “Rom” or “Roma person,” is a linguistic portmanteau that operates much like Woolf’s “Blackamoor” or “Moor,” inasmuch as the term lumps together disparate ethnicities in the same classificatory sweep. In addition to Romani people, gypsy is often used in reference to the Lom of eastern Anatolia and Armenia, as well as the Lyuli of Central Asia (in fact, these might be the “gypsies” inhabiting Potter’s [re]construction of Khiva). The word is also used to describe itinerant Irish Pavee (who traveled through England and the United States), “Sea Gypsies” of Thailand and southeast Asia, Yeniche of Germany and Switzerland, and the Banjara or Pindari of India and Rajastan (cf: Fraser 1995: 1-7).
who seek to activate Orlando’s imminent change, while Purity, Chastity and Modesty are the “horrid sisters” who strive to impede his transformation (84).

I would like to emphasize that readers are never told Orlando is about to undergo a change of sex. There is no “lead-in” to this part of the story. We are simply informed that six supernatural figures have entered Orlando’s bedroom, and the female characters do not want us to see what is happening. In addition to setting up an oppositional tension between the gendered teams of supernatural interlocutors (male gods vs. female sisters), there also seems to be an inherent dischord between the human virtues they represent, suggesting Truth is against Purity, Candor is against Modesty, and so forth. Not only does this arrangement imply specific human virtues are sexed as male or female (as if there were no other options), it eliminates the possibility for virtuous hybridizations between human virtues – precluding, for example, the possibility of pure truth or modest candor. Instead, Woolf creates an either-or binary that depicts the relationship between supernatural agencies in sexualized virtues in oppositional tension.

Amid a fanfare of silver trumpets, Truth, Candor and Honesty call for “The Truth and nothing but the Truth!” But Purity objects to the Truth, seeking to cover or obscure it with her robe and veil:

I am the guardian of the sleeping fawn; the snow is dear to me; and the moon rising; and the silver sea. With my robes I cover the speckled hen’s eggs and the brindled sea shell; I cover vice and poverty. On all things frail or dark or doubtful, my veil descends. Wherefore, speak not, reveal not. Spare, O spare! (85, emphasis mine)

38 In terms of magic, the differences between the Moor’s head sequence and the scene of Orlando’s sexual transfiguration fall along the separation between magical object and magical act, which are not always mutually inclusive. As a magical object, the Moor’s head is a proprietary totem object that gestures towards an ancient, pagan past in which heads were kept for magical purposes. But the magicality of Orlando’s sex change involves the magical act itself; a change reminiscent of fairy tales in which supernatural entities such as evil witches, fairy godmothers and talking cats impel changes that transform princes into frogs, Cinderellas into princesses, and ogres into lions or mice.
In an interesting juxtaposition between hybrid and unclean, Woolf’s deployment of the fawn becomes a clever homonym for “faun,” and can perhaps be seen as an oblique reference to those forest creatures of Greco-Roman mythology, half-human and half-goat, that were often up to sexual mischief. But there is a certain innocence or naivety implied in the passage as well. As Purity speaks, Orlando sleeps like a dozing fawn, vulnerable, at peace, unconscious of the impending change that will forever affect his fate. But Purity does not merely seek to protect the fawn’s recumbent form. She seeks to “cover” it for the sake of decency, confessing a need to cloak the “dark and doubtful” elements of all things spotted and striped – in other words, marked. Juxtaposed against the silver sea and unblemished snow, the dark dots of the hen’s egg seem to trouble Purity. Equating spotted and striped substances with matters that are “frail or dark or doubtful,” Purity places doubt and darkness on the same linguistic playing field as weakness and deception. In Purity’s view, only whiteness is the basis for purity, a primordial whiteness that must be covered and defended lest it be weakened or disfigured by darkness.

Purity does not win the argument, however, and Truth banishes her with a blast of his horns. Then her sister Chastity rises to the stand. Threatening to “freeze [Orlando] to the bone,” Chastity objects to Orlando’s impending transformation, asserting that Orlando’s impending sex change is unchaste and unclean. In short, it is abject, and therefore inherently destabilizing. Of course, Chastity regards Orlando’s move from male to female as unsettling precisely because the very act of chastity relies on a literal lockdown of sexual change – only one movement is sanctioned, and that is a movement towards the marriage bed. The fact that Chastity stands against the impending transfiguration suggests it would be unchaste, and is therefore a threat to the
heteronormative marriage pact – the same pact that Orlando has so recently entered (and broken) with Rosina Pepita. Threatening to sanitize Orlando’s impending change through freezing, Chastity recalls freezing a number of bodies in motion, from a “star in its dancing” to “the wave as it falls” (85). Truth gets rid of her, too, banishing her with his horns. Of course, her sister Modesty is still more extreme, given the fact that modesty is implicitly the force that impels the repressive sanctions of chastity:

I am she that men call Modesty. Virgin I am and ever shall be. Not for me the fruitful fields and the fertile vineyard. Increase is odious to me; and when the apples burgeon or the flocks breed, I run, I run; I let my mantle fall. My hair covers my eyes. I do not see. Spare, O Spare! (85)

Condemning all matters of sex as “odious,” Modesty’s abhorrence of copulation and reproduction centers on safeguarding virginity, a state that is easily corrupted by the temptations of sex. But the virginity Modesty protects is not a transitory state (and virginity must be transitory if human children are to be born). Instead, for Modesty, virginity spells celibacy in disguise: the celibacy of a sexual recluse. Modesty does not care about virginity as the arbitrary demarcation point that separates girlhood from womanhood; that type of virginity must be arrested before it develops into the capacity (or desire) for copulation. The irony here is obvious: if Modesty is successful in keeping everything virgin, from burgeoning apples to breeding flocks, there will be no flocks or apples on planet Earth.

But Truth – and this is a capitalized Truth of the same capitalized proportions as Orlando’s initiatory HE – has his own plans. He is not to be dissuaded. As the “weird sisters” hector him for flaunting “in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone,” Truth unleashes another blast of trumpets that clears them from
the room. But before they go, the “weird sisters” remind Truth there are adherents who still adore them, devotees who still exist:

… in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those who still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. To them we go, you we leave. (86)

Woolf’s use of the word “dark” in this context – particularly as darkness is positioned as the property of those who honour the repressive traditions of Purity, Chastity and Modesty – implies their disciples are hiding in the dark, closing off their senses, evading Truth. In addition, the passage depicts the sanctimonious purity of the “tribe of the respectable” as a veneer for willful ignorance, the duplicitous desire to keep oneself from recognizing the humanity of others – including other sexes – in order to enjoy the rewards of heterocentric order (Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease). But Truth has no investment in preserving darkness or safeguarding the sensibilities of Purity, Modesty or Chastity, and he banishes them with a sonic blast:

The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast:—

“THE TRUTH!”

at which Orlando woke.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—*he was a woman*. (87, emphasis mine)

So Orlando emerges as a woman. But the exact anatomical details of Orlando’s sex change are never revealed. We are merely informed “the sound of the trumpets died away
and Orlando stood stark naked,” and that “no human being, since the world began […] ever looked more ravishing” (87). Standing naked before us, we are told that Orlando’s body simultaneously combines “the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (87). Then, as if they cannot quite believe the transformation has occurred themselves, the biographer interjects:

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman. There is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity (87, emphasis mine).

The biographer rapidly shifts sexual pronouns in the passage above. Although numerous scholars have referred to this passage to justify their prioritizations of the reputed androgyny of Orlando, there are several key differences between androgyne and sexual ambiguity, which, etymologically speaking, are far from the same. The term androgynous (Latin: “man-woman”) was deployed until at least the seventeenth century as a counterpart of hermaphroditism, and in that archaic usage, both hermaphrodite and androgyne referred to a person born with both male and female genitalia. But from the

the seventeenth century forward – and particularly since the early 1970s – the concept of

39 As I have mentioned, there are many scholars who have incorrectly or inaccurately prioritized the reputed presence of androgyne in Orlando, chief among them Hermione Lee, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar, etc. Woolf scholar Maria DiBattista claims that Orlando is essentially a tale of “androgyne … a comic myth directed primarily, but not exclusively against the tyrannies of sex,” although aside from the fact that Woolf never mentions the word “androgyne” or “androgyneous” in Orlando, it is precisely the character’s recognizable qualities as a man or a woman that I argue are centralized in the tale – not the exploits of an androgyneous character who takes advantage of viewer confusion about their “actual” sexual identity (122). Similarly, in Virginia Woolf and the Problem of the Subject, Makiko Minow-Pinkney makes the argument that Orlando’s multifarious sexual themes depend on a “Woolfian androgyne” that “opens up new possibilities in the fixed division of gender” (1987: 130). While I am not sure what the term “Woolfian androgyne” means (Minow-Pinkney fails to describe any other kind), Orlando’s brief moment of sexual ambiguity does not so much “open new possibilities” for the fixed division of gender as it calls into question the issue of fixing divisions in gender in the first place – a far different thing.

40 In Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life, Marjorie Garber details the common etymological roots of androgyne and hermaphrodisism, an analysis supported by the Oxford English Dictionary’s definition of androgynous as “uniting the (physical) characters of both sexes, at once male and female; hermaphrodite” (Garber 2000: 203, OED online 2010, emphasis mine).
androgyny has been adapted into a larger classification to account for subjects in whom “traditional male and female roles [are] obscured or reversed” (Webster 2010). According to The Merck Manual (that unimpeachable compendium of sexual recognition), a gender role is “the objective, public expression of being male, female, or androgynous” (Merck online 2010, emphasis mine). If we view the semantic relationship of androgyny and gender role as precisely that – a relationship – the state of androgyny gains shape as the performance of a gender role in which the androgynous subject consciously manipulates fashions, hairstyles, mannerisms and affectations to appear as male when one is not, to appear as female when one is not, or to appear so “androgynous” that adherents of heterocentric normativity cannot tell whether the subject is male or female, causing confusion (or delight) depending on the sexual polemics of the observer. Since the 1970s, “gender bending” celebrities like David Bowie, Boy George and Kate Bush have engaged in these types of obscurations and “reversals,” cultivating an “androgynous” public persona. But as the Intersex Society of North America has been quick to point out, gender-bending is not always the modus operandi of people who have been designated as “androgynous,” and such subjects may not always appreciate that designation.

41 Tracing the roots of androgyny back to their source, the term is a portmanteau of the Greek anér = man + gyné = woman. But where the hermaphroditic subject “has” genitals that appear to be those of a man or woman at the same time, the androgynous subject has the tendency to be mistaken for either a man or woman, when they are “actually” one or the other.

42 As I have noted in the preceding chapters of this work, both Brisson and Bataille have explored the possibility that the representation of hermaphroditic images and “sexually ambiguous” others in cultural artificats is at least as old as representations of the primal pair (perhaps older), perhaps even predating the representational primacy of male/female.

43 The Intersex Society of North America poses the following question: “An androgynous look has often been revered as an ideal of physical beauty, and gender confusion is explored by many people through fashion [but] what is the reality of androgyny for those born neither male or female?” (ISNA web materials 2010). According to the ISNA, the impression of androgyny can bring unwelcome visibility to intersex individuals and “sexually ambiguous” subjects who do not want to be valorized or scrutinized for the way they appear to others.
The semantic relationship between androgyny and sexual ambiguity is also quite conflicted. While they are not necessarily synonymous, androgyny and sexual ambiguity are not mutually exclusive; a person might be designated as both sexually ambiguous and androgynous at the same time, or they might not. One term is not inherently linked to the next. Unlike gender-bending, androgyny is not always intentional. And unlike sexual ambiguity, androgyny is not inherently considered a genital abnormality or aberration, inasmuch as the medicolegal diagnosis of sexual ambiguity is typically (and seemingly inevitably) traced “back” to the facticity of one’s “original” genitals and their appearance at birth, according to a binary codex that positions male-female as the only recognizable terminuses on its diagnostic pole.

Yet there is more to say concerning the differences between androgyny and sexual ambiguity, particularly as this difference applies to the concepts of recognition and intent. Whereas sexually ambiguous subjects, through no fault or intervention of their own, might prove too difficult for medicolegal practitioners to recognize within their heteronormative systems of sexual recognition, an androgyne might intentionally pass themselves off as male or female, consciously masquerading in a gender role that seems “wrong” or “reversed” to those who view it. In short, the androgyne may be actively taking advantage of this heteronormative misrecognition, in order to reap any bounties that performing as the “opposite sex” might offer.

It is not my objective, however, to assert that Orlando centralizes or prioritizes sexual ambiguity as opposed to androgyny. It does neither, inasmuch as it spends no time detailing the life of an androgyne or a sexually ambiguous individual. Instead, the first half of the book depicts Orlando as without-a-doubt male and the back half presents her
as a woman from head to toe. Thus, Orlando precludes any assertion that its protagonist is androgynous; instead, the book emphasizes that Orlando is a boy when he is presented as a boy and is a woman when presented as a woman. Orlando’s appearance as a boy, man or a woman is never depicted as causing confusion or misrecognition in others; instead, her appearance, whether male or female, is portrayed as awakening their sexual desire – a desire positioned as well-placed as opposed to misplaced. Accentuating the success of Orlando’s sex change by the “proof” of her absolute desirability as a recognizable woman, the novel centralizes the outcome of Orlando’s sexual transfiguration to a much greater extent than the transformation itself: Orlando is a woman now, and those who see her desire her sexually without confusion or delay.

On a structural level, then, whatever androgyny is present in Orlando’s fleeting moment of sexual ambiguity occurs in the sudden and brief appearance of the third person plural. Observing that Orlando’s change of sex “altered their future,” the biographer (who has resumed narrating the tale) notes the transfiguration did “nothing whatever to alter their identity.” Because the biographer has only referred to Orlando as “he” until this point in the novel, and because they only refer to Orlando as “she” from this point forward, their rapid-fire interjection of the word “they” seems like a verbal tic, even as it seems to indicate that more than one person is inhabiting Orlando’s body – an implication that would stand at odds with their larger observation that Orlando’s sex change did nothing to alter “their identity.” As Orlando demonstrates for the next 127 pages, her sexual transfiguration has changed everything about their gender role and their gender identity for centuries to come.
This is another reason I object so strongly to the popularized notion that *Orlando* prioritizes states of androgyny and/or transsexuality. Take, for example, Sandra Gilbert’s oft-cited claim that *Orlando* centralizes “transsexualism through sardonic costume changes rather than through actual physical transformations” (1980: 404). Although Woolf runs through some nuances in wardrobe in *Orlando*, we plainly see the protagonist emerge from the specific moment of her sex-change *naked*, without a costume of any kind. And Gilbert’s conceptualization of “transsexuality” in this context is technically incorrect. As I have argued in essays such as “Retrotranslations of Post-transsexuality, Notions of Regret,” a sexual subject is no longer *trans*-anything once they have shifted their visual/linguistic point of purchase from one sex to another – they have simply *(re)located* their sexual affiliation to reappear within recognizable forms of masculinity or femininity (2007: 86). In that sense, Orlando’s sexual relocation is clearly not *transsexual* – it is *sexual* to the highest degree, inasmuch as Orlando becomes a ravishing woman whom the biographer describes as both sexy and recognizably sexed.

44 The claim that the photographs and reprints of artworks to be found in *Orlando*’s “picture gallery” support the “fact” that the protagonist is androgynous is merely a matter of subjective interpretation. Although numerous scholars neglect it, the original cover of *Orlando: A Biography* depicts a burly, dark-haired, bearded Orlando about to smite his enemies with a heavy sword. One might certainly ahistoricize *Orlando*’s other images, and claim the paintings of Elizabethan boys “look androgynous” by the standards of our times – but this simply gives the slip to the manner in which scholars use androgyny as a totalizing one-size-fits-all, stating that the word is *about androgyny* rather than closely comparing the ways in which *sexual difference* was articulated, for example, between the 1500s and today.

45 As I mention in my introduction to this thesis, the term “transsexual” is often misused to describe people who are relocating their position within a male or female paradigm (see: “passing”). While the *trans*- prefix in *transsexual* indicates a subject who is either in transit or undergoing a transformation, this is typically not the case with individuals societally cast as transsexuals; people who have adopted a different “without a doubt” sexual speaking position within the symbolic order. This is a point that I have argued in my article, “Retrotranslations of Post-Transsexuality, Notions of Regret,” wherein I discuss the problematic ways in which subjects are designated as transsexuals simply because they appear to have changed from one sex into its “opposite.” When it is discernable, the “trans-” element of transsexuality typically occurs in a fleeting moment of abnegation, disavowal, or retraction; the moment wherein the sexual subject *disengages from* one sexual position – but before they become cemented in gender on the Other side.
Clearly, states of sexual ambiguity and androgyny are not inherently sexy; as Marjorie Garber observes in *Bisexuality and the Eroticism of Everyday Life*: “the real question about ‘androgyny’ is how it comes to mean both sexlessness and sexiness at once” (2000: 233). Moreover, as Garber notes, androgyny has little political value. “Basically, what is wrong with ‘androgyny’ as a term in and of itself and as a synonym for ‘bisexuality’ is that it tries to take the sex out of gender” (234). Closely analyzed, Orlando’s primary transsexual, androgynous, sexually ambiguous moment consists of two or three sentences at the most; sentences in which the pronouns alternate quickly between his-their-her.

Occurring seconds before the biographer concludes that discussing the vicissitudes of this Orlando’s sex change is “odious,” any detailed recapitulation of Orlando’s in-between sexuality is summarily shut down. Bracketed by lengthy narrations of masculinity on the one side and femininity on the other side, Orlando’s moment of sexual ambiguity is tightly bracketed as a precipitous, momentary glitch that occurs when Truth *demands* a reprioritization of the heterocentric order in favor of transfiguration and change. That said, we must keep in mind that Orlando-as-male is not the *producer* of his own magical transfiguration – he is its passive *recipient*. Amid the bedlam created by Truth and the trumpeters, our sedate protagonist remains oddly unaffected, as if to suggest the only transfigured element is his/her body, which skips from HE into she without creating an emotional stir. In this respect, I concur with Gilbert: Orlando’s

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46 I have come to similar conclusions concerning the term *transgendered* in my article, “Retrotranslations of Post-Transsexuality, Notions of Regret,” asserting the term is deceptively past-tense and post-sexual (2007: 77-90).

47 Once more, I refer to Hermione Lee’s statements (cf. fn7), in *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*, that Orlando “is the same whether she is a man or a woman, and it is evident from the first line of the book that Orlando’s womanly characteristics overlap” (1977: 149). The novel is not so much about overlapping as shifting and changing, a clear instance of from-to. Whatever overlap there is occurs during Orlando’s mystical trance.
biographer does “rush” the protagonist’s sex-change, not only echoing Modesty’s censorial language but vowing to “let other pens treat of sex and sexuality,” while beseeching the reader to join the supernatural deities in quitting such “odious subjects” as soon as they possibly can (88). This adjuration to flee the locus of Orlando’s sex change comprises a request for us to demur from examining Orlando’s genitalia in detail, thereby forfeiting our right to witness these genitals as they might appear in their intermediate or transitory state, after they are male but before they are female. Dismissing any interest in such matters as “odious,” the biographer neglects a number of significant questions about how Orlando becomes a woman. Does his penis shrink into oblivion as her vagina opens? Does his formerly manly chest swell up with a voluptuous pair of breasts and nipples? And how does Orlando develop the ovaries she will need to produce the eggs that will be necessary for her to bear children later in the tale? Or is this impending conception of a more immaculate nature? All such questions are summarily suspended by a biographer who brushes them off as “odious,” expressing a reluctance (at least) or a revulsion (at worst) to discussing any matters of anatomy, particularly those that involve genitalia:

Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man until the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.

But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can. (88)

If nothing else, this statement calls for a semantic breakdown of *odiousness*, which most typically defines subjects/objects that arouse “hatred or repugnance; hateful;
disagreeable; offensive; repulsive.”48 While some might argue that the biographer is using the concept of odiousness in a fashion that is mocking or sarcastic, the aesthetic attachment of odiousness to Orlando’s sex change casts the character’s sexual transfiguration into abject discourse. This stands in contrast to Gilbert’s notion that Orlando’s sex-change “comically eschews specific descriptions of the bodily changes that mark Orlando’s gender metamorphosis” (1991: 344). There is nothing in the least bit comic about this sex-change. The topic of odiousness is no joke, and the sex change is accompanied by no jests, puns, clever word-plays, humorous asides or situational comedies of error. Instead, the vicissitudes of the sex change are pushed brusquely aside with the biographer’s implication that while the medicolegal regime is generally preoccupied with odious matters of biology, writers have less odious things to do with their time than arbitrate claims of maleness or femaleness based on anatomic details. Having asserted that technical descriptions of both genitals and/or genital transformations are hateful or repulsive, the biographer ejects the entire sequence in a sweep of disavowal, deferring the topic to “other pens.” In that sense, the biographer echoes Modesty’s desire to flee any scene of explicitly odious sex. Yet, while the biographer does not wish to linger on Orlando’s transformed genitalia, and does not elaborate on what it means to be sexually ambiguous, their apparent haste to quit the scene of Orlando’s sexual transformation underscores its disruptive impact. Indeed, if the biographer’s logic is carried to its discursive ends, their dismissal of the sexual details of

48 The above definition of odious was taken from the online version of the Oxford English Dictionary. The Random House Dictionary defines the term as “deserving or causing hatred […] highly offensive or disgusting” (1980: 610), while Webster’s describes it as “arousing or deserving hatred or repugnance.” Between these definitions, a semantic relationship between odiousness and abjection takes shape, as the abject Other arouses sensations of disgust and repugnance in its abjectifier; in short, the presence of the abject causes sensations of odiousness.
Orlando’s transfiguration as “odious” implies that sex itself is odious (the act, the organs, their “true” significance).

Although the remainder of Orlando richly details what it means for its protagonist to be a woman, I should like to more explicitly discuss what the odiousness of Orlando’s sex change means as it is flanked, permeated, and emancipated by abjection. The concept of sexual recognition will prove pivotal to this discussion, and herein, I rely on a combined reading of Julia Kristeva and Judith Butler. As I have mentioned throughout this study, Kristeva maintains the abjectifying subject can only be repulsed by qualities that it recognizes as undesirable in its abject other, and can only disavow the elements it perceives as repulsive from within its own cultural symbolic. Ultimately, abjection is merely activated by the discrete smell, touch, or look of the other, which triggers the violent reaction (to the stink of their breath, the pallor of their skin, etc.). But the abjectifier can only be repulsed by what they are able to detect as abject in the other; in short, the abjectifier can only be repelled by the abject elements of the Other that they recognize as hateful, repugnant or offensive. It is those discrete elements (the stench of the Other, the pallor of their skin, their missing limbs or features) that hint at the abjectifiers own repugnance, ambiguity and incompletion. That said, the biographer is not merely repelled by Orlando’s sex change and graphic descriptions of Orlando’s sex, but by the topic of genitalia in general.

It is here that the work of Kristeva and Butler intimately touch, despite the atmosphere of conflict that seems to proliferate between them. Clearly, Kristeva is more concerned with exploring the discourse of abjection as it affects the psychoanalytic subject, while Butler engages the concept of abjection to critique its projection against
politically marginalized subjects in heteronormative strategies of control. Obviously, neither of these discourses is mutually exclusive. Ultimately, I concur with psychoanalytic theorist Lisa Cosgrove’s insights that Kristeva and Butler both “de-reify gender and see it as originating in a complex interplay between the psyche and performance, mediated by discourse and sustained by the desire-power-knowledge matrix” (2003: 97). Despite the truth of this statement, little seems to appease Kristeva’s detractors. Kaja Silverman and Elizabeth Grosz, for example, have criticized Kristeva for essentializing notions of femininity – but it is Butler who goes one step further, attacking Kristeva’s theories as “not useful for feminism” on the grounds that they are ahistorical and overly ambiguous (Oliver 1993: 1-2). Butler is also critical of Kristeva’s acceptance of “the structuralist assumption that society is founded on the heterosexual exchanges of women,” and even accuses Kristeva of being homophobic. Setting aside the fact that Butler’s own work has been criticized in specific feminist circles as being overly ambiguous and less than useful, I find Butler’s perpetuation of her conflict with Kristeva to stand at odds with the political solidarity she is typically (and

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49 According to Cosgrove, Kristeva and Butler both demonstrate “that we do not have to elide gender difference (as feminist empiricists tend to do)” – nor must we “exalt femininity (as standpoint theorists tend to do) in order to change the system” in which human bodies are negotiated (2003: 104). Similarly, Sara Salih asserts that Butler’s theorizations in *Subjects of Desire* (1999) align with the work of Foucault and Kristeva in suggesting the “Hegelian discourse on desire should give way” to a larger “discourse on bodies” (Salih 40, Butler 1999: 235, emphasis mine). In *Subjects of Desire*, Butler sees Kristeva and Foucault as “similarly concerned with the construction of the subject via the denial of the body and the heterogeneity of its impulses” (1999: 234). Citing Butler’s work in *Gender Trouble*, Salih nevertheless draws an important distinction between Butler and Kristeva, noting that while “both Kristeva and, at times, Foucault assume that there is a body prior to discourse, Butler follows Wittig, the materialist lesbian theorist, in asserting that the form of the body, i.e. the product of a heterosexual scheme [...] Like gender, sex is an effect, a discursive category that, as Butler puts it, ‘imposes an artificial unity on an otherwise discontinuous set of attributes’” (Salih 61, Butler 1990: 114).

50 Butler and Grosz have both critiqued Kristeva for depicting homosexuality as deviant, and Butler, as Oliver points out, has insisted that “Kristeva is homophobic” (Oliver 140, referring to Butler 1989). Yet, in her dialogue with Rosalind Coward, Kristeva emphasized her “deep conviction that every person has a very particular sexuality” (1984: 22-27). “This sexuality and this kind of love is what interests me and not the group of the homosexuals, the heterosexuals, and so on” (22-27).
compellingly) advocating. In *Reading Kristeva: Unraveling the Double-Bind*, Kelly Oliver draws an insightful distinction between Butler’s work, which typically focuses on identities that trouble culture, and Kristeva’s interest in “discourses that call up a crisis in identity” (1993: 48). Pointing out that Kristeva has outspokenly urged scholars “to move away from the dualism between heterosexuality and homosexuality,” Oliver suggests that Kristeva actually *joins Butler* in emphasizing “there are as many sexualities as there are individuals” (81, 141).

In short, when it comes to analyzing the vicissitudes of abjection, Butler and Kristeva share much common ground on the concept – they simply mobilize their findings in different directions. Both scholars suggest we can “build a politics of solidarity” for/with marginalized others, while simultaneously providing latitude for more nuanced or complex visions of difference (2003: 105). As Butler notes in *Gender Trouble* and *Undoing Gender*, the degree to which sexual subjects visibly reiterate normative ideals often has a bearing on the extent to which they are socioeconomically abjectified in force relations. This type of abjectification can be identified in the range of legal constraints levied against those who do not recognizably live within heterocentric marital norms, as having the temerity to live these lives is greeted with a reduction or elimination of capital rewards, health benefits, social status, marriage, the adoption of children – and even the right to be recognized as a human being in the first place.51

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51 Like abjection, the state of liminality is known for evoking sensations of disorientation and dislocation, as well as for opening corridors of critical self-reflection and paradigm shifts. In *Post-Colonial Studies, the Key Concepts*, Ashcroft et al follow Bhabha in defining liminality as: “an interstitial or in-between space, a threshold area,” a distinction that separates the word from “the more definite word ‘limit,’ to which it is related” (2000: 130). The potential of the liminal “for post-colonial theory is precisely its usefulness for describing an ‘in-between’ space in which cultural exchange may occur: the transcultural space in which strategies for personal or communal self-hood may be elaborated, a region in which there is a continual process of movement and interchange between different states” (130). In terms of their effect on the subject, I see much common ground between the states of liminality and abjection. Take, for example,
But there is another significant theoretical overlap between Kristeva and Butler on the topic of abjection, and this concerns the territory shared by abjectifier and abjected in abject discourse. As Sara Salih notes in *Judith Butler*, Butler has suggested that heterosexual identities are often “constructed in relation to their *abjected* homosexual ‘Other,’” but melancholic homosexuals are haunted by the trace of this ‘Other,’ which is never finally or fully *abjected*” (2002: 70, emphases mine). In evaluating the pivotal role abjection plays in the process of sexual subjectivation, Butler determines that engaging in abject discourse bears a potential to unsettle and renegotiate long-established gender norms (70-71). For Butler, in particular, abjection is palpable in the punitive systems that regulate non-normative manifestations of sexual identity through effects of deprivation, limitation, and constraint. As early as her 1989 essay, “The Body Politics of Julia Kristeva,” Butler centralizes the significance of abjection in sexual subjectivation – a vein she continued to mine in *Gender Trouble* and beyond. Noting that Kristeva's conceptualizations of abjection in *Powers of Horror* presented critical opportunities to regard abjection as “a boundary-constituting taboo for the purposes of constructing a discrete subject through exclusion,” Butler reflected on the fact that abjection is primarily “an expulsion of alien elements” (1990: 133). Returning to the concept of abjection in *Bodies that Matter*, Butler observed that the normative cultural symbolic “marks the body

Bruce King’s position, in *New National and Post-Colonial Literatures*, that if “the liminal or transitional state is too prolonged or too excruciating to cope with,” the subjects who experience liminality may “withdraw” and retrench from this open-ended relation into older, more familiar modes of being – even if these familiar modes are destructive or confining (1998: 217). This thought reveals a strong correspondence between King’s conceptualization of liminality and the state of abjection. Like Eeyore and his diet of thistles, although these old modes of perception might be constraining, oppressive or distasteful, they are disagreeable in a familiar or recognizable way.

52 Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is axiomatic for Butler’s and Kristeva’s assertions that a dynamic of rejection and expulsion marks the narcissistic transvaluation that takes place in abjection. Although Butler’s standpoint concerning Lacan is generally less sympathetic than Kristeva’s, both scholars access Lacan’s work in “The Significance of the Phallus” to evaluate the alienating propensity of performing subjectivity before the arbitrary face of the symbolic order.
by sex through threatening that body, through the deployment/production of an imaginary threat, a castration, a privation of some bodily part” (1993: 101). In Butler’s words:

To assume the law, to accede to the law is to produce an imaginary alignment with the sexual position marked out by the symbolic, but also always to fail to approximate that position, and to feel the distance between that imaginary identification and the symbolic as the threat of punishment, the failure to conform, the spectre of abjection. (101, emphasis mine)

In short, the specter of abjection does not merely haunt the liminal space between the subject and its Other, it hovers menacingly between the subject and its cultural symbolic. But this same abject interstice is precisely what provides human bodies with the opportunity to articulate their desire – even when the objective of this desire is to change the cultural symbolic in hopes of providing all subjects with a more viable (read: livable) experiential point of purchase. This negotiation of a livable life within the turbulent interstices of force relations occurs on the field of human recognition – and for Butler, the problem of human recognition and the attendant question of social visibility is inevitably “bound up with the question of power and with the problem of who qualifies as recognizably human and who does not” (2004: 2). By displacing “the binary model for thinking about relationality,” Butler suggests we might begin to “appreciate the triangulating echoed in heterosexual, homosexual, and bisexual desire, and complicate our understanding of the relation between sexuality and gender,” and asks, in Undoing Gender, whether “the place of the body in all of these struggles” can open up a different

53 Following Iris Young, Butler evaluates abjection as a productive notion for discussing the dynamics of sexism, racism and homophobia, noting that the ejection of the other is “the mode by which others become shit” (1990: 134). Abjection, notes Butler, is a pivot point around which subjective positions of “me” and “not-me” are established; yet, this apparent dyadic coupling is not easily divisible, as one always implicates and thereby connects one to the other. “For inner and outer worlds to remain utterly distinct,” Butler explains, the “entire surface of the body would have to achieve an impossible impermeability” (134).

54 Oliver notes that Kristeva, as well as Butler, views the body as setting up and harboring the cultural symbolic while simultaneously threatening it (1993: 3).
notion of politics and change the culture that produces the body in the first place (2004: 21). Detailing the double-edged potential of recognition, Butler notes when the “schemes of recognition that are available to us are those that ‘undo’ the person by conferring recognition, or ‘undo’ the person by withholding recognition, then recognition becomes a site of power by which the human is differentially produced,” and warns us that it might be possible to recognize the other in harmful ways, thereby perpetuating the cycle of abjection (2).

The act of negotiating a livable life within an abject interstices of heterocentric force relations is clearly a central issue in Orlando, particularly as this concerns the negotiation of human rights through a social distribution of sexual recognizability. Obviously, these negotiations do not have any real bearing on Orlando’s bracketed moment of sexual ambiguity, as Orlando cannot ever truly be said to “live as” a sexually ambiguous character, and does not make any decisions or take any action in that capacity. Thus, any negotiation of what Orlando’s sex means occurs within either the compartment of his life as an unambiguously sexed man (“there could be no doubt”) or her life as a ravishing woman (“there is no denying it”). Not only does the singular unambiguity of these sexual subject positions (as HE and she) stand at odds with the wavering quality Orlando’s skid through a sexually multiple transformation (him/her/their), the singular quality of Orlando’s actions as either a male or female stand out against the ways in which the character is passive during his/her/their moment of sexual ambiguity (87). Any opportunity for readers to consider or even recognize Orlando as sexually ambiguous is clapped shut before they can get a good look around. The biographer simply determines the subject is too odious to read or write about, then pushes us into Orlando’s new
femininity, despite the obvious fact that some of us might want to read about Orlando’s transforming breasts, penis, vagina, hands, hair, and all the other physical nodes along which the distribution of sexual recognition takes place. The decision of whether or not to view Orlando’s sexual ambiguity is never in our control, just as the moment of Orlando’s sex-change is not depicted in the character’s control.

But the abruptness that characterizes Orlando’s rushed transition through sexual ambiguity prompts the question of how well either Woolf or the biographer could describe the zero point at which Orlando turns into a woman, given the ontological limitations of the times. Herein, the narrative value of deploying Orlando’s sexual ambiguity as a transitional phase (as opposed to a continued state) grows clear: the character was never intended to remain sexually unrecognizable. If the protagonist had remained sexually ambiguous, Orlando would be a different story – perhaps so different that Woolf would not have been able to publish it within the context of 19th-century England. That is precisely the point: Orlando is not the biography of some sexually ambiguous character who causes confusion in everyone they meet. It is the biography of an unambiguously sexed man who turns into an unambiguously ravishing woman. Flanking every aspect of Orlando’s from-to transition, a narrative opting-out enforces a specific command NOT to be, written as Truth’s capitalized command that Orlando must not remain in a sexually ambiguous state, sliding back and forth between pronouns, blurring, amplifying or focalizing the odious demarcation points that stand between male and female. Clearly, a writer of Virginia Woolf’s caliber could have spent the remainder of her story detailing Orlando’s sexual ambiguity; she could have constructed characters who were sexually motivated by Orlando’s sexual ambiguity and so on. But Truth
commands Orlando, above all else, *not to be* a sexually ambiguous character. Instead, Orlando is compelled to take up her role as a woman, to remain silent about the experience of having been sexually ambiguous, and to *move on* into sexual relationships with men – ultimately to bear a child.

That said, Orlando does not become just any woman; she becomes a recognizably sexy woman, a “ravishing” woman – a word whose archaic meaning (to seize someone and carry them off by force) makes me wonder if Woolf is somehow extending an invitation to *do something to Orlando*, as in the ravishing of Europa – and one can only wonder what Orlando’s reaction might have been if she had woken from her magical slumbers as anything but a ravishing woman (87). What if Orlando had emerged from her bath naked, for example, only to recognize neither a penis or vagina, but something else entirely, something so ambiguous that it defied recognition altogether? Would she have been so nonplussed then? Or what would have happened if Orlando emerged from her bath as an ugly woman, an ancient woman, a destitute woman, a plain woman, or a black woman? Would she have remained similarly unaffected? Would her identity remain similarly “unchanged?” Or is it a prerequisite of being Orlando that the protagonist must remain ravishing, graceful, erudite and privileged? Woolf’s book raises these questions precisely through its silences and omissions. Similarly, the biographer’s hasty observation that Orlando’s sex change “seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely” makes me wonder about the transfiguration’s lack of *jouissance*, pain, emotional sensations of any kind. Appearing in such close proximity to “change,” the words “painlessly” and “completely” do not merely imply Orlando’s sexual transfiguration had the potential to be both painful and incomplete (but was neither) – it
also indicates that Orlando experienced no curiosity about her changed genitalia, no elation over her ability to enjoy sex with a vagina instead of a penis, no consideration of the fact that she might now bear children. Perhaps, on the one hand, the impact of Orlando’s transformation is so intense that she experiences an emotional short-circuit, deadening her ability to experience affective sensations of any kind, and she emerges from the transformation emotionally neutered. On the other hand, it is possible that Orlando’s transfiguration has turned the character around 360 degrees instead of 180, and she cannot observe any difference between Orlando-boy and Orlando-girl because she does not recognize what happened. But this seems unlikely, as we are informed that Orlando retains virtually every memory of herself as a man. Within those parameters, Orlando must still recognize that she was once a man and is now a woman. She simply slides through sexual ambiguity like an anaesthetized kitten, emerging from her magical nap without a trace of pleasure or pain.

In this section, I closely analyzed Orlando’s mythical sex change in Constantinople, the land of Orlando’s dark-skinned other, suggesting the protagonist’s transsubjective interactions in this location ultimately transcend all nodes of white, patriarchal, colonial heteronormativity (race, class, religion, and most of all, sex). Discussing the interplay of sexual recognition and abjection that frame both Orlando’s sexual copulation with Rosita Pepita and his/her/their change of sex, I engage Judith Butler’s and Julia Kristeva’s theorizations of abjection to evaluate the narrative silencing of Orlando’s sexual ambiguity and “odious” sexual transformation. In the next section of this chapter, I more deeply analyze Orlando’s transition into life as a woman.

Ma Rose en Vie: Orlando’s Reversal and Remobilization of Recognizable Gender
In the previous section, I described Orlando’s sex change as a “complete” transformation – so complete that it stands outside the scope of everyday events, as Orlando’s body bears no trace of surgical intervention. Although contemporary medical procedures can craft a person’s genitals so they appear male or female, scientists and doctors have not successfully transplanted ovaries and fallopian tubes in a formerly male body, nor can they change a person’s chromosomal composition or DNA. In that sense, Orlando’s sex change goes beyond our existing surgical techniques, yielding a character who is not merely a woman but a mother.

As the remainder of the novel plays out, Orlando’s womanhood is what follows her states of masculinity and sexual ambiguity. On a structural level, this linear progression is important, particularly as Woolf poses Orlando’s emergence into femininity as a sexual evolution that makes Orlando a better person, although it is fraught with peril. Following her transfiguration, the biographer states that Orlando’s new “position” as a woman is “precarious and embarrassing in the extreme” (98). Within the space of a few pages, Orlando has gone from a wealthy duke to a visibly endangered girl. Hiring a “gipsy” caravan to take her away from Constantinople into the Turkish desert, Orlando seeks refuge with a nomadic tribe, where she entertains fantasies of marrying into their clan. Yet, although Orlando seeks refuge in the territory of the Other, her presence among the Roma has an unsettling effect, and they instinctively intuit that Orlando’s newly minted femininity makes her vulnerable. Because her weakness might be infectious, a contagion of bad *mana* that could negatively impact the entire caravan, the Roma tribesmen begin to mistrust Orlando. A Roma boy accuses her of giving him the “evil eye,” and she
begins to sense an uneasiness among the elders, a hostility that is “felt by the whole tribe” (92). “A great rage filled them,” the biographer writes, and “they wished Orlando would leave the tent and never come near them again” (92). They secretly vow to kill Orlando if she decides to remain.

Although the Roma are outsiders in relation to Turkish culture, their societal rubric can only accommodate subjects who fall within the moral-ethical purview of their normative order. Thus, Orlando’s imbalance as a newly minted woman makes her one Other too many, and her newly assumed sex poses a threat to the Rom’s already precarious social position. She becomes an additional abject burden that threatens to topple the lot.\(^{55}\) Still, at this point, Woolf’s asks us to assent to the narrative proposition that Orlando has become a woman in every way, even as she continues to remind us that, no matter how ravishing Orlando might be, she will always grapple with the fact that she was once a man. Although her body has been solidified as without-a-doubt female, her new position within the reigning sexual ontology has not stabilized, as if her brief moment of sexual ambiguity continues to roil beneath the surface of her body long after it has moved into womanhood. Like a child growing aware of adult relations for the first time, Orlando begins to critique the roles of both sexes:

“To fall from a mast-head,” she thought, “Because you see a woman’s ankles; to dress up like a Guy Fawkes and parade the streets, hoping a woman may praise you; to deny a woman teaching because she may laugh at you; to be slave of the frailest chit in petticoats, and yet to go about as if you were the Lords of creation—Heavens!” she thought, "what fools they make of us—what fools we are!" And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being she seemed to vacillate; she was a man; she was a woman; she knew

\(^{55}\) In “Viscerality, Faith, and Skepticism,” Michael Taussig observes that the ability to change one’s sex often makes the changeling “feared for their magic more than unchanged men or women” (1998: 280).
the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and
whirligig state of mind to be in. The comforts of ignorance seemed utterly
denied her. (158, emphasis mine)

In this sense, Orlando is quite correct: she has been denied the comforts of sexual
ignorance precisely because the spirit of Truth – sexual Truth – has denied them, even as
he has turned her into a woman. Yet the fact that she once enjoyed all the chauvinist
privileges of a heterosexual male does not make this transition seamless, and from the
moment Orlando begins to define herself as female, she becomes intensely aware of the
privileges that were unquestioningly bestowed by her former rank and sex, even as she is
beset by the abjectifying forces of heterocentric normativity from all directions. Thus,
while Truth demands that Orlando relocate her subject position in relation to the
patriarchal order of masculinity, the unsettling force of her sexual ambiguity threatens to
destabilize the male/female binary altogether, thereby summoning the relentlessly
totalizing tendencies of cultural force relations, which redouble their efforts to squeeze
her back into sexual recognizability. Faced with these pressures, Orlando hastily exits
Constantinople, lest her “secret” be discovered and violently outed. It seems almost as if
the instability of Orlando’s sexual ambiguity activates an accompanying volatility in her
trajectory as a nascent female. This instability makes Orlando’s womanhood a position of
great vulnerability at a moment she most needs strength – to face forms of socioeconomic
abjection she never experienced as a man.

But like a top that rights itself, Orlando acclimates to her abjection. Indeed, her
continued acclimation to phases of instability seems vital to Woolf’s modernist prose,
and her strategy of disrupting the normative order(s) of sex, temporality, race, class and
language. Confronting the complex forces at play in sexual subjection, Orlando’s
destabilizing moment of sexual ambiguity performs what Bhabha calls “an act of epistemic violence” that threatens to disrupt the larger ontology of sex as construed in patriarchal force relations (42). Yet as Orlando solidifies as a woman – a process that takes several centuries – her relationship to abjection transforms, and she becomes not merely comfortable, but fascinated with her own instability and the general instability of life. In that sense, Orlando, in 1928 – as a woman of independent means who was formerly a man – is able to take advantage of the centuries at her disposal to adapt to the ritualized abjection Kristeva sees as the trauma of daily life. She takes a husband, bears a child, publishes her book, and learns assert herself as a woman of means. Her life is still a relentless collision of emotions and forms, but Orlando’s interactions with masculinity, race, class, and abjection have enabled her to face the future with artistry and poise.

Given Orlando’s narrated satisfaction with her life at the end of the novel, it would appear as if the better side of her tightly bracketed sex-change is the feminine side. But the constraints of this bracket are so tight that it makes me wonder about the volatility of Orlando’s sexual ambiguity – as if a sexually ambiguous Orlando might prove too fugitive, unrecognizable or unstable to survive. Allowed to have free rein, this sexual ambiguity might spread across Woolf’s novel like the Moor’s head, its silent, triumphant grin sucking everything into its vortex, setting the entire paradigm of male-female sexuality on its head and foreclosing our ability to negotiate the arbitrary differences between masculinity and femininity as they are abjectified in force relations. But Woolf’s objective in Orlando is to replace the centralization of the traditional heroic male in epic biography with the centralization of a singularly epic woman – a woman who was once a
man. Orlando must not remain sexually ambiguous precisely because Woolf seeks, above all, to write an emancipated history of feminine discourse.

In this chapter, I analyzed the multifarious interplay of abjection and sexual subjectivation that emerges in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*, detailing how this discourse is impelled by the protagonist’s brief moment of sexual ambiguity. In the next chapter, I extend my discussion of *Orlando* to evaluate Sally Potter’s cinematic adaptation *Orlando* (1992), as well as her companion book and screenplay of the same title (1994). Tracing the adaptive threads that skitter between these *Orlandos*, I analyze the ways in which Potter’s omission of the Moor’s head sequence and her reorientation of Orlando’s sex change alter the protagonist, change the narrative, and pose a far different (post)feminist critique.
Chapter Four

“Neither a Woman, Nor a Man,” Almost: The Questionable Premise of Sally Potter’s Orlando

Simple white credits on a black background. No special effects, fancy typography, areal shots or animated lettering. The opening sequences of British filmmaker Sally Potter’s adaptation, Orlando (1992) are aesthetically straightforward and unpretentious. Following her acknowledgments to co-producers and financiers, the words “A film by SALLY POTTER … based on the book by VIRGINIA WOOLF” are followed by a pause, then a tentative splash of Fred Frith’s electric guitar. Orlando’s voice rises at the edge of audibility, reciting a sixteenth-century epic by Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene.¹ As the credits roll, the cadence of actress Tilda Swinton’s voice runs up against Frith’s polished chords, faltering yet persistent, as if Orlando is attempting to memorize Spenser’s poem, or reading it aloud for the first time. Juxtaposed against this audio montage, the film’s title, all caps, juts out abruptly: ORLANDO.

While this pastiche of credits, music and text might seem straightforward at first blush, it initiates Potter’s film in a series of adaptive clinamen that alter the “original” beginning of Woolf’s novel, and assert the potential for revision that lies at the heart of

¹ Using Frith’s electronic sound as the backdrop for this scene is an interesting choice; on the one hand, the song is evocative and has its affective hooks, while, on the other hand, its use of electronic music as somehow connotative of the Elizabethan era corresponds to Potter’s signature postmodern style. And Frith is no stranger to Potter’s ouevre; in addition to Orlando, Potter collaborated with Frith on The Tango Lesson (1997) and Yes (2004). Frith’s recording recording legacy includes the production of genre-bending albums with musicians as diverse as Brian Eno, Anthony Braxton and John Zorn. Of course, combining Spenser’s poem with the music gives Potter’s adaptation another layer of embellishment; neither the poem nor Spenser its author ever appear in Woolf’s text. An epic in two volumes, Spenser’s Faerie Queen was never officially “completed.” It was reputedly written in honor of Queen Elizabeth I; its first half was published in 1590, the second installation in 1596. Queen Elizabeth reputedly liked the poem so much she awarded Spenser a pension of 50 pounds per annum; a fact that hints Woolf may have patterned Orlando’s interactions with character Nick Greene on the Queen’s interactions with Spenser, as Greene is constantly trying to hit Orlando up for a similar pension.
any adaptation.2 Potter’s first misprision can be detected in her title, ORLANDO, which shifts the capitalization of the protagonist’s name to all-caps and drops the “biography” altogether. Obviously, this condensation immediately raises a number of questions concerning Potter’s elegiac promise that her film is “based on the book by VIRGINIA WOOLF.” How closely can her film be based on the book, when her first adaptive move is to remove the title’s associations with the very traditions of patriarchal biography that Woolf sought to parody?3 Is Potter implying her Orlando is not a satire or a biography, or is her film otherwise different than Woolf’s book in this regard? Or does she simply think Woolf’s title is too long, boring, complex, or confusing?4 And if Potter is going to initiate her film by altering Woolf’s title, what other key details will she jettison or transform? Is she going to make her adaptive strategy known to us, or is she going to leave her viewers to sleuth it out themselves? Would that be so bad?

2 In adaptation studies – particularly in the wake of Harold Bloom’s “Six Revisionary Ratios” – the term clinamen has often been used to define the ways in which adapters “swerve” from their influential source texts and authors, revising works in ways the original author may not have intended – and might have disapproved of. It is commonly acknowledged that Bloom patterned his notion of clinamen after Lucretius, who used the term to account for the ways in which atoms curve unpredictably through a void at no fixed place or time. Ironically, the modes of tribute and fidelity, which Potter evokes in her opening credits, have long been the sites of debate in contemporary adaptation studies. Significant clinamen often take place under the banner of tribute. Critic Dan Geddes calls Bloom’s notions on clinamen among his “strongest,” explaining acts of clinamen as creative forms of “misprision” (from the Old French term mesprendre, “to misunderstand”). Although Bloom does not explicitly discuss the process of adaptation in his Anxiety of Influence, he does describe poetic misprision as an act of “strong misreading” and “creative interpretation” that often precedes the alteration of a “strong” work of literature (1997: 69).

3 In “Orlando’s Sister, Or Sally Potter Does Virginia Woolf in a Voice of Her Own,” scholars Karen Hollinger and Theresa Winterhalter meticulously detail Potter’s extensive revisions of Orlando, which they see as large-scale revisions that are “without question, extensive and involve alterations in plot, narration, and, despite her claims to the contrary, thematic content” (2001).

4 The complex relationship of commercial success and “mainstreaming” in films with an avant-garde theme is clearly linked in Potter’s mind. In “Debate,” a 2005 Screen interview with Penny Florence, the filmmaker expresses delight that Orlando “made a breakthrough into the commercial zone” – but when Florence brings up the “complex relationship between the avant garde, the mainstream and the popular,” Potter decries these terms as “meaningless definitions,” musing that unless any film has “got the timing, the intoxication of the senses and the kind of heart in it - in other words, all the different structures of pleasure - then it's not going to work anyway […] I think that applies to everything; the so-called avant garde, the popular, the mainstream. I really listen to audiences I think audiences are there to be learned from, not talked down to” (2005: 278). Judging from a recent Newsweek article by Caryn James, this old Debate has some tooth left in it, as James observes that Potter’s “sumptuous, androgynous Orlando vaulted her from the avant-garde to the mainstream” (2010: emphasis mine).
Based on the introduction to her film’s companion book (*Orlando*, by Sally Potter [1994]), the filmmaker’s interest in adapting *Orlando: A Biography* never included recapitulating Woolf’s “great work” of art verbatim; like Fellini’s adaptive approach to the Petronian *Satyricon*, Potter sought to create an interpretation of Orlando that would stand or fall on its own legs. Yet if we closely examine Potter’s pledge to fidelity alongside her modification of Woolf’s title, we see her film beginning with a split commitment: a passing tribute to fidelity followed by a swift hook into infidelity. And Potter follows her this one-word condensation of Orlando’s title with more modifications to Woolf’s narrative, completely deleting the book’s opening Moor’s head sequence in favor of Swinton’s dramatic recital from *Faerie Queen*. Given the fact that neither Spenser nor *Fairie Queen* ever appeared in Woolf’s text, their seemingly arbitrary insertions into Potter’s film cast more doubt on her elegiac claims to fidelity. A similar

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5 Potter’s introduction to her companion book underscores her conviction that the “process of adaptation” for *Orlando* was “not as simple” as she first anticipated. When she “came to write the screenplay,” for example, “Woolf’s authorial intentions and the spirit of the book did not [….] leap naturally onto the page” (1994: ix). Potter explains that she had to “be prepared to make changes – ruthless changes if necessary – in order to stay true to what I loved in the book, and yet enable it to work as a film” (ix). Of course, Potter’s difficulties with “staying true” and her ascription to a “ruthless” adaptive stance lead us straight back to The Fidelity Wars, leading me to conclude yet again that the most unfaithful, adulterous, polymorphously perverse transtextual adaptations often yield the most promising results, both for the corpus at hand and for examining *how adaptation works*.

6 This is the specific wording of *Orlando’s* film credits. In Potter’s companion book, the capitalized emphases of the title page has been revised to read “ORLANDO, by Sally Potter.” The book’s title page makes no mention of Virginia Woolf whatsoever, and beneath the title is a pull-quote from *Rolling Stone* that reads: “Hip, sexy, and wickedly funny.” Following two empty pages, the third page repeats the word ORLANDO, followed by an empty fourth page. The fifth page reads: “Orlando SALLY POTTER based on the book by VIRGINIA WOOLF.” The above is an excellent example of the critical potential of typography on a formal level, as Potter’s use of a large, bold typeface for her own name, when juxtaposed against the smaller, non-bold typeface reserved for Virginia Woolf raises interesting questions about the hierarchical ordering of authorship. To complicate matters, one cannot help but notice that Potter places her own name, SALLY POTTER, in the same font style as VIRGINIA WOOLF, an all-caps hierarchical arrangement that implies both names are of equal importance. Obviously, if Potter placed her own name in title case, but rendered Woolf’s name in all-caps (e.g., a film by Sally Potter, based on the novel by VIRGINIA WOOLF), the ensuing sense of self-deprecation would seem more consistent with the sincerity of an homage or tribute. Perhaps that is precisely why Potter rejects the tactic; but of course, it is impossible to say for certain – as close readers we can merely observe that presenting both names in all-caps contradicts some of the panegyric implications germane to the standard eulogy, while placing the proper names of POTTER and WOOLF on equal footing in the hierarchical matrix of authorship, thereby asserting that both authors have equal rights to vouchsafing *Orlando’s* message.
argument could be made concerning her deployment of Frith’s guitar, inasmuch as
tremolo-saturated electronic instrumentation did not exist in Elizabethan times – nor did
it exist at the time Woolf wrote her novel (distortion-effect guitar did not, in fact, come
into play – no pun intended – until long after ViviTone engineer Lloyd Loar pioneered
the electronic pickup in 1923).\(^7\)

Taken together, Potter’s cinematic bricolage of electronic instrumentation, period
clothing, genre and contemporary editing ultimately combine to establish her film’s
opening sequence as nothing less than her signature postmodern style, a fact that was not
lost on the critics and scholars who heralded Potter’s *Orlando* as a patently postmodern
affair. In *Sally Potter*, for example, Catherine Fowler comments on the proliferation of
scholarship that centers on Potter’s “‘postmodern’ use of costume drama” in *Orlando*,
while Anne Ciecko suggests Potter’s postmodern narrative produces a “transnational
cinema” that rises above flavorless “Europudding” (Fowler 2000: 60 [citing Pidduck
1997: 172-189], Ciecko 1998: 19-34). In *Feminism and Film*, scholar Maggie Humm
suggests the *Orlandos* of Woolf and Potter both “parody the ‘straight’ forwardly
representational with multisecnic elements (from Shakespeare to Botticelli) involving the
spectator/reader as a self-conscious and active contributor to the narrative process […]
All of these features are characterized as postmodern” (1997: 145). Of the ample critical
treatments of Potter’s *Orlando*, however, few scholars have explicitly analyzed the
filmmaker’s decision to eliminate Orlando’s act of slashing at the head of a dead black
man from Woolf’s story. Yet Potter’s editorial removal of this scene, whether it
comprises a deletion, retraction, replacement or effacement – or all of these things

\(^7\) Though Loar’s initial pickups were primarily designed for classical guitars, solid-body electric guitars of
the type played by Frith in Orlando’s soundtrack would not appear until 1939, when the Slingerland Co.
began mass-producing them.
together – initiates Orlando with a radically different view of its protagonist, both in terms of what he means and what he does.

I open my chapter with an analysis of Potter’s elimination of the Moor’s head sequence, particularly as she combines this move with a narrative muzzling of the protagonist’s masculinity to set forward an Orlando who is visibly *feminized* by the removal of masculine aggression from his affective wardrobe (cf. Richard Corliss and Carrie Welch, 1993: 63). Ironically, Potter relies on these exact tropes of masculine aggression to impel her narrative forward, portraying male violence as the driving force behind Orlando’s sexual transformation.\(^8\) But sanitizing Woolf’s more violent or racist sequences from her adaptation does not produce a narrative that causes less trouble (to borrow a term from Butler) – instead, Potter’s *Orlando* causes trouble in a different direction, as the erasure of such scenes combines with her insertion of sequences prioritizing Orlando’s motherhood and femininity to agitate a different crowd; namely, the Woolf scholars and feminists who viewed her film as a “travesty,” “straight-jacketed” and “de-lesbianized.”\(^9\)

In the second section of this chapter, I closely evaluate Potter’s relocation of Orlando’s sex change from Constantinople to Khiva, the ruins of an ancient city in Uzbekistan. Analyzing Potter’s insertion of a new character to the storyline – “The Khan,” an effete Uzbeki prince who does not appear in Woolf’s text – I discuss this

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\(^8\) Because Orlando’s sex never actually changes in Potter’s film – despite the filmmaker’s claims to the contrary – I use the term “(s)exchange” to suggest that Orlando’s costume change from drag king to recognizable woman is no transformation of sex, but an exchange of gender.

\(^9\) According to Jane Marcus, Potter’s film is a “travesty” that betrays both feminist cinema and the feminist cause. Winterhalter and Hollinger view Potter’s film as “suppressing the lesbian elements” of Woolf’s text, while Leslie Hankins sees Potter carrying out a “lesbian erasure” in the film (Hollinger and Winterhalter 2001: 243). Yet, little controversy was generated (in critical circles, at least) by the filmmaker’s neutralization of the novel’s more troubling black figures (Grace Robinson, the Gypsies, and Orlando’s affair with Rosina Pepita). I return to this issue in my chapter’s third section.
character’s position in the overarching fraternity of violence Potter depicts as impelling Orlando’s transfiguration into a woman. Positioning systemic masculine aggression as the reason for Orlando’s (re)formation, Potter eliminates the novel’s cast of supernatural characters and ejects Orlando’s brief interlude of sexual ambiguity, turning her protagonist’s “sex change” into a transformation of gender. Whereas Woolf depicts her protagonist as transforming from recognizable masculinity through sexual ambiguity into recognizable femininity, Potter’s film depicts Tilda Swinton as two different women. That said, the outcomes of Swinton’s change in gender nevertheless summons the protagonist into abject discourse, as the film does not excise the element of abjection so much as it reprioritizes the position of Orlando’s gender within its discursive interstice.

In my chapter’s final section, I expand my assessment Orlando’s feminization to query the feminist politics that serve to open an ontological door for Potter to depict Orlando as a queer, feminist mother. Of particular interest in this section are the changes Potter makes to the sex of Orlando’s child, which Woolf wrote as a boy, but whom Potter changes into a girl. Exploring the political and artistic possibilities opened by this specific sex change, I assert Potter’s alterations in this regard rekindle the film’s most troubling potential, not merely irking Woolf purists, but destabilizing the arguments

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10 In this chapter, I generally align with film critic Stuart Klawans’s observation that “Tilda Swinton manages to look as if she’s in drag as both the male and female Orlando” (1993: 78, emphasis Klawans). Because it is impossible to argue that Tilda Swinton is anything but a recognizable woman, and because Potter’s overall demasculinization of Woolf’s without-a-doubt male Orlando is so striking, I thus refer to Potter’s Orlando as “she” and “her” throughout this chapter. As numerous scholars have noted, it is straining credibility to assert that Swinton is a man, no matter what Swinton and Potter might declare to the contrary. Indeed, as Maggie Humm observes in *Feminism and Film*, the explicit contradiction between what Potter and Swinton say about Orlando’s masculinity vs. what the viewer instinctively knows about Swinton’s femininity is a driving force in the film. Humm notes that “Swinton’s physical beauty […] connotes femininity,” and therefore emphasizes that the adapted Orlando’s “masculinity is a performance” (1997: 165, emphasis mine). Catherine Fowler follows a similar tack in *Sally Potter*, and underscores that “there are clearly doubts about Orlando's sex when we first see 'him,'” and that this “narration should be seen as ironic” (2009: 66).
of critics who asserted Potter’s film lacks political tooth (Marcus 1994, Halberstam 1998, Garber 2000). Concluding the section by exploring the ways in which the Orlando of Woolf and Potter ultimately work together to form a body of Orlando-lore that opens new corridors for gender trouble, I return to the question of whether there is something ambiguous about the sexuality of characters in general, asserting that “the same character” in a series of adaptations can invite political change and shift dominant sexual paradigms whether or not this character is male or female, boy or girl, sexually ambiguous or sexually unambiguous. I then conclude the chapter by suggesting Woolf’s work in Orlando, along with the work of other feminist visionaries, opens a political and representational space for Potter to envision a mainstream queer cinema that few could have envisioned in the sociopolitical context of 1920s England.

On a theoretical level, I will elaborate on the opportunities abject discourse offers as a staging grounds for the linguistic and visual emancipation of marginalized Others into political discourse. To those ends, I broaden my interrelationship of Butlerian and Kristevan conceptualizations of abjection to account for my own notions on the discourse of girlhood. I also draw together Deleuze and Guattari’s notions of revolutionary girlhoods in Milles Plateaux with Teresa de Lauretis’s theorization of resistance (cf: de Lauretis in Technologies of Gender and Figures of Resistance) to explore the idea that revolutionary, resistant girlhoods might prove a potential site for sexual ambiguation. My understanding of colonialism and post-colonialism in this chapter will continue to rely on Bhabha’s work in Location of Culture, along with Jack Shaheen’s and Lina Khatib’s conceptualizations of Arab-ness and Arab Land, specifically as these works bear on Potter’s decision to relocate the scene of Orlando’s sex change from Constantinople to
the ruined city of Khiva, in Uzbekistan. Concerning the burgeoning field of research on Potter’s film in gender studies and cultural studies, I refer to Jay Prosser’s *Second Skins*, Marjorie Garber’s work in *Vested Interests* and *The Bissexuality of Everyday Life*, and a number of critical essays by Jane Marcus, Kaja Silverman, Julianne Pidduck, Kate Hollinger, Teresa Winterhalter, and Brenda Silver. As regards biographical scholarship on Sally Potter per se, the works of Catherine Fowler and Sophie Mayer are particularly informative concerning the details of *Orlando*’s cinematic production, as well as its critical reception.

I would like to conclude my introduction to this chapter with the following thought: If we conceptualize the *Orlandos* of both Woolf and Potter as a common body of adaptive lore (as opposed to two disparate works in some sort of dyadic relationship), it is possible to see *Orlando* emerging through acts of extreme transtextual infidelity to raise urgent questions about how sexual ambiguity is fabricated and framed. Although Potter’s film eliminates the epic/mythical qualities that Woolf associated with Orlando’s transformation from a man into a woman, her adaptation produces a character who continues to rise through abject discourse to be more resilient, more queer, and, in a Rancierian sense, more *emancipated* than before; not completely liberated, but at least more discernable in the field of political discourse.\(^{11}\)

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\(^{11}\) Rancière’s notion of emancipation will prove particularly useful in this chapter, particularly as this term – like Butler’s *performativity* – is prone to a degree of *clitímen* and so-called maladaption in its own right. In his *Politics of Aesthetics*, Rancière carefully delineates his take on “emancipation” as: “Neither the teleological end of a political project nor a state of social liberation […] the process of emancipation consists in the polemical verification of *equality*” (2000: 87, emphasis Rancière’s). According to him, the interjection of heterology into political structures (such as aesthetics) that rely on forming a homologous doxologies typically “challenges the *police order,*” and opens new spaces of discourse (87, emphasis Rancière’s). In the conclusion to this chapter, I assert that both *Orlandos* significantly emancipate discourse on a sexual-political level. On a side note, Rancière’s take on emancipation seems to resonate interestingly with Butler’s notions, in *Bodies that Matter*, that effecting a shift in valuations of subjectivity does not involve “the abstract inference of an equivalence based on an insight into the partially constituted character
Did We Lose Our Head? A Decapitated Moor Hits the Adaptive Chopping Block

Suffuse with light and color, our first glimpse of the cinematic Orlando stands out as an adaptive pièce de résistance. Staging her camera below the protagonist’s range of motion, Potter positions the viewer beneath Orlando, who paces beneath an enormous oak tree atop a sunny hill. Perfect lighting, crisp contrast, sensitive blocking – the tasteful tableau of Potter’s opening shot would appear expertly composed, were it not for the the filmmaker’s placement of the gigantic tree smack in the middle of the frame. To the untrained eye (or the viewer who has never read Orlando), the oak’s looming presence dead center might seem intrusive or disruptive, irreverent to the most basic techniques of composition – but its centrality bears a deft literary reference to The Oak Tree, the title of the epic poem Orlando is incessantly scribbling in Woolf’s version of the tale. In addition, the bulk of this sprawling oak imparts Potter’s opening with a sensation of roots, history, stasis – perhaps even the metaphoric associations of oaks with virility and phallic power in Elizabethan heraldry.12

Isolated on a hill, beneath an overwhelming tree, Orlando’s actions appear inordinately small, clumsy, incessantly on the verge of stumbling, fumbling, bumping her head. Beneath her knees, a sea of golden wheat blends with her ridiculous ochre stockings, and her legless torso seems to hover in the air, an ungainly effect that might

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12 In Display of Heraldry, William Newton discusses the symbolic metaphorical link between fidelity and images of oak trees: “Of trees, the oak is preeminent, as monarch of the forest […] It is a symbol of strength and of long-tried fidelity, which, by its appropriation, may figuratively imply the worthiness of the original bearer” (1846: 138, emphasis mine). In that sense, Potter’s centralization of the oak tree in her opening scene is a conflicted adaptive move, making a literary reference to Woolf’s embedded narrative of Orlando’s Oak Tree poem, on the one hand, while underscoring the extreme infidelity of Potter’s opening sans Moor’s head.
border on the comic, were it not for a sense of urgency that is distinctly unhumorous, a restless anxiety that colors each of Orlando’s gestures. This unsettling effect is at least partially due to Potter’s camera work: each time Orlando paces in one direction, the camera tracks to the opposite side, making it seem as if the figure is physically struggling against our gaze, resisting its imperative to stay in one spot long enough for us to have a good look. This dystopic effect is further amplified as Orlando continues reciting from *Fairie Queen*, as the voice of an unseen narrator rises over the soundtrack in tones of compassionate melancholy.\(^\text{13}\)

There can be no doubt about his sex, despite the feminine appearance that every young man of the time aspires to. And there can be no doubt about his upbringing. Good food, education, a nanny, loneliness and isolation. And because this is England, Orlando would seem destined to have his portrait on the wall and his name in the history books. But when he …

Orlando fixes the viewer with a penetrating stare, interjecting: “That is, I.”\(^\text{14}\)

\(^{13}\) Tilda Swinton reads the part of the narrator in Potter’s adaptation. This is a departure from Woolf’s text, which gives every indication that the narrator is *not the protagonist* but a third party whose task is archiving Orlando’s adventures. Potter’s adaptive shift positions her protagonist seeing her own body move through the past, explaining its movements with introspection, poise, compassion. These types of narrations are most often provided, in other films, by people who are either dead (i.e., *The Jacket, Boys in the Hood*), or are looking back at their childhood with the wisdom of time (*Stand By Me, Rumblefish*). Potter’s *Orlando* seems to fall into the latter category.

\(^{14}\) In terms of breaking the theatrical fourth wall, Swinton and Potter collaborated on the concept of the protagonist speaking directly to the camera, according to Hollinger and Winterhalter. Noting that “direct address is the strongest single element Potter employs to inscribe [the] blurring of identities within the film,” Hollinger and Winterhalter describe the “extraordinary claims for the radical nature” of Potter’s deployment of direct address that have been made by contemporary film critics, although this trope was actually considered commonplace “in the sphere of avant-garde cinema from which Potter has emerged,” noting that Swinton hailed the technique as “Brechtian” (Winterhalter and Hollinger 2001: 246, Swinton as quoted in Dennis and Joan West 1993: 21). I concur with Cristina Degli-Esposti’s assertion that Potter’s use of direct address, which Degli-Esposti terms “the reverse look,” is a vital part of the “neo-baroque style” that Potter relies on “to rewrite the art of filmmaking” along with Humm’s observation that Swinton’s “constant looks to the camera reject any object status” that might be projected towards the protagonist by her viewers (Degli-Esposti 1996: 82-83, Humm 1997: 173). Of course, the technique of breaking the theatrical fourth wall through direct audience address can be traced beyond the works of Brecht to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, and classical figures who address the audience in witty “asides” – a fact to which Brecht alludes in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* (Brecht 1977: 6, 51). Bell cites Brecht’s deployment of actors speaking of themselves either in the past tense or in the third person, as well as Brecht’s habit of scripting in the director’s instructions to actors, and his tactic of instructing actors to speak directly to the audience.
... came into the world, he was looking for something else. Though heir to a name that meant power, land and property, surely, when Orlando was born, it wasn’t privilege he sought … but company.  

Let us set aside for a moment the fact that all of these lines are an utter departure from Woolf’s text. As I have mentioned, the first three minutes of Potter’s film contain at least a dozen modifications to Woolf’s Orlando, and while some of these alterations – Potter’s capitalizations, rewordings of titles, re-orderings of authorial status – might seem cosmetic, there are other revisions that substantially impact the story. The opening scene, for example, is exterior, expansive and literary (brightly lit and lyrical, with Orlando reciting poetry), while Woolf’s opening is interior, dark and unsettling (tucked inside his ancestral attic, Orlando enjoys a barbaric property ritual with a decapitated

“Like a frame breaking,” Bell explains, “performers ‘break the fourth wall’ between themselves and the audience, making observers aware they are being watched and that performers, in turn, are watching their own behavior” (2008: 203). Recent films that deploy such techniques include Monty Python and the Holy Grail (1975), or the scenes in Quentin Tarantino’s Kill Bill: Vol. 2 (2004), wherein Uma Thurman winks at the audience and speaks to them directly. Min Tian provides a specific discussion of the theoretical relationship between Brechtian disruptions of the fourth wall and techniques of Asian theater, which Brecht often cited as his inspiration (cf. Tian 2008: 46, 177).

15 While Woolf makes it clear that her “biographer” is not Orlando but some anonymous third party, the revised role of Orlando in Potter’s film makes her both narrator and narrated, biographer and protagonist. And these roles are not simply conflated; instead, they provide Orlando with a power of hindsight that did not exist in Woolf, as he addresses the viewer directly to entreat our empathy. Super important: put into text

16 Considering Potter’s elimination of the word “biography” from the title of her adaptation, I am hardly the first to observe that the opening shifts in her film change the narrative from a biography to an autobiography. But this is only one of many alterations that changes our technology for viewing Orlando. Suzanne Ferriss and Kathleen Waites suggest Potter’s new opening seeks to “overturn” the “thematic, conventional signifying systems” with which viewers are accustomed to viewing Orlando (1999: 111, emphasis mine). But their subsequent claim that Potter’s revisions to the opening enable “the spectator/reader to apprehend the ‘reality’ we perceive” is not fixed, but is instead “a construction fashioned by floating signifiers” strikes me as intellectually thin (1999: 111). For this rationale can only hold true for viewers who have actually read Woolf’s novel before seeing Potter’s film, and are thereby acquainted with the signifiers doing the floating. Also, it does not allow for the possibility that audience members might regard both bodies of work as continuations of a larger body of Orlando-lore. For some viewers, Potter’s film comprised their first and only exposure to Orlando; so that order of reality is, for them, the order of the day. But where Ferris and Waites truly swing wide of the mark is in their transposition of a unilateral set of “thematic, conventional signifying systems” onto an abstract projected receivership. As Walter Benjamin so succinctly emphasizes in “Task of the Translator,” any attempt to project an ideal receivership inevitably leaves something or someone out.
head). While Woolf’s initial descriptions of Orlando tumble out in binary collisions, Potter’s opening sequences are poised, polished, politically correct. Then, there is the matter of gender. While Woolf’s all-male Orlando begins His story as an aspiring Alexander seeking to conquer the world, the freckle-faced Swinton doesn’t want to conquer anyone – she simply wants to be our friend (“it wasn’t privilege he sought, but company”).

But the most striking alteration of all is Potter’s complete sanitization of the Moor’s head sequence from the tale. Naturally, her ejection of Woolf’s opening did not go unmarked by critics and scholars. In their critical essay, “Orlando’s Sister, Or Sally Potter Does Virginia Woolf in a Voice of Her Own,” Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter aptly describe Potter’s replacement of Orlando “rehearsing for manhood by slashing with a sword at a hanging Moor’s head,” with the protagonist reading from “a book of poetry, standing beneath the oak tree that serves as his inspiration.” And in his 1993 film review in The Nation, critic Stuart Klawans extended this general argument to characterize Potter’s ejection of the Moor’s head as “unfortunate,” suggesting her “squeamishness, political or otherwise, seems to have turned her away” from including the “telling detail […] with which Virginia Woolf so effectively introduced the protagonist” of her novel.

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17 Any conjecture as to why Potter eliminated the Moor’s head is speculative. Perhaps she thought the Moor’s head sequence would be too offensive for a cultivated audience, or she was afraid of the political backlash (and drop in box office sales) such depictions of racial cruelty would evoke, or feared that her projected audience would not be able to “identify” with the protagonist after witnessing such repulsive violence. Obviously, there was no legal mandate for Potter to remove the Moor’s head sequence from her film, and, as Stuart Klawans notes in his Nation article, the final production might have benefitted from it, as the scene at least would be in keeping with the protagonists ambitions and temperament (“A great English country house in the age of Elizabeth; a 16-year-old boy, sword in hand, dreaming of glory in all its guises; a Moor’s head, somewhat the worse for wear, dropping to the attic floor with a thunk, as Orlando strikes the trophy with a vagrant blow. Terrific – as Sally Potter’s Orlando would put it” [Klawans 1993: 77, emphasis mine]). Yet, even though we will never be able to truly say precisely why Potter eliminated the scene from her film, the effects of its deletion can be studied in detail.
Of course, Potter was not content with steam-cleaning the Moor’s incendiary visage from her opening sequence; she scrubbed many of Woolf’s racially charged characters from the adaptation, removing Orlando’s “blackamoor” serving woman (Grace Robinson), eliminating Rosina Pepita (the gypsy dancer), and erasing the reappearance of the Moor’s head later in the tale (70). Yet because Potter’s elimination of all xenophobic references from her adaptation is so complete, her most radical set of adaptive clinamen do not comprise her visible additions to the tale so much as the things that are not shown – elements that were held back, stifled, cut. In that sense, the triumphant grin of the Moor’s head is either recanted or denied – but for those who know that something is missing, the thoroughness of its rejection has the curious effect of underscoring our sense that the Moor’s head was significant, and its triumphant grin proliferates long after its most obvious markers have been obscured, much like the “Pandora’s Boxes” Laura Mulvey refers to in Fetishism and Curiosity, which gain, through their elimination or censorship, a potent political power as “ironic, empty signs” (1996: 157). Because the Moor’s head is banished from Potter’s adaptation so thoroughly, with such great finality, it swells to a larger narrative significance, suggesting the force of its omission sucks the entire sequence out of the immediate narrative opening and into the larger frame of abject discourse.

In terms of adaptive infidelity, Potter’s removal of the Moor’s head sequence cannot be undersold, as it initiates the film with a much different view of the protagonist, eliminating Woolf’s depictions of not only Orlando’s heartlessness, violence – but his

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18 Potter’s elimination of the Moor’s head sequence would obviously only be visible to insiders; viewers with an a priori experience of Woolf’s text. As Sophie Mayer suggests in The Cinema of Sally Potter, this is not always the case, and for many viewers Potter’s film might be the only contact they have with the Orlando story – making conclusions like Ferriss and Waites’s seem overly reductive or intentionally exclusive (Mayer 2009, Ferriss and Waites see: fn 20).
implicit endorsement of colonial aggression. If we consider the two Orlando as a whole unit or body of work, the fissure opened by Potter’s removal becomes a departure point for fresh critical evaluation, as her (re)visions in this regard do not delete the troubling head from the larger body of Orlando-work – she merely eliminates it from her own interpretation, thereby ensuring the missing head’s return as an object of discourse among those most invested in Orlando’s critical reception (Woolf scholars, Orlando devotees, adaptation theorists, film critics, etc.).

Ironically, Potter’s sanitization of the Moor’s head is precisely what pulls the larger act of its omission into the realm of abject discourse, as this omission fervently attempts to compel us away from the scene of abjection into more pleasant intersubjective realms. But this clearly does not happen. While Potter’s stylistic disavowal attempts to establish a protagonist unfettered by violent impulses towards Big Other – presenting a Good Orlando who is devoid of racism and transracial violence, those of us who know exactly what is missing immediately find her act of adaptive sanitization suspicious. Recalling Werner Herzog’s Grizzly Man, and that filmmaker’s vow to “protect” his viewers by holding back an audio recording of animal activist Tim Treadwell being eaten by bears, Potter’s large-scale excision of xenophobic sequences from her adaptation reads as phony, suspicious, patronizing – and interesting. Whether her efforts at sanitization are protective or conciliatory is a subjective call, but one thing is certain – her elimination of Woolf’s most profane references accomplishes little more than drawing our attention to them, as the adapter’s censorship makes us curious about what the film would have been like had she left those references intact.

Potter’s complete excision of the Moor’s head does more than eliminate its
discourse of abjection from her film, however; instead, it performs an odd translocation in which the viewer is now positioned in the spot formerly occupied by the Moor. Because the new Orlando seems hellbent on addressing us directly, looking squarely into the camera and repeatedly breaking the fourth wall, it is we who are positioned as Big Other. Rather than slash at our heads with his ancestral sword, however, this teary-eyed Orlando speaks to us courteously, intimately, gazing soulfully into our eyes and imploring us to be friends.19 Far from dispersing our sensations of abjection, there is something about Tilda Swinton sitting dejectedly atop a hill that radiates abjection: her downcast eyes, laughable hosiery, faltering hands. Orlando thus becomes the abject Thing, estranged and alienated – we view him and are agitated. While Potter reconstructs the beginning of her narrative in a manner that flips us into the position Orlando’s other, she somehow manages to place her protagonist in the role of abject deject. And even as we are invited to join Orlando in friendship, those of us who are in the know can feel the tug of the Moor’s head distracting us, as if the Thing is still regarding us from a distance, outside our sacred circle, triumphantly grinning at Orlando and ourselves, insisting it has not been properly put to rest, or has nowhere else to go. Perhaps this is its rightful home, after all, and we are the ones who don’t belong in the role of Big Other. Not that we had

19 On this score, Leslie Higgins and Mary-Christine Leps, in their essay entitled, “From Contingency to Essence: Fictions of Identity in Novels and Films” remark: “Never [in Mrs. Dalloway or Orlando] is the reader presented with an unobstructed view of the characters or their situations; a narrative presence mediates the reader’s apprehension and calls attention to the constructedness of life forms—biological, social, and biographical” (2000: 278). Film critic Stanley Kauffman, writing in The New Republic, goes so far as to cite Potter’s “unobstructed,” unmediated view of Orlando as the apex of Potter’s version, suggesting that “Potter’s decision to have Orlando occasionally play to the camera is in fact the closest that the film comes to the invitations of the book. The way that Potter takes Orlando through an immense maze in a formal garden, to emerge radically changed, has humor and verve. (1993: 27). But ultimately, Kauffmann finds that “Tilda Swinton as Orlando is insufficient,” objecting that although “Swinton has subtlety – her line readings are sometimes almost chordal, freighted with more than one meaning […] she has no whiff of fire” (27). For Kauffmann, “this is a drastic loss in a character who, as male or female, goes lovemaking through the ages,” as “Swinton’s declarations of passion – for people, for poetry, for life – come right from the refrigerator” (27).
any choice in the transaction.

In addition to her ejection of the Moor’s head sequence, Potter’s opening makes other key shifts that alter our perception of her protagonist’s gender. Many of these alterations revolve around Swinton’s point-blank assertions that she is actually a man. I am hardly the first to remark on the preposterousness of Swinton’s truth claim. Observing that Woolf comes down hard on the facticity of Orlando’s initial masculinity, Hollinger and Winterhalter remark that Swinton-as-Orlando is so “transparently female” that she neutralizes “the novel’s introductory claims about [the protagonist’s] indisputable maleness” (2004: 240). The preposterousness of Swinton’s truth claim thus deflects the viewer from questioning “how the construct of masculinity is produced” into the question of whether Swinton can “fulfill the male role” (240). Thus, the film opens by making us wonder what it means that Swinton is trying to convince us she is a man, as opposed to Woolf’s effort to thrust us into confronting the xenophobic hostility of an aristocratic boy whose primary occupation is ratifying his position in the patriarchal order. Conversely, Potter’s Orlando is never an accomplice to the patriarchal order; in fact, she seems to stand in opposition to it from the start – a position we have few problems endorsing.

I began this section of the chapter by discussing Orlando’s opening credits, arguing that Potter’s revisions reprioritize the hierarchies of authorship while claiming fidelity to their source. I then analyzed Potter’s omission of a Moor’s head sequence from the opening scene, suggesting this ejection initiates her version of Orlando with a character who is more sensitive and urbane; a protagonist who wants to be our friend instead of chopping Moors’ heads; a person who wants to conquer poetry instead of heathen enemies. Following the arguments of Hollinger and Winterhalter, I examined Potter’s
modifications to the narrator’s function, switching the voice from a third party “biographer” to the voice of Tilda Swinton looking back at herself. Citing the ways in which these alterations combine with Potter’s deletion of the Moor’s head to reorient the subject-object relation that initiates Woolf’s text, I suggested this reorientation places *Orlando*’s viewers in the abject space that was formerly inhabited by the Moor’s head. As Higgins and Leps observe in “From Contingency to Essence,” the outcomes of these *clinamen* sublimate the protagonist’s masculinity and alter the moral-ethical lens through which we regard Orlando’s sex change later in the tale.

I hasten to add that while these changes significantly swerve the set-up for Orlando’s sexual transfiguration, which becomes a transformation of gender, we must avoid jumping to the conclusion that her adaptation does not live up to Virginia Woolf’s political aims. Although Jane Marcus and Marjorie Garber have both argued as much, the truth is quite different, regardless of the attacks of old guard feminists who derided her film as “disastrous,” “gratuitous” and “desecrating” (Marcus and Robin Morgan as quoted in Hollinger and Winterhalter 2001: 240). As is often the case with adaptations of “classics,” the most vociferous indictments of critics tend to echo the exclusionary biases of their own political agenda, thinly masked by a professed desire to preserve some kind of “legitimate reading.” This fact seems doubly true when the new version bears the potential to negatively impact the preservation of an institutionalized status quo.

Clearly, Potter focalizes our first view of Orlando’s sexuality in a way that Woolf does not, but exactly what these alterations mean on a political level can only become clear when they are juxtaposed against the aspects of Woolf’s text that Potter *preserves*, inasmuch as Potter’s non-violent, feminine Orlando remains Elizabethan, wealthy and
white, a person of great privilege (whether she seeks it or not), deeply educated and cultivated. If we restrict ourselves to analyzing the beginning of Potter’s film, the most visible political impact of her extreme acts of fidelity and infidelity ultimately come down to this: in the midst of all the sweetness and light, with this female Orlando who so desperately craves our friendship, the absence of the Moor’s head keeps tapping us on the shoulder, reminding us that the abject is lurking somewhere in the vicinity, rendered all the more recognizable by the contours of its absence.

In the next section of the chapter, I approach the “sex change” sequence in Potter’s adaptation to analyze how the protagonist’s lack of masculine aggression is positioned as the chief quality that causes her to turn away from living as a man and into living as a recognizable woman. As I suggested in the previous section, Potter’s essentialist approach towards masculinity (as the root of violence and the problem for which Orlando’s “sex change” is the solution) diminishes the complexity of the source text’s sex change scenes. But in the final knell, attacking Potter for creating a protagonist who is less masculine and more feminine than Woolf’s seems far less productive than exploring the questions raised by the fact that Potter’s Orlando is a woman from the start. What kind of woman is she, and what does she hope to gain by pretending she is a man? And what happens when the protagonist grows increasingly feminized, becoming a different woman altogether, not hiding in her role as an aristocratic fop but becoming increasingly feminist and even (post)feminist? Does this change her role in abject

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20 In her essay, “Envisioning/Revisioning Woolf in Film at the End of the Twentieth Century,” Michelle Milmitsch notes that Potter’s omission of the Moor’s head sequence in favor of presenting “Orlando under the Oak Tree, attempting to compose poetry” is a modification that supports “the war-related motivation Potter gives to Orlando’s eighteenth-century sex change” (2000: 286). Leslie Higgins and Mary-Christine Leps come to a similar conclusion in their assertion that “[Potter’s] Orlando becomes a woman because he will not take up arms and kill another” (2000: 281). I can only reemphasize that Potter’s Orlando was never a “he” in the first place — she was always Tilda Swinton.
discourse? These are the questions I explore in closely reading the outcomes of Potter’s adaptations to Orlando’s sex change scene.

Salaam, Constantinople! Orlando’s Unbelievable Transformation in Arab Land

Aside from the fact that Potter shifts the location of Orlando’s sex change from Constantinople to Uzbekistan, the sequencing of the protagonist’s sojourn in the East follows the basic pattern of Woolf’s novel.21 Depressed by her lover’s betrayal and rejected as an inconsequential writer by poet Nick Greene, Orlando jettisons the stifling grasp of England in favor of Faraway Lands. But instead of asking King Charles I for an appointment as Ambassador Extraordinary, Orlando turns for some inexplicable reason to King William of Orange (Thom Hoffman), a regent who existed somewhat further down the temporal line.22 For this modified scene, Potter decks each character out totally in white, right down to the ostrich feathers in their oversized tricorne hats. Tracking this downy flock of courtiers through pristine tulip gardens, the frosty lighting combines with their raiment to underscore an overarching aesthetic of whiteness. With the chilly hint of a lisp, King William turns to Orlando and murmurs: “Once the balance of power has been established here in Europe, we must certainly turn our attention to the East.” Plucking a purple blossom from a flowerbed, William adds: “I fear you will be quite starved for

21 While Woolf’s transitions between her protagonist’s life-phases are often uncertain and ambiguous, Potter’s dexterity with quick-change editing techniques gives the film’s time-changes an exhilarating velocity, trimming her plotline into a “lean, mean machine” that holds our interest despite our incredulity at its fantastic storyline. It is due to the clockwork precision of the scenes leading up to Orlando’s journey to Constantinople, for example, that the tightly-wound sexual chemistry of Orlando and Sasha (Charlotte Valandrey) works with the compressed duration of their love affair to make their interaction more compelling than Woolf does.

22 It is common knowledge that King Charles I lived from 1600 to 1649, while King William of Orange (William III) lived from 1650 to 1702. Why Potter elected to stage Orlando’s journey East more than 50 years later than Woolf remains as much a mystery as why she changed the location of his sex change to Khiva from Constantinople.
conversation and amusement in such a remote corner of the world [...] However, I believe they have an interest in *horticulture*.” Pausing over the word, relishing its technicality, its science, its roots in Western civilization, King William declares: “I’d like you to bring them some tulips.”

The scene of frozen whiteness fades to black, opening suddenly on a scene full of dust and disorder, as replete with signifiers of *foreignness* as an old Cecil B. DeMille movie (cf: *The Arab* [1915], *Samson and Delilah* [1949], *The Crusades* [1935]). From the dusty recesses of a crowded bazaar, the camera tracks across a host of “robed and turbaned” figures, toothless and haggling, all shouting in the same stylized Arabic bickering as the shifty characters in Carroll Ballard’s *Black Stallion* (1979), or Steven Spielberg’s interminable *Indiana Jones* series (1981, 1984, 1989, 2008). From a precarious perch atop an obligatory camel, Tilda Swinton is surrounded by an ambiguous horde of Arabs; the same type of characterization Lina Khatib describes in *Filming the Modern Middle East*; that dark-skinned crowd whose faces function as an abstract backdrop for the English-speaking protagonists whose actions are central to the narrative. This sense of *foreignness* is supported through a number of aesthetic cues: an unfamiliar, exotic tongue (presuming “we” do not speak Arabic), dark beards, craggy skin, broken teeth, wild hand gestures. These are the denizens of the dusty fantasyland Jack Shaheen terms “Arab-Land” – that Extraordinary East to which Orlando is now

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23 Following Edward Said’s work in *Orientalism*, Khatib interrogates the juxtaposition of East vs. West in contemporary film, and examines the tendency of films like *The Mummy* (1999) to portray “Egyptian Arabs […] as ignorant, cowardly, and *barbaric* (for instance, being referred to as ‘smelly like camels’), while American characters in contrast are portrayed as ‘civilized’ (being composed, acting logically and bravely” in the face of danger (2006: 5, emphasis mine). Recalling Bhabha’s notions on the Western depiction of Eastern others as “barbarians,” Khatib’s concept of the “dogmas of Orientalism” seems familiar.
Ambassador Extraordinary.\textsuperscript{24} As the pensive, tight-lipped Orlando is guided into Khiva (an ancient Uzbekhi city that Potter chose to substitute for the Constantinople of Woolf’s novel), a gallery of Arabic specimens yammer and gesture from windows, alcoves, colonnades, cracks, doorways, and other shadowy recesses. Abandoning her camel, Orlando is led on foot through a breathless cliché of misty mosques, prayer rooms laden with blue rugs, and vast ceremonial expanses that resound with the clattering of her entourage’s heels. Thus far, Potter’s depictions of Arabic others are fairly similar to Woolf’s: the sumptuously barbaric counterpoint to Orlando’s frosty veneer of civilization, populated by a faceless horde depicted at turns as dangerous, volatile, laughable, inscrutable and dishonest.

This paradigm changes when Orlando meets The Khan (Lothaire Bluteau). Although this character never appeared in Woolf’s novel, he plays a serious role in Potter’s adaptation. Always composed and regal, The Khan stands in contrast to Potter’s ungainly Orlando, who stumbles through Arab Land in implausible brocades and wigs. The Khan is more politically savvy than Orlando, as well. During their first meeting, he wryly observes: “It has been said to me that the English make a habit of collecting … countries.” To which Orlando fumblingly responds: “Oh, we have no designs upon your sovereignty at all […] No, none at all” (1994: 32). Charming, witty and elegant, Potter’s

\textsuperscript{24} Asking us to “visualize the \textit{reel Arab}” of mainstream Hollywood, Shaheen comments on the “black beard, headdress, dark sunglasses” and accoutrements of Arab-ness in blockbuster films, with their background images of “limousine[s], harem maidens, oil wells, camels” (2009: 8). Describing how “the early 1900s served up dancing harem maidens and ugly Arabs [who] ride camels, brandish scimitars, kill one another, and drool over the Western heroine, ignoring their own women,” Shaheen detects few changes between earlier depictions of Muslims and the “contemporary ‘Arab-land’” of mainstream Western film, which is “populated with cafes and clubs like the ‘Shish-Ka-Bob Café’ and ‘The Pink Camel Club,’ located in made-up places with names like ‘Lugash,’ ‘Othar’ [and] ‘Hagreeb’” (14). According to Shaheen, this new improved Arab-Land still revolves around a “desert locale” replete with “an oasis, oil wells, palm trees, tents [and] fantastically ornate palaces” (14). It is difficult to view Potter’s depiction of a sixteenth-century Khiva as anything else (14).
Khan is a far cry from DeMille’s hordes of Arabic others. Potter’s depictions of Khiva still resemble Shaheen’s Arab Land, with its braying camels, shimmering sand dunes, and mesmerizing mosques – but she depicts The Khan as the only noble character in a film conspicuously populated by despotic British nobles. Up until the Khan’s appearance, we are led to believe that all aristocrats are greedy, self-obsessed overlords who do not merit their considerable social privileges (this alone refutes the critics who accuse Potter of watering down Woolf’s attacks on the British caste system). While Potter admittedly offers an altered version of Woolf’s racial politics, her film is still politically progressive, and to some extent even exceeds Woolf’s modernist attacks against patriarchal British aristocracy by depicting an Eastern Other with more integrity than his Western counterparts. In addition, The Khan possesses considerably more political power than any of Woolf’s ethnic others (Grace Robinson, The Moor’s Head, Rosina Pepita, The Gypsies).

In a gesture of friendship, the Khan invites Orlando on a falconing trip. Standing outside a group of flapping tents, the new friends extoll the virtues of one another’s countries. With a similar ambiance as the film’s opening, which took place under a sprawling oak tree, this scene is suffuse with light – but it is the light of white sand and pale sky, far from the lush meadows of Orlando’s opening. Once more, Potter’s camera is stationed below the line of action, making the characters seem like stage players whose gestures and oratory are subordinate to the sweeping sand dunes and sky. Orlando and

25 Potter thereby reverses the representational paradigm detailed by Lina Khatib, jettisoning Hollywood depictions of Arabs as “ignorant, cowardly, and barbaric” – the same qualities that Potter projects onto her cast of British nobles. Khatib describes the standard depiction of “The West […] not only as the diametrical opposite of the East, but also as its protector and carer” (5). It is in those terms that Potter shifts Orlando, and the Khan becomes Orlando’s protector and carer, the doctor of her soul.
The Khan raise their glasses, toasting everything from their countries to their women. But Orlando cannot hold his liquor, his emotions go to his head, he collapses in a heap.

The next scene fades up from black to reveal Orlando dressed in white Arabic pants and a turban, her face gentle in contemplation. This quiet moment of self reflection is interrupted by the arrival of Archduke Harry, who appears at Orlando’s lodgings decked in full British regalia. From the moment Orlando’s eyes meet the Archduke’s, we realize the extent to which Orlando has been estranged from her own culture. She now stares into the soul of England with the eyes of the Other, a stare that cuts through all of Harry’s pretentions and posturing. At that moment, Harry is an interloper, as far removed from Orlando’s lived experience as a creature from another planet, whose words, manners and customs are completely incomprehensible. Wheedling Orlando into an official commemoration of her coronation as a Duke, the Archduke insists “there must be a party – though of course one must demonstrate the gravity of an investiture […] A large party – food and entertainment […] But, of course, you know the local customs” (1994: 36).

Orlando assents to having the party, and the appropriate arrangements are made. But The Khan – who is the only guest Orlando cares about – arrives to the celebration late, and when he does arrive, he brushes off the Archduke’s genuflections and turns abruptly to Orlando:

KHAN: I was warned that Englishmen would be dangerous for me, but I would like to give you an opportunity to prove this wrong.

(The ARCHDUKE appears behind ORLANDO, brandishing a gun.

ORLANDO calmly puts a hand on the ARCHDUKE’s arm.)

ORLANDO: Let me introduce you. This is Archduke Harry from England.

KHAN: Delighted. Orlando … our enemies are at the City Wall. Will you help?

ORLANDO: (Slowly) You wish me to take arms …?

KHAN: Surely Orlando, you, an Englishman, are not afraid?

ARCHDUKE: (Indignant) Sir!
At this pivotal moment, Potter’s leading paradigm begins to re-solidify in a familiar manner as she underscores the common bond between the Archduke and the Khan: the patriarchal bond of masculinity and violence. Painting the Archduke with the same brush as the rest of the British monarchy, Potter comes down hard on this note: as men of power, the Archduke and the Khan share an unspoken connection that separates their world from Orlando’s. They are “real” men, and, as such, are quite capable of killing other men, a murderous impulses that overcomes even the deepest rifts of race and class. And it is precisely this shared desire – the desire of men to kill other men – that Potter depicts as the tipping point for Orlando’s change from “man” into a woman.

Struggling across the ramparts, deafened by the burst of cannon fire, Orlando and Harry meet the Khan as bullets ricochet from the walls. The Khan graciously approaches Orlando, arms outstretched, clapping him on the back and saying only: “Brother.” It’s a crucial line, of course, as we long ago concluded that Potter’s Orlando can never be anyone’s brother, let alone their brother-in-arms. Standing nervously next to Harry, Orlando does her best to act brave, as Harry sports a malevolent grin. War is his world. He is at home in it, even happy.

A figure appears on the walls uttering a battle cry. Orlando draws a pistol, then hesitates. Harry pulls the trigger of his own pistol, there is the clap of powder, and the marauder falls to the ground, writhing in pain. But when Orlando attempts to soothe the fallen raider, Harry objects:

ARCHDUKE: Leave him! Leave him.
ORLANDO: But this is a dying man!
ARCHDUKE: He is not a man, he is the enemy.
It is precisely this moment of masculine aggression that Potter presents as the impetus for Orlando’s “sex change.” Confronted with the Archduke’s demand to ignore a dying man, Orlando turns to the camera and gazes directly at the viewer with “dark questioning eyes” – a reverse look that does not so much invite the audience to empathize with Orlando’s predicament as it requests us to agree with Orlando that the Archduke’s position is untenable, barbaric, and morally bankrupt (Potter 1994: 40). Because it so clearly invites us to join forces with Orlando against the Archduke, this reverse look is nothing less than an invitation for us to take Orlando’s side in rebelling against patriarchal oppression.

As the camera cuts to Orlando stumbling down dimly lit streets towards home, it suggests we are following Orlando away from the patriarchal injunction to kill, heading to his change of sex. I am hardly the first scholar to remark on this set-up; according to Hollinger and Winterhalter, Orlando’s sex change is “prompted by Orlando’s recognition of history’s imbrication of masculinity and warfare,” particularly as the horror of this aggression is positioned in “the carnage of the battle scenes [Orlando] witnesses in Turkey” (2001: 240). Aside from the fact that Orlando does not witness this imbrication of masculinity and war in Turkey, but in Uzbekistan, I generally concur with Hollinger and Winterhalter, with the caveat that Orlando’s “sex change” is not a change of sex – it is as a change of gender.

The sex change scene begins with a medium shot of the protagonist naked, asleep. Morning. Her eyes flicker open. She stares across a pile of pillows with the sudden recognition (and resignation) of a person who has just experienced a life altering event: “ahhh, so that happened yesterday … well, nothing can change that.” An evocative rush of music mingles with the rhythmic voices of women, distant yet intimate. Orlando gazes
across her coverlets, eyes resigned, soft, even sad – but there is also knowledge in her look. With each physical gesture, the music grows a beat louder. Orlando removes her wig. The voices rise. A cascade of red hair tumbles down. The voices rise again. Orlando emerges from bed and tosses her wig aside. The camera lingers on the wig. We can see its infrastructure, its pale ribs and the implausible interlacement of elastic: the wig is a ridiculous contraption, as absurd and pointless as the institutionalized vagaries of gender.

Orlando casts off her ruffled shirt, and the camera focuses on a golden chalice of water. Reaching for the chalice, golden reflections dance across its rim. Water trickles through Orlando’s fingers, and the air is alive with motes of dust, shimmering, catching the golden light, refracting it everywhere. We hear the splash of water as the patriarchal injunction for us to revel in a bloodbath (of war), which Orlando experienced just the night before, is transformed into an invitation to take a bath, enjoy the water, cleanse ourselves of battle’s filth. Water drips from Orlando’s face as she strikes a three-quarter profile, looking into a golden keyhole mirror. The camera shifts once more, and we are gazing at Orlando in the center of the mirror, gazing at the reflection of her own naked body at the same moment we see her nakedness for the first time. She stares lovingly at her body, then says: “same person, no difference at all … just a different sex.”

Of course, there is nothing much different about Orlando’s sex – we are simply seeing her naked for the first time. Aside from having no clothes, nothing else about her has changed, no matter what the character or the filmmaker has asserted to the contrary. The camera has simply confirmed what we knew all along, that Tilda Swinton is among the most ravishing women in the world. Vanished is Woolf’s mythical sequence, with its masculine Truth bossing folks around, and The Horrid Sisters seeking only to obstruct
Truth’s commands. Recalling Fellini’s professionally sculpted latex penis and breasts for the Hermaphrodite in *Fellini-Satyricon*, Potter adds nothing on a visual level to assert Orlando was “actually” a man; no tell-tale marks of a transsexual event, no evidence of surgical subtractions (scars, pits, concave surfaces) or additions (silicone, hydraulic implants, Botox). Nothing about Swinton’s anatomy before or after this transformative moment indicates she was or will be a man. She simply claims to have made a change of sex, when all our senses assert that she has not. She has always been a woman. The primary difference, following her dramatic change of gender, is that Orlando will clothe herself in recognizably feminine Western attire for the remainder of the film. Up until that point, for unspecified reasons, she has been wearing the clothes of an Elizabethan man.

Gone is the biographer’s feeble attempt to divert our eyes from the “odious” facticity of Orlando’s sex, along with their assertions that the act of changing sex – and the sexual apparatus in general – is a topic fit more for doctors than writers. But because Orlando is not actually changing sex, those interjections are not necessary, thereby begging the question: what does it matter that Orlando was never truly a man, and therefore never...

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26 In an essay, entitled, “The Mirror Didn’t Crack: Costume Drama and Gothic Horror in Sally Potter’s *Orlando,*” Sophie Mayer suggests that Orlando “becomes a woman when she has to enter into the socialized discourse of dressing for her peers,” and concludes that “clothed or unclothed […] transgressing/blurring gender boundaries and adhering to them, the presence of the female body [in *Orlando*] is a problem” (2008: 42, emphasis Mayer’s). She also notes that Swinton’s nakedness becomes a symbol for the “making-public” of Potter’s own queer sexuality and feminist theory, and “her nakedness is the film’s” (43). But Mayer’s logic is flawed in one regard: the fact is that Swinton’s body, naked or not, never transgresses or blurs anything. There is nothing upsetting, destabilizing, discomforting or unorthodox about Swinton’s naked form; every contour is lovingly caressed by Potter’s camera. Mayer is also technically incorrect in suggesting Orlando becomes a woman when she begins dressing “for her peers” – as if the film’s viewers truly do not recognize Swinton as a woman before the costume change. If nothing else, Swinton’s womanhood first becomes recognizable at the moment she stands before us naked – not when she begins dressing again. And rather than transgress or blur, Swinton’s naked femininity is presented as pleasing; a long-anticipated balm for the gendered itch that had no scratch – a dissatisfaction she felt as a woman, not as a man. No matter how emphatically Swinton and Potter exhort us that Orlando is “a different sex,” Potter’s only “other” choice is also womanhood.
underwent a change of sex? To be sure, there are all manner of ways in which Potter could have indicated Orlando’s alleged change of sex. The camera might, for example, have panned across Orlando’s genitalia as they appear to swell, shrink, take on all manner of shapes and configurations. Or the change might have taken place in a blinding flash, obscuring Orlando’s private parts in a blur of light, then revealing a vagina. Perhaps Orlando could have looked into the same mirror and, in one of those celebrated reverse looks, she could have talked us through the change: “Goodness gracious, I am becoming a woman now, my breasts are growing bigger, my penis is disappearing.” There is no shortage of narrative arrangements that Potter might have deployed to indicate Orlando’s sex change – and any of them would seem more plausible than Tilda Swinton simply looking at us declaring she has changed her sex. But Orlando simply makes the claim that its protagonist is now the woman we knew she was in the first place, and leaves it at that.27

Almost. But as Orlando stands before us naked, a woman from head to toe, Potter’s camera lovingly caresses Swinton’s supple frame, panning down her breasts and nipples, across a mound of red pubic hair, over a slightly tilted foot.28 Potter’s is not merely revealing the facticity of Orlando’s sex; she is embracing it, exploring it, loving it. Thus, Mayer observes that Orlando’s sex change takes place “in a stylized, languorous mood, both naturalized and fantastic, with dust motes suggesting both shooting in natural light and a fairy godmother’s magical powder” (2008: 42). Of course, these are all inferences on Mayer’s part – these fairy godmothers and magical powders. We could also state the presence of dust motes “suggests” Orlando’s apartment is in need of a cleaning. But what would be the point in that? The image we have is Tilda Swinton naked in a swirl of glittering dust. Isn’t that enough?

27 Critics have compared Swinton’s pose during the (s)exchange scene to Botticelli’s Birth of Venus. In “The Mirror Didn’t Crack: Costume Drama and Gothic Horror,” Mayer claims Orlando’s posing “nakedly before the mirror” refers to “the body politics of Botticelli’s Venus” (2008: 42). Humm similarly believes that “the scene where Orlando surveys her naked female form […] echoes Botticelli’s Birth of Venus” (Humm 173).
while Woolf’s biographer dismissed the brief interlude of Orlando’s sexual ambiguity as odious, eschewing any graphic description of Orlando’s genitalia and quitting the scene as quickly as possible, Potter arrives a similar destination without faltering over sexual ambiguity at all. Like Woolf’s protagonist, Potter’s Orlando is now a ravishing woman – of course. She was ravishing even when she was dressed in the preposterous attire of an Elizabethan fop. But she was a woman from the start.

Because Potter made such a big deal about professing fidelity to Woolf’s text, one can only wonder what inspired her to disappear the epic moment of Orlando’s sexual ambiguity, the sequence Woolf populated with so many mythical characters? Does her rejection of this moment imply that representing sexual ambiguity on a visual level is too fraught, complicated, repellant, obvious, boring, corny, unnecessary or implausible that any attempt to explicitly tackle it is nothing more than a side argument? In that sense, Potter’s deletion does resemble Woolf’s move in Orlando – but instead of “rushing” the scene of Orlando’s sex change, Potter skips it completely. She might not think it is odious (we will never know). But we do know beyond the shadow of a doubt that Potter could have depicted Orlando’s sex change graphically. Things could have been different, but were not.

Although we can say little with veracity regarding Potter’s motives for scrubbing Woolf’s sex change sequence, there is much to say about the results, particularly from the vantage point of feminism and the film’s polemic stance on patriarchal force relations. While Potter frames the misanthropic tendencies of warlike males as the cause of Orlando’s sex change, if we agree Orlando does not actually change her sex, is that the barbarism of masculine aggression causes Orlando to stop dressing as a man and become
a more effeminate woman. This raises an important question: if Orlando is not a different sex, but a different gender – in short, a different kind of woman – then what kind of woman is she?

The answer is simple: she’s a 1990s British feminist, just like Sally Potter – and as such, she is the inheritor of the feminist legacy writers like Woolf fought so hard to establish. Indeed, Woolf’s book and Potter’s film are both feminist projects, inasmuch as they critique the arbitrary vagaries of patriarchal normatization. But Potter adds a layer of political complexity that Woolf could not have foreseen in the 1920s. As Sophie Mayer observes, fixing Swinton’s body at the “center of controversy: too feminine to be read as male in the first part of the film,” ultimately makes the character “even more troubling” than she is in Woolf’s rendition (2008: 43). Yet, rather than jeopardize our tenuous hold on the “conventions of signification,” as Ferriss and Waites maintain, Orlando’s sudden recognizability as a woman comes as something of a relief: now she can be the hip, sexy feminist we knew she was all along. And because this new, all-girl Orlando is the symbolic proxy for progressive feminists – and the Archduke Harry is the symbolic proxy for Western patriarchy – their moral-ethical collision represents nothing less than the twentieth-century showdown between patriarchy and feminism. The argument is one of value, marriage and property. Harry wants it all, and Orlando wants nothing to do with it.

Although I do not concur with Mayer’s assessment that Woolf’s novel is “the (dis)embodiment of a feminist literature,” I generally agree with her assertion that Potter’s film is compatible with the mainstream feminism of the 1990s (2008: 43). I also cannot concur with Mayer’s proposition that whether Orlando is “clothed or unclothed,” the protagonist is perpetually engaged in the act of “transgressing/blurring gender boundaries and adhering to them” (2008: 42). As a woman disguising herself as a male, Potter’s protagonist passes as a man, and enjoys all the privileges thereof: no transgression there. And when she stands naked, nothing is transgressed or blurred; she is a lovely, naked woman. It is only when Potter’s protagonist emerges into patriarchal culture as a feminist that the trouble starts.
From the moment Orlando begins dressing in women’s clothing, Potter’s protagonist snaps into focus as a contemporary feminist in a Victorian body. Having become visibly feminine, she can fight to signify for herself in the type of entrenched patriarchal culture that was reviled by second-wave feminists (Kate Millet, Mary Daly and Andrea Dworkin): the dominant order of *men*, whose singular aim is oppressing the existence of women. The fact that Orlando becomes abjectified by patriarchal culture at the very moment she returns from Khiva and assumes her mantle as Potter’s feminist ideal underscores this conclusion. Following her ascension into recognizable femininity (and feminism), Orlando’s property is seized, she is no longer allowed to travel, and she is told, above all else, that women *must not write*. But while Orlando fights to overcome her socioeconomic abjection and set the terms for her intellectual and physical emancipation, this specific point bears repeating: Orlando is *never abjectified as a sexually ambiguous character* precisely because she is never depicted as sexually ambiguous. Although Potter follows Woolf in exploring the ambiguities of *gender* and the vicissitudes of actualizing a feminist speaking position in a culture fraught with masculine aggression, Potter’s Orlando is nothing less than her feminine vision of a feminist ideal.

**Shifting Orlando and Her Daughter into the Future of Feminist Filmmaking, Even**

In the previous section, I suggested Sally Potter depicts her protagonist’s alleged sex change as impelled by a patriarchal mandate for men to kill other men, a mandate of male-on-male violence presented as the common thread that binds all men together. Rebelling against this mandate, Orlando makes her transition into being a more
recognizable woman within the standards of her time. Following her transition, which is primarily a change in appearance, Orlando begins to rebel against the injustice of the patriarchal order with greater energy than she did when she was enjoying the privileges patriarchy can bestow. Asserting that her “sexual” transformation is a change of gender rather than a change of sex, I detailed the increasing socioeconomic abjection that Orlando faces from the moment she jettisons her life as a female transvestite, emerging as Potter’s feminist ideal. The fact that Potter felt Orlando could not embody the same feminist ideal as a female transvestite is something of a point – but due to space constraints, it must be a point for another time.

In my conclusion to this chapter, I will analyze the gender trouble that faces Orlando as she moves through a milieu of abjection into her life as a queer mother whose daughter is the inheritor of Potter’s feminist ideal. I would like to begin the section by calling attention to the narrative differences between Orlando’s departure from the East and her arrival in the West. Because Potter depicts Orlando’s return to England swiftly, without any significant interaction between Orlando and the characters described in Woolf’s text (the gypsies, Captain Bartolus, etc.), Potter’s protagonist enters her life as a recognizable woman with no mention made of her missing girlhood and its relevance to that life.

This discrepancy seems particularly critical in light of our knowledge that Potter’s Orlando has been a woman all along, a fact that implies she had some sort of girlhood in the past, however stultified, conflicted or complex. Thus, Potter’s protagonist moves

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30 In Woolf’s novel, Orlando’s passage back to England on The Enchanted Lady, as well as her time among the gypsies, consistently reiterates the fact that she entered womanhood as someone who had no experience of girlhood; thus, she enters it like a child discovering a pleasant toy cabinet or mystery box. In particular, Potter’s deletion of Orlando’s time among the gypsies raised questions about her fidelity to the text among Woolf scholars. Ultimately, Marcus criticizes Potter for taking Woolf’s “scathing critique of English imperialism and racism and the repression of sexual identity—and reduc[ing] it to tapioca pudding” (1994:
into her life as a recognizable woman without the same level of circumspection as Woolf’s Orlando, who must re-learn all sorts of things she never learned as a girl – precisely because she never was one. Be that as it may, the sudden immersion of the cinematic Orlando from a life of female transvestism into wearing dresses and performing femininity in a patriarchally sanctioned mode feels no less disruptive than the sexual travails of her literary counterpart. From the moment Potter’s Orlando begins dressing as a woman, she embarks on a comical battles with an onslaught of gowns, corsets, wigs and make-up. Encountering the same social obstacles as her namesake, she is attacked by creditors and lawyers, forced to square off with sexual ostracism, punitive legal measures, financial insecurity and preposterous gendered fears. This fact alone makes it difficult to concur with Marcus, Halberstam, Garber, who have suggested at turns that nothing is troubling or transgressive about Potter’s film. While her adaptation was clearly provocative enough to impel these scholars into attack mode, what we can take away from the heat of their criticism is not so much that Potter’s film was as politically incendiary as Woolf’s novel (it was), but that it stirred up trouble in different directions. As I hope to demonstrate, it was not so much Potter’s cinematic representation of Orlando that produced this trouble, but her representations of the things that traditionally

11-13). According to Marcus, Potter’s Orlando is nothing more than “a sweet white movie taken to the toothache level,” wherein the aspect of “whiteness appears to be so important to Potter that she overdoes the fetishism factor, in the meantime ignoring the ways in which Woolf’s novel engages with race-ing the Other” (11-13). While it might be true that Potter’s gypsies are incidental props – human vehicles whose sole function is to convey Orlando to her next place of residence, and are relegated to a subordinate function that places them in the silenced company of Potter’s other dark-skinned Others (the Moor’s head, Grace Robinson and Rosina Pepita) – Marcus glosses over the fact that Potter’s thoroughness in sanitizing xenophobic images from her adaptation actually serves to draw our attention towards them – particularly those of us who maintain a political/libidinal investment in the raw or incendiary edge of Woolf’s work. Similarly, Marcus’s contention that Potter’s attempts to squeeze Woolf’s troubling descriptions of “blackamoors,” gypsies and “niggers” into the sensibilities of a politically correct Happy Valley removes the Woolf’s critique of colonial chauvanism is overly reductive; Potter’s film does critique imperialism and repression; she merely does it differently way than Woolf, through the implicit ridicule of the Archduke Harry, for example, or her addition of the articulate, anti-imperialist Khan.
depicted female bodies can do when culturally emancipated by feminist politics. In short, it was not Orlando’s body but her body politics – and a specific mode of feminist body politics at that – which caused all the trouble in contemporary critical circles. And most of this trouble seemed to center on the fact that Sally Potter’s protagonist had sex with a man and gave birth to a daughter.

From the moment Orlando arrives in England, Potter depicts her as a second-wave activist who, although she is intimidated by the prospect of financial divestiture because she has become a woman without a male heir, nevertheless spurns Archduke Harry’s proposals of marriage, rebukes several famous writers for their chauvinism towards women, and decides to fly under her own banner rather than subordinate herself to the whims of a male benefactor. But it would be counterproductive to reduce Orlando to an example of second-wave agitprop. Indeed, Potter’s film generated some of its greatest heat among proponents of second-wave feminism. Jane Marcus, for example, whose essay in The Women’s Review of Books began by suggesting Potter was ignorant of Orlando’s “cult status in lesbian and gay culture” (1994: 11). Recalling the extent to which “Orlando’s slippery sexuality” is valued by the gay community, Marcus railed: “How dare [Potter] represent Orlando as merely a straight white Englishwoman?” (11-13). Asserting that Orlando was imbued in “upper-class romanticized white feminism,” Marcus fumed that Potter’s film catered to the bourgeois preoccupation with “Great

31 Mayer comes to a similar conclusion in her remarks that Orlando presents “second-wave feminist aesthetics […] as the source of ‘new possibilities’” (2008: 195-8).
32 In terms of its detraction by many feminist writers, Potter’s film shares common ground with Woolf’s novel; while second-wave feminists like Elaine Showalter do not consider Woolf’s book overtly feminist enough to be “proper” women’s writing, scholars like Marcus and Halberstam did not view Potter’s film as either feminist or gay enough.
Houses and Elizabethan extravagance” (1994: 11-13). Extending a similar argument in *The Bisexuality of Everyday Life*, Marjorie Garber excoriated Potter for seeking something “essential” and “transcendent” in human beings regardless of their gender, thereby advocating a perilously androgynous humanism (2000: 233). “This is the androgyne as humanist hero,” Garber grumbles. “There is no bisexuality in Potter’s Orlando, because there is no sexuality” (233).

Setting aside the fact that Tilda Swinton definitely sexed as a woman, Marcus and Garber beg a similar question: Why couldn’t a humanist, androgynous feminism have as much political efficacy and legitimacy as their own? Is there own version of feminism the only one that is not perilous? Or is the perilousness of feminism actually an indicator of its greatest strengths – it’s ability to topple, upset and overcome? Furthermore, if (post)feminist scholars like Butler and Kristeva are correct in their assertions that no singular representative of womanhood exists, then, by that rationale, there can be no singular feminism, either – and the question of what specific *polis* comprises the legitimate voice of feminism is clearly a matter of interpretation. While I am intrigued

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33 On the ambiguous homosexuality of Potter’s Orlando, Sibel Celik-Norman writes that Orlando’s “romantic affair with a Russian princess seems distinctly lesbian,” and adds that Orlando as “a young man later has a brotherly friendship with an Uzbek Khan which [Anne Cieko sees] as having ‘homoerotic overtones’” (2007). But because we can only pretend that Swinton is a man, and because we know Tilda Swinton is a woman, her love scenes with Sasha remain distinctly lesbian, just as her erotic relations with the Khan have *heterosexual overtones*.

34 Garber considers Potter’s film to be an oversimplistic reification of the “androgyne as humanist hero” (233). Because she is typically a champion of marginalized forms of alterity, I do not understand why Garber attacks Orlando’s reputed “androgyne” with such vehemence. As I have argued in this chapter, Potter’s protagonist is never androgynous; we always know she is a woman. I also do not concur with Garber’s statement that “there is no bisexuality in Potter’s Orlando, because there is no sexuality” (2000: 233). Whether or not one finds Orlando’s sex interesting or attractive, there is no doubt that she does have a sex. On a side note, when Garber decrtes *Orlando*’s “bland and inoffensive” androgyne for failing to live up to her standards of “ambiguous, ambivalent, transgressive sexuality,” she pays short shrift to Quentin Crisp’s deliciously androgynous performance as Queen Elizabeth, which I have regrettably neglected in this chapter for the sake of brevity.

35 After designating Woolf as “the mother of feminist criticism,” Marcus turns her discussion back to the ongoing public debate between herself and Elaine Showalter, claiming that she (Marcus) seeks to
by Marcus’s suggestion that Virginia Woolf was the “forerunner of socialist feminism,” as well as the “mother of feminist criticism,” I definitely do not concur with her argument that Sally Potter reduces Woolf’s novel to heterocentric “tapioca.” As Brenda Silver argues, Potter’s film belongs in “the arena of the queer” simply because it calls into question the act of defining queerness itself (1999: 225):

Potter’s refashioning of Orlando, which dresses androgyny in the concepts of cross-dressing, gender-bending, masquerade, camp and/or genderfuck, appears to undo not only the differences between the genders/sexes but the stability of gender itself. In this way the film’s representation of gender could be read as a mirror image of its status as an adaptation: a performance that undoes any claim to stability, oneness, or an authentic text. Ironically, however, despite its potential to undo the concept of authenticity, Potter’s Orlando and its reception illustrate how powerfully the desire for authenticity, both as trope and political strategy, continues to operate, even, or especially, in a queer age. (1999: 225)

I concur with Silver. It is not merely unproductive but myopic to dismiss Potter’s adaptation as a mainstream betrayal to any feminist or queer cause. In point of fact, the legitimize feminist criticism by claiming Woolf's prior status as feminist critic, while Showalter and others wanted to identify their own practice as originary” (13). According to Marcus: “We’re facing two faces here […] Feminism, I now think, has been demonized in modern Britain around the figure of Virginia Woolf as upper-class repressed lesbian, creating identity problems for women readers around issues of class solidarity, politics and sexual identity,” while in the United States, Woolf’s name “has been invoked around issues of madness, suicide, anorexia and child abuse, a cluster of problems claiming woman as victim” (13). While I completely concur with her arguments on Woolf, it puzzles me that Marcus does not see their obvious connection to the excoriation of Potter’s film in second-wave feminist circles; the backlash may have changed faces, but it is political backlash nonetheless.

Contrary to Marcus’s allegation, there is little evidence indicating Potter’s “mainstream” audiences regarded her adaptation of Orlando as heterocentric pudding. In fact, my perusal of dozens of Amazon citizen reviews have suggested that everyday viewers regard Potter’s film as “one REALLY odd movie,” or “beautiful to look at but challenging to the mind.” As reviewer A. Burchfield puts it in his amazon.com review: “I've never seen anything quite like it. I found the story interesting but strange at the same time. I'm not sure how historically accurate it is but the movie seems very well researched and loaded with tiny details that could so easily have been overlooked or even left out, much better done than so many modern day setting movies” (2001).

In Technologies of Gender, de Lauretis cites the ways in which “the feminist discourse on gender and representation, and their own commitment to feminism (a discourse and a commitment which do not always go hand in hand)” has inspired some contemporary feminist filmmakers to begin “a project to develop the means, conceptual and formal, to represent the contradiction itself, the contradiction which I see as constitutive of the female subject of feminism” (1987: 114). Similarly, in her analysis of Potter’s films, from Thriller (1979) to The Gold Diggers (1983) and Orlando, Julianne Pidduck follows de
political agenda that Potter’s adaptation most visibly runs against is the normatizing version of queerness imposed on the film by scholars like Marcus and Garber, particularly as their comments concern Orlando’s transformation from female transvestite to queer mother.38

The notion that Orlando’s motherhood is queer has gone relatively unexplored in recent scholarship. But if it isn’t queer enough that Potter begins her film by depicting Orlando as a lesbian transvestite in the first place, it seems doubly queer that Orlando suddenly rejects this role and casts herself into motherhood and femininity, a move that plunges her into greater sexual and socioeconomic uncertainty than she experienced living as a man. For Potter depicts Orlando as not merely passing as a man – she is able to enjoy considerable privileges in that role (wealth, adventure, lots of sex). Although we can only wonder how Potter’s Orlando was never outed in her “stealth mode” (perhaps because her fellow courtiers were intimidated by her wealthy parents, perhaps because they did not care), within the context of Potter’s film, she does prosper. Yet she compromises – some might even say she sacrifices – all of this prosperity to reject male domination and privilege.

We must also recall that while Potter’s Orlando begins her story as a woman living as a man, she is also having affairs with other women; specifically, Euphrosyne and Sasha. Thus, Potter’s storyline exceeds the intensively veiled allusions to lesbianism in

Lauretis’s work in Alice Doesn’t to conclude that Potter’s œuvre “playfully take[s] up the challenge” of expanding “the project of feminist film criticism and filmmaking” to excavate “the production of new forms of discourse” and “new forms of narrative which can ‘construct the terms of reference of another measure of desire’” (Pidduck 1997: 172, quoting de Lauretis 1984: 103-57, emphasis mine). Of course the other measure of desire in question here would be the queer measure, the measure that Potter’s Orlando fulfills in her desire to become a queer mother.

38 Celik-Norman suggests that “the deliberate sexual ambiguities of the film” are reflected “in the Queen played by a man (the ‘Queen of Queens,’ Quentin Crisp), the castratus singing in the literary salon [and] the boyish good looks of the Russian princess” (2007: 2).
Woolf’s novel, thereby performing a queer intervention of sorts. Even Judith Halberstam, who is generally critical of Potter’s efforts in Orlando, concedes that Swinton’s femininity lends “the love affair between Orlando and Natasha […] serious lesbian overtones” (1998: 214-15). What Halberstam objects to is Potter’s refusal “to capitalize on the queer sexuality invoked by this love affair,” along with Potter’s decision to reserve any explicit sex scenes for “a rather conventional encounter between a female Orlando and an all too male young American” (1998: 214-5). Needless to say, it is difficult to accept Halberstam’s proposition that Orlando’s encounters with her lover, Shelmerdine, later in the story are “conventional” – it is during this affair, after all, that both characters explicitly discuss their own bisexuality and confess that they could conceivably live as the “opposite” sex.

In the final knell, while Orlando’s queerness might seem compromised by the fact that she has sex with a man (to Marcus and Halberstam, at any rate), their conclusion that Potter’s film supports heterosexist norms swerves oddly wide of the mark, and I can only wonder what Halberstam and Marcus hope to gain by ejecting Potter’s film from the borders of queerness and lesbianism simply because its protagonist has an affair with a man – as if queers can never have sexual encounters with the “opposite” sex, or somehow betray the mandates of queerness if they do. Furthermore, if Halberstam is correct in her assertions that “queer uses of time and space” are inherently “in opposition to the institutions of family [and] heterosexuality,” it seems difficult to imagine any temporality more “in opposition” to the arbitrary conventions of the above institutions than Orlando’s four-century lifespan, which provides her with the moral-ethical latitude to create a queer family that no longer valorizes 19th-century heteronormative arrangements of class, race
or sexuality (2005: 1).\textsuperscript{39} Is this all to be overlooked simply because Orlando screws a man or bears a child?\textsuperscript{40}

But there is another reason Orlando’s motherhood stirs up gender trouble, and that concerns the alteration of her child’s sex, which the filmmaker changes from male to female – an alteration that is only amplified by the child’s extended narrative function. Concerning children, the tumultuous conclusion to Woolf’s novel feels almost interrupted by the biographer’s dispassionate observation that “Orlando was safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o’clock in the morning” (295). Aside from this brief note, Woolf’s depiction of Orlando’s son seems little more than a placeholder; this character is simply a child-like shape, a muted citation of boy-ness. Woolf never details the child’s physical appearance, and his actions bear no influence on the plot.

But when Potter depicts Orlando’s child as a girl – perhaps her adaptation’s most provocative sex change, if we consider the critical backlash it caused – completely transforms the conclusion of the narrative. In Hollinger and Winterhalter’s estimation, Potter is guilty of a cardinal feminist sin, suggesting that “woman’s only ‘inheritance’ and her path to ‘true self’ is through motherhood,” the evidence of which they find in the

\textsuperscript{39} “How queer is Potter’s Orlando?” asks Halberstam in \textit{Female Masculinity}. “When we are not being seduced by the visual opulence of Potter’s scenery, we suddenly notice that Tilda Swinton’s cross-dressing androgyny has distinctly unqueer limits” (214). Yet Halberstam does not explain how a revolutionary \textit{polis} – even queerness – can remain queer once it has been broken into a system of limits and constraints, no matter how anti-heteronormative those queer borders seem to be. In fact, if we concur with Halberstam’s view that queerness is the “outcome of strange temporalities, imaginative life schedules and eccentric economic practices,” Potter’s Orlando seems doubly queer. Considering the fifty years the protagonist spends as a transvestite, and her “eccentric economic practice” of rejecting her apparently successful masquerade as a man, which in turn nullifies her claims to patriarchal entitlements such as title, estate, and the trappings of manhood in a patriarchal society. Halberstam’s question should not be “is Orlando queer or not?” so much as it should be: “in what ways might Orlando be queer?”

\textsuperscript{40} Setting aside the dozens of websites devoted to disputing whether or not Billy Zane and Tilda Swinton are “actually” gay, the bisexuality of their characters in \textit{Orlando} seems difficult to dispute. That this bisexuality surfaces after they have intercourse is an interesting precursor for the transidentification that takes place between the two characters, as Orlando articulates the possibility of living as a man without engaging in violence or wars, while Shelmerdine cites the potential for women to live without sacrificing their life for their children or “drown[ing] anonymously in the milk of female kindness” (1994: 54).
filmmaker’s depictions of Orlando’s “blissful relationship with her female child” (2001: 252). Setting aside the question of how having a good time with your kid suddenly becomes a political proclamation that motherhood is the only true path to self-revelation, I can only refute Hollinger and Winterhalter’s assertion that Potter’s representation of Orlando and her daughter endorses a “postfeminist promised land of complete gender equality” (252). Arguing that Woolf’s work in Orlando underscores that “the gendered structure of society is deeply implicated in the perpetuation of war across history,” Hollinger and Winterhalter describe Potter’s version as “a visible sign, as Orlando runs forward pregnant on the battlefield, that [the protagonist] is moving out of the militaristic male world” (252) Within this comparison, Hollinger and Winterhalter miss an important point: at the conclusion of Potter’s film, Orlando and her daughter remain at war, not only with the world of militaristic men, but with unjust hegemonic practices of all types, including those found in the world of publishing, art, cinema, finance, and any other form of discourse that systematically devalues women.

If nothing else, the ongoing indignation such scholars display towards Potter’s depiction of Orlando’s motherhood demonstrates that representing maternity of any type in feminist discourse remains a political minefield – a point of view that resonates with much current scholarship on the fraught ontological interstice of feminism and motherhood (cf. Lauri Umansky or Patrice DiQuinzio). As Amber Kinser notes in Motherhood and Feminism, “the feminine mystique, racial uplift, revalorist feminism, the mother heart, the second shift, othermorthering, the new momism, the mommy wars – all

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41 Following Pat Dowell, Hollinger and Winterhalter express confusion as to “why Orlando, a being so clearly headed for life outside the normal parameters, longs for a child, especially in this age of family values, when the political right wing has staged a full-court press to convince men and women how much they want to parent” (2001: 252, quoting Dowell 1993: 16-17). But is it not possible that Potter is daring to suggest that parenting can be as queer as anything else?
of these phrases serve as cultural flashpoints that highlight the complex, dynamic and sometimes contentious relationship between feminism and motherhood” (2010: 1).\footnote{Kinser observes that “feminist writers and activists in the United States have moved at various points in history between celebrating motherhood, critiquing it, using it as leverage to gain other rights, and reconceptualizing it so that mothering can be a more empowering experience for women” (1). In the concluding section of this chapter, I discuss the ways in which Potter’s conclusion to Orlando reconceptualizes and celebrates an intergenerational wave of feminist mothers and daughters.}

The high political stakes of exploring motherhood in adaptations of cherished feminist works, when coupled with the outcomes of failing to meet the satisfaction of disparate and sometimes conflicting feminist audiences, clearly necessitates a closer reading of the mother-daughter relationship in Potter’s adaptation.

When we first glimpse Orlando’s daughter, she and her mother are enjoying a moment of elation. The reason for their joy is simple: barring a few editorial changes, Orlando’s manuscript, The Oak Tree, has been provisionally accepted for publication. As Orlando exits her publisher’s tastefully modernist offices, the little girl’s face beams up at her from a motorcycle sidecar.\footnote{Potter’s Director of Casting, Irene Lamb, made an excellent decision in casting Jessica Swinton (Tilda Swinton’s niece) as Orlando’s daughter. In the space of their shared smile, the palpable love-bond between the two, along with their family resemblance, seems conducive to portraying them as a mother-daughter pair.} They exchange a loving smile as Orlando kicks the motorcycle to life, roaring off into London streets.\footnote{Orlando’s publisher (Heathcote Williams, who also stars as author Nick Greene) is dressed in a natty sharkskin suit, and resides in a glass and stainless steel edifice that reads as distinctly modernist, or the late ’80s version of corporate modernism, at any rate. In her companion book to the film, Potter describes Greene’s office as “ultra-modern chrome and glass” (59). These aesthetic cues combine with Orlando’s vintage motorcycle (a Triumph Bonneville café bike prized by 1990s avant garde hipsters), as well as the bomber helmets and goggles she has procured for herself and her daughter, to denote a particular mode of contemporary chic. Intellectual, effete, well-heeled; Orlando and her daughter are now the coolest of bobos (bourgeois bohemians).} This bricolage of effects – the modernist edifices of the publisher’s office, mother and daughter decked in trendy cycling leathers, a vintage road bike and riffs of electric music – all combine to inform viewers that we are immersed in our contemporary now: this is “our” time, our fashion, our children, our cultural milieu. These sensations of now-ness are quickened as we...
follow Orlando’s glittering motorcycle into the “modern urban landscape” of London’s docklands, a tangle of cop cars, busses, taxicabs and horns.

This loud, crowded pastiche of modernity seems to stand at odds with the tranquility of the following scene, a long tracking shot that follows Orlando’s motorcycle swinging down Knole’s extensive carriage sweep. Orlando is bringing her daughter on a visit to her ancestral mansions, and to emphasize the fact that Orlando’s return to Knole is taking place in our contemporary now, Potter provides a wry reference to conceptual art, wrapping Knole’s stately topiary sculpture in white fabric – a tableau reminiscent of Bulgarian conceptual artist Christo’s wrapping of the Reichstag (1977) and Running Fence (1976). As Orlando’s motorcycle rolls to a stop, the camera follows her daughter dashing through the tightly wrapped shapes. For this girl, the conceptually ripe forms do not constitute high art or the minimalist critique of commodity culture – they are simply fun to run through, a theatrical site of shapes for exploring her libidinal pleasure. Like a child dragged to MOCA, scrambling disobediently across priceless works of sculpture, Orlando’s daughter is a child of the 90s, with no allegiance to anyone or anything save her mother and her own jouissance. Following Orlando on a chaperoned tour, only half-attentive to a docent’s longwinded account of Knole’s history, Orlando’s daughter gazes cheerfully at portraits of her mother as an Elizabethan male, attempting to stay focused but growing bored.

Time for lunch. Leaving the guided tour, mother and daughter strike out on their own, picnicking beneath the old oak tree. As Orlando props herself against the giant trunk, her

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45 In analyzing Potter’s deployment of Christo’s 1970s conceptual art as the principle signifier for a contemporary artistic now, it is interesting and even ironic to view the ways in which Christo’s work has become a permanent fixture in the canon of 70s art, as his wrapping projects have moved from a subversive tactic of representation to an institution in their own right. Conversely, the film Orlando is what has remained subversive, and continues to stand defiantly outside the feminist filmmaking canon.
daughter romps through the same fields of wheat that served as the stage for her mother’s recitation of *Fairie Queen*. Only now, Potter has replaced the image of Orlando clutching a book of poetry with Orlando’s daughter gripping a video camera. Then the camera’s point-of-view shifts, and we are no longer viewing Orlando through the lens of a 35mm Arriiflex; instead, we are seeing her through the grainy “untrained” footage of the little girl’s handycam. The sudden switch in perspective snaps our gaze from Potter’s polished footage into cinematic chaos as Orlando’s daughter leaps through the grass, bouncing the camera up at the sky, pointing it at the sun, capturing images of trees, flowers, mother, everything.

And just as Potter’s crisply detailed opening sequence positioned the viewer facing Orlando, occupying the position formerly inhabited by a Moor’s head, this new relocation of our point-of-view to the little girl’s videocam ends the film by shifting our specular point of purchase *into* the viewfinder of the little girl running towards her mother. This shift is both disruptive, exhilarating, and evocative in the same blow. As the girl approaches Orlando, we see that Orlando is crying. A single tear runs down the contours of her cheek, and the daughter’s videocam follows it with an unabashed documentary detachment.

“Why are you sad?” the little girl asks. “I’m not,” Orlando replies, gazing into the videocam. “I’m happy. Look. Look up there” (62). Orlando’s daughter tilts her camera towards the sky, and the figure of an angel emerges on the horizon.\(^{46}\)

\(^{46}\) According to Potter’s shooting script, this character, named The Falsetto (Jimmy Somerville) “is dressed in gold, has wings, and is singing in his high voice to ORLANDO as he flies in the sky above” (62). Like Fellini’s addition of the Hermaphrodite to Petronius’s *Satyricon*, Potter’s glittering Falsetto presents an improbable figure, a little girl’s *fantasy* of an angel (or a drag queen in the sky, camping in a musical burlesque). It goes without saying that Potter’s angel, hovering between the comic and the sublime, resplendent yet goofy with gold lamé wings, appears nowhere in Woolf’s text. Indeed, the sheer
Numerous scholars have been highly critical of the distinction between the concluding moments of Potter’s film and Woolf’s source text. Hollinger and Winterhalter, for example, suggest Woolf’s conclusion “remains entirely open with a sense of an unknowable future as Orlando looks to the sky unsure of what she sees” (2001: 253). Conversely, Hollinger and Winterhalter argue, Potter invests her adapted conclusion with a sense of closure, as “Orlando does not see the symbol of an unknowable future when she looks to the sky, but an angel singing of a future that has already arrived” (2001: 253). But if we closely evaluate Potter’s conclusion, what we actually see is Orlando’s daughter looking into her mother’s eyes and asking why she is crying, followed by Orlando’s adjuration for her daughter to redirect her gaze to the fantastic figure of an angelic castratus in the sky. Thus, I cannot concur with Hollinger and Winterhalter’s assertion that Potter “has Orlando return to the oak tree and declare her happiness directly to the audience” – a happiness they regard as missing from Woolf’s text (2001: 204). Once more, their deductions seem to swing wide of the mark. As any parent knows, simply because Orlando tells her daughter she is happy does not mean that she is; there are all sorts of things a parent lies about to children (things that improbability of Potter’s Falsetto seems to point towards the awkwardness of her statements in favor of “trying to restore to people that sense of themselves which has nothing to do with gender, time, or circumstance” – indeed, her claims in this regard seem curiously akin to Fellini’s naïve pledge to “restore paganism” to the Romans (Stout 1993: 183). And although the Falsetto might seem to be a sexually ambiguous character on the order of renaissance angels and putti – he is simply a drag queen singing in the air. Because the character’s name (The Falsetto), is so intimately linked to the castrati of Italian opera, this character is in fact a neutered male, a castrated form that Potter juxtaposes against Orlando as contemporary feminist mother.

47 Like Hollinger and Winterhalter, Higgins and Leps suggest Potter’s Orlando “ultimately reiterate[s] the liberal humanist dream of personal freedom and expression,” resulting in an Orlando who is “finally liberated from the fetters of gender, property, and privilege” (2000: 281). According to them, Woolf’s Orlando knows “no such easy answers,” because, in Woolf’s novel, “social pressures are maintained rather than denied: only her son’s birth entitles her position at the family estate” and “her compulsory husband […] returns home in an airplane” (281). Conversely, the voiceover of Potter’s film underscores that Orlando has changed for the better; that “she is no longer trapped by destiny” and “ever since she let go of the past, she found her life was beginning” (Higgins and Leps 281, quoting Potter’s shooting script 1994: 61).
will frighten or upset them, things they might not understand). Aside from the fact that Orlando is crying, she certainly does not sound happy, and we are ultimately given to wonder if Orlando can be happy in the way Hollinger and Winterhalter mean (as a triumphant declarative).

In this moment, we know Orlando is glad to be alive, glad to be a woman, glad to have her daughter nearby, glad to have lived a full life – although her life, at 400-plus years, seems far from over (Tilda Swinton looks as if she’s thirty-something). But any “happiness” felt by Potter’s version of Orlando will always be tinged with sorrow, even melancholy, and, in that sense perhaps, the contemporary Orlando seems a lot like us. That much is implied by the warmth of her smile as she gazes at us through her daughter’s camera. This reverse look, tinged with a smile, is Potter’s parting gesture: while her film began with an Orlando who only wanted companionship, it ends with an Orlando who is no longer alone, accompanied by her little girl.

Closely considering this girl and her final moments on film, particularly as Potter uses the little girl’s videocam as a hyperbolic site for shifting the focalization of our specular gaze, I find myself concurring with Degli-Esposti that “an interesting code switch” happens when the girl releases our scopic perspective into “a reality which will remain beyond the present” (1996: 90). According to Degli-Esposti, when Potter shifts our gaze into the daughter’s video camera, she proposes “a new discourse for the act of viewing and creativity,” suggesting the protagonist is now “the object of the look of her daughter's

48 Although I concur with Degli-Esposti’s suggestion that Orlando’s daughter opens the field for new modes of discourse, I take exception to her assertion that switching Orlando’s child from a boy to a girl makes Potter’s adaptation “speak the post-modern language of self-consciousness and manipulation” (1996: 90). Can it truly be said that Woolf’s modernist prose is neither self-conscious nor manipulative – and what use is there in policing the gap between Woolf’s modernism and Potter’s post-modernism, when their intimate connections suggest that much productive discourse might be derived from viewing them as a whole?
camera,” which quite literally “offers the possibility of a new and different perspective” (90).49

This sudden shift in perspective, right at the film’s conclusion, shakes the roots of our proprioceptive relationship to Potter’s film – and feels substantially Woolfian. In that sense, I detect some interesting traction between Degli-Esposti’s assertion that the scopic shift of the little girl’s camera proposes new forms of discourse, and Teresa de Lauretis’s notion, in Figures of Resistance, that numerous characters in Woolf’s writing, “by disarticulating logic and rhetoric, question the self complacency of referential language and the logocentric entitlement of the subject of speech” (2007: 260).50 Asserting that Woolf forms such disarticulations “entirely through language, or rather, by the hint of a silence at the heart of language,” I see a similar disarticulation take place when the girl usurps our specular gaze with her videocam. In appropriating Potter’s camera, the girl does more than share the stage with her mother – she becomes the film’s author, perhaps even its “biographer.” If we closely analyze this shift on a structural level, it is not so much that we are seeing things through the little girl’s eyes, or that we are seeing things the way she would like us to see them (although this is clearly the implication). We are

49 In “Two Feminist Classics,” Sibel Celik-Norman makes the apt point that Woolf’s Orlando is “not a straightforward feminist statement,” but instead contains depictions of sexuality that are “subtle and sometimes confusing” (2007). Similarly, Potter’s film is not a straightforward feminist statement, but is a (post)feminist indication of the highly nuanced interplay of sex and gender as construed in force relations.

50 Of course, Degli-Esposti is not alone in suggesting that Potter’s films and Woolf’s texts share a tendency to open new perspectives for seeing and knowing. In Figures of Resistance, de Lauretis speaks of Woolf’s Orlando as a character who “resist[s] grammatical meaning” even as s/he conveys it, “thus suspending the logic of conventional assumptions about gender identity and gender difference” (258). De Lauretis places Potter’s early works (cf: The Gold Diggers) in the same category, asserting these films engage in “devising strategies of representation which […] in turn, alter the standard of vision, the frame of reference of visibility, of what can be seen” (2007: 66). Similarly, in The Threshold of the Visible World, Kaja Silverman cites the ways in which The Gold Diggers works to expand the contextual frame for considering both gender and films about gender, and avails herself of Potter’s famous quote: “‘I know that even as I look and even as I see, I am changing what is there’” (Silverman 1996: 161, citing the final words of Potter’s Gold Diggers). Of course, this argument can be extended to the project of adaptation in general, which by nature changes the way things change.
now beholding Potter’s vision of what would happen if Orlando’s daughter suddenly claimed authority over her gazing apparatus – an articulation that takes place in the same moment the filmmaker suggests we might join Orlando and her daughter as enlightened human beings, rising above the constraints of heterocentric gender norms. In seizing the filmmaker’s camera, the figure of the girl becomes a combination of performance art and the document of a performance; a performance not simply of resituating the normatizing gaze, but of queering the Queer. ⁵¹ At the moment the girl apprehends our vision and swerves it towards her mother, Potter’s film begins to redefine our “conditions of vision, as well as modes of representing” (de Lauretis 2007: 66). Yet precisely because the conditions for intersubjective transformation “cannot be predicated on a single, undivided identity of performer and audience,” the final scenes of Orlando do not yield the “postfeminist promised land of complete gender equality” to which Winterhalter and Hollinger object (de Lauretis 2007: 66, Hollinger 2001). Instead, the sudden appearance of the girl and her camera hyperbolically destabilizes our gaze and pivots us away from “reaching” any totalizing conclusion. Not only does the ending of Potter’s Orlando suggest it might be possible for the protagonist (or anyone) to be a queer mother, it depicts the actions of Orlando’s daughter entwining with the destabilizing force of her mother’s politics and her own queer pleasure to open a space for new forms of art and thinking, revitalized ways to articulate gender roles long considered commonplace or “normal.” In that sense, the conclusion of Potter’s adaptive Orlando exceeds Woolf’s source text, inasmuch as mother and child have both ascended to the apex of

⁵¹ Surely, it is this same destabilizing critique that Potter sees at work in pieces by girl filmmakers such as Sadie Benning, with their Fischer-Price cameras, predilection for verité, and exuberant irreverence for conventional filmmaking. In that sense, Benning is Potter’s theoretical daughter; the “ideal” Potter unconstrained by the canon of filmmaking and strictures of political correctness.
Yet at the precise moment the girl snatches our gaze in her camera, she becomes increasingly ambiguous on a corporeal level – not entirely invisible, but no longer quite visible, either. When we examine this move closely, we see the girl’s ambiguation occur on two distinct planes: on the one hand, her body becomes invisible to us because we are now looking through her viewfinder, almost as if we are standing inside her body looking out – but we know the girl is still there precisely because the unskilled actions of her camera continue to intercede between ourselves, Orlando and Sally Potter, asserting the girl’s presence as she moderates, facilitates and directs our gaze. Although we can no longer see her body, we feel the raw exuberance of her technique, as her moment of girling the camera disrupts and adds to our viewing relation with her queer, queer mother.

As I have suggested, our access to Orlando has been primarily restricted to Potter’s practiced lens up to the point that Orlando’s daughter appropriates our gaze. Until the moment of that intervention, we have delighted in all of the tropes that signify the work of a “master”: we have basked in Potter’s virtuosic depth of field, her sumptuous choices of period wardrobe, her savvy decisions in casting and location – in short, her technical command of high production values. But in one deft twist, Potter juxtaposes the brash filmmaking style of Orlando’s daughter against her own polished oeuvre, suggesting the

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52 Of course, Woolf advocates a similar paradigm shift in A Room of One’s Own, in which she offers “an opinion on one minor point—a woman must have a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (1929: 1-2). Indeed, Potter’s invitation for viewers to re-consider long-established gender roles is exactly what Woolf calls for in Orlando: A Biography – a fact that Jane Maher touches on in “Prone to Pregnancy,” when she asserts that both Orlando’s work together to expand the larger discourse on motherhood and pregnancy, thereby offering “a critical instance where the productivities of pregnancy are opened out and celebrated” (2000: 19-20). Yet, while Maher sees the Orlando’s join forces to “challenge our sense that the ‘seen’ of sexed embodiment generates clear and certain definitions,” Fowler views Potter as extending Woolf’s story “into the contemporary moment,” facilitating a progression into “the future promised by Orlando’s daughter” (Maher 2000: 20, Fowler 2009: 107). In that sense, while both authors deploy Orlando’s motherhood as “evidence” that the protagonist has become a recognizable woman, only Potter’s version focalizes the actions of Orlando’s child to illuminate an ontology of girlhood.
little girl’s irreverent filmmaking subverts it, critiques it, opens it to adaptation. In that sense, Potter presents Orlando’s daughter not merely as the future of feminism, but as the future of feminist filmmaking. But she does not depict this future as set. Instead, it is a state of flux and rebellion, in which any institutionalized tendency towards concretization stands to be disrupted by the revolutionary figure of the girl. By usurping Potter’s camera, filming the protagonist (her mother) in the manner of her choosing, Orlando’s daughter asserts an alterious position of pleasure and defiance. Because this position is only beginning to exist at the moment of her articulation, it does not yet fully exist, precisely because the outcomes of the girl’s actions, if they succeed in cracking the dominant hegemonic order (of filmmaking, sexuality, heteronormativity, unilateral feminism), will change the way things change, transforming the ontological order that bears down on her from all directions. That is the order she resists. In that sense, Orlando’s daughter, like her mother, has not finished changing. Her position in the narrative is unclear, ambiguous, unstable.

Some of this instability emanates from girlhood itself, as that sexual subject position is often defined by arbitrary markers that bracket it as another trans-location; a state that shifts between childhood and womanhood, beginning from the moment the baby’s sex is

53 Slipping between our conventional systems of viewing and conceptualizing (a film, a storyline, a technology of viewing Orlando) the pivotal position of this girl evokes Deleuze and Guattari’s notions, via their analysis of Virginia Woolf’s writing, that girls “slip in everywhere, between orders, acts, ages, sexes,” yielding the possibility to “get outside” the dyadic dualism of abject power structures: hetero-/homo-, male/female, licit/illicit, child/adult (1987: 57, 305). Although feminist scholars such as Alice Jardine and Catherine Driscoll critique Deleuze and Guattari for positioning the girl “an impossible figure of escape” from Freudian oedipal paradigms, the truth is that Mille Plateaux extends the tactics of girlhood beyond the scope of psychoanalytic praxis to sexual subjectivation in general (Jardine 1985: 208-20, Driscoll 2002:192). In fact, although Jardine and Driscoll march under a feminist banner to reject their conceptualization of girlhood for its perceived dependence on Freud, Deleuze and Guattari’s theories actually reflect many (post)feminist notions on subversive and/or resistant bodies (or queer bodies, if you like). In Bodies That Matter, for example, Butler argues that it is critical “to wield the signs of subordinated identity in a public domain that constitutes its own homophobic and racist hegemonies” (1993: 118). Many of these hegemonies are the types of oppositional dyads that Deleuze and Guattari see the girl slipping between, calling them into question.
detected (as a girl) and exited through any number of occurrences that rarely take place at the same time, during the same age or in the same way – occurrences such as puberty, intercourse, menstruation, each of which marks a transition towards marriagability (or its renunciation). Ontologically speaking, the performative state of girlhood is flanked by iterations of the transitory and provisional. It is along these lines that scholars in the nascent field of girl studies have suggested the state of girlhood, so long regarded as a “normal” and penultimate sexual state, bears a potential to be more volatile, revolutionary and sexually ambiguous than formerly recognized.\(^\text{54}\)

The girl’s propensity to intermediate, “slide between” and/or shift ontological discourse has long influenced both poststructural and (post)feminist thought.\(^\text{55}\) Kristeva and Butler have both commented on the girl’s potential to call many dyadic “certainties” into question (gender, class, race, sex). In particular, Kristeva focuses on the slipping-between that occurs in aject discourse at the moment of primary identification, when girls begin to distinguish between themselves and their mothers. This act of identification (in effect an act of trans-identification) is a precursor for the girl’s entrance into the cultural symbolic, a transsubjective reorientation that plunges the girl and her mother into abjection via the impact of the girl’s renunciation (you are not me!), yet provides the girl with a potential to articulate her desire within the larger cultural order. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva calls our attention to “the verbal games of little girls,” which linguistically attempt to bridge not only the gap that divides the girl from her mother, but

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\(^{54}\) Until recently, many academic enclaves of feminism have regarded the state of girlhood (and even girl theory) as subordinate to womanhood (and women’s studies) – when in fact girlish acts can alter or adapt the ontological boundaries of what it means not simply to perform femininity, but to be a woman.

\(^{55}\) On a poststructural level, the girl’s potential to “slip between” hegemonic dyadic relations leads Deleuze and Guattari to position the girl as an “intermezzo” figure; an agency who slips between bureaucracies of normatization to posit the existence of (any) alterity. According to Deleuze and Guattari’s, Virginia Woolf just that type of girl, “with all her energies, in all of her work, never ceasing to become” (2004: 305).
the larger ontological rift that looms between the girl and the cultural symbolic. “Through the mouth that I fill with words instead of my mother whom I miss from now on more than ever,” Kristeva writes, “I elaborate what I want, and the aggressivity which accompanies it, by saying” (1982: 41, emphasis Kristeva’s). Defining the cultural symbolic as a matrix of “phallic power and paternal meaning that is both erotic and symbolic,” Kristeva sees girls confronting the symbolic order in a manner that is slightly different than boys. Because the symbolic order constitutes a phallic function, Kristeva suggests that girls enter the linguistic order with an impression of “strangeness” that stems from the necessity to assess themselves “in terms of the law of the other” (2003: 59, emphasis Kristeva’s). Abjection obviously permeates every aspect of this volatile interstice, as the girl attempts to signify for herself, striving to differentiate herself from her disavowed mother while confessing herself to the Law of the Father, the cultural symbolic that embraces and repudiates all subjectivity regardless of sex or gender.

Butler also explores the girl’s position in primary identification – and although she is careful to parse her terminology differently than Kristeva, she too assesses the girl’s emergence from “the matrix of gender relations [that] is prior to the emergence of the ‘human’” (1993: 7). In Bodies That Matter, Butler interrogates the seemingly irresistible desire of medicolegal authorities to split the preliminary “it” of an infant into either “the

56 In Tales of Love, Kristeva regards the speaking position of the girl as problematic if she “buries” her primary indentification “in abstraction, which, as it flies away from the body, fully constitutes itself as ‘soul’ or fuses with an Idea, a Love, a Self-sacrifice.” Of course it is exactly such Ideas, Loves and Self-sacrifices that gave wings to feminism, as notions such as Patriarchy, Intercourse and Womyn developed into the Big Ideas that ultimately kindled the reorientation of women’s position in the cultural Symbolic. “For Kristeva,” Keltner suggests, “the Third Party is a fundamental condition of life” and its rictus of “separation opens the possibility of becoming a subject of representation through symbolic identification with another” (2010: 51-2). Needless to say, Kristeva’s notion that the Law (of the other) is necessarily paternal has caused some controversy: as Beardsworth points out, Kristeva could easily have left the position of the other unsexed, or ambiguously sexed. But of course she did not. With her roots in Lacanian theory, Kristeva views the paternal law as symbolic of the Name of the Father (cf. Lacan in Écrits and elsewhere).
boy” or “the girl” (7). Closely evaluating the ways in which girls are “brought into the domain of language and kinship through the interpellation of gender,” Butler remarks that “the girling of the girl” does not end at the moment when the infant is split into a boy/girl binary; indeed, the case is quite the contrary, as the “founding interpellation” of this medicolegal split “is reiterated by various authorities and throughout various intervals of time to reinforce or contest this naturalized effect” (7). Thus, the possibility arises that this discursive process can be tilted back into the arena of the girl as she forms a counter-iteration of her own (backtalk, lip, sass), thereby resisting the repetitious imperative of the natural and translating forward to signify for herself.

What can be drawn from a combined reading of Butler and Kristeva – inasmuch as both scholars cite the girl’s potential to rebel against the medicolegal, cultural imperative to split – is the notion that the revolutionary girl’s stance is a position of extreme exception, wherein the girl repudiates subjectivation in all terms save her own. Wilkerson describes a similar disruptive potential in Sexual Ambiguities, when he analyzes the ambiguity that enshrouds any articulation of the new, which always has one foot in the now, and one in the future. In that light, the full meaning of the sexual new as it arises from sexual ambiguity to signify for itself always seems ambiguous because its

57 Butler continues her thoughts on girlhood to discuss how “the naming of the ‘girl’ is transitive,” and “initiates the process by which a certain ‘girling’ is compelled, the term, or, rather, its symbolic power, governs the formation of a corporeally enacted femininity that never fully approximates the norm” (232).

58 In Tales of Love, Kristeva examines how the girl’s first encounter with the cultural symbolic is a confrontation; an aggressive act that is resumed whenever her desire is constrained by the symbolic order. In her analysis of Claude Levi-Strauss’s re-telling of “The Girl Who Was Crazy About Honey,” Kristeva calls attention to the fact that the story’s protagonist is a girl who stands outside: “who is not married, who wants to escape the law, who does not want to share, who refuses to cook, who consumes an invaluable product in secret” – honey (2003: 111). “How well we understand her,” Kristeva writes. “That beautiful child! Today, we are girls crazy about every sort of honey.” (111). In that sense, I am equally crazy about Orlando’s daughter, who treats her camera like a toy, prancing madly through a Christo installation, standing within the institutions of gender, class and money, yet regarding them each with silent but irreverent repudiation.
outer discursive edge has not been fully defined; there is a liminal edge of every emergent Other that even the Other cannot predict or see.

Simply put, there is no way for us, or for Orlando’s daughter, to completely see what the sexual future will hold in store until the emergent girl has made her mark in it, engaging the lessons she learned from her mother’s revolutionary defiance of sexual normativity. While the film’s protagonist, then, might comprise the filmmaker’s (post)feminist ideal, Orlando’s daughter is the inheritress of Orlando’s ontological resistance, and the queer feminism enacted by the mother ensures her girl will no longer be bound to same socio-sexual strictures that constrained Orlando’s expression of sex, precisely because women like Orlando (and Woolf, and Potter) have resisted, de-seated and re-ordered the dominant sexual hegemonies of their time.

Placing Butler’s notions on “the girling of the girl” alongside Kristeva’s discussion of the girl’s potential to slide between entrenched dyadic conventions, we see the act of girling bear a potential to cause gender trouble in a fashion that deeply resembles queering, inasmuch as both speaking positions can advance their agenda by destabilizing sociosexual norms through acts of disarticulation. In this tactic, the girl does not merely speak for herself; she actively speaks against the translation of what the dominant regime thinks she ought to be saying. When girling becomes a semiotic act of disarticulation, the girl’s sassy backtalk (often interpreted as “nonsense”) rejects any dyadic tradition by articulating the presence, not merely of A Third, but of many thirds – in short, of alterity

59 Celik Norman suggests that the “deliberate sexual ambiguities” in Sally Potter’s Orlando can also be traced in the fact that the Queen is “played by a man )’the Queen of Queens,’ Quentin Crisp), the castratus singing in the literary salon [and] the boyish good looks of the Russian princess” (2002: 2). While there is the ring of truth to this argument, I argue that the shifting of the camera’s focus to the little girl’s camera brings up still more deliberate issues of sexual ambiguity, and what happens when we “take the place” of the other. Can we really stand in the place of the other, stand for the other?
in general. The girl’s backtalk does not, therefore, merely unsettle masculinity and femininity as the dominant/dominating nodes of a primal sexual paradigm – her deeply emergent discourse, bubbling forth from the *new*, reasserts the fact that masculinity and femininity can be as alterious as anything else.60

In fact, if we return to the moment Orlando’s daughter gazes at her mother through the lens of her videocam, it becomes obvious the girl does not consider her mother to be either androgynous or sexually ambiguous. She does not view her mother as refuting gender norms because she has no lived perspective on the history of her mother’s relationship to those norms.61 Orlando is her mom. A loving mother who gives her daughter permission to signify for herself, to question and rebel, to revel and refute. In that sense, her parting gift to us is a daughter who will begin her life unfettered by the constraints of sexual normatization that feminism shattered. Of course the girl will face other constraints – but she will face them on a newly emergent playing field, the cultural negotiation of gender and sex that feminism shifted, and is shifting. In that sense, it is *Orlando’s daughter* who Potter positions – and who positions herself – as the most volatile and sexually ambiguous agency in the film. Of all the characters and scenes that

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60 Mayer suggests Potter’s cinematic aesthetics, “as embodied in the strategic employment of video at the end of Orlando,” are “liberatory” (2008: 195-8). According to her, the film does not create a suspension of disbelief, but rather “a Harawayian relay of play, engaging the viewer in a virtual space in which multiple narratives and identities are simultaneously possible” (195-8). Of course, Mayer’s rather utopian view of art as *liberational* (as opposed to Rancière’s notions concerning artistic emancipations into discourse) is patently second-wave. Furthermore, one must not forget that among the “new possibilities” opened by second-wave feminism was the post-feminist discourse of Judith Butler, which laid many essentialist second-wave sticking points to rest. Setting aside this inconvenient truth for a moment, if we examine *Orlando* closely, it remains a staunchly feminist film in its repeated assertions that violence and war are the regrettable products of masculine aggression, and that intellectual and gender stultification can be traced to patriarchal gender oppression.

61 This is where many scholars fall short, claiming that Potter places a narrative premium on Orlando’s androgyny, thereby making her film irreconcilable with a feminist or post-feminist agenda (cf. Marcus, Halberstam, and Alison Darren, among others). Noting that “for Butler, and arguably for Woolf […] there is no essential self, only a multiplicity of selves and genders,” Hollinger and Winterhalter assert that Potter’s “androgyne is much less likely than Woolf’s *sexually ambiguous hero* to stimulate thinking that could lead to social change” (242-43, emphasis mine).
she adds to her adaptation, it is her figure of the girl who beckons us into the delightfully ambiguous future of feminism and feminist filmmaking.\textsuperscript{62}

In this chapter, I closely read Sally Potter’s adaptation of \textit{Orlando}. Beginning with her sanitization of the Moor’s head from Woolf’s opening sequence, I suggest the force of Potter’s editorial cut calls attention to her larger elimination of racist imagery – an adaptive move that rekindles our attention to the abjection of colonial violence. I next examine Potter’s relocation of Orlando’s “sex change” from Constantinople to Khiva, suggesting that Potter’s altered sex-change sequence comprises a change of gender. Exploring this gender change in light of Orlando’s abjection as a woman, I suggest the intertextual objects of Woolf and Potter form a body of Orlando-lore that works to destabilize any dyadic cultural order. I then evaluate Potter’s transformation of Orlando’s child from a boy into a girl, suggesting that Potter’s new vision of Orlando as a queer mother vests both the protagonist and her daughter with a politicity that causes gender trouble in a different direction than Woolf’s novel. Asserting that Orlando’s daughter is the most sexually ambiguous character in the film. I conclude the chapter by exploring her adaptive role in the future of feminism and feminist filmmaking.

In the next chapter, I return to sexual ambiguity and the girl, in order to analyze a girlhood that was depicted as sexually ambiguous against the wishes of the girl; namely, the girlhood of Camille Barbin as portrayed in Michel Foucault’s \textit{Herculine Barbin: Being The Memoirs of a French Hermaphrodite}. Investigating the fact that sexual

\textsuperscript{62} Although Winterhalter and Hollinger suggest Woolf “forcefully suppresses the lesbian subtext in Woolf’s novel,” I do not believe this is the case (2001: 243). At the core of their argument is the inside debate about Woolf’s lesbianism and \textit{Orlando’s} status as an homage to her affair with Sackville-West, which a viewer new to \textit{Orlando} would not understand. Thus, any suppressed lesbianism in Potter’s version is a secondary repression, which is apparent only to those who have read Woolf’s novel or glanced at her biographic details. Hollinger and Winterhalter even concede that lesbianism was only a “secondary concern” for Woolf in \textit{Orlando} (243).
ambiguity, like girlhood, is not necessarily queer – nor is queerness sexually ambiguous – I discuss the representation of individuals who desire little more than a fade into normativity, but whose physical “facticity” seems to contradict their desired sexual subject position, summoning them into abjection. In the desired girlhood and enforced manhood of Camille Barbin, one does not merely see her girlhood as an interstitial locus for revolution and change. Instead, it becomes a sexual subject position turned back on itself until it leads to Camille’s subjective eradication. Still, Camille’s enforced return to maleness raises many questions concerning the point at which the sexual subject exceeds itself, and why this excess seems to summon either its inquisition or demolition. Anything but stasis or peace. Must an excess of sexual unrecognizability inevitably summon affect in excess, via abjection or *jouissance*? Can anything lie beyond this dyadic arrangement? And how much does the act of exceeding inevitably involve excess, anyway? Can it in fact predicate a lack on the part of the agencies of normatization that seek to know excess and trace the contours of ambiguation – an overarching lack that has the propensity to suck any “non-normative” agency back down a rabbit hole of power, choice and recognition, into an unwanted state of disambiguation, where it is compelled to signify not so much for itself, but for the pleasure of a reigning sexual ontology?
In 1860, Adélaïde-Hercule Barbin, a twenty-year-old schoolmistress known to her loved ones as “Camille,” submitted herself to French medical authorities for an examination, complaining of pains in her groin. After detecting the girl’s “sexually indeterminate” features, and hearing her confession that she was attracted to other girls, the physicians charged with Camille’s care began to consider the possibility that Camille was not a girl (125). Spurred by employers and clerics with a professional stake in establishing her “true” sex, this blue ribbon panel of doctors concluded that Camille Barbin was “hermaphroditic no doubt, but with an obvious predominance of masculine characteristics” (125, 127-8). Following that official pronouncement, Camille’s name

1 Throughout Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite, Foucault vacillates in his choice of names for Camille Barbin, calling her “Herculine” and “Alexina.” As a mark of respect, I refer to Camille by the name she selected for herself. As for Foucault’s speculation that Camille chose this name either because it was her pet name, or to protect her relatives from scandal, I respond that Camille selects every other pseudonym carefully throughout her roman-à-clef, and therefore I honor her choice for her own.

2 Foucault refers to this diagnosis as emblematic of a nineteenth-century science of pseudohermaphroditism, in which doctors of the period attempted to prove the “true sex” of intersexual subjects (ix). An arcane term that has been widely rejected in favor of “intersexuality,” pseudohermaphroditism is defined by Webster’s as the condition “of having the gonads […] of one sex and external genitalia that is of the other sex or is ambiguous” (2013). Interestingly, although Foucault makes this case about pseudohermaphroditism in his introduction to Herculine, none of Camille’s doctors ever deployed it in their reports – perhaps because the “science” of pseudohermaphroditism had not at that point congealed. According to Foucault, the conceptualization of the pseudohermaphrodite within the scientia sexualis of the late-1800s was symptomatic of the overarching ontological imperative for all individuals “to have one and only one sex […] Everybody was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity” (viii). The methodology for this technology, Foucault notes, lay in “strip[ping] the body of its anatomical deceptions” and deciphering “the true sex that was hidden beneath ambiguous appearances” (viii, emphases mine). As I argue throughout this chapter – and as Foucault points out in both Herculine and the History of Sexuality series, the ambiguity of most of these individual appearances was simply a claim, beneath which lay nothing less than an inability to recognize.
was changed to Abel and her birth certificate was revised to show her sex as male. Then came the task of trying to live as a man.³

But Camille never adapted to masculinity. Depressed and destitute, hounded by scandal and shame, she committed suicide in February of 1868 by lighting a charcoal stove in her garret and choking to death on the fumes.⁴ Although her story caused “a little stir” at the time of her death, it might have eventually faded from view had it not been for Michel Foucault’s publication of her memoirs in Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite (103).⁵ Of course, Foucault’s use of the word “discover” in this title is either misleading or ironic; technically speaking, his editorial/archival efforts actually comprise a re-discovery. The fact is, Camille’s memoirs were initially discovered at her bedside by Dr. Régnier, a Civil Status Registry Office physician who recorded her death and conducted an initial autopsy. Régnier later relinquished the texts to Dr. Auguste Tardieu, who published excerpts in his 1872 study, Question médico-légale de l’identité dans ses rapport avec les

³ In addition to his observations concerning Camille’s sexual indeterminacy, Dr. Chesnet of La Rochelle describes her clitoris as “monstrously enlarged,” and remarks that her voice was “ordinarily that of a woman, but sometimes in conversation or when she coughs, heavy, masculine tones mingle with it” (125). In an official report for the Annales d’hygiène publique, Chesnet also states Camille’s chest was like “that of a man; it is flat and without a trace of breasts,” adding that “menstruation has never occurred, to the great despair of her mother and of the doctor whom she consulted, who saw all his skill remain powerless to bring about the appearance of that periodic discharge” (125). In this report, the subtext is clear: normal female bodies must have visible breasts and/or menstruate; girls without breasts or “discharge” will cause despair in mothers and doctors alike.

⁴ Referring to Chesnet’s findings in Question médico-légale de l’identité, Dr. Auguste Tardieu briefly discusses Camille’s “new and incomplete sex,” remarking that the way in which masculinity was “imposed upon him” might have been what led to Camille’s suicide. Tardieu’s choice of the word “incomplete” in this context is interesting, as it infers Camille might have felt “complete” as a girl – but there was something about her new state of masculinity that she found lacking. Obviously, every stage of Camille’s sexuality was incomplete: she left her girlhood before she turned into a woman, she never fully assimilated into her role as a man, and she had no desire to live in the ill-defined category of the hermaphrodite, pseudo- or otherwise.

⁵ In Herculine, Foucault initiates the analysis of ontological shifts in sexual subjectivation that he carries to such impact in The History of Sexuality series (the three-part series that followed Herculine’s publication). If we compare these sets of work closely, we find that both contain an indictment of the heteronormative apparatuses used to “strip the body of its anatomical deceptions” in the effort to decipher “the true sex” that lies hidden “beneath ambiguous appearances” (viii, emphases mine).
In her memoirs, Camille predicts her story might one day be regarded as nonsense because its disclosures move “beyond the limits of what is possible.” In that sense, she touches one of the major themes Foucault explores as editor of Herculine; namely, the fact that the heteronormative medicolegal regime of the nineteenth century was utterly limited in its ability to envision sexual possibility. Not merely unequipped to deal with the vicissitudes of sexualities they could not recognize, they were unable to account for the most basic functions of “normative” sexes, as those sexes also possessed desires and urges considered too difficult, deviant, or contradictory to pass as “normal” within the dominant schema of sexual subjectivation (1980: 15). In 19th-century medicolegal literature, this general obliviousness is evidenced in the sheer abundance of misinformation concerning female orgasm, masturbation, childhood sex, and the wealth of “perversions” Freud eventually begins to evaluate and analyze in Three Essays on The Theory of Sexuality.

But what Camille could not foresee from the vantage point of her own time was that someone like Foucault, through an act of adaptive editorship, would one day emancipate her memoirs into political discourse, along with the reports of her medicolegal

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6 Foucault does not refer to Tardieu’s book by its full title, calling it only Question médico légale de l’identité.
interlocutors – those doctors, journalists and priests responsible for categorizing, articulating and dissecting – or as Butler might say, for *undoing* – Camille’s sexuality (Butler 2004). For Foucault’s editorialization of Camille’s memoirs succeeds in underscoring not merely the injustices perpetuated against Camille by those charged with her care – he mobilizes an effective indictment of the entire nineteenth-century heteronormative system of sexual recognition, led by those “princes of science,” whom Camille predicted would “shatter the extinct mechanisms” of her body in an effort to “draw new information from it” (193).7

On a structural level, Foucault’s editorial assemblage of *Herculine Barbin* is comprised of four primary sets of work. The first is Foucault’s introduction, some fifteen pages in length, which contextualizes Camille’s memoirs and their significance in terms of a heterocentric *scientia sexualis*. Next, Foucault places Camille’s memoirs, more than one hundred fifteen pages of unexcerpted accounts detailing her journey from a highly religious upbringing in provincial La Rochelle to the medicolegal inquest that preceded her attempted conversion to masculinity. Following the memoirs, Foucault places a third set of texts, *The Dossier*, which contains official (and semi-official) documents from a variety of doctors, employers and journalists. The concluding section of *Herculine* consists of a novella entitled *A Scandal at the Convent*, by Oskar Panizza, a noted German psychiatrist, playwright and “seditionist” (Foucault wagers Panizza’s novella

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7 In her essay, “Uncertain Erotic: A Foucauldian Reading of *Herculine Barbin dite Alexina B.***,” Mélisse Lafrance describes Foucault’s collection as a “constellation of narratives,” noting the various texts in this galaxy “may be said to articulate the stories not only of the protagonist, but also of the doctors and lawyers who scramble to render intelligible her sexed corporeality, of the public observer who textualizes collective fantasies of sexual deviance, and of the philosopher [Foucault] who foregrounds her narrative” (2002: 120, emphasis mine). Although Foucault did his best not to alter Camille’s text in any significant way, the acts of foregrounding and drawing together these texts is a narrative re-contextualization that clearly makes his editorialization is an act of adaptation.
was based on Tardieu’s work in *Question Médico Légale*). Through this act of adaptation and arrangement, Foucault fashions these four elements into a larger intertextual whole, carefully positioning them in a metonymic order that supports his polemic aim: to expose the fraught exchange between subject and clinic in sexual subjectivation.

Obviously, there was no inherent “need” for Camille’s memoirs to be contextualized by Foucault, or any other scholar; like Anne Frank’s *Diary of a Young Girl* or the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, Camille’s memoirs would easily stand alone, without editorial appendices, interjections or addendum. They are written passionately and cogently, providing the details of her life in chronological order, containing no lacunae that call for the intercessions of an editor. But in compiling these specific texts in one place and placing them in discourse with his upcoming work in the *History of Sexuality*, Foucault manages to create a deep transtextual discourse between Camille’s memoirs and the works of those experts who exploited and interrogated her sexuality for institutional and polemic ends. Yet, no matter how complete or nuanced his intertextual arrangement might seem, it still makes me wonder how Foucault’s enterprise might have been expanded if he had added other texts to *Herculine*. The voice of Camille’s mother

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8 Asserting Panizza’s *Scandal* is a fictionalized version of Camille’s memoirs, Foucault suggests Panizza sensationalizes elements of Camille’s life for the sake of drawing a crowd. A closer reading of Panizza’s novella, however, leads to a more complex assessment, as there are intimate parallels between Panizza’s life and Camille’s. Yeo Huan suggests that Panizza’s *Scandal* “overtly displays the operation of power as (what Foucault would consider) ‘games of strategy,’” thereby underscoring how power and pleasure “are ‘linked together by complex mechanisms and devices of excitation and incitement’” (2008: 13-15, quoting Foucault in Rabinow 1998: 298 and 1984: 327). That said, Oskar Panizza’s life story (Foucault spells his name “Oscar”) is no less sensational or transformational than Barbin’s. Jettisoning his practice as a German psychiatrist in favor of becoming a playwright, poet, essayist and novelist, Panizza’s most widely known work, *Das Liebeskonzil* (*The Love Council*), proved so scandalous in its own right that the courts of Munich sentenced him to prison on ninety-three counts of blasphemy. Panizza spent the final sixteen years of his life in deteriorating mental health, suffering from paranoid delusions and hallucinations, and, following his own unsuccessful suicide attempt, he was placed in an asylum in Bayreuth, where he died in 1921.
seems curiously absent from the collection, as does the correspondence of those benefactors who might have been concerned with Camille’s story from outside a technical perspective. In the final knell, Foucault had his mission with Herculine, and from that mission he did not stray.

In this chapter, I analyze Foucault’s editorial appropriation of Camille’s memoirs, which theorists such as Judith Butler have categorized as both superficial and naive. In point of fact, my own reading of Camille’s memoirs differs sharply from Butler’s and Foucault’s. Concerning the former, I do not concur with Butler’s claims that the collection of documents comprising Foucault’s work in Herculine Barbin supports the type of “emancipatory” discourse he so deftly avoids in The History of Sexuality—nor do I agree with her suggestion that Foucault’s “cursory reading of Herculine” sets forward an “ontology of accidental attributes” that position identity as little more than a “culturally restricted principle of order and hierarchy, a regulatory fiction” (24). Only an extremely narrow reading of Herculine Barbin would endorse the claim that Foucault’s treatment is cursory, or that it champions utopian ideals of sexual ambiguity.

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9 When Butler accuses Foucault of a “cursory reading” of “Herculine Barbin,” she places the name in quotes instead of italics, thereby insinuating Foucault cursorily reads both the writer and her memoirs. Although it is tempting to suggest Butler’s reading of Foucault is equally cursory, it would be more accurate to call it a highly restricted analysis. Yet, Butler’s own reading of Camille’s memoirs in particular ends up being surprisingly similar to Foucault’s, inasmuch as she uses the memoirs as an example, in support of a theory (in this case, Butler’s theory that Foucault’s work in Herculine contradicts his conceptualization of sexual subjectivation in The History of Sexuality), as opposed to analyzing Camille’s memoirs as body of work in its own right.

10 According to Butler, Foucault views Barbin’s life as a world in which “smiles, happiness, pleasures and desires are figured […] as qualities without an abiding substance to which they are said to adhere” (1990: 24). Claiming Foucault’s efforts in Herculine can be reduced to “sentimental indulgence in the very emancipatory discourse his analysis in The History of Sexuality was meant to displace,” Butler’s assertions have inspired a new generation of scholars to argue that Foucault is suggesting Barbin might have “avoided the structuring effects of power” altogether, when nothing could be further from the truth (Butler 1990: 96, Lucey 2003: 135). While I return to this topic more fully in the concluding sections of this chapter, suffice it to say that Butler’s conflation of emancipatory discourse with liberatory politics is problematic, particularly if we consider this conflation in light of Rancière’s discussion of linguistic emancipation in The Politics of Aesthetics (Rancière 2006: 5, 83). As Rancière notes, discursive emancipation is a far different thing than political liberation.
Yet, although I align with Foucault’s general point of view that Camille Barbin was a marginalized subject caught in the crucible of institutionalized sexual subjectivation, I would submit that his analysis (and Butler’s) significantly short-sell Camille’s position as a girl, and the political impact of her memoirs as a girl’s text.11

The first section of this chapter offers a close reading of Camille’s memoirs. Beginning with a discussion of Camille’s religious upbringing in Ursuline convents, orphanages and boarding schools, I closely read Camille’s descriptions of her blossoming sexual relations with other girls. I then evaluate her gendered undoing at the hands of the nineteenth-century medicolegal apparatus. Suggesting Camille attempts to make the switch from a girl into a man in order to gain access to the patriarchal privilege of licitly having sex with girls – a transition arrested by the very clinicians Camille turned to for support – I assert Camille is not a hermaphrodite or a sexually ambiguous figure at all, but rather a specific type of girl: a girl who claims she was a boy, but who is studied as a “masculine hermaphrodite” even while being told she must live as a man. Rather than debate whether Camille Barbin was a “real girl,” my central objective in this section is to analyze the socioeconomic abjection Camille faces when the validity of her girlhood is placed in question. Apprehended through the forced confessions of her genitals – and due

11 While I am critical of Butler’s arguments regarding Foucault’s efforts in Herculine Barbin, I have made every effort to also detail positive points of contact between the two scholars. But I emphasize that Butler omits these points of agreement/similarity from her critique of Foucault, particularly as it concerns her claim that “Foucault’s appropriation of Herculine is suspect” – a point I suggest Foucault would not dispute; rather, the problem with Butler’s position here is she does not find Foucault’s appropriation of Camille’s text suspicious enough (1990: 23, emphasis mine). If she had been more suspicious, Butler might have observed that Herculine is not an appropriation plain and simple, just as she might have acknowledged the fact that he modified Barbin’s extant memoirs into an intertextual relation of discreet discursive elements (the introduction, the subject’s “personal” memoirs, the Dossier, Panizza’s short story, etc.). Although she does not discuss it at any length, Maureen Cain points out that this type of project indeed had precedent, observing that Herculine Barbin is not the only place Foucault “re-present[s] lost documents for the reader to interpret” – his approach, for example, is much the same in I, Pierre Riviére, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister, and My Brother (Cain 1993: 84).
in no small part to the inability of her doctors to safeguard her confidences – I explore the heteronormative backlash of scandal and socioeconomic abjection Camille faces when she attempts to change her sex from female to male, assessing the regret she experiences when she can no longer live as a girl.

Extending my analysis of Camille’s girlhood into the chapter’s second section, I bring Camille’s memoirs into contact with Teresa de Lauretis’s work on resistant bodies in *Figures of Resistance*, suggesting the memoirs of Camille’s girlhood *continue resisting* her abjection as a man long after she was no longer regarded as a girl. As Patricia White notes in her introduction to *Figures*, resistant subjects often “refuse to accede to prevailing orders and modes of knowing, as well as the way the figural properties of language (or representation more generally) always resist a purely referential approach to the world” (2007: 9). Following de Lauretis’s remarks on the resistant potential of “eccentric bodies” that challenge the boundaries of hegemonic order, I argue that Camille’s memoirs underscore her status as an eccentric subject engaged in “a process of struggle and interpretation, a rewriting of self [...] in relation to new understanding[s] of community, of history, of culture” (180-81). But Camille was not able to resist forever, and the “facticity” of her eccentric body virtually guaranteed she would not survive – not in 19th-century France. Still, she resisted long enough to complete a set of memoirs that continue to resist any snap analysis long after their messenger has gone.

The third section of this chapter transitions from Camille’s resistant girlhood to an analysis of her memoirs as a resistant text. Critiquing Foucault’s characterization of

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12 In *Figures of Resistance*, de Lauretis observes that feminist theory became possible precisely because it acknowledged “the interrelatedness of discourses and social practices, and the multiplicity of positionalities concurrently available in the social field [...] not a single system of power dominating the powerless but a tangle of distinct and variable relations of power and points of resistance” (2007: 167). A similar position can be detected in Butler’s *Gender Trouble, Bodies that Matter* and *Undoing Gender.*
Camille’s writing as “turgid schoolgirl prose,” I assert Camille’s memoirs more closely resemble the raw, elegiac poetry of visionary Catholic saints. Arguing that Camille’s girlhood is not merely some sexually ambiguous shadow of a primal dyadic pair, but a sexual subject position that bears its own exception and its own ambiguous edge, I suggest that Camille’s sexual undoing produced her physical dissolution, but did not wipe away her voice, which remains lingering at the scene – much like the grin of the Cheshire Cat that Foucault cites in *Herculine*. Needless to say, it is always unwise to dismiss such cats too lightly, no matter what Butler might say to the contrary.\(^\text{13}\) Aside from leaving their ethereal grins behind, these cats have a habit of turning up where and when they are least expected, subverting tyrannical power structures and reiterating their uncanny messages while their grins fade from view.\(^\text{14}\) This chapter advocates Camille’s memoirs as a successful *resistance* of the heteronormative imperative to fall silent, slink away and become-nothing. Elbowing out their own discursive spaces-between, the memoirs of this girl – who could not physically resist the blows of her interpreters, but who could set down her resistance in writing – resurface as an anti-singularity, an inscription of

\(^\text{13}\) Foucault’s reference to the Cheshire Cat of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* can be detected in his introduction, when he states: “One has the impression, at least if one gives credence to Alexina’s story, that everything took place in a world of feelings – enthusiasm, pleasure, sorrow, warmth, sweetness, bitterness – where the identity of the partners and above all the enigmatic character around whom everything centered, had no importance […] It was a world in which grins hung about without the cat” (xiii, emphasis mine).

\(^\text{14}\) Butler returns to Foucault’s cats twice in *Gender Trouble*, first at the beginning of the book, and again on page 96, suggesting Foucault’s vision of the “sexual world in which Herculine resides” is comprised of “bodily pleasures [that] do not immediately signify ‘sex’ as their primary cause and meaning; it is a world, [Foucault] claims, in which ‘grins hung about with the cat.’ Indeed, these are pleasures that clearly transcend the regulation imposed on them, and here we see Foucault’s sentimental indulgence in the very emancipatory discourse his analysis in *The History of Sexuality* was meant to displace” (Butler 1990: 96, quoting Foucault’s introduction to *Herculine*, xiii). Thinking of Rancière’s conceptualization of emancipation in *Politics of Aesthetics* and elsewhere, Butler’s usage of the term seems over-restrictive, and attempts to reduce Foucault’s catty metaphor to a winsome smile of liberatory politics, when it is actually the grin of linguistic emancipation.
exception to the heteronormative rule, thereby expanding the ontological limits of the possible.15

Camille, in Her Own Words: Disrupted Girlhood, Sexual Reverence

Born in the village of Saint-Jean-d’Angely in 1838, Camille Barbin was the daughter of Jean Barbin, a maker of sandals, and Adéläide Destouches, his devoted wife. When Camille’s father died shortly after her seventh birthday, the Destouches’s financial straits became so dire that Camille’s mother placed her daughter in the “The House of L.,” a charity home overseen by Ursuline nuns.16 “I hardly knew my unfortunate father,” Camille reflected, noting that his “sudden death tore [him] away from the tender affection of my mother, whose gallant and courageous soul tried vainly to struggle against the terrible inroads of the poverty that threatened us” (4).

Recalling her status “among the motherless little girls who were brought up in this pathetic refuge,” Camille’s memoirs return frequently to the affection she received from a

15 Suggesting Foucault’s earlier work examines the nineteenth-century systematization of sexual subjectivation and its efforts “to bring sex under control, not in order to stifle it, but in order to make it productive” Gerald Bruns, in On Ceasing to be Human, discusses Foucault’s concern with the marginalized figures who were “scarcely noticed in the past,” but who suddenly step forward to “make the difficult confession of what they were” (Bruns 2011: 51, citing Foucault 1978: 38-9). According to Bruns, Foucault’s later studies explore the intricacies of the limit experience: the crisis-point at which calling the subject into question leads to “its actual destruction, its decomposition, its explosion, its conversion into something else” (Bruns 56, citing Foucault, 2000: 247). Camille Barbin’s confessions – that she might not be a girl, that she is not a man – clearly place her at the limit-point of recognition, where she is undone. My position in this regard finds traction with Brady Thomas Heiner’s views in “The Passions of Michel Foucault,” particularly his notion that “the dissolution effected by the limit-experience is necessarily linked to (re)creation for Foucault; passion is inextricably tied to transformation” (2003: 25). We must keep in mind, however, that Camille’s final transformation did not comprise a move from female to male, but a move beyond the body. At the point of her death, Camille was unconcerned with further sexual transformations.

16 In keeping with the form of roman-à-clef, Camille’s choices of pseudonyms for her lovers (and for herself), her choice of names for “The House of L.” could also be a clever pun; The House of Elle, the house of femininity. But this House of Elle is not merely a house of femininity – it is the Catholic version of femininity, a version controlled, defined and interpreted on all sides by an overarching patriarchal regime of Church and State – the apparatus that tells Camille and her mentors exactly how to behave, and administers discipline if they do not.
series of ecumenical surrogates. “I was not afraid at their side,” Camille reflects. “And I was so happy when one of them, taking me on her knees, would offer her sweet face for me to kiss!” (5). Needless to say, forming a positive relationship with one’s substitute mothers is incredibly important to a girl whose life is entirely devoid of material comfort and parental love. The Ursulines are her ethical and spiritual guardians, her comforters and saviors in an existence that is at best uncertain.

At the request of her Mother Superior, Camille, who is uncommonly intelligent for her age, leaves Saint-Jean-d’Angely for the convent at Chavagnes, where she continues her education, sharing close quarters with girls “who are mostly rich and noble” (6). Describing her guardians at Chavagnes, Camille writes: “I shall never forget the impression I had at the sight of [Mother Eleanor],” who had “so much grandeur and such expressive beauty in a religious habit […] Her bearing was proud and inspired respect” (7). There is much traction between Camille’s description of Mother Eleanor and her subsequent depictions of Lea, a schoolmate and friend. “I loved her at first sight,” Camille reflects, “and though her outward appearance had nothing about it that was dazzling, it was irresistibly attractive because of the modest grace that was shed over her entire person” (9). But the degree to which Camille prioritizes Lea’s grace, elegance and intellect, which she esteems beyond her physical beauty, is not the clear-cut evidence of a young boy’s sexual desires, as Camille’s detractors have suggested. It seems more likely that her reverence for Lea evinces the yearning of a young girl who was orphaned by her mother, a girl who craves feminine affection wherever it can be found. A Catholic girl from the provinces who values intellectual prowess over coyness, who prizes modesty over coquetry.
Of course, there is more to say about the influence of religion on Camille’s memoirs. Although her world of convents and boarding schools appears to be centered on girls, it is actually a patriarchally dominated space created precisely for the management of unmarried girls. The chief duties of the Ursuline sisters who staff this institution primarily concern facilitating a suitable staging grounds for their wards’ entry into adulthood as either virgin brides, prepared to serve their husbands, or as the permanent virgins of the convent, which is subordinate to a host of male officiants. Thus, the convent’s shelter is dominated by men, whose brooding presence flanks this sexual staging ground in all directions, abstract and overwhelming – a presence made all the more ominous by their absence, as the patriarchal fathers make crucial decisions about the girls’ lives from behind closed doors. This strict patriarchal pressure is silent but always felt, always active – much like Camille’s father, whose absence (in death) summons the overarching financial burden that ruptures Camille’s relationship with her mother, who in turn abandons the girl to the care of religious surrogates.\footnote{One can only wonder if poverty was truly the motivating factor behind the decision of Adelaide Destouches to give Camille up for adoption, or if it was the knowledge of her intersexual daughter’s “true” sex. Although this can only be speculation, the ease with which Destouches abandoned her daughter to The House of Elle has always made me wonder if she could have lied about her ignorance of Camille’s sexuality, and it was her own fears of scandal and socioeconomic abjection led to giving Camille away.} Within the overarching patriarchal order that governs Camille’s world, the men in Camille’s life are powerful but absent authority figures whose sudden interventions threaten her existence; monseigneurs and benefactors whose capricious whims are law. At the behest of these male figures, the girls of the convent are careful to place obedience before love, fear before joy.

Camille is twelve years old when she meets Lea, whom she describes as shy, intellectual, brooding, prone to bouts of illness. Indeed, their delicate health requires both
girls to spend substantial time in the convent infirmary, where Camille tiptoes to Lea’s bedside each night seeking companionship, conversation, perhaps a bit more – but their relationship remains platonic. During one of her nocturnal visits to Lea, Camille is apprehended by a dormitory monitor and scolded for being out after curfew. Yet even when she is chastened, Camille bears her Ursuline guardians no malice. Instead, she recalls their admonitions with nostalgia:

... today, when I have learned to judge men and things, the accents of [Mother Eléonore’s] beloved voice echo deliciously in my ears and make my heart beat faster. They recall to me that happy time of my life when I did not suspect either the injustice or the baseness of this world, which I was called on to know in all its aspects” (12-13). 18

Closely read, this passage provides Camille’s readers a glimpse behind her position as narrator of her own story; the temporal vantage point from whence she splices the nostalgic memories of her past with a foretaste of what is to come – the unspecified “injustice and baseness” that awaits her in a future outside the convent. The tenor of this passage and others like it raise several questions about Camille’s editorial function in her memoirs, particularly as she takes advantage of the narrator’s role to drive indictments at the medicolegal empire. Given our general lack of information, it seems difficult to ascertain whether Camille began writing her memoirs when as a young girl and worked back through them as an editor later, or whether she began setting down her reflections

18 The distinction Camille draws between the happiness of her girlhood (the happiness of a fatherless child who was given up by her mother to endure a series of foster homes and convents), and the bleakness of her future in a world full of injustice and baseness (her world as a man in the world of men), articulately frames the dystopic relationship between Camille’s own impressions of her acceptance by an all-female community (as a girl, happy and carefree), and her entrapment in an unwanted state of masculinity by a male-dominated medicolegal system whose primary function consists of bolstering patriarchal privilege. Moreover, Camille’s use of the phrase called upon in this sense lends her revelations a queer religiosity, as if she feels God called her to undergo her suffering for a purpose, perhaps to witness the baseness of mankind “in all its aspects.” Her many subtle references to martyr saints and martyrdom, along with the fervent quality of her prose, point to the fact that Camille regarded herself as martyred.
only after she became disillusioned with her masculinity and sought to return to girlhood. One thing seems certain: the thinly-veiled bitterness expressed in these passages indicates that Camille at the very least combed through her memoirs in retrospect, shortly before her death, when her disdain for the medicolegal empire – and heteronormative culture in general – was at its apex. In the passage above, Camille’s juxtaposition of the world’s injustice/baseness against the loving voice of Mother Eleanore engages the narrator’s function not merely to “predict” her failed masculinity, but to emphasize the fact that she is looking back on her girlhood with tenderness and pain.

Of course, readers of *Herculine* can only “get” the subtle nuances and inflections of these passages if they understand something of the outcomes of Camille’s story, having either perused Foucault’s introduction and learning about Camille’s life, or, having reached the end of the memoirs, returning armed with the knowledge that Camille will eventually attempt to live as a man and be treated unjustly. Without this *a priori* knowledge, the reader will only detect the presence of Camille’s bitterness, but will find it difficult to ascertain exactly who the indictments are leveled against, let alone decipher what they have to do with her sexuality.

Furthermore, because Camille has only spoken of herself as a girl at this point, her infatuation with Lea takes on lesbian overtones. This effect intensifies as Camille

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19 Needless to say, we could never have been informed by Foucault’s introduction *before* he positioned Camille’s memoirs in his edited collection. Thus, we can merely conclude that Camille left her premonitions about her future unhappiness intentionally vague, electing for whatever reason to mute the fact that this unhappiness occurred following her move into masculinity. Of course, the way her inferences are worded indicates Camille may have assumed that whoever read her memoirs would be familiar with her life story through reading popular journalistic accounts of it, and would thereby be acquainted with the “scandal” and misery that awaited her “discovery” as a hermaphrodite. The lack of evidence makes it difficult to say anything with certainty.

20 Rebecca Jennings analyzes the vicissitudes of the schoolgirl crush in *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls: A Lesbian History of Post-War Britain*, noting that the “onset of adulthood meant the beginning of a new struggle to conform to social expectations of heterosexual femininity and marriage and many women spent
depicts her increasingly sexual relationships with other girls. Throughout these affairs, Camille’s ardor is chivalrous, epic, and romantic (in the sense of epic literary romance). She paints her passion for girls as unrequited desire, spurned, denied and forbidden – a desire that borders on religious ecstasy, evoking the jouissance of Catholic martyr saints. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Camille selects the name of a Catholic saint as the pseudonym for her girlfriend Lea – and all the other girlfriends she describes throughout her story.\(^{21}\) Perhaps this gesture hints at the suffering Camille experiences as a girl among girls, a girl whose forbidden desires can never be fulfilled. Perhaps it indicates the suffering she will experience in failing to live as a man, or the pain she will experience in looking back on her girlhood from the vantage point of this sexual train wreck, recalling girlhood as the site of enumerable ecstatic pleasures, a girlhood that ultimately yielded to a collusion of religious indignation and medicolegal inquisition. Perhaps the answer to the question is “all of the above,” perhaps more – but in the absence of further evidence, it seems impossible to say.

Leaving Chavagnes to gain employment with her mother’s benefactor in La Rochelle, Camille begins working as a lady’s maid for Mademoiselle Clotilde de R., an eighteen-
year-old heiress whose pseudonym recalls the legend of St. Clotilde. As a lady’s maid, Camille oversees her mistress’s most intimate activities, brushing her hair, dressing her, washing her, preparing her for bed, a constant companion. This position affords Camille a level of physical intimacy with Clotilde that she would not have been granted if her benefactors had not only considered her a girl, but a pious girl with a strict religious upbringing. Yet although Camille is all those things, she is still not the girl they think she is. She grows increasingly infatuated with Clotilde: “If silence set in, I would innocently start admiring her,” she reflects. “The whiteness of her skin had no equal […] It was impossible to imagine more graceful contours without being dazzled by them” (16).

In addition to her duties as lady’s maid, Camille takes on the duties of personal secretary and reader for Clotilde’s bedridden father, who encourages Camille’s intellectual life. This occupation gives Camille frequent access to the family library, where she stumbles across a copy of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. “Those who know them can imagine how I felt,” Camille reflects. “As the sequel of my story will show, this discovery had a special bearing on my case” (18-19). This reference to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, and its subtle allusion to the myth of Hermaphroditos, is perhaps the closest the memoirs come to directly broaching the topic of hermaphrodism. But the mention is oblique; she never cites Hermaphroditos by name, she does not make any comprehensive connections between Hermaphroditos’s story and her own, and she

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22 In this portion of the narrative, Camille continues her pattern of fashioning the pseudonyms for her girlfriends after those of Catholic saints. Here, Camille alludes to St. Clotilde, the daughter of King Chilperic II of Burgundy (Monks 1921: 66). St. Clotilde’s was noteworthy for encouraging her husband, King Clovis, to convert from paganism to Christianity, making him the first Christian King of the Franks. Among the parallels between Camille’s girlfriend and the legendary saint is the ardor with which the two Clotildes devote themselves to their husbands and families –although one can detect Camille’s jealousy – or her aversion to the masculine –when she remarks that “the pure girl whom [Raoul] was going to make his wife loved him as ardently as her angelic nature allowed” (19). Once more, Camille depicts the female figure as “pure” and “angelic,” above the “base” (carnal) desires of Raoul/mankind.
glosses over which specific parts of the *Metamorphoses* leave her “extraordinarily shaken.” Instead, she engages the narrator’s function to recall her “case,” an insider reference that will only make sense to readers who are acquainted with it.

As is the case with her other schoolgirl *pashes*, Camille’s passion for Clotilde goes unfulfilled. She is heartbroken when Clotilde agrees to marry Raoul, a dashing officer in the French navy. Although Camille outwardly approves of their marriage, she confides: “an indefinable sensation tortured me at the thought that [Clotilde] would no longer be there to give me her first smile in the morning, her final word before going to sleep” (20). Camille’s interlocutors later interpret her jealousy of Raoul as “evidence” of her male sex drive, implying that women cannot be jealous of each other in the same fashion as men. But the scenario none of these interlocutors approach, save perhaps Foucault (and then only indirectly), is the possibility that Camille’s jealousy is not inherently masculine or feminine, as if human beings can only experience longing, jealousy, infatuation and lust from a hetero- or homonormative position.

When Camille grows depressed after Clotilde’s marriage to Raoul, her village priest encourages her to enter The Normal School at Oléron, where she joins twenty-five young women pursuing their teaching credentials, as well as “a hundred little girls, some boarders, some day students” (26). As she acclimates to Oléron, Camille grows increasingly concerned about her physical appearance, particularly her facial hair, which she tries to conceal “by making frequent use of scissors in place of a razor” (26). Rather than linger resentfully on her physical differences from other girls, Camille circles back to her need for affection from her surrogate mothers and peers, emphasizing that she was:
generally well liked by my teachers and companions, and I returned their affection fully but in a way that was almost fearful. I was born to love. All the faculties of my soul impelled me to it; beneath an appearance of coldness, almost of indifference, I had a passionate heart. (27)

Although Camille is capable of analyzing herself with incisive introspection, she still refrains from disclosing the possibility that she may not be a girl at all, almost as if she seeks to protect her innocence or delay the reader’s “discovery” of her “true sex” until the last possible moment. Yet while she continues holding this information back, Camille proceeds to disclose the details of still another infatuation with a fellow schoolgirl – as if to suggest it is not her lesbian affections for girls that Camille finds problematic or difficult to discuss, but the possibility that she desired such girls as a man.

After enrolling at Oléron, Camille develops a crush on eighteen-year-old Thécla, recalling how they “were always called the inseparables, and in fact we did not lose sight of each other for a single instant” (27). But Camille is no longer a little girl, she is turning into a young woman – and her demonstrations of affection attract scrutiny:

From time to time my teacher would fix her look upon me at the moment when I would lean forward to Thécla to kiss her, sometimes on the brow and—would you believe it of me?—sometimes on her lips. [This kissing] was repeated twenty times in the course of an hour. I was then condemned to sit at the end of the garden; I did not always do so with good grace. (27)

As Camille’s passion grows for Thécla, their contact becomes increasingly physical, running against the numerous taboos against lesbianism typical in nineteenth-century girls’ boarding schools (28). Apprehending Camille on the way to Thécla’s bedroom one

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23 Camille once more selects the name of a Catholic saint for her girlfriend. A disciple of St. Paul, St. Thécla once disguised herself as a boy and was commissioned to preach the Gospel. She was considered to be as holy as the apostles, and was the recipient of several noteworthy miracles, including being saved from being burned alive by a mysterious storm – perhaps an echo of the storm that drives Camille into the bed of Sister Marie.
evening, Sister Marie-des-Anges chastens her back into “the feeling of modesty that was commanded by morality and the respect owed to a religious house” (28). Yet Camille continues to pursue Thécla, even though she knows her infatuation will bring suffering on them both.

One summer evening as the girls stroll the village ramparts, they are overtaken by a thundershower. Racing to Oléron for shelter, they spend the night cowering in bed as lightning cracks the skies. The storm’s violence frightens Camille so badly that she crawls into bed with Sister Marie-des-Anges for protection. But when Sister Marie draws the girl close, hoping to calm her down, Camille is overcome by “an incredible sensation” in her groin; a sensation so powerful that she retreats to her own bed “possessed by feelings it would be difficult to describe” (32). Amplifying her guilt over her encounter with Sister Marie, Camille blames herself for these physical sensations “like a crime,” and attributes this guilt to the fact that she was “completely ignorant of the facts of life” (33). But whether this declaration of ignorance applies to the fact of an erection, clitoral stimulation, or even sex in general, Camille does not say. All we know is she is ashamed of her physical response to touching Sister Marie-des-Anges’s breasts.

When Camille graduates from Oléron, she is nineteen and eligible for employment. She applies for a position as schoolmistress at an all-girls boarding school in the canton seat of “L” (again, the possible pun on elle). Hiring Camille to teach classes alongside her eighteen-year-old daughter, Sara, the headmistress instructs the girls to work together in close proximity. Camille and Sara share everything from lesson plans to bedrooms, and, given Camille’s history of romantic encounters, we are not surprised when their friendship blossoms into something more. Praying, laughing, cooking, swapping stories,
braiding hair; Camille’s romantic feelings for Sara echo her earliest infatuations – but there is something about this girl that sets her apart from Lea, Clotilde and Thécla. While Camille describes her former lovers as beautiful, “graceful” or frail, she comments on “something ironical” about Sara’s features that gives her face “a certain hardness” – a hardness that mirrors Camille’s descriptions of herself as “hard” (44). Yet she also sees a “prodigious sweetness” in Sara’s gaze, “in which was to be read the ingenuousness of an angel who is unaware of herself” (44).

Camille decides to make her aware. Every evening before bedtime, she helps Sara undress, lingering at her bedside. This lingering leads to kissing, and more lingering, until their relationship becomes deeply sexual. But as their intimacy deepens, the “nameless, intolerable” pain that afflicts Camille’s groin when she reaches the apex of arousal ultimately forces her to grapple with her own sexuality more explicitly (51). Yet even at this critical juncture, Camille does not entertain the notion that she might be anything other than female. Instead, her anxieties revolve around the fact that she and Sara are lesbians, and she seems particularly agitated by the possibility that they might be “destined to live in the perpetual intimacy of two sisters” who must “conceal from everybody the terrifying secret that bound us to each other !!!” (51-2). Precisely what this secret is – Camille’s femininity or masculinity, the couple’s lesbian relations, or something else altogether – she does not say, perhaps because she does not definitively know how to say it.

24 Here, Camille’s choice of pseudonyms not only recalls St. Sara, the patron saint of Roma people (aka. St. Sara-La-Kali in French, or Sara e Kali [“Sara the Black”] in Romani). That St. Sara e Kali is something of a contentious figure in the Catholic canon – and one of the best-known virgin saints who lived in provincial France – makes for some interesting possibilities along these grounds. Among the more controversial accounts regarding Sara e Kali and the Saintes-Maries-de-la-Mer are the legends, recently rekindled by authors like Margaret Starbird in The Woman with the Alabaster Jar, that Sara e Kali was the love-child of Mary Magdalene and Jesus Christ.
Although Camille hints that she is not “like” other girls, this could mean virtually anything. But it certainly does not amount to an admission or confession that she was “truly” a man. Any conjecture along these lines is difficult to verify, but because Camille is playing out her own story chronologically and editing her memoirs up until the time of her death, one is left to conclude that while Camille-as-narrator knows exactly where her “unknown” passions for Sara are headed, she elects not to explicitly broach the issue until it arises in time. Clearly, at the time she is completing her memoirs, Camille-as-editor knows she will eventually be exploited by the medicolegal community as a pseudohermaphroditic male, and although she knows her relationship with Sara will be destroyed in the process, she decides to make her readers wait for it – perhaps to build suspense, to emphasize she was once an “innocent girl,” or to underscore her own shock when she recognized she was not the kind of girl she thought she was. We can only guess at her motives, as I have said – but if the reader has already encountered Foucault’s introduction to the memoirs, they know Camille is holding back or downplaying the outcome of her story. Ultimately, this narrative obfuscation has the same effect as Sally Potter’s deletion of the Moor’s head sequence from her version of Orlando, as Camille’s evasiveness raises more suspicions than if she had tackled the matter explicitly, highlighting both her aversion to the male sex she occupied (for a while) and underscoring her aversion to discussing issues of sexual anatomy more graphically.

Still, given the heteronormative nineteenth-century hostility towards lesbianism, hermaphroditism, and premarital sex in general, downplaying the truth is first and foremost critical to Camille’s survival, not merely as a schoolmistress, but as a human being. If she was ever suspected of being a boy, a lesbian or a hermaphrodite, Camille
and her lovers will almost certainly be discovered and undone. Their survival depends on keeping their relationship secret – from Sara’s mother, from other schoolgirls, from church and school authorities. Being outed would have disastrous consequences not merely for themselves but for their families. That said, it bears repeating that societal taboos against lesbianism are the constraints flanking Camille’s most intimate ecstasies – and until the moment of her detection, these constraints have little to do with either hermaphrodisim or maleness – as far as Camille is concerned at this point in the narrative, she is still a girl.

Although she does not outwardly approve or disapprove of her daughter spending so much time with Camille (perhaps because she does not understand the extent of their intimacies), Madame P. eventually pulls Sara aside, warning her “to be more reserved in the future in your relations with Mademoiselle Camille […] You are very fond of each other, and for my part I am very happy that you are; but there are proprieties that must be observed, even among girls” (56, emphasis Camille’s). Setting aside the possibility that Madame P’s benevolent attitude could imply a sympathy for lesbian love relations (“for my part I am very happy”), her admonishment makes Camille “tremble for the future […] What would it be like when she learned the truth! ! !” (56). In addition, I can only wonder at Camille’s use of italics for the word “girls” in the above passage, as this use of italics could be used to address a wide swath of possibilities. The most likely of these might be the fact that Madame P. understands that girls share a special degree of physical intimacy that boys do not, or it could be Camille’s emphasis that Madame P. and many others still believed she was actually a girl. But it could as easily indicate Camille’s incredulity that
Madame P. believed she was a girl, or could imply that Madame P had suspicions that Camille was not a girl.

While it is impossible to say for certain, the phrasing of the passage seems to imply that Madame P. does not yet know the truth about Camille’s sex or gender (which not even Camille seems to fully recognize) – thus, the potentially mind-blowing truth is posed as the fact that Camille and Sara are lesbians. Because neither of them has explicitly considered that Camille might be a boy, the only law Camille seems to be afraid of is the law that applies to them; the socioreligious taboos against lesbianism that were prevalent in all-girls boarding schools in the 1800s. In defiance of these prohibitions, Sara and Camille spend the better part of a year in their clandestine relationship, tasting its pleasures and suffering its pains.

Concerned by the hurtful sensations Camille experiences in her groin whenever they make love, Sara eventually persuades Camille to seek help from a local practitioner. Camille initially rejects this idea, sensing a potential trap, but her plight becomes so desperate that she submits to the humiliating examination. Although her doctor is no genius, his clumsy probing determines the source of her pain is genital:

His hand was already slipping under my sheet and coming to a stop at the sensitive place. It pressed upon it several times, as if to find there a solution to a difficult problem. It did not leave off at that point!!! He had found the explanation that he was looking for! But it was easy to see that it exceeded all his expectations!

The poor man was in a state of terrible shock! Sentences escaped from his throat by fits and starts, as if he were afraid to let them out. I wished he were a hundred feet under the ground. (68-69)

The “discovery” yielded by the village practitioner’s medical exam – particularly his detection of a clitoris the size of which exceeds “all his expectations” – leads the doctor
to seek counsel from more qualified specialists. Turning her over to a regime of religious and medical officials, this blue ribbing panel of experts embark on a further series of tests. Motivated by the findings of their discoveries, and Camille’s disclosure that she sexually desires other girls – they arrive at the mutual conclusion that changing Camille’s sex from female to male will restore harmony to the normative order. In that sense, Camille’s visit to her local physician is a diagnostic turning point on several levels: what begins with the patient’s desire to find a solution for one set of problems (to address her own discomfort and assuage her lover’s worries) yields a different symptom altogether, a symptom that Camille may never have sought to “treat.” At the moment her doctors trace the source of her pain to her genitals, Camille is suddenly “exposed,” leading to a medicolegal outing that negatively impacts not merely herself but her entire support system.

In addition to this medicolegal verdict of masculinity, there are several concurrent factors that influence Camille’s decision to go along with the consensus and attempt to live as a man. In the first place, living as a man might be her ticket to enjoying a licit, sanctified relationship with Sara as husband and wife. But rather than restore harmony to her world, the medicolegal mandate of masculinity throws Camille’s life into complete disarray, rupturing her relations not only with Sara, but with everyone she knows. After recognizing Camille for so long as a girl, none of her intimates can accept the “truth” that she is now a man. Madame P., for example, refuses to call Camille monsieur, and insists on referring to her as “daughter” (the same is true of Mother Eleanor and the other females who have known Camille the longest [88]). But while her loved ones profess undying love for Camille no matter what her sex, the authorities who represent the
institutions on which Camille’s livelihood depends are outraged to discover Camille is “truly” a man, as this discovery indicates their own inability to correctly recognize her when she was in their care. Knowing they will be penalized for allowing a boy to slip under the radar into an all-female fold, the men in charge of Oléron are only concerned with how to get rid of Camille with the least amount of publicity, while the doctors in charge of her care, professing a desire to return Camille into the normative sexual order, become preoccupied with Camille’s status as a specimen. Even as the women in Camille’s life seem reluctant to acknowledge her change of sex (and the extent to which the sex change will undo them), the patriarchal order begins to distance itself from Camille, viewing her alternately as a medicolegal curiosity and conniving impostor.

Ironically, at the moment Camille most urgently seeks to join the patriarchal order, she is denied entry to its inner sanctums. In renouncing her girlhood and claiming she is a man, she loses many of the privileges she formerly enjoyed as a woman – covert or otherwise. Once the medicolegal experts discover her sexual truth, Camille faces double jeopardy in all directions. Because she was once a girl, Camille is not only forbidden unlimited access to the privileges of masculinity – because they are unmarried, Camille loses all access to Sara – because Camille is a man, she loses her job as a schoolmistress – because she has lived as a girl for so long, Camille is forced to leave Oléron before she summons overwhelming scandal. On the day she parts with Sara for the final time, Camille recalls:

I clasped [Sara] for one last time in my arms, the girl whom I called my sister and whom I loved ardently, with all the passion of my twenty years. My lips brushed her own. Everything had been said between us. This time as I left I was bearing away in my soul all the happiness that I had enjoyed during those
twenty years, the first, the unique love of my life. As the carriage moved off, my beloved faded out of sight. It was all over. (87)

Camille later views her break-up with Sara as a mistake: “Here again my inexperience was my undoing. I cannot doubt that if I had known how to manage the situation my future would have been different. Today, perhaps, I would be [Madame P’s] son-in-law.”

But who in the nineteenth century has any experience with the act of changing sex? As I mentioned, instead of making Camille’s “situation” easier, her abrupt shift into masculinity attracts scandal and socioeconomic abjection from all directions. Obviously, these punitive processes share a common moral-ethical edge. Because their interlacement so thoroughly frames Camille’s sex change, I would like to evaluate this edge more closely.

When Camille’s doctors begin broadcasting their medicolegal determination that Camille is a masculine hermaphrodite, she becomes a medicolegal anomaly, and the target of gossip and speculation. “People were already talking in whispers,” Camille notes. “The little town of L. was aroused by this extraordinary event, which by its nature elicited criticism and slander” (90). Accusing Camille’s mother of “concealing” her daughter’s true sex, Camille’s critics call her “a real Don Juan,” claiming she took advantage of her sexual ambiguity to fool young girls into a false sense of security as a means of “engag[ing] secretly in love affairs” with them, thereby spreading “shame and dishonor everywhere” (90). When the Parisian newspapers get hold of Camille’s story, there is a flurry of sensational articles speculating on her clandestine sexual relations. “The high society of the town were excited by them,” recalls Camille. “I was the subject
of all the conversations at the seashore bathing establishment. Some persons of standing were there that day with the prefect, who proclaimed his astonishment loudly” (90).

Still, it is difficult to see why the intensity of the scandal aroused by the fact that an alleged boy spent the first twenty years of his life in a series of all-girl communities seems to take Camille so completely by surprise. Once again, she seems to approach her switch from femininity to masculinity with a strange naïveté. Considering the magnitude of the change she is proposing, Camille appears to be so preoccupied with her desire to access the sanctums of patriarchal privilege that she cannot foresee the normative backlash that will accompany this attempt, as if blind to the catch in her plan: in order to become a “true” man, Camille must first confess to the medicolegal community that she was never truly a girl. And it is precisely this confession that summons the avalanche of scandal on Camille and Sara, along with family, friends, employers and benefactors, all of whom are implicated and thereby publicly censured for failing to detect her “true” sex. In that sense, Camille’s confession that she is not a girl generates a far greater degree of scandal than if she and Sara had been outing as lesbians.25 Yet this confession does not spring from Camille’s lips; it is wrung from her body by the girl’s doctors, whose inability to keep her “aberration” secret ultimately leads to shame and socioeconomic abjection in every direction. Of course, as Butler notes in Gender Trouble, this scandal does not emanate from Camille’s body per se, but from the larger system of sexual subjectivation that supports the larger sexual ontology of nineteenth-century France. It is

25 Arguing in Gay Shame that scandal is a type of “politics,” David Halperin asserts that two chief markers (and attendant consequences) of scandal are shame and socioeconomic abjection; in fact, “scandal as a performative can operate and make sense only within structures of shame” (2010: 313).
this system, and the medicolegal operatives who shape and support it, that fail to recognize her body as “normal.”

Remarking on the ways in which bodily confessions that broach the limit-point of cultural recognizability tend to destabilize the performative reiteration of cultural norms, Butler analyzes the scandal and punishment levied at an affronting body by heteronormative agencies attempting to squeeze the body back into the normative frame. In that sense, scandal is not so much an attribute or product of individual bodies per se; scandal permeates any culture and/or language that restricts the borders of sex-gender-desire with a punitive dialectics of socioeconomic abjection. To borrow a term from David Halperin’s Gay Shame, Camille’s confession (that she is not the girl they thought she was) turns her into a queer outlaw whose bodily speech act destabilizes the heteronormative praxis of subjectivation, as if to suggest the presence of anything less than a clear reproduction of the primal male-female binary summons a disorganization of

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26 This bodily confession discomforts the medicolegal community because it reminds those practitioners that their system of sexual recognition is scandalously inadequate. As Butler notes in Gender Trouble: “Although male and female anatomical elements are jointly distributed in and on [Camille’s] body, that is not the true source of scandal. The linguistic conventions that produce intelligible gendered selves find their limit in Herculine precisely because she/he occasions a convergence and disorganization of the rules that govern sex/gender/desire” (31). Positioning the enactment of scandal at the limit of culture and language, where it manifests in a social reluctance to confer the full spectrum of human rights on subjects who stand at the threshold of recognition,

27 Butler also approaches the issue of scandalous speech acts in Excitable Speech, noting: “the body that speaks is a scandal precisely because its speech is not fully governed by intention. No act of speech can full control or determine the rhetorical effects of the body which speaks. It is scandalous as well because the bodily action of its speech is not predictable in any mechanical way. That the speech act is a bodily act does not mean that the body is fully present in its speech. The relationship between speech and the body is that of a chiasmus” (1997: 155). As this concerns Camille Barbin, the chiasmus between her body and her bodily confession unpredictably asserts to her interlocutors that she is a hermaphrodite, when her intention is to be a man.

28 In light of her statement that “Herculine is not an ‘identity,’ but the sexual impossibility of an identity,” Butler’s use of backslashed pronouns (s/he and h/er) to designate Camille’s “sexually impossible identity” seems to beg an important question; namely, the question of Camille’s girlhood, and the inability of any of the players around her to recognize it. In that sense, it is not that Camille is the sexual impossibility of an identity, but rather that the medicolegal community cannot recognize who she “truly” is.
the governing body itself.  

Ironically, Camille’s attempt to access heteronormative security summons her greatest state of abjection; to put a fine point on it, although Camille lacked many privileges as a woman, her attempt to change from a woman into a man leads her deeper into abjection, from little money to no money, little power to no power, from a clandestine sexual relationship to no sexual relationship at all.

At the end of her financial rope, Camille decides to try her luck in Paris as a laborer (“Paris that I like because I am ignored here” [104]). Obtaining the promise of a position with the railway, Camille seems mildly hopeful of her prospects – but the job does not pan out, and she quickly runs short on cash. Old acquaintances are useless: they express their sympathy and a prurient interest in her circumstances, but no meaningful support. Camille’s situation grows dire. With each passing step marked by fresh depths of socioeconomic abjection, she invites us to “discover how many wounds scathing contempt, abuse, vile mockery, bitter sarcasm, have inflicted” on her (104). Growing desperate, Camille accepts a job as a busboy for a large shipping company, full of trepidation about leaving everyone and everything behind, hoping that traveling to The United States will give life a positive turn. And as her world spins into a vortex of loss and deprivation, Camille becomes mired in regret about leaving her girlhood behind, as if she betrayed a special trust.

Regret. The conclusion of Camille’s memoirs is saturated with it. Regret over attempting to live as a man and failing, regret that she cannot return to girlhood or move

29 In Gay Shame, David Halperin discusses the ways in which queer studies reifies figures like Gertrude Stein and Liberace, noting that “the antiassimilationist queer culture of the 1990s” was attracted to such “queer outlaws” precisely because they were “inimical to the ethos of gay pride, repulsive to liberated, self-respecting lesbians and gay men of the post-Stonewall era” and therefore resistant to inclusion in “affirmative histories of homosexuality” (2010: 7). What made these outlaws “newly attractive to the queer movement was the scandal they continued to represent to conventional social values, their unfitness for sociality (gay or straight), [and] their inaptitude for ‘serving the state’” (7).
forward into it. Regret that there is no possibility for a girl like her to exist. Regret marks her recollections of the sensations of utter worthlessness that define her final days:

A burden to myself and others, without any affection, without any of those prospects that at least sometimes brighten with their pure and tender rays the careworn brows of those who suffer. But no, nothing. Always abandonment, solitude, outrageous scorn (110).

Abandoned, scorned, alone – and, worst of all, foreclosed from her cherished girlhood – Camille decides it is better to have lived one day as a girl than one hundred years as Abel. So she destroys them both. Reduced to an existence nobody would consider a livable life, the melancholy subject opts to destroy life altogether. Thanks to the pressures of socioeconomic abjection, her options for living in any sex have been removed. Camille never gets to be a man because she ultimately rejects all men – including herself – as unworthy. She never gets to be a woman, because she never progresses beyond girlhood into womanhood. And because she can never return to girlhood once the medicolegal authorities have decided she is officially a man, there is no space left for Camille to inhabit within the sexual and social ontology of her time. Betrayed, angry, ashamed, Camille perceives her only way forward as out.

In the final knell, Camille is never completely able to be Abel, so deeply did she detest his existence. Perhaps that is why the name “Abel Barbin” never appears in the body of her memoirs, but only in an epigraph inserted after her final words by Foucault: “In the month of February 1868, the corpse of Abel Barbin, who had committed suicide by means of a charcoal stove, was found in a room in the quarter of the Théâtre de l’Odéon […] He had left the manuscript of the preceding text” (115). On this score, I find Foucault’s post-script remiss: Abel has left us nothing. Abel never fully existed; he was
nothing more than an attempt, a repeated failure to make or do, and Camille discarded that attempt in favor of more libidinally satisfactory options, even if her ultimate option was death. But it is Camille who writes the memoirs, Camille who leaves them behind, Camille who lets us know that her girlhood was, above all else, the thing that made her life worthwhile.

In the next section of this chapter, I will more extensively explore the possibility that Camille is not “truly” an intersexual or a sexually ambiguous person, but rather a recognizable girl who is undone by a heteronormative backlash unleashed when she claims to be a man.

**Nameless, Furtive, Triumphant: A Resistant Girlhood Trumps Sexual Recognition**

Closely examined, the function of the narrator’s voice in Camille’s memoirs raises several key issues about her authorship and her sex. The fact that Camille never fully takes residence as a man – even a failed man – before expressing regret at losing her girlhood makes one wonder if she ever vacates the vantage point of girlhood long enough to write her memoirs as a man, or if she was a girl all along – a girl who attempted to change her sex but was unhappy with the results. Is there ever a point at which Abel is writing his own memoirs, or does Camille work back into them at the end of her days, reemerging as a girl in an editorial role to explain/vindicate/demonize her unsuccessful attempt to be Abel? Once the reader reaches the conclusion of her memoirs, they begin to sense that Camille has been writing them all along, and that beneath the facade of a crumbling Abel there was always this defiant girl, outraged and regretful, seeking
retribution for the injustices committed against her by medicolegal authorities. But Camille’s final words present far more questions than answers:

What strange blindness was it that made me hold on to this absurd role until the end? I would be unable to explain it to myself. Perhaps it was that thirst for the unknown, which is so natural to man. (114)

While it is difficult to pinpoint whether this “thirst for the unknown,” which Camille sees as so natural to man, is intended to apply to the male sex specifically or human beings in general. It is clear that the “strange blindness” that makes Camille hold on to her absurd role to the end is not so much blindness as an inability to recognize a sexual truth that extends far beyond Camille’s own misrecognition of her “true” sex or “true identity” to permeate every aspect of her negotiations with the guardians of the dominant sexual ontology, and the inability of this ontology’s adherents to recognize her. The entire system of recognition is rife with méconnaissance in all directions; not merely the village practitioner’s inability to “correctly” recognize Camille’s birth sex, or the inability of the medicolegal panel to recognize their mistake in concluding the “natural” heterostatic balance will be restored if Camille takes up life as a man, but the inability of all players to recognize that Camille is not a man or a hermaphrodite, but a girl without a fully circumscribed position in the dominant sexual order.30

I am hardly the first to remark on the fact that Camille’s memoirs predominantly focus on her life as a girl. It seems ironic, however, that Camille’s insights about her

30 Although she was exiled from girlhood by the dominant sexual ontologies of her times, that does not mean Camille’s girlhood would pose any questions now, particularly as our understanding of girlhood has expanded significantly since the 1990s. As I mentioned in Chapter Four of this thesis, in my analysis of Orlando’s daughter, growing factions of the (post)feminist community have been increasingly regarding girlhood as a sex with discrete truths of its own. I follow Ilana Nash in asserting that the activism of Girl Studies and its close readings of popular culture still bears the feminist commitment to increasing “the visibility, the respect, and the fair treatment” of all females – not only clear-cut women and girls, but intersexual girls like Camille Barbin (Nash, 2001).
girlhood grow most poignant at the moment she completely rejects her manhood, at the end of her life, when she finally recognizes how deeply the loss of her girlhood has been guaranteed. The bitter tenor of her commentary in the biographical interventions she intersperses throughout the memoirs, combined with her factual knowledge concerning the outcomes of her journey into masculinity, strongly indicate that this juncture – at the end of her life – was the critical point at which Camille placed the final edit on her memoirs. It is from that rueful vantage point that she levels her most vociferous indictments at the medicolegal regime that irrevocably separated her from girlhood and all its “nameless, furtive pleasures,” to borrow a phrase from Foucault (xv). 31 Yet it was Camille’s eagerness to transcend the constraints of those furtive girlish delights that spurred her attempt to become a man in the first place, so she could more licitly enjoy her partnership with Sara. At the point Camille is finishing her memoirs, it seems the pleasures that delighted her most were not so much the pleasure of sex with other girls, but the pleasure of living as a girl among girls – and not just any girls, but the Catholic schoolgirls who populated the convents and boarding schools of nineteenth-century France. It is both her loss of this specific community of girlhood, and the finality of her ejection from it, that throws Camille into a crisis of subjectivization, rupturing her so violently that she can never coalesce as a man. Along with her perceived inability to rejoin the ranks of girlhood in the aftermath of Abel, this rupture is increased by her isolation and socioeconomic abjection, producing an undoing so profound that Camille commits suicide.

31 Camille’s vehement disavowal of an entire sex is audible in her sweeping indictment of the sex of men, whose promises “soil the lips,” whose copulations are “hideous,” and whose characters lack “the noble, the great heart, the generous soul that are needed in order to suffer” (99). If Camille was truly Abel, she would be the target of her own indictment – but she clearly considers her own character as cut from a different cloth.
In an earlier article, “Retrotranslations of Post-Transsexuality, Notions of Regret,” I suggest there is only so much socioeconomic abjection a subject can tolerate before it begins to fold back on itself, and its ability to resist the backlash of normatizing counter-translations is weakened. In the case of male-to-female transsexuals who no longer wish to continue living as women, for example, their ability to move forward as a post-transsexual can be compromised by overwhelming counter-translations asserting they are “returning to being a man.” Standing at this crisis-point, the subject can either find the ability to move forward in resistance despite the massive counter-translations thrown against it, or they can retreat from a position of resistance into a more livable frame – or, like Camille, they can relinquish their hold on life altogether. The closer Camille comes to her final undoing, every fiber of her being cries out to be a girl again – but once she has been Abel, no matter how forcefully she disavows his existence, girlhood becomes the exact sexual subject position to which she can never completely return. This presents a negative ontological paradox. Like the little Match Girl longing for the cozy hearth of heteronormative privilege, Camille ultimately wants to break back into a normative sexual frame – but it is the normative frame of girlhood that she desires, not the “true sex” of masculinity she has been driven towards by the princes of science.

Once Camille has tried to be Abel, no matter how abysmally he fails, no matter how much she wants to be a girl again, nobody will ever accept her claims that she is female. At the point the medicolegal establishment has officially registered Camille as a man,

32 For more on the topic of goneback politics and the medicolegal deployment of regret, see my work in “Retrotranslations of Post-Transsexuality, Notions of Regret” in The Journal of Visual Culture (2007) don’t you already quote this in previous chapter? If so shorten reference. This essay is particularly indebted to Butler’s notions of sexual recognition, and explores the plight of sexes positioned as unrecognizable within the cultural Symbolic, and the agencies of normatization that bear down on them with retro-translations attempting to push them back, instead of allowing them to translate their way forward.
particularly in light of their shocking “discovery” that they misdiagnosed her as a girl in the first place, this normative regime sanctions Camille to live as a man or suffer the consequences. In that case, those consequences are not clearly established because there are no explicit laws governing individuals who are not recognized within the dominant sexual ontology.

Once more, we arrive at the fraught moral-ethical juncture where abjection flanks individuals who have been determined to be sexually ambiguous by heteronormative agencies who cannot recognize their sexuality within the existing lexicon. There are several reasons the authorities in charge of Camille’s recognition will never regard her as a girl. On the one hand, they need her to be a man if she is to continue having sex with women (otherwise she is a lesbian, thereby breaking a recognizable law). On the other hand, they need Camille to be a pseudohermaphrodite in order to justify their ongoing examination of her “monstrous” genitalia. And because the parameters of their sexual ontology are so restrictive, the things Camille wants or needs seem of little consequence. Once the medicolegal authorities have marked Camille in their administrative crosshairs, interpreting her sexual truth is their game, not hers. It is precisely this game that Camille seeks to overturn with the indictments in her memoirs. But she cannot overturn it.

Considering the concept of *resistance* as discussed in de Lauretis’s *Figures of Resistance*, Camille’s memoirs are a resistant text that oppose the structure of dominant norms seeking to pressure her into an unacceptably normative mode of sex (2007: 73).[^33]

[^33]: In *Figures of Resistance*, de Lauretis develops her conceptualization of resistant eccentricity from her earlier work in *Technologies of Gender*. In *Technologies*, de Lauretis writes that: “The construction of gender goes on today through the various technologies of gender (e.g., cinema) and institutional discourses (e.g., theory) with power to control the field of social meaning and thus produce, promote, and “implant” representations of gender,” noting that “the terms of a different construction of gender also exist, in the margins of hegemonic discourses. Posed from outside the heterosexual social contract, and inscribed in
Taking up “a position of resistance and agency that is not outside but rather eccentric to the social cultural appara
ti of the heterosexual institution,” Camille’s memoirs seek to remap the “boundaries between bodies and discourses, identities and communities” (de Lauretis 2007: 75 emphasis mine). Foucault also assesses the topic of resistance in The History of Sexuality, observing: “where there is power, there is resistance” (1978: 96).

Like de Lauretis, Foucault suggests that resistance “is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power,” arguing that force relations are intercalated with “a multiplicity of points of resistance: these play the role of adversary, target, support, or handle” throughout every transaction in “the power network” (96). But Foucault does not adequately address the overwhelming loss Camille could not resist; namely, the finality of her foreclosure from girlhood. Camille is not undone by the lack of girlhood’s furtive, nameless pleasures – she is undone by the regret she feels because she is no longer...

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34 Drawing a significant distinction between the concepts of eccentric and outside, de Lauretis suggests that while sexually resistant subjects might be eccentric to any given hetero- or homonormative paradigm, they do not inherently stand outside of them, as if shorn away or divided from them by an ambiguous and invisible wall. Instead of being surrounded or flanked by alterity, every sexual ontology is permeated with alterity, running through every layer of its stratification. Indeed, if Butler is correct in her assertions that there is no singular, universal “type” (of man, woman, intersexual, transsexual, homosexual, heterosexual, etc.), sexual alterity is merely eccentric to the dominant sexual ontology – it is part of it even though it resists its overly restrictive classificatory norms. This would make a sexually resistant subject far different than Fausto-Sterling’s “third sex,” a term that is overly restrictive by sheer dint of its nomenclature, which suggests that human beings who are not recognizable as members of “primal” dyadic pair can only exist outside of it, in a Third Position, mashed in the overarching envelope of the Other. Responding to Fausto-Sterling’s third sex paradigm, Allison Andrew, in an insightful thesis project titled “Intersexed, Intertext: A Critique of Limited Gender Identity in ‘Herculine Barbin’ and ‘Middlesex,’” notes: “The need to define the self in the face of the Other becomes a crucial problem in both [Herculine and Middlesex] because the other remains cognizant of a framework wherein the intersexed cannot be the third category that Fausto-Sterling declares necessary” (29). Observing that notions of a “collective other mandates conformity, a conformity that the intersexual body cannot possibly adhere to, at least not without extensive medical intervention,” Andrew writes of the unavailability of any of these categories to Camille Barbin (29).

35 While de Lauretis mines the concept of resistance more thoroughly in several of the essays in Figures of Resistance, she utilizes this concept as early as Technologies of Gender, in which she explicitly analyzes the Foucault’s notion of resistance as quoted above. “Both power and resistance,” de Lauretis notes, “operate concurrently in ‘the strategic field’ which constitutes the social, and both traverse or spread across—rather than inhere in or belong to— institutions, social stratifications, and individual unities” (1987: 35).
recognized as a girl. This regret destroys her resistance to the socioeconomic abjection she faces from the heteronormative culture that commands her to live as a man.

Yet no matter how much regret colors the final passages of Camille’s memoirs, the text still testifies to her resistant resolution to die as a girl rather than cling to the undesirable role of a man, in which Camille is unable to visualize a plausible route forward. But it is clearly the inability of the dominant sexual ontology to recognize Camille’s girlhood that makes her return to that girlhood impossible. Why is it so difficult for the medicolegal regime to recognize that it has, for a second time, misrecognized Camille’s “true” sex? Wouldn’t this recognition amount to the admission of the second error, which was even more egregious than the “original” medicolegal error of miscategorizing Camille’s birth sex as female? And would it not comprise an even more egregious admission that they were also mistaken in their prescription of masculinity, which was supposed to counteract the “aberrancy” of Camille’s mistaken femininity, as this prescription clearly did not work? By all accounts, Camille would have no problems “going back” to being a girl, if only they’d let her; she was officially recognized as a girl for the first nineteen years of her life – and not simply by herself and her doctors, but by family, peers, employers and benefactors. She probably would have been happy living in that role even if it were surrounded by socioeconomic abjection. But the medicolegal community cannot recognize such a multidirectional move – from girlhood to masculinity and back to girlhood again – as an acceptable alternative to their ultimatum of masculinity.

What emerges from a close reading of Camille’s memoirs is not so much the fact that she was an alterious girl, a non-normative girl, or even an eccentric girl – but the
possibility that Camille truly was a girl, no matter what medicolegal authorities and contemporary scholars asserted to the contrary.\textsuperscript{36} What kind of girl was she? Her memoirs tell us. Ungainly, plain, dark-haired. Frequently melancholy, occasionally ecstatic. A bookish, intelligent girl who was unafraid of taking risks, a girl who derided coquetry but valued honesty and fidelity, a girl who sexually desired other girls. A girl who did not like or trust most men, and had good reasons not to trust them.\textsuperscript{37} But above all, Camille was a girl who valued femininity. She prized it with a righteous, even religious zeal. Not merely her own femininity and her own girlhood, but the states of femininity and girlhood in general – states she considered worth fighting for, perhaps even dying for. In remembering this girl, whose resistance was undone by the efforts of medicolegal interlocutors with career interests in exploiting her body (as a case study of pseudohermaphroditism, at least), Camille’s gendered undoing still demands a reorientation of our “normative sexualities,” so that future girlhoods that appear to stand beyond cultural recognition might be emancipated into discourse.

While this section of the chapter primarily focused on Camille Barbin’s inability to resist the counter-translations of a medicolegal regime intent on preventing her return to girlhood, the next section will approach Camille’s memoirs as a resistant text, drawing

\textsuperscript{36} In “Intersexed, Intertext,” Andrew writes that Barbin’s case “proves that the ‘true self’ and ‘true sex’ are at odds with one another,” and that her abjection and suicide “highlights the drastic actions that one is willing to take when they are forced into a categorization, in this instance a gendered identity, that they feel is inaccurate. Rather than living as something she was not, Barbin chose not to live at all” (75). Although Andrew is correct in this regard – that rather than live as a man or a hermaphrodite, Camille chose not to live at all — I doubt Camille would have wanted to live as an intersexual, had the category even been available. It was girlhood Camille was interested in, when all was said and done, a fact to which Andrew pays scant attention in her analysis.

\textsuperscript{37} Camille reverred several men in her life; particularly Monsieur de Saint-M. and other benefactors, whose friendship she valued for its access to history and myth, of god and religion. But their friendship seems to have been earned, as if wrested from the grasp of a jealous god, perhaps the ghost of her father, whose presence is never seen but always felt.
several conclusions on how that textual resistance might come to bear on narrations of sexual ambiguity.

**A Pensive Resistance: The Memoirs of a Nineteenth-century French Girl, Undone**

In the previous section of this chapter, I propose that Camille was not merely a girl, but a specific kind of girl; a resistant girl whose eccentric refutation of the dominant sexual ontology was overwhelmed and disabled by a heteronormative culture established and bolstered by a medicolegal regime appointed to police its boundaries. Yet while this girl’s body – her physical self – may have been undone by those princes of science, her body of work was not. My concluding section will submit that Camille’s memoirs are a **resistant text**. Offering some connections between its textual resistance and the narration of sexual ambiguity in adaptation, I will discuss the questions they continue to raise long after the girl who wrote them has gone. But if one is to convincingly ask the question, “what kind of writing was this text?” the answer depends on the text in question, and whether one means Camille’s memoirs on their own, or Foucault’s adaptative curatorship of the memoirs in a collection of texts.

I will take advantage of this section to examine both. According to Foucault, Camille’s memoirs are representative of the “turgid and outdated” literature of girls boarding schools in the late 1800s, a style he refers to as “elegant, affective, and allusive” (xii). Although Camille’s memoirs do evince each of these qualities, they cannot be reduced to them; even in light of their first passage, Foucault’s analysis falls rather flat:
I am twenty-five years old, and, although I am still young, I am beyond any doubt approaching the hour of my death.

I have suffered much, and I have suffered alone! Alone! Forsaken by everyone! My place was not marked out in this world that has shunned me, that had cursed me. Not a living creature was to share in this immense sorrow that had seized me when I left my childhood, at that age when everything is beautiful, because everything is young and bright with the future.

That age did not exist for me. As soon as I reached that age, I instinctively drew apart from the world, as if I had already come to understand that I was to live in it as a stranger. (3)

Perhaps Camille’s use of multiple expression marks (!!!) does resemble, on a superficial level, the schoolgirl prose of the late 1800s. But the emphatic style of her writing also combines with its intensive level of self-inquiry to evoke the tradition of confessional literature since the fourth century – a style of prose that would be daily fare for Camille in her Catholic boarding schools. Like the writings of St. Augustine, St. John of the Cross, Hadewijch d’Anvers and Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, the opening of Camille’s memoirs tumbles out in a complex tangle of revelational disclosures, each conveyed with a sense of impending doom.38 Young, approaching the hour of her death, the author is disavowed and suffering like a martyr.

I am by no means the first to detect the similarity between Camille’s writing and the works of Catholic saints.39 In The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault, Chloë Taylor suggests Camille’s diaries are not merely a confession, but the memoirs of a forced confession that is later regretted; namely, Camille’s confession to medicolegal

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38 Concerning Camille’s regrets, Andrew writes: “The shame that Barbin felt from the public nature of her re-gendering permeates her memoirs” (2012: 29). Shame is often the marker of regret. It is the act of telling her story that immortalized the tortured Barbin; an act of telling that becomes likened to the coming out of so many people who blur the “straight” lines set up by a society unwilling to accept difference” (2012: 76)

39 In Confessions, St. Augustine asks: “What am I even at the best, but one sucking Thy milk, and feeding upon Thee?” (1876: 57). There is a similar effusive, dolorous angst to the poems of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz (“Death to my hapless lyre from which you drew/these echoes that, lamenting, speak your name,/and let these awkward characters be known/as black tears shed by my grief-stricken pen” [2004: 10]).
authorities that she might not be a girl (2009: 225). But just as Camille’s memoirs are not reducible to schoolgirl prose, they are not reducible to the genre of religious confession, either. They are critical of organized religion. In addition, they include elements of roman-à-clef, cleverly deploying narrative conventions to protect the people she loved while discussing unpleasant or damaging truths (as I have suggested throughout this chapter, Camille interrelates her pseudonyms with literary references to underscore key themes from religious persecution to chivalric love). Furthermore, because Camille’s critique of the medicolegal system is so visionary – as was her assessment that contemporary readers would view her account as going “beyond the limits of the possible” – it is no stretch to suggest that Camille’s memoirs predict (if not exhort) scholars like Foucault to re-discover them and activate their revolutionary petition.

Of course, Foucault is only one possible re-discoverer, and his editorial rearrangement of Camille’s memoirs with other texts is merely one possible adaptive recombination. But without Foucault’s editorial intervention, chances are that Camille’s memoirs would still be gathering dust in the now-defunct Ministry of Public Hygiene – perhaps even deaccessioned or destroyed. Foucault intervened because he had an agenda, however, and this was not simply to bring Camille’s memoirs into contact with other texts, but to underscore a central component of his own work in The History of Sexuality. His primary motive was to consider the ways in which sexual subjects linguistically confess themselves up to the Law, and are thereby emancipated into political discourse – not merely adding to it, but completely reorienting its terms. As Taylor notes, public acts of confession bear the potential to result in broad social and epistemological changes (2009: 225). Taylor’s viewpoint here aligns with Peter Brooks’s notion, in *The Routledge*
Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory, that the emergence of the confession as literary genre is indicative of larger scale epistemological shifts in the valuation of the subject-as-individual (like Taylor, Brooks cites St. Augustine’s writings as an example of “religious confessional literature”). Citing the posthumous publication of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s Confessions in 1782, Brooks suggests that Rousseau’s works forked into a variety of forms, including “memoirs, letters, diaries [and] foot-of-the-gallows confessions” (2005: 82). Interestingly, Camille’s memoirs span each of these forms – even as they harken to the tradition of Catholic confession – a point that was not lost on Foucault when he adaptively edited her memoirs in his collection.

In I, Having Died: Foucault and the Writing of the Self, Yeo Huan notes that Foucault’s editorial efforts in Herculine underscore the fact that “the confession of sex—cannot be divorced from the early Christian tradition” (2008: 14). In his adaptive (re)arrangement of Camille’s specific confession, Foucault not only traces the ways in which “the compulsion to confess becomes embedded in society and the act of narrativising itself,” he assists Camille in leveling an indictment of heteronormative culture by positioning her memoirs with selected ancillary documents to create not merely a complex intertextual discourse, but a discursive interstice that resists any overarching or “legitimate” conclusion (14). Instead, Herculine Barbin becomes a textual interface that urges us to examine the pivotal role of the subject in sexual power relations; specifically, the position of the resistant writer/figure in such relationships.

While scholars like Butler often gloss over this fact in their “close readings” of Herculine, dismissing Foucault’s collection as a departure from his typical deconstruction of force relations, Foucault’s adaptive enterprise in Herculine aligns with his general
analyses of discursive processes in force relations.\textsuperscript{40} Viewing technologies of subjectivation as they emerge through history, \textit{Herculine} is not merely another Foucauldian study of memoirs (ck. \textit{I, Pierre Rivière, Having Slaughtered My Mother, My Sister and My Brother}) – it resonates with his work in \textit{Birth of the Clinic, Madness and Civilization} and \textit{Discipline and Punish}, each of which centralizes the emancipation of eccentric speaking subjects and the articulation of their voices in the fulcrum of force relations.\textsuperscript{41} Furthermore, the nuanced intertextual discourse initiated by \textit{Herculine} is consistent with the Foucauldian style of writing that Deleuze describes as “irreducible to statements” (1988: 49). Simply put, it is impossible to distill any of Foucault’s writings to a one-liner, and whatever Butler might say to the contrary, this goes double for his adaptive editorship in \textit{Herculine}.\textsuperscript{42}

\textsuperscript{40} Because her larger project is so incisive (and charismatic), numerous scholars have followed Butler’s lead in \textit{Gender Trouble}, producing an echo effect that reverberates throughout contemporary analyses of Foucault’s work in \textit{Herculine}. In \textit{Misfit of the Family}, for example, Michael Lucey argues that Judith Butler’s work in \textit{Gender Trouble} is characterized by “the force of Butler’s critique and her subsequent careful reading of Herculine Barbin’s own text” (Lucey 2003: 135). M.E. Bailey amplifies Lucey’s sentiment in “Feminism: Contesting Bodies, Sexuality and Identity,” stating that readers “could aspire no higher than to plagiarize or legitimately reproduce” Butler’s restrictive analysis of Foucault, a reading Bailey finds “critical and exhaustive” (Bailey 1993: fn4, 120). Yet Butler only examines an extremely limited slice of Foucault’s work in \textit{Herculine} – primarily his introduction, which she seeks to attack – and pays little heed to the memoirs themselves, or the doctors’ memoranda, or Oskar Panizza’s novella, all of which Foucault has shaped into the collection. In that sense, Butler’s reading of Camille’s memoirs is surprisingly selective, and her stated motives for “reading against” Foucault comprise too limited a theoretical lens for a comprehensive evaluation of \textit{Herculine} and its nuanced intertextual relations.

\textsuperscript{41} In \textit{Up Against Foucault: Explorations of Some Tensions between Foucault and Feminism}, a 1990s collection edited by Caroline Ramazanoğlu, Cain joins an array of new feminist scholars who grant Foucault the savvy to assemble texts that intercalate the subaltern’s speech with the technical discourses that frame their utterances. Cain sees two inhibiting factors working to limit the critical reception of Foucault’s work in \textit{Pierre Rivière and Herculine Barbin}: firstly, the “two books are not mentioned” in the more celebrated critical commentaries on Foucault’s oeuvre, and; secondly, in his more widely known books, Foucault typically “directed his analytic efforts to serious and elaborated discourses rather than to common sense knowledges [sic] (although plainly the two overlap)” (1993: 84). According to Cain, Foucault’s primary aim in \textit{Pierre Rivière} and \textit{Herculine} was to investigate how and when it is “possible to have an experience without a knowledge (let alone a developed discourse) to have it in” (85). This seems significant in light of the fact that Camille Barbin is clearly experiencing the medicolegal negotiation of her intersexual girlhood without a developed discourse to arbitrate it in.

\textsuperscript{42} Deleuze observes that although Foucault “states that discursive relations exist between the discursive statement and the non-discursive,” he does not ever say “whether the non-discursive can be reduced to a statement, and whether or not it is a residue or an illusion” (1980: 49, describing Foucault’s writing in \textit{The
That said, I would like to reflect a bit on Butler’s rush to dismiss Foucault’s efforts in *Herculine*. In *Judith Butler: Live Theory*, Vicki Kirby observes that Butler is “keen to make a more contentious point about the constitutive aspects of power and its many guises” that differs from Foucault, even though “Foucault’s most valuable contribution to the reconceptualization of power was to acknowledge its perverse productivity and ubiquity” (Kirby 2006: 40). According to Butler, Foucault’s work in *Herculine* falls prey to the “emancipatory or liberationist” politics he refutes elsewhere – but in this instance, Butler erroneously conflates the terms emancipatory and liberationist, which are hardly synonymous (Butler 1990: 95-6). As Rancière suggests in *The Politics of Aesthetics*, these terms are not interchangeable, as an emancipatory speech act does not inherently liberate; instead, it merely places formerly unacknowledged political positions onto the field of discourse (Rancière 2004: 3-4). Discursive emancipation does not free or “liberate” anything from being repressed, broken, or jacked open in force relations.44

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43 Kirby goes on to suggest that “power for Foucault is not merely a negative, juridical energy that represses, prohibits and prevents. If all knowledge, including self-knowledge, is an articulation of power, then it would be misguided to think, as we might in the case of Herculine Barbin, that s/he possessed an essential identity that pre-existed the prying medical and juridical intrusions of the state” (2006: 40).

44 In *Live Theory*, Kirby approaches the fault lines in Butler’s argument against Foucault’s emancipatory tendencies. On the one hand, Kirby notes that Butler’s relation to the force of repression in sexual power relations is often just as emancipatory as Foucault’s, while she also acknowledges that although “Foucault’s work, in the main, represents an assault on emancipatory politics and the easy appeal to a ‘before power,’” it seems difficulty for Foucault to relinquish “such modes of thinking is underlined in [his] tendency to romanticize the past as a time of untramelled ‘bucolic’ and ‘innocent’ pleasures, a time of heterogeneous possibility prior to the univocality of the law” (2006: 40). Still, Kirby points out that while “Butler is certainly critical of [Foucault’s] nostalgia,” a similar “recourse to an emancipatory politics reappears in Butler’s work as well,” and is evident, for example, in Butler’s notions concerning melancholic homosexuals “whose true desire/identity is forbidden by the incest taboo” (41). In this structure, Kirby argues, if force relations are “constitutive and ubiquitous such that even the resistance to power is actually the (re)articulation of power, then the conventional identity of ‘power’ is significantly reconfigured” (41). I remain skeptical of Butler’s overprioritization of power’s repressive stamp and its alleged ubiquity.
Indeed, Butler’s odd coupling of emancipatory/liberationist comprises yet another backslashed portmanteau that neutralizes the destabilizing edge of emancipatory speech, just as her overly restrictive analysis of *Herculine Barbin* shortchanges the role Foucault and Camille play in emancipating numerous hitherto unrecognized truths about sexual subjectivation into the sociosexual register.

Throughout this chapter, I have maintained that the medicolegal regime of the late 1800s was still in the process of adapting its technologies of hermaphroditism and sexual ambiguity at the moment Camille Barbin turned to them for help. While none of these medicolegal experts explicitly describes her as sexually ambiguous, their rhetorical use of the term “sexual indeterminacy” amounts to the same thing. Furthermore, while doctors like Regnier, Chesnet and Tardieu were certainly aware that sexually indeterminate individuals existed, their ability to make productive connections between their diagnoses of sexual indeterminacy. Indeed, their general fund of knowledge about hermaphrodites and sexually indeterminate subjects had about as much bearing on reality as a second-century bestiary has on actual animals. As Foucault observes in his introduction to *Herculine*, the key to deciphering a human being’s true sex in the late-1800s consisted of reducing the indeterminate “truth” of their body to a judgement of male and female, much like genetic researchers of today are attempting to reduce it to a matter of chromosomes (Houk 2006, or Propriuc, Dumitrescu and Chirita 2009).45

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45 In their recent *Acta Endocrinologica* article, “Complete Sex Reversal: SRY Positive 46 XX Male by Y to X Translocation,” geneticists Propriuc and Dumitrescu note individuals “with male phenotypes and 46 XX karyotype appear in about 1 of 20,000 births with clinical features varying from normal male appearance to sexual ambiguity and hermaphroditism” the use of the term hermaphrodite” (2009: 525). Specifically, their juxtaposition of the term “normal male” against “sexual ambiguity” – as well as their arcane use of hermaphroditism – indicates the cultural and sexual lexicon of this clinical team (at least) needs an update. And while other works, such as Christopher Houk’s 2006 *Pediatrics* article, “Summary of Consensus Statement on Intersex Disorders and Their Management” use the word “intersex” as a replacement for “hermaphrodite,” their explicit emphasis on the “disorder” that needs to be “managed” through the
subordination of human sexuality to “forms of administrative control in modern nations,”
Foucault argues that the Western science of hermaphroditism came “little by little to
rejecting the idea of a mixture of two sexes in a single body, and consequently to limiting
the free choice of indeterminate individuals” (viii, emphasis mine). This medicolegal
mandate for every human being “to have his or her primary, profound, determined and
determining sexual identity,” resulted in Camille’s undoing by doctors and researchers
eager to develop the science of the pseudohermaphrodite, that archaic condition in which
“an individual possesses the internal reproductive organs of one sex while exhibiting
some of the external physical characteristics of the opposite sex” (Foucault viii, The
American Heritage Medical Dictionary 2007). Confronted with a body like Camille’s,
nineteenth-century practitioners were far less concerned “with recognizing the presence
of two sexes” than they were with the task of “deciphering the true sex that was hidden
under ambiguous appearances” (viii).

But if we take Camille at her word, all of her associates accepted her as a girl until
she told them otherwise. Perhaps this girl had unwanted facial hair, small breasts, “hard”
features and a low voice — but none of those physical characteristics made her sexually
indeterminate; it was only a rigorous examination of her genitalia that yielded the verdict
of indeterminacy — and this finding was so unexpected that it shocked her examining
doctors. For Camille Barbin was not sexually indeterminate; she was a girl until the
moment she submitted her genitalia to inspection, at which point her doctors projected a
diagnosis of indeterminacy onto her genitalia, which they had trouble recognizing within

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intervention of medicine has gone nowhere. As I have mentioned throughout this study, the science of the
hermaphrodite has slowly, grudgingly, been rejected in favor of an intersexual semantics. But as Morgan
Holmes so effectively argues in Intersex: A Perilous Difference, the term “intersexual” is also fraught with
dangerous tendencies that highlight its volatile position in sexual discourse.
the framework of their heterocentric lexicon. From that point forward – the point at which the medicolegal meaning machine no longer recognized Camille as a girl but categorized her as sexually indeterminate – a rampant injustice bore down on her in a state of increasing socioeconomic abjection that made it impossible for Camille to live – not merely as a male or female, but as a human being. At first blush, the negative repercussions of this diagnosis seem to respond “no” to Foucault’s opening question of whether we truly need a “true sex.” Clearly, we do not need a “true sex” if the truth in question (the “truth” of our sex) can result in our demolition. But Foucault suggests there are “complex, obscure and essential relationships between sex and truth” – relationships that can lead to discoveries about the selves that lie wrapped in a projected enclosure of sexuality (x). Standing at the brink of sexual selfhood, we encounter the ambiguous intersubjective interstice in which human subjectivity is staged. But the valuation of what counts as recognizably human is perpetually shifting and adapting in response to enumerable cultural pressures that are themselves in a state of flux. That is why no sexual hegemony can ever account for all possibilities: the range of sexual subject positions is always adapting to the shifting grounds of its ontological frame and resisting the constraints of its performative reiteration. The unpredictable proliferation of sex and gender in the interstice of a deeply emergent sexual ontology lends the liminal edge of any sexual truth an ambiguity that can never be reduced to the sole property of a singular sexual subject (man, woman, hermaphrodite, transsexual, girl), but instead stands at the edge of all sex and everything we are using sex to know.

Returning to Foucault’s framing question in *Herculine*, the case is not so much that his question rhetorically dismisses the need for sexual truth altogether, advocating the
“happy limbo” of the sexual neutrality that Butler faults him for (Foucault 1980: xiii, Butler 1990: 94). Instead, he seeks to provide a transtextual discursive space for Camille’s text to continue its dislocation of the reigning sexual ontology, motivating us to adapt our modes of recognizing sex to accommodate for more rather than less. What Foucault and Camille both advocate is nothing less than an ontological shift in our cultural production of sexuality – not towards the sexually neutralized fairyland Butler accuses Foucault of soliciting, but into an interstitial negotiation that will never be resolved.

If Foucault is correct in asserting that Camille’s “little provincial chronicle” stands at the epicenter of a significant shift in ontological discourse, however, it puzzles me why the sexual subject position so axiomatic to this shift – Camille’s girlhood – has gone unaddressed by Butler, Foucault, and other scholars who overprioritize her alleged intersexuality or sexual ambiguity.46 During Camille’s lifetime, as I have mentioned, the category of the intersexual did not exist, and she professed no interest in living as a hermaphrodite. Little about her was sexually ambiguous. Yet numerous scholars have followed Butler in centralizing Camille’s ambiguities, even going one step further to attribute sexual ambiguity and hermaphrodism as the cause of her death. For example, in “Ambiguous Bodies/Believable Selves: The Case of Herculine Barbin,” Tamsin Lorraine begins her essay by citing “the story of Herculine Barbin, a French hermaphrodite living in the nineteenth century whose ambiguously sexed body ultimately led to suicide” (1996:

46 Although Butler never addresses Camille’s girlhood per se, she does pose an interesting question, namely: “is there not, even at the level of a discursively constituted sexual ambiguity, some questions of ‘sex’ and, indeed, of its relation to ‘power’ that set limits on the free play of sexual categories?” (1990: 101, emphases mine). But this same question makes one wonder about the nagging notion of repression that seems to crop up in Butler’s works time and again, as in her view the relations of sex and power are always subject to a repression of the “free play of sexual categories,” no matter how loosely or abstractly we set our sexual lens. For Butler, this much is true no matter whether we conceive of sexual categorization “as a prediscursive libidinal multiplicity or as a discursively constituted multiplicity” (101).
261, emphasis mine). In suggesting the cause of Camille’s death was innate, lying deep in the body itself, Lorraine asserts that Camille’s ambiguous sex somehow summoned its own destruction. Claudia Moscovici formulates a similar argument in *Gender and Citizenship*, observing that Herculine Barbin “traces the experience of an individual […] whose life was eventually destroyed by sexual ambiguity” (2000: 89, emphasis mine). Such arguments impart a peculiar, malevolent agency to sexual ambiguity, when it is not sexual ambiguity that destroys anything: it is the destructive and inhumane culture that calls for sexual un-ambiguity in the first place.

Throughout *Gender Trouble*, Butler positions Camille as a figurative poster-child for sexual ambiguity, shouldering aside the impact of Camille’s revolutionary girlhood in favor of attacking Foucault’s introduction to her text. Jumbling her into a series of backslashed portmanteaux (“s/he” and “h/er), Butler sweeps Camille into the couture of the backslash, the Third, the smashed-between – when what Camille wanted, above all else, was to be a girl – without the slash, without the division, without exception (1990: 93). Rather than prioritize Camille’s authorial intentions over Butler’s, I would simply ask why Butler disregards the role of Camille’s girlhood so completely when this sexual subject position is so central to the text. Aside from claiming Camille’s “sense of h/er own gender […] is ever-shifting and far from clear,” Butler’s conclusion that “the

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47 Following Butler’s remarks on Camille’s suicide, Andrew notes that “survival is not the same as affirmation,” and “there is no affirmation without survival (unless we read certain suicidal acts as affirmative)” (Butler in 2007: 195). Andrew follows Butler’s notions by observing that Camille’s “act of suicide was coupled with the act of composition, erasure complicated by creation” (Andrew 2012: 76). For Andrew, Camille’s suicide is “the clearest expression of what she felt was her metaphorical death—her reclassification as male. By stripping her of agency in creating her own gendered identity and then leaving with that identification, Barbin was forced to enact her autonomy more violently” (76). This “toxic cocktail of shame and isolation,” Andrew notes, “led Barbin, and leads many others, to react violently against that which is different” (88). While Andrew considers Camille’s suicide to be an act of violence, it makes me wonder if their can ever be a violent relinquishment, and if Camille privately suffocating on smoke qualifies as an act of violence or tacit retribution.
directionality and objects of h/er desire is especially difficult” swings uncharacteristically wide of the mark (1990: 99). Camille’s sense of her own gender only shifts twice: the first time when she attempts to become Abel, and a second time when she rejects Abel as insufficient and yearns to go back to being a girl.

In contacting this girl’s body and her text, one can detect the intimate coupling of Camille’s inability and ability to resist; on the one hand, there is a girl whose body is unable to resist the force of socioeconomic abjection, while, on the other hand, we discover a body of work that continues resisting long after the girl’s body is undone. Thus, Camille’s bodily resistance, for as long as it holds out, gives rise to a resistant set of confessions that illuminate the arbitrary and often ambiguous system of sexual recognition that led to her sexual undoing in a maelstrom of socioeconomic abjection. But the most significant question raised by Camille’s memoirs comes on the heels of her vehement disavowal of Abel; namely, if Camille rejects her life as Abel, and it is not possible for her to “go back” to being a girl, are there any alternative routes forward that might lead to a livable life?

The resounding “no” that greets this question, from all sides of the 19th-century normative order, is so emphatic that Camille resorts to suicide. Yet while it might be true that no scripted space existed for girls like Camille in nineteenth-century France, it is thanks to Camille’s work in her memoirs – and Foucault’s work in *Herculine Barbin* – that such spaces have begun to exist, here and now.48 M.E. Bailey touches on this fact in

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48 Bailey’s observations in this regard resonate productively with Maureen Cain’s insights that Foucault’s primary aim in both *I, Pierre Rivière* and *Herculine Barbin* consists of exploring how and when it is “possible to have an experience without a knowledge (let alone a developed discourse) to have it in” (85). Placing Bailey and Cain in intimate discourse, one might articulate another question Foucault drives at in *Herculine*; namely, how is it possible to have a right to experience a specific libidinal pleasure when that specific economy of desire is not recognized within the reigning discursive order?
suggesting Foucault interlaces the texts of *Herculine Barbin* to pinpoint the moment of conception for a “description of new pleasures – the pleasure of telling the truth of self,” raising questions about “how it is that we truth-seekers have been complacently complicit in our own subjection to sexuality’s unitary power-knowledge-truth dominion” (1993: 116). The ongoing power struggles over the right to sexually signify for oneself, however, would seem to suggest that we truth seekers are not so complacent at all. From the vantage point of our contemporary “now,” the dominant sexual ontology responsible for Camille’s death simply did not account for *enough*. But we must refrain from reducing *Herculine Barbin* to an intertextual admonishment to abolish our systems of sexual differentiation altogether. Libidinal desire is *about* the difference, after all.

The issue here is clearly one of scope. We must not merely increase our ability to recognize previously unrecognized genders; we must readapt and revolutionize genders long taken for granted. Only then can we extend human rights to those who appear to exceed or elude our recognition, knowing there will always be those who actively or indirectly resist recognition within the sexual ontology of the present. When we find ourselves faced (always again) with Foucault’s little question about whether we “*truly* need a *true sex,*” there is really only one reply: yes and no. The problem is the truth claim

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49 Bailey notes that Foucault does not so much advocate “a turn to these pleasures, or the truth that impregnated bodies with them,” but instead seeks to analyze the ways in which “these pleasures are part and parcel of the systems of truths of identity which co-operate painfully to circumscribe the possibilities for human lives” (116). Obviously, Bailey’s position contrasts with Butler’s view that Foucault is using *Herculine* to champion a utopian sexual limbo.

50 “Why force people to adhere to an antiquated way of classification?” Andrew asks. “Why not alter the system? Why not allow the [sexual] categories to emphasize the overlap, to highlight the possibility of human existence rather than letting the erasure of that difference stifle any possibility of understanding and accepting it?” (2012: 91). Along those lines, Andrew argues the “fluidity between the genders […] leaves ample room for any overlap or in-between,” yet we ultimately “restrict the natural order of gender and identity, privileging instead an artificially created sense of order” (31). Ironically, Andrew’s viewpoint reduces sexual subjectivation to a binary nature/culture argument, with fluidity and liminality on the side of nature and artificial order on the side of culture.
itself: when it comes to sexual truth, both subject and truth are constantly undergoing adaptation. Therein lies the thrill, and the danger. The sheer ambiguity of our sexual ontology – the liminal and ambiguous spaces-between, which enable us to sexually adapt – assures us of the risk, if not the reward. You can show me yours and I can show you mine. But there is no guarantee we will recognize what we see.
Epilogue

My initial objective in this study was to analyze a series of intertextual adaptations in which characters had been narratively endowed with aesthetic qualities of sexual ambiguity. By closely reading the structural modifications made to such characters, I hoped to detail the specific aesthetic markers deployed to signify sexual ambiguity in general, and to assess what such cultural markers could do—how they might, for example, be deployed to articulate queer positions and desires, as well as establish and bolster notions of sexual normativity, and/or to indicate moments of intersubjective transformation and (mis)recognition.

From the outset of my research, however, getting a handle on the pivotal concept of sexual ambiguity proved to be an intensely fraught process. In the first place, adequately describing sexual ambiguity as a framing device for specific manifestations of sexual normativity proved difficult; this aspect of the concept was at best a multifarious interstice of open-ended conclusions and diverse contradictions, not the least because the standard definition of sexual ambiguity was largely misguided and retained a potential to be highly damaging. As of this writing, the medicolegal community in both the West and East continues in its collusion with State legislative apparatuses to police the borders of sexual normativity with violent, violating results – particularly as the limit of those borders is maintained by a psychopathologization of individuals whose bodies, whether intentionally or not, resist complying with sanctioned gender norms. This type of political collusion perpetuates a social space ripe for hate crimes such as the 2011 attack against Chrissy Lee Polis, the Maryland transsexual who was beaten into a seizure when she
attempted to use a women’s restroom at a McDonald’s restaurant outside Baltimore. As her fellow diners looked on, some laughing, others in disbelief, McDonald’s employees cheered on Polis’s assailants before urging them to flee the crime scene before police arrived. What staggers the mind about this incident is the firm conviction of the McDonald’s workers that the attacks against a transgendered customer were justified retribution for her illicit infiltration of a sexually scripted space (a woman’s restroom), never questioning how they might conduct themselves in this abject exchange. The McDonald’s employees did nothing to stop the attack precisely because they did not sexually recognize Polis on several levels; not only did they fail to recognize her as a woman, they failed to recognize her as a human being deserving their protection – and this decision (to not recognize) stemmed from their inability to reconcile their impressions of the meaning of Polis’s body with the dominant codes of sexual normativity that afford an ethical-rhetorical basis for extending the most basic human rights to our fellow human beings. These codes are not merely arbitrary or capricious; they are potentially dangerous precisely because they promote a moral eschatology hinged on subjective perceptions of humanness and the value of human sexuality, an eschatology in which sexually “ambiguous” others are rejected from the recognizable protections of a normative meritocracy that is speculative at best – a meritocracy whose discernable borders are consistently malleable and adapting.

Concurring with Wilkerson’s position that ambiguity permeates all levels of sexual subjectivation, my study ultimately explored the possibility that a projected fold of sexual ambiguity is the implicit flanking device for any discrete manifestation of sexual specificity, producing a sense of separation rather than connection, emphasizing an
abstractly tangible separation between gay and straight, between man and woman, between a sexually ambiguous individual and a sexually recognizable person. Herein lay a significant contradiction: the practice of flanking sexual specificity with an undifferentiated libidinal rictus might be exactly what provides us with the potential to sexually adapt and change. In that sense, sexual ambiguity is not only a conceptual playing field on which human sexualities make their home or even survive – it can also be an adaptive tactic that provides conceptual latitude for seemingly concrete sexual subject positions to proliferate and expand their ontological borders. As such, the concept of sexual ambiguity will continue to remain a live issue, both intensely provisional and ripe for adaptation.

Rather than conclude my project by simply recapitulating its chapters, I will attempt to interrelate and synthesize four key facets of sexual ambiguity that my chapters have excavated: the structural composition of sexual ambiguity as an aesthetic trope, which can be driven to different polemic ends; the potential deployment of sexual ambiguity as a flanking device for the shifting, shifty borders of sexual normativity; sexual ambiguity as a potential site for opening revolutionary possibilities to renegotiate or expand the limits of so-called “normative” genders (masculinity, femininity, girlhood, boyhood, etc.), and; sexual ambiguity as the transfigurative grounds for intersubjective and ontological adaptation, which often takes place in abject discourse.¹

¹ As I mentioned in my introduction, there are many critical connections between Kristeva’s and Butler’s work on abjection and the work of postcolonial theorists (via Bhabha) and post-structural and even post-Marxist psychoanalytic theory (Žižek). In Gender Trouble, for example, Butler describes links between her work and Bhabha’s, such as their mutual usage of Frantz Fanon’s themes in Black Skins, White Masks (Butler 1990: 206 fn11). In discussing her own work, Butler explicitly notes that “Homi Bhabha’s work on the mimetic splitting of the postcolonial subject is close to [her] own in several ways: not only the appropriation of the colonial ‘voice’ by the colonized, but the split condition of identification are crucial to a notion of performativity that emphasizes the way minority identities are produced and riven at the same time under conditions of domination” (206 fn11). Noting that 1970s poststructuralism ultimately “migrated
Closely reading three primary sets of adaptive work, each chapter of my study examined sexual ambiguity as an aesthetic trope impacting a range of characters and other narrative devices, yielding some insights on the specific visual and linguistic markers utilized to designate sexual ambiguity. In Chapter One, I detailed the tropes of diminishment, transfiguration and decorporealization that mark the ambiguation of the Cumaean sibyl as she proceeds from Virgil to Petronius – an argument I extended into Chapter Two’s discussion of Fellini’s script, particularly as this script defines the Hermaphrodite character as “monstrous,” animalistic and alien. Chapter Two then analyzed Fellini’s placement of latex prosthetics on a teenaged albino actor, closely reading the death scene in which Fellini kills the opaque lilac-eyed Hermaphrodite, a character who, despite her monstrosity and perhaps because of it, seduces rather than repels, becoming a silenced character who nevertheless gains a voice in a discourse of sexual abjection. Chapter Three traced the narrative tropes Virginia Woolf deployed to position Orlando’s brief moment of sexual ambiguity as a significant paradigm shift, particularly as this depiction hinged on a rapid-fire swerve of shifting pronouns, the intercession of supernatural characters, and the shifts in unreliable narrators that precede

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Butler returns to this issue in *Undoing Gender* to describe a feminism that holds gender “no more central than race,” colonial positionality, or class (1990: ix, 2004: 259, fns 11 and 13). In that sense, for both Butler and Bhabha, the production of normative meanings assigned to the formation of race, class and sex take place in the same interstitial discourse – discourse that, by Kristeva’s standards, is inevitably and fundamentally abject. Of course, there is also the fact that Kristeva’s thoughts on abjection have been approached by postcolonial theorists, for example Bhabha’s *Nation and Narration*, which asserts that both Fanon and Kristeva “seek to redefine the symbolic process through which the social imaginary — nation, culture, or community — become the subjects of its discourse, and objects of psychic identification” (1990: 304). Indeed, Kristeva and Fanon interrogate the plane of cultural identification, a process of signification Bhabha sees as “poised on the brink of what Kristeva calls the ‘loss of identity’ and Fanon describes as a profound cultural ‘undecidability,’” wherein the individual speaker “as a form of address emerge[s] from the abyss of enunciation where the subject splits, the signifier ‘fades’, the pedagogical and the performative are agonistically articulated” (1990: 304). Like Kristeva and Butler, Bhabha also affirms that the cultural interstices in which subjects are produced is constantly shifting, perpetuating and dispelling multiple and even contradictory transidentifications in an ever-broadening discourse of abjection (see fn 10).
Orlando’s sex-change, producing a shifty staging grounds that is only intensified by the Biographer’s reluctance to chart the “odious” specifics of Orlando’s transfiguration from man into woman.

While Sally Potter deployed lavish wardrobe and makeup to underscore Orlando’s “androgyny,” Chapter Four suggested her only verifiable designator of sexual ambiguity per se is Orlando’s truth claim that she “is” a man. Draped over Tilda Swinton’s corporeal frame, that claim deliciously strains credibility no matter how unambiguously masculine or feminine Potter’s wardrobe choices are, suggesting that sexual ambiguity consists of more than subjective claims and/or androgynous wardrobe choices. Sometimes, even precariously so, there seems to be an overbearing autonomy to our sex that supercedes anyone’s truth claims about it one way or the other, including our own – even when those claims are voiced with great conviction. But this overbearing sensation of “facticity” is as potentially provisional as anything else – and the provisional is always open to adaptation, despite the urgency of anyone’s claims to the contrary.

Tracking the aesthetic markers of sexual ambiguity through Foucault’s adaptation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs was also a central objective in Chapter Five, particularly as those markers become tangible in Foucault’s editorial prioritization of his protagonist’s so-called “sexual indeterminacy.” While Foucault confines most of his take on this matter to the collection’s introduction, the documents he places in the “Dossier” make reference to – and ostensibly even coin – numerous medicolegal markers of indeterminacy that remain in circulation to this day; the clitoris the size of a penis, the simultaneous appearance of a penis and a vagina on the same body, hirsute facial features and a confident speaking voice, etc. Arguing that Camille’s own take on sexual indeterminacy
would be impossible to determine in light of her resistance to being regarded as either a hermaphrodite or a man, I asserted the state of girlhood is the sexual subject position Camille unambiguously seeks to (re)attain. But there is no going back for Camille, in part because the doctors who vouchsafed her masculinity will not allow it, and in part because one can never completely purge the fact of earlier sexual transformations from their subjectively gendered lexicon. Having attempted to live as Abel, Camille’s only option seems to involve becoming a girl who was once a failed man – but this possibility is foreclosed on several levels, not so much because Camille wants nothing to do with her failed masculinity, but because there is no sexual space in 19th-century France for a girl like this to live, primarily because the medicolegal regime – and the patriarchal discourse of Camille’s time – refuses to recognize the legitimacy of this type of girlhood, and cannot recognize it because they cannot permit themselves to see it. All the sexually ambiguous signifiers in the world cannot open a social space for a sexual subject position if the medicolegal regime that controls social spaces does not – or will not – fully recognize their meaning.

In that vein, the most typical structural designators of sexual ambiguity – diffusion, etherealness, androgyne, the semblance of two sexes on one body, a resistance to sexual normativity [intentional or not], projections of sexual transfiguration, truth claims that may or may not be or feel true, blurriness, incompleteness, the presence of a body that causes confusion, doubt, a projected difficulty to recognize – taken together, have a more limited impact than the ways in which such aesthetic/narrative systems of sexual ambiguity are used to construct sexual meaning. Thus, the second objective of my study concerned structuring an analysis of how narrative fabulae of sexual ambiguity can be
deployed to bolster, subvert, expand and adapt the parameters of sexual meaning, thereby raising the question: can such meaning-machines be activated in more than one direction at the same time to offer mutually exceptional and even contradictory readings?

The first meaning-machine I explored in Chapters One and Two concerned the state of abject discourse, particularly as this relates to tropes of the monstrous and barbaric, the sacred and profane. Considering the Cumaean sibyl as she is revisioned from Virgil and Ovid to Petronius – and from there to her adaptation in Fellini-Satyricon – Chapters One and Two followed the path of the prophetess as her corporeal ambiguation motivated a discourse of abjection. While Fellini seems to escalate the estrangement of his Hermaphrodite by depicting the character as corporeally monstrous and sacred, this depiction proves to be a double-edged sword, as the Hermaphrodite’s form appears lovely to some and grotesque to others, depending on their subjective sexual aesthetics. Engaging a structural arrangement of the character’s name (The Hermaphrodite) and its relation to the proto-myth of Hermaphroditos, which Fellini combines with pale makeup, an ephemeral wardrobe, unintelligible language, interactions with other characters and eroticized shots of nubile latex breasts, the filmmaker succeeded in enfolding his character in an aesthetic of abjection, associating the Hermaphrodite (and hermaphrodism) with a larger gallery of monstrous “types.” Placing the character in the thorny wasteland in which she meets her death, disavowed by the film’s protagonists and estranged from prior systems of support, the Hermaphrodite’s disavowal seems to culminate in the closing shots of her defiled corpse in a hearse – but the abject discourse opened by Fellini’s film poses an insightful critique of phallocentric sexuality, turning the paradigm of the monster on its head, asking us to consider the monstrosity of any
“modern” culture of sexual normativity that oppresses sexual subject positions deemed difficult to recognize.

Extending my investigation of sexual ambiguity and abject discourse into Chapter Three, and a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*, I set out my journey with an analysis of the barbarism that distinguishes Orlando’s cut at his Moorish other, emphasizing that Woolf’s story does not open with Orlando as a sexually ambiguous or even androgynous character, but as a without-a-doubt male. By gradually immersing Orlando in the aesthetic “land” of his dark-skinned others, and in an ever-increasing collision of language and imagery, Woolf works her readers up to the zero-point of sexual ambiguity that precedes his supernaturalized sex-change from a without-a-doubt man into an unambiguously sexed woman. Detailing the shattering impact Orlando’s sex change has on her entire ontological foundation, I suggest that Woolf’s act of sundering her protagonist abruptly into an abject position in relation to patriarchal order opens a discursive space for the *jouissant* liberation Orlando experiences as a woman, heralding a new dawn of femininity and feminism.

Moving from Woolf’s new dawn to a close reading of Sally Potter’s *Orlando* adaptation, Chapter Four analyzed the impact of Tilda Swinton’s “truth claim” that she is, in fact, a man – a direct claim that occurs simultaneously with Potter’s adaptive decision to sanitize the Moor’s head sequence from her adaptation. Suggesting that Potter nevertheless (and by radically different means) joins Woolf in suggesting any dominant regime based on upholding a normative sexual order is both monstrous and barbaric, I argue that Potter’s addition of a daughter to her adaptation opens *Orlando*’s discourse to address the advent of (post)feminism and (post)feminist filmmaking. I then explored the
meaning-machine of girlhood as a potentially volatile space based on arbitrary codes of sexual development, questioning why ontological states-between that are both ambiguous and transitory bear a high potential to lead to revolutionary acts.

Tracking the confluence of abjection, (mis)recognition and girlhood into Chapter Five, I attempt to contrast Foucault’s prioritization of Camille’s “sexual indeterminacy” with her conflicted desire to live as a man – a move that culminated in Camille’s realization that she could only be happy living as a girl. Whether we read all of the works in Foucault’s collection or closely evaluate Camille’s memoirs on their own, the meaning of her narrative nevertheless opens another abject paradigm, in which Camille’s life, whether she elects to live as a man or a girl, is undone by the very medicolegal regime she turns to for support. While this might seem a depressing conclusion to some, I close Chapter Five by suggesting that Camille’s life – through the indictment of her words (in the memoirs), as well as the indictment of her body (which could not be recognized in the way she desired), comes to a similar end as Woolf’s Orlando: it welcomes the advent of an era when we can rejoice in sexual difference and libidinally cherished identities even as the strictures of sexual normativity no longer repress us so severely. Of course, this is also the conclusion Foucault advances in his editorialization of Camille’s work, shaping his collection into a meaning-machine that underscores the transdisciplinary relationship that occurs on both an intersubjective and intertextual level between overarching regimes of normativity (medicolegal, cultural, and media regimes) and the sexual subject positions they seek to discover, dissect and quantify. Through this intertextual discourse between texts and languages, which takes shape as a discourse between the clinic and the subject, Foucault does not simply present an effective indictment of this crocodile’s
invitation to stand forth, signify, and be devoured in the process. He suggests that the signification of the devoured bears a potential to change the entire medicolegal apparatus from the inside out, as its lexicon of recognition is expanded and the possibility for sexual adaptation is secured.

Kristeva, Oliver and other psychoanalytic theorists have abundantly noted that discourses of abjection are often productive precisely because they bear a potential to de-seat or trouble repressive systems based on notions of normativity. This potential to destabilize moral-ethical systems and mandate their revision brings to mind another meaning-machine activated by narratives featuring sexually ambiguous characters; namely, that these characters are often catalysts for radical ontological and/or paradigmatic shifts. Compared to the Cumaean Sibyl, for example, as she is depicted in Virgil’s *Aeneid* – a thundering prophetess whose words have the power to shift the course of kingdoms and sway the cycle of life and death – the works of Ovid and Petronius deploy tropes of ambiguation and diminishment to rob the Cumaean Sibyl not only of her voice, but of any transformational power whatsoever, shedding light on their polemic objective: fixing strong females into a subordinate relationship to patriarchal domination.

But as I suggest in Chapter Two, Fellini’s adaptive infidelity to the Petronian *Satyricon* has its own curious way of re-empowering its hermaphroditic sibyl to deliver a different prophecy altogether – and though this might be putting words in Fellini’s mouth, it remains a message worth hearing, precisely because *Fellini-Satyricon* depicts patriarchal oppression as murderously monstrous, whether its repressive laws are enacted by gay men or straights.
I return to this notion of sexually ambiguous characters as catalysts for paradigm shifts in Chapter Three, closely following Woolf’s depiction of Orlando’s sexual ontology as completely de-seated and relocated by his/her sex-change, particularly as Woolf’s protagonist moves forward with the potential to transform the abject discourse of heteronormativity in its turn. I discussed a similar paradigm shift in Chapter Four – but as I argued in that chapter, the paradigm shift (of sexual subjectivation, feminism, and feminist filmmaking) that Potter favors in her adaptation is escalated not merely by the film’s protagonist, but through the potential of Orlando’s daughter to move our dominant sexual ontology one step further, both by dint of her spatiotemporal re-location and via her mother’s proto-feminist experience. In other words, because Orlando’s daughter is not dominated by the same rules that oppressed Orlando in the past (except perhaps as broken rules), she does not recognize the same limits concerning her expressions of sexuality or her filmmaking. In Potter’s meaning-machine, both the daughter’s film and sex can be anything, and this lends them a more accelerated indeterminate, incendiary, ambiguous edge than Woolf’s son; precisely the edge that threatened Potter’s critics, who attacked the film for its lack of old-school feminist aesthetics and values.

In Chapter Five, I approached the intersection of sexual ambiguity and paradigm shifts by exploring Camille Barbin’s incomplete sexual transformation: the protracted shift from girl-to-man that results in shifting Camille’s entire system of survival yet resolves none of her ontological dilemma. While her failed attempt to shift into masculinity accomplishes nothing to Camille’s advantage – and in fact estranges her further from the systems of social privilege she sought to fully enter – her attempts to have her masculinity officially vouchsafed led to her detection as a hermaphrodite by the
medicolegal community, which subsequently insisted hermaphroditism was her “true” sex, her secret sex. But the truth of Camille’s sex is never fully known by Camille or her doctors – or her mother, or even Foucault – as Camille became just as entangled in the medicolegal community’s general inability to recognize not merely that an indeterminate sex as a sexual subject position in its own right, but that there may be more than one type of girlhood. Shifting the paradigm of sexual recognition forms the polemic basis not only for Foucault’s adaptation of Camille’s memoirs, which he accessed as a precursor of not merely History of Sexuality, but the works in its wake, as we cannot so easily cut an epistemological divide between Foucault’s work on sexuality, say, and his analyses in The Order of Things. In each of these works, Foucault manages to shift an entire ontological discourse from identity politics to identity discourse; it is simply that Herculine and History of Sexuality most pointedly suggest we rekindle the question of what we use our sex to know – not merely as a means of looking, feeling or reading, but as the means for shifting an entire ontology of thinking, which is to say being.

Another related system of meaning that I discussed throughout this thesis – a system common to narratives featuring sexually ambiguous characters – involves the positioning of such characters at the center of resistance surrounded by turmoil. This finding seems significant in light of the fact that resistance is precisely what makes any performance of discrete sexuality possible and even distinguishable from others – one cannot separate themselves from other sexualities without resistance – but this matters little if we consider sexual ambiguity as a discrete sexual state in itself. Moreover, sexually ambiguous figures (Fellini’s sibyl, for example, or Camille Barbin) are often depicted in such a way as to emphasize their failure to resist the overwhelming
aggression of sexual norms, resulting in their corporeal undoing. Chapter One closely traces the vaporization of the Cumaean Sibyl into the remnant of a person who can no longer resist; indeed, in this adaptive cycle the character is decorporealized from narrative-to-narrative until her punishment for resisting patriarchal oppression reduces her to invisibility, just as the hermaphroditic priestess analyzed in Chapter Two is depicted as unable to resist her kidnappers – she is decorporealized in death.

But the inability to resist is not the only meaning-machine that distinguishes the resistance of sexually ambiguous characters: Chapter Three suggested that Woolf’s Orlando successfully resists patriarchal order as a fledgling feminist, while Chapter Four argues that Orlando’s daughter successfully occupies the political space that the resistance and retaliation of her queer mother opens, thereby developing her own counter-praxis as film. Chapter Five focused at length on the resistance of Camille’s writing, which continues to proliferate long after her body could no longer resist the toxic milieu surrounding it, particularly the masculinity that was presented by the medicolegal community as palliative tonic, when it was for Camille deadly toxic. Still, while Camille’s body could not resist its medicolegal negation forever, the counter-praxis of her memoirs opened the ontological door for girls like her to come.

Throughout this study, I have suggested that iterations of sexual ambiguity often translate to a lack of recognition on the part of the beholder. Considering Fellini’s “sacred little monster,” while Fellini’s aesthetic toolkit seems to suggest the character “is” sexually ambiguous, there is nothing particularly ambiguous about her, whether the character “is” a hermaphroditic priestess or a twelve-year-old albino boy sporting latex breasts. As I have suggested, there might be a sexually ambiguous edge that appears to
divide all sexual subject positions – a location device that appears to separate discrete manifestations of sexuality – but the same edge serves to connect them. As a separation device, the rictus of ambiguity is primarily a game of appearances, in which the “truth” of masculinity seems to trail off and the “truth” of femininity seems to begin, when in fact the two truths are so intricately interwoven as to make their ambiguous separation less productive than their points of connection – particularly the points we do not recognize, yet.

But what about those hypothetical spaces in which sex and sexuality do not appear to exist at all? Can *nothing* be sexed, even if it is not sexed humanly? Do things have to reproduce in order to have sexuality? Can rocks and water have sexuality, or black holes, or machines? Just because we do not recognize things as humanly sexed or even sexually recognizable within a human frame of reference does not mean they have no sex at all, or there aren’t connections and influences between them – thinking so merely indicates the difficulty of relinquishing the category of the human as the central nexus for sexual valuation, in which “the human” (and by extension, human sexuality) becomes a location device for separation and prioritization, the means of individuating our divided/dividing human experience from the intersubjective copulations of everything else. Surely, this need to distantiate human sex from the sex of “the non-human” is a form of taking control, a fort-da game of “go away” that is in fact quite attached to the return of the Primal Mother. But how much is this type of control necessary, and to what extent might it be possible (or productive) for us to relinquish it and renegotiate its limits, even the sexual limit of the visibly human?
As early as Freud’s work in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, and perhaps even before (cf. Albert Moll’s *Libido Sexualis*), psychoanalytic theorists have proposed there is a robust vitality to the imprecision of the undifferentiated libido and the polymorphous perversity/diversity of human sexuality in general. From the undifferentiated libido comes a wave of energy that can ostensibly be shaped and reshaped, and, through a series of carefully articulated repressions, can ultimately be articulated into productive outcomes, driving us to achieve such lofty aims as publication, career advancement and tenure, none of which are completely separable from libidinal pressure and gratification. Moreover, while the libido might appear to manifest in specific ways – focusing into precise desires about individuals and for specifically sexed bodies – there remains an ambiguous part of the equation that does not relate to the human so much as its context. The warmth of the sun as I lay on the grass or the wind playing through my hair can give me an erection as easily as any partner after all, and the ill-defined borders of fantasy allow me to slide between a variety of ambiguously sexed pleasures. The playing field on which the not-completely-seen desires of my partner make contact with my own desires is the site of many blissful copulations, yet to desire the one at the exclusion of everything else simply means we have envisioned what appears to be a precise motive for our libidinal energies. But the libido never *belongs to us* – not entirely. There is always something about the libido that extends beyond our control, as evidenced by the enumerable narratives in which unforeseen others enter our worlds and change the scope of our desires and even the foundations of our existence, even against our “will,” seducing us into pleasures we never thought imaginable. This multifarious libido is in fact our most tangible connection to the sensual world around us,
a world that is difficult to recognize but not impossible – even if we would like to resist
the “specific” places the libido seems to be guiding us. The words “I don’t want to go
there” are little more than a tacit acknowledgment of the possibility that we could – that
something inside/outside us might even want us to go there, but we have (perhaps)
recognized this suddenly specific set of urges and resist their inclinations, for whatever
reason. But if we entertain the possibility that sexuality and sexual desire go beyond a
human lust for specific holes and orifices, desire-at-large is not simply sexual desire. And
even when these desires prove negative or deadly, they are not separated from our sexual
desires by an ambiguous force field that affords no overlap or interchange. Nor are they
connected in a harmonic convergence that congeals in homeostatic balance. Quite the
contrary: they are perforated, colliding, antagonistic, even contradictory – and all in
collision, too – and what results through this collusion is something we cannot know
until our entire world, perhaps seemingly ruined, has the opportunity to reset in
something worthwhile.

Because the meaning of our sex is emergent, undergoing constant adaptation in
response to contextual pressures, we are still finding out what, if anything, our sex means
at all. And yet it somehow always seems to define us, just as we seem oddly attached to
precisely defining it, even when the identity we claim is trans-, inter-, or queer. To say “I
want” is not so much to preclude other wants and desires so much as it comprises our
entry into abject discourse, where we are suddenly flanked by the possibility of not
getting it. Yet there remains an ambiguous edge to each individual desire as it contacts
the desires of everything else, including the consequences of our desires, which we can
never completely control, predict, or even see. Yet we never seem to completely deny the
possibility to want something more or something different if it should make contact with us and prove irresistibly delicious than anything else. We know it could be there, but we know we haven’t met it yet, or we would have followed its summons like a kitten to catnip.

And still, the rictus of ambiguity that surrounds specific nodes of desire reveals something alive inside, as if a fertile kernel lies within an ambiguous cloak that can burst out in new directions, adapting and transforming along unpredictable paths in response to contextual pressures. Once more, this is a game of appearances, in which it appears difficult to recognize what can be “sexually worthwhile” outside a human system of valuation, which by necessity can only be subjective. Is sunlight sexually worthwhile? Are stones sexually worthwhile? Is the expansion of the universe sexually worthwhile? In the end, my conclusion comes down to this: just as there are sexes we cannot yet know because our incomplete, arbitrary and deeply emergent systems of sexuality guarantee we cannot recognize them (not the least because they do not yet exist), despite the certainty of my partial failure I have little choice but to keep on looking. And there, at the periphery of my gaze, a gaze that is always at least quasi-scopophilic even at its most clinical, there is a shroud of ambiguity that contacts the liminal margin of everything it touches, both obscuring and outlining its contours to the visible world.
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see me complete a doctoral thesis. I think of you often, mom, and wish you were here to discuss and even argue with me a bit – about my work, art, life’s adventures, and everything.
English Summary

This thesis analyzes the depiction of sexually ambiguous characters in works of adaptation. Because the clinical and critical misuse of the term “sexual ambiguity” since the late 1950s has been so striking, my project necessitated a reorientation of the concept away from its function as a defining characteristic for the sexual anatomy of human bodies, as that usage is both highly subjective and potentially damaging. Thus, the initial move in this thesis lays in producing an argument that it might be more productive to view sexual ambiguity as both a transitive flanking device that is used to shroud or frame the ontological kernels of individual sexualities, and as a tangible characteristic of the ill-defined pressures that permeate the arbitrary yet determinant process of sexual subjectivation in general. Thus, my thesis comprises both a critique of sexual ambiguity as a diagnostic trope and an exploration of the narrative deployment of sexual ambiguity as a political-aesthetic system. Several key questions guided me in this search. Through what tropes and meaning-devices are the limits and characteristics of sexual ambiguity articulated, and how do they define sexually ambiguous characters? How are such characters positioned in relation to other characters, and what are the products of their projected interactions? What acts are such characters deployed to do (or un-do, as the case may be)? And how does sexual ambiguity emerge not merely as an aesthetic marker for human characters, but as a means of framing sexual singularity and even human sexuality in general?

The findings of this thesis suggest a distinct difference between states of sexual ambiguity and practices of sexual ambiguation. Concerning the former, sexual ambiguity often functions as a framing device for modes of sexual singularity, as well as a lack of
recognition – or claimed lack of recognition – on the part of a viewer (the doctor who cannot or will not recognize, the reader who “does not understand”). But the practice of sexual ambiguation is not a state; it is a narrative, authorial act that bears down on the corpus of characters, and from there exerts its influence on projected readers, encouraging intended receivers to assent to its narrative propositions. As such, sexual ambiguation is a literary technique in which aesthetic tropes of sexual ambiguity – qualities of indeterminacy and incompleteness, categories of the marginal and in-between – are deployed to articulate the actions not merely of trans- and inter- characters, or characters that defy easy identification within a male-female binary, but the so-called “normative” sexes as well: boys, girls, women and men. The narrative ambiguation of a character’s sex always has a result; it always does something. And because the only contact many people have with “sexually ambiguous” others is through literature, art and film, the way in which human characters are sexually ambiguated matters; it has a political effect, as such projections and aesthetic devices are interpreted as somehow representative of the behaviors and qualities of real human beings.

Conducting this type of inquiry – examining narratives in adaptation from a variety of theoretical angles – required an approach that is both inter- and transdisciplinary. My adaptive corpus of study comprises three main sets of work: the adaptation of sibylline prophet/esses from the classical Greco-Roman literature of Virgil and Petronius to Federico Fellini’s *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969); the *Orlando* of modernist Virginia Woolf and postmodern filmmaker Sally Potter; and Michel Foucault’s editorialization of Camille Barbin’s memoirs in his collection, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. Yet while these
adaptive sets of work are my primary objects of study, bringing them into contact with an equally interdisciplinary body of critical and scholarly works required an ability to establish theoretical traction between scholars from fields of study sometimes viewed as unrelated or even incompatible. Although they appear to be centered in different academic fields, for example, bringing psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva’s notions on abjection into discourse with queer theorist Judith Butler’s views on the same resulted in producing a more robust understanding of the relationship between ambiguity, (mis)recognition and abjection. Similarly, while my understanding of the complex force relations at play in sexual subjectivation was vastly informed by poststructuralist Michel Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality*, the task of analyzing his work in *Herculine Barbin* as a corpus of study in Chapter Five was an interesting switch; following and even aligning one’s own analyses with Foucault’s notions of sexual subjectivation is far different than evaluating his authorial mission as an act of adaptive editorialization. Along those lines, tracking the nuances of a highly intertextual corpus enabled me to trace productive connections between Kristeva’s work on intertextuality (which she derived from Mikhail Bakhtin), the work of contemporary adaptation theorists like Thomas Leitch, and formal structural studies in narratology such as those by Mieke Bal and Gérard Genette – not to mention specific contributions in film theory from Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek and Teresa de Lauretis. Furthermore, as the representation of marginalized others is both solidified and/or controverted in adaptative sets of art, literature and film – from whence it impacts the recognition and distribution of human rights – my critical approach benefited from an entwinement of cultural analysis in Žižek, Homi K. Bhabha, Kaja Silverman, Jacques Rancière and Marjorie Garber. Other
theoretical alignments in this thesis that provided complex interdisciplinary connections concerning my specific advocacy of an expanded definition of sexual ambiguity included notions explored in previous works by scholars from fields as diverse as sociology, philosophy, queer studies, women’s studies and psychoanalytic theory (cf. William Wilkerson, Geneviève Morel, Judith Halberstam and others).

Such an interdisciplinary approach to critical theory was additionally mirrored in my methodology for shaping these groupings of intertextual works into thesis chapters; thus, while there is substantial connective tissue between them, my methodology and findings in Chapters One and Two are slightly different than my analyses in Chapters Three and Four, or my discussion of Foucault’s adaptation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs in Chapter Five. My examination of the first set of works, on the one hand, seeks to establish a historical and cultural precedent for the narrative adaptation and deployment of corporeal ambiguation in general, examining the ways in which physical ambiguation is often positioned in a framework of abjection, and teasing out connections and differences between the ambiguation of a female character (The Sibyl) in classical literature and Fellini’s adaptation of the “same” character into the hermaphroditic prophet/ess of *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969). On the other hand, drawing together a broader corpus of Orlando-lore as my object of study in Chapters Two and Three yields a different type of findings, beyond evaluating Orlando’s tightly bracketed moment of sexual ambiguation in Woolf’s novel towards/into articulating the ways in which “normative” sexualities (like girlhood) might disrupt the stultifying polarization of sexual normativity in general – regardless of whether these binary polarizations are hetero- or homonormative. My fourth and final chapter evaluates the adaptive relationship between
the memoirs of Camille Barbin and Foucault’s adaptive incorporation of her memoirs in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. Although many scholars have written about the political significance of Camille’s “intersexuality” (as I have noted, that category did not exist in the nineteenth century), I evaluate Foucault’s placement of Camille’s memoirs in intertextual discourse with her interlocutors’ documents as an opportunity to analyze how the writings of a girlhood-before-its-time might impel a critique of the medicolegal apparatus that killed such a girlhood with its inadequate systems of sexual recognition.

On a specific level, Chapter One of the thesis analyzes the adaptation of The Sibyl of Cumae from her first appearance in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to her emergence in the Petronian *Satyricon* more than one hundred years later. While none of these authors mark their Sibyl as sexually ambiguous per se, this chapter suggests each author is responsible for *ambiguating* the character as she emerges from each of these texts into a larger body of Sibyl-lore. Arguing that her escalating corporeal ambiguity bears significant consequences regarding her sexual recognizability later in the adaptive trajectory, I assess the moral-ethical fabulae that result from the Sibyl’s increasing weakness, diminishment and alienation the further she moves from visible recognition. Bringing my corpus of study into contact with Kristeva’s take on abjection in *Powers of Horror*, I ask how diffuse the human body can become before it is rendered untouchable by the systems of socioeconomic abjection that bear down on marginalized others deemed less than recognizable by the gatekeepers of sexual normativity.

Moving from representations of the Sibyl in Greco-Roman literature to an analysis of Federico Fellini’s hermaphroditic prophet/ess in *Fellini-Satyricon*, Chapter Two
produces a close reading of the visual and literary tropes the filmmaker deploys to designate his character’s sexual otherness. Following Alberto Moravia’s compelling critique of Fellini’s mission of “restoring paganism to the pagans,” I examine the mise-en-scène of fragmentation, monstrosity and alienation that Fellini engages to focalize the “hermaphroditic” lynchpin of his tale, arguing that Fellini creates a facsimile of antiquity that accentuates the perceptual gap between his projected audience and an equally projected past. Placing the Hermaphrodite squarely in this rift, Fellini concurrently depicts the character as a gentle prophetess and sexually ambiguous “monster.” This adaptive modification of the Sibylline character escalates the paradigm of abjection that frames the character in earlier versions – yet the reaction of the film’s protagonists to the character’s projected ambiguity also affords an opportunity to critique the beefcake “heroes” of the tale, whose actions are depicted as still more monstrous and barbaric. Returning to Kristeva’s notions of abjection as I discussed them in Chapter One, I extend my analysis of the Sibyl to explore the ways in which this character’s abjection as a “monstrous” amalgamation positions an overarching heterocentric sexual normativity as the monster of the monster, even as it releases the larger discursive apparatus into abject discourse, in which the monster gains an opportunity to signify for herself.

My corpus of study in Chapter Three is Virginia Woolf’s novel, *Orlando: A Biography*. Beginning with a close reading of Woolf’s Moor’s head sequence, I interrelate Bhabha’s conceptualization of the barbarian and Žižek’s notions of the monstrous with Kristeva’s viewpoints on abject discourse to analyze the tropes of monstrosity and barbarity that frame the masculine Orlando, a character whom Woolf initially paints as a privileged barbarian, a patriarchal monster with money. Discussing
the tropes of sexual ambiguity that Woolf deploys to “change the sex” of her protagonist halfway through the tale (via shifts in pronoun, changes in the narrator’s point of view, etc.), I refute the popular claim that Orlando is a significantly androgynous character. Closely tracking the events that foreshadow the character’s brief moment of sexual ambiguity, I examine Orlando’s initial “unambiguous” masculinity as a representational trope that makes it seem more “plausible” for tropes of sexual ambiguity to open possibilities for Orlando to live, not merely as a woman, but as a feminist later in the story. Returning to the concept of abjection as discussed in Chapters One and Two, I bring Kristeva’s insights on abject discourse into contact with Butler’s insights on social marginalization and sexual recognizability. Concluding the chapter with a close reading of Woolf’s tactic of “proving” Orlando’s legitimacy as a woman by her “ability” to bear a child, I suggest that Orlando presents not merely the adaptation of a man into a woman via an instance of sexual ambiguation, but the adaptation of patriarchal escriture into a specifically feminine and even feminist writing: Woolf’s writing.

Chapter Four broadens my examination of Orlando-lore to evaluate Sally Potter’s Orlando (1992), a cinematic adaptation that functions as a revision of – and paean to – Woolf’s politically troubling text. Beginning Chapter Four with a critical reading of Potter’s decision to replace Woolf’s Moor’s head sequence with an opening scene that centralizes the questionable claim that actress Tilda Swinton “is” a man, I suggest Potter’s attempt to shift the barbarous masculinity of Orlando’s boyhood into that of a visibly feminized character is accomplished by the removal of the same tropes of male violence the filmmaker relies on to insinuate that male-on-male aggression is the impetus for Orlando’s sexual transformation into a woman. Following a discussion of this
aesthetic interlacement of violence and masculinity, I analyze Potter’s revision of Orlando’s sex-change sequence, particularly as the filmmaker presents Orlando’s sex-change as the response to patriarchal chauvinism. Citing Butler’s accounts of troubling sexualities in *Gender Trouble*, I assert that Potter’s repeated acts of distancing her protagonist from masculine aggression does not produce a narrative that is less troubling than Woolf’s, but instead combines with the filmmaker’s prioritization of Orlando’s motherhood to emerge as troubling to a different crowd; namely, the scholars and feminists who lambasted Potter’s adaptation as an anti-feminist, “de-lesbianized” travesty. Closely analyzing Potter’s decision to relocate the setting of Orlando’s sex change from Constantinople to Uzbekistan, I explore her addition of a new character (The Khan) to the fraternity of violence that impels Orlando’s sexual transfiguration. Reviewing Potter’s elimination of supernatural characters and biographers from her representation of Orlando’s “in-between” stage, I assert the filmmaker removes any vestige of ambiguity from Orlando’s sexual transformation, turning it into a change of *gender* as opposed to a change of *sex* – a revision that nevertheless succeeds in summoning the protagonist into an abject discourse as productive as Woolf’s source text. Suggesting Potter’s adaptation of the protagonist into a character whose rapidly evolving feminist politics open an ontological door into her role as a queer mother, I argue Potter’s film opens new corridors for gender trouble – and for queer feminist cinema – by switching the sex of Orlando’s child to a girl instead of a boy. Drawing out the intimate connections between abjection, girlhood and the concept of *resistance* as envisioned by Teresa de Lauretis, I conclude Chapter Four by suggesting Sally Potter adapts Orlando’s
child into a revolutionary girl whose ambiguity beckons us into the future of feminism and feminist filmmaking.

Exploring Michel Foucault’s adaptive incorporation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs into a collection entitled, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a French Hermaphrodite*, I initiate Chapter Five by tracing Camille’s own accounts of her religious upbringing in Ursuline convents and schools. Following the progression of her lesbian sexual relations through her girlhood into adolescence, I focus on the zero-point at which Camille allows her body to be examined by medical doctors and is discovered to be a “pseudohermaphrodite.” Tracking her subsequent mental and physical undoing at the hands of nineteenth-century medicolegal “experts,” I argue Camille’s accounts do not reflect the experiences of a sexually ambiguous character, but instead chronicle her attempt to switch from an unambiguous state of femininity into an unambiguous state of masculinity, a transformation that Camille hoped would facilitate her access to the patriarchal privilege of having licit sex with girls. Ironically, this transition was arrested by the very clinicians Camille turned to for support, as these medicolegal experts had more of a stake in studying Camille’s hermaphrodisim than they had in allowing her to live as either a man, woman, or girl. It was this latter state (girlhood) to which Camille desired to retreat once she realized masculinity held no attraction for her, but perceiving no acceptable route forward or backward into girlhood, she was shut down by an overwhelming heteronormative backlash of scandal and socioeconomic abjection, at which point she committed suicide rather than continue living without enjoying the attributes of manhood that she sought to achieve. Bringing Camille’s memoirs and Foucault’s intertextual collection into further contact with de Lauretis’s work in *Figures*
of Resistance, I consider de Lauretis’s notion that “eccentric bodies” bear a potential to resist the boundaries of hegemonic order. Arguing that Camille’s resistance was broken by the medicolegal regime and the very heteronormative culture in (and from) which she sought shelter, I begin to approach her resistant text. Refuting Foucault’s characterization of Camille’s writing as “turgid schoolgirl prose,” I suggest there is traction between Camille’s memoirs and the elegiac confessions of eccentric religious figures (e.g., St. Augustine, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and Hadewijch d’Anvers). Asserting that Camille’s girlhood was not merely some sexually ambiguous shadow of a primal dyadic pair, but was instead a prohibited but complete sex replete with its own ambiguous edge, I argue that Camille’s memoirs resist an overarching heteronormative imperative to fall silent. I conclude Chapter Five with a discussion of the ways in which Camille’s writings adaptively challenge Foucault’s editorializations to elbow out a resistant space-between, inscribing their exception to the heteronormative rule, and extending the limits of the sexually possible.

In the epilogue to this thesis, I reiterate my convictions that there are precise reasons we remain locked into ontological performances of sexual specificity that are shrouded or veiled in ambiguity, not the least because there is joy in knowledge, and joy in undoing knowledge. *Jouissance* not only stems from the ability to intimately know something right down to its very roots — it also comes from the ability to draw aside the veil of ambiguity that cloaks the known to reveal that which was hidden or unexplored. Yet we must always bear in mind that the *jouissance* of new sexual terrain can yield to a terror of the same in the flash of a moment. When we remove the ambiguous seine that shrouds each articulable sex, we may find that only the thinnest veil — if there is any veil
at all – stands between the dyadic nodes of male and female, hetero and homo. There are always points of contact, and an active but ambiguous confluence of sexual difference is hardly the same thing as an arbitrary dividing line that stands between.
English Summary

This thesis analyzes the depiction of sexually ambiguous characters in works of adaptation. Because the clinical and critical misuse of the term “sexual ambiguity” since the late 1950s has been so striking, my project necessitated a reorientation of the concept away from its function as a defining characteristic for the sexual anatomy of human bodies, as that usage is both highly subjective and potentially damaging. Thus, the initial move in this thesis lays in producing an argument that it might be more productive to view sexual ambiguity as both a transitive flanking device that is used to shroud or frame the ontological kernels of individual sexualities, and as a tangible characteristic of the ill-defined pressures that permeate the arbitrary yet determinant process of sexual subjectivation in general. Thus, my thesis comprises both a critique of sexual ambiguity as a diagnostic trope and an exploration of the narrative deployment of sexual ambiguity as a political-aesthetic system. Several key questions guided me in this search. Through what tropes and meaning-devices are the limits and characteristics of sexual ambiguity articulated, and how do they define sexually ambiguous characters? How are such characters positioned in relation to other characters, and what are the products of their projected interactions? What acts are such characters deployed to do (or un-do, as the case may be)? And how does sexual ambiguity emerge not merely as an aesthetic marker for human characters, but as a means of framing sexual singularity and even human sexuality in general?

The findings of this thesis suggest a distinct difference between states of sexual ambiguity and practices of sexual ambiguation. Concerning the former, sexual ambiguity often functions as a framing device for modes of sexual singularity, as well as a lack of
recognition – or claimed lack of recognition – on the part of a viewer (the doctor who cannot or will not recognize, the reader who “does not understand”). But the practice of sexual ambiguation is not a state; it is a narrative, authorial act that bears down on the corpus of characters, and from there exerts its influence on projected readers, encouraging intended receivers to assent to its narrative propositions. As such, sexual ambiguation is a literary technique in which aesthetic tropes of sexual ambiguity – qualities of indeterminacy and incompleteness, categories of the marginal and in-between – are deployed to articulate the actions not merely of trans- and inter- characters, or characters that defy easy identification within a male-female binary, but the so-called “normative” sexes as well: boys, girls, women and men. The narrative ambiguation of a character’s sex always has a result; it always does something. And because the only contact many people have with “sexually ambiguous” others is through literature, art and film, the way in which human characters are sexually ambiguated matters; it has a political effect, as such projections and aesthetic devices are interpreted as somehow representative of the behaviors and qualities of real human beings.

Conducting this type of inquiry – examining narratives in adaptation from a variety of theoretical angles – required an approach that is both inter- and transdisciplinary. My adaptive corpus of study comprises three main sets of work: the adaptation of sibylline prophet/esses from the classical Greco-Roman literature of Virgil and Petronius to Federico Fellini’s *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969); the *Orlando* of modernist Virginia Woolf and postmodern filmmaker Sally Potter; and Michel Foucault’s editorialization of Camille Barbin’s memoirs in his collection, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. Yet while these
adaptive sets of work are my primary objects of study, bringing them into contact with an equally interdisciplinary body of critical and scholarly works required an ability to establish theoretical traction between scholars from fields of study sometimes viewed as unrelated or even incompatible. Although they appear to be centered in different academic fields, for example, bringing psychoanalytic theorist Julia Kristeva’s notions on abjection into discourse with queer theorist Judith Butler’s views on the same resulted in producing a more robust understanding of the relationship between ambiguity, (mis)recognition and abjection. Similarly, while my understanding of the complex force relations at play in sexual subjectivation was vastly informed by poststructuralist Michel Foucault’s work in *The History of Sexuality*, the task of analyzing his work in *Herculine Barbin* as a corpus of study in Chapter Five was an interesting switch; following and even aligning one’s own analyses with Foucault’s notions of sexual subjectivation is far different than evaluating his authorial mission as an act of adaptive editorialization. Along those lines, tracking the nuances of a highly intertextual corpus enabled me to trace productive connections between Kristeva’s work on intertextuality (which she derived from Mikhail Bakhtin), the work of contemporary adaptation theorists like Thomas Leitch, and formal structural studies in narratology such as those by Mieke Bal and Gérard Genette – not to mention specific contributions in film theory from Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek and Teresa de Lauretis. Furthermore, as the representation of marginalized others is both solidified and/or controverted in adaptative sets of art, literature and film – from whence it impacts the recognition and distribution of human rights – my critical approach benefited from an entwinement of cultural analysis in Žižek, Homi K. Bhabha, Kaja Silverman, Jacques Rancière and Marjorie Garber. Other
theoretical alignments in this thesis that provided complex interdisciplinary connections concerning my specific advocacy of an expanded definition of sexual ambiguity included notions explored in previous works by scholars from fields as diverse as sociology, philosophy, queer studies, women’s studies and psychoanalytic theory (cf. William Wilkerson, Geneviève Morel, Judith Halberstam and others).

Such an interdisciplinary approach to critical theory was additionally mirrored in my methodology for shaping these groupings of intertextual works into thesis chapters; thus, while there is substantial connective tissue between them, my methodology and findings in Chapters One and Two are slightly different than my analyses in Chapters Three and Four, or my discussion of Foucault’s adaptation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs in Chapter Five. My examination of the first set of works, on the one hand, seeks to establish a historical and cultural precedent for the narrative adaptation and deployment of corporeal ambiguation in general, examining the ways in which physical ambiguation is often positioned in a framework of abjection, and teasing out connections and differences between the ambiguation of a female character (The Sibyl) in classical literature and Fellini’s adaptation of the “same” character into the hermaphroditic prophet/ess of Fellini-Satyricon (1969). On the other hand, drawing together a broader corpus of Orlando lore as my object of study in Chapters Two and Three yields a different type of findings, beyond evaluating Orlando’s tightly bracketed moment of sexual ambiguation in Woolf’s novel towards/into articulating the ways in which “normative” sexualities (like girlhood) might disrupt the stultifying polarization of sexual normativity in general – regardless of whether these binary polarizations are hetero- or homonormative. My fourth and final chapter evaluates the adaptive relationship between
the memoirs of Camille Barbin and Foucault’s adaptive incorporation of her memoirs in *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*. Although many scholars have written about the political significance of Camille’s “intersexuality” (as I have noted, that category did not exist in the nineteenth century), I evaluate Foucault’s placement of Camille’s memoirs in intertextual discourse with her interlocutors’ documents as an opportunity to analyze how the writings of a girlhood-before-its-time might impel a critique of the medicolegal apparatus that killed such a girlhood with its inadequate systems of sexual recognition.

On a specific level, Chapter One of the thesis analyzes the adaptation of The Sibyl of Cumae from her first appearance in Virgil’s *Aeneid* and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* to her emergence in the Petronian *Satyricon* more than one hundred years later. While none of these authors mark their Sibyl as sexually ambiguous per se, this chapter suggests each author is responsible for *ambiguating* the character as she emerges from each of these texts into a larger body of Sibyl-lore. Arguing that her escalating corporeal ambiguity bears significant consequences regarding her sexual recognizability later in the adaptive trajectory, I assess the moral-ethical fabulae that result from the Sibyl’s increasing weakness, diminishment and alienation the further she moves from visible recognition. Bringing my corpus of study into contact with Kristeva’s take on abjection in *Powers of Horror*, I ask how diffuse the human body can become before it is rendered untouchable by the systems of socioeconomic abjection that bear down on marginalized others deemed less than recognizable by the gatekeepers of sexual normativity.

Moving from representations of the Sibyl in Greco-Roman literature to an analysis of Federico Fellini’s hermaphroditic prophet/ess in *Fellini-Satyricon*, Chapter Two
produces a close reading of the visual and literary tropes the filmmaker deploys to designate his character’s sexual otherness. Following Alberto Moravia’s compelling critique of Fellini’s mission of “restoring paganism to the pagans,” I examine the mise-en-scène of fragmentation, monstrosity and alienation that Fellini engages to focalize the “hermaphroditic” lynchpin of his tale, arguing that Fellini creates a facsimile of antiquity that accentuates the perceptual gap between his projected audience and an equally projected past. Placing the Hermaphrodite squarely in this rift, Fellini concurrently depicts the character as a gentle prophetess and sexually ambiguous “monster.” This adaptive modification of the Sibylline character escalates the paradigm of abjection that frames the character in earlier versions – yet the reaction of the film’s protagonists to the character’s projected ambiguity also affords an opportunity to critique the beefcake “heroes” of the tale, whose actions are depicted as still more monstrous and barbaric. Returning to Kristeva’s notions of abjection as I discussed them in Chapter One, I extend my analysis of the Sibyl to explore the ways in which this character’s abjection as a “monstrous” amalgamation positions an overarching heterocentric sexual normativity as the monster of the monster, even as it releases the larger discursive apparatus into abject discourse, in which the monster gains an opportunity to signify for herself.

My corpus of study in Chapter Three is Virginia Woolf’s novel, Orlando: A Biography. Beginning with a close reading of Woolf’s Moor’s head sequence, I interrelate Bhabha’s conceptualization of the barbarian and Žižek’s notions of the monstrous with Kristeva’s viewpoints on abject discourse to analyze the tropes of monstrosity and barbarity that frame the masculine Orlando, a character whom Woolf initially paints as a privileged barbarian, a patriarchal monster with money. Discussing
the tropes of sexual ambiguity that Woolf deploys to “change the sex” of her protagonist halfway through the tale (via shifts in pronoun, changes in the narrator’s point of view, etc.), I refute the popular claim that Orlando is a significantly androgynous character. Closely tracking the events that foreshadow the character’s brief moment of sexual ambiguity, I examine Orlando’s initial “unambiguous” masculinity as a representational trope that makes it seem more “plausible” for tropes of sexual ambiguity to open possibilities for Orlando to live, not merely as a woman, but as a feminist later in the story. Returning to the concept of abjection as discussed in Chapters One and Two, I bring Kristeva’s insights on abject discourse into contact with Butler’s insights on social marginalization and sexual recognizability. Concluding the chapter with a close reading of Woolf’s tactic of “proving” Orlando’s legitimacy as a woman by her “ability” to bear a child, I suggest that Orlando presents not merely the adaptation of a man into a woman via an instance of sexual ambiguation, but the adaptation of patriarchal escriture into a specifically feminine and even feminist writing: Woolf’s writing.

Chapter Four broadens my examination of Orlando-lore to evaluate Sally Potter’s Orlando (1992), a cinematic adaptation that functions as a revision of – and paean to – Woolf’s politically troubling text. Beginning Chapter Four with a critical reading of Potter’s decision to replace Woolf’s Moor’s head sequence with an opening scene that centralizes the questionable claim that actress Tilda Swinton “is” a man, I suggest Potter’s attempt to shift the barbarous masculinity of Orlando’s boyhood into that of a visibly feminized character is accomplished by the removal of the same tropes of male violence the filmmaker relies on to insinuate that male-on-male aggression is the impetus for Orlando’s sexual transformation into a woman. Following a discussion of this
aesthetic interlacement of violence and masculinity, I analyze Potter’s revision of Orlando’s sex-change sequence, particularly as the filmmaker presents Orlando’s sex-change as the response to patriarchal chauvinism. Citing Butler’s accounts of troubling sexualities in *Gender Trouble*, I assert that Potter’s repeated acts of distancing her protagonist from masculine aggression does not produce a narrative that is less troubling than Woolf’s, but instead combines with the filmmaker’s prioritization of Orlando’s motherhood to emerge as troubling to a different crowd; namely, the scholars and feminists who lambasted Potter’s adaptation as an anti-feminist, “de-lesbianized” travesty. Closely analyzing Potter’s decision to relocate the setting of Orlando’s sex change from Constantinople to Uzbekistan, I explore her addition of a new character (The Khan) to the fraternity of violence that impels Orlando’s sexual transfiguration. Reviewing Potter’s elimination of supernatural characters and biographers from her representation of Orlando’s “in-between” stage, I assert the filmmaker removes any vestige of ambiguity from Orlando’s sexual transformation, turning it into a change of gender as opposed to a change of sex – a revision that nevertheless succeeds in summoning the protagonist into an abject discourse as productive as Woolf’s source text. Suggesting Potter’s adaptation of the protagonist into a character whose rapidly evolving feminist politics open an ontological door into her role as a queer mother, I argue Potter’s film opens new corridors for gender trouble – and for queer feminist cinema – by switching the sex of Orlando’s child to a girl instead of a boy. Drawing out the intimate connections between abjection, girlhood and the concept of resistance as envisioned by Teresa de Lauretis, I conclude Chapter Four by suggesting Sally Potter adapts Orlando’s
child into a revolutionary girl whose ambiguity beckons us into the future of feminism and feminist filmmaking.

Exploring Michel Foucault’s adaptive incorporation of Camille Barbin’s memoirs into a collection entitled, *Herculine Barbin, Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a French Hermaphrodite*, I initiate Chapter Five by tracing Camille’s own accounts of her religious upbringing in Ursuline convents and schools. Following the progression of her lesbian sexual relations through her girlhood into adolescence, I focus on the zero-point at which Camille allows her body to be examined by medical doctors and is discovered to be a “pseudohermaphrodite.” Tracking her subsequent mental and physical undoing at the hands of nineteenth-century medicolegal “experts,” I argue Camille’s accounts do not reflect the experiences of a sexually ambiguous character, but instead chronicle her attempt to switch from an unambiguous state of femininity into an unambiguous state of masculinity, a transformation that Camille hoped would facilitate her access to the patriarchal privilege of having licit sex with girls. Ironically, this transition was arrested by the very clinicians Camille turned to for support, as these medicolegal experts had more of a stake in studying Camille’s hermaphrodisim than they had in allowing her to live as either a man, woman, or girl. It was this latter state (girlhood) to which Camille desired to retreat once she realized masculinity held no attraction for her, but perceiving no acceptable route forward or backward into girlhood, she was shut down by an overwhelming heteronormative backlash of scandal and socioeconomic abjection, at which point she committed suicide rather than continue living without enjoying the attributes of manhood that she sought to achieve. Bringing Camille’s memoirs and Foucault’s intertextual collection into further contact with de Lauretis’s work in *Figures*
of Resistance, I consider de Lauretis’s notion that “eccentric bodies” bear a potential to resist the boundaries of hegemonic order. Arguing that Camille’s resistance was broken by the medicolegal regime and the very heteronormative culture in (and from) which she sought shelter, I begin to approach her resistant text. Refuting Foucault’s characterization of Camille’s writing as “turgid schoolgirl prose,” I suggest there is traction between Camille’s memoirs and the elegiac confessions of eccentric religious figures (e.g., St. Augustine, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, and Hadewijch d’Anvers). Asserting that Camille’s girlhood was not merely some sexually ambiguous shadow of a primal dyadic pair, but was instead a prohibited but complete sex replete with its own ambiguous edge, I argue that Camille’s memoirs resist an overarching heteronormative imperative to fall silent. I conclude Chapter Five with a discussion of the ways in which Camille’s writings adaptively challenge Foucault’s editorializations to elbow out a resistant space-between, inscribing their exception to the heteronormative rule, and extending the limits of the sexually possible.

In the epilogue to this thesis, I reiterate my convictions that there are precise reasons we remain locked into ontological performances of sexual specificity that are shrouded or veiled in ambiguity, not the least because there is joy in knowledge, and joy in undoing knowledge. *Jouissance* not only stems from the ability to intimately know something right down to its very roots – it also comes from the ability to draw aside the veil of ambiguity that cloaks the known to reveal that which was hidden or unexplored. Yet we must always bear in mind that the *jouissance* of new sexual terrain can yield to a terror of the same in the flash of a moment. When we remove the ambiguous seine that shrouds each articulable sex, we may find that only the thinnest veil – if there is any veil
at all – stands between the dyadic nodes of male and female, hetero and homo. There are always points of contact, and an active but ambiguous confluence of sexual difference is hardly the same thing as an arbitrary dividing line that stands between.
Samenvatting

Dit proefschrift analyseert de afschildering van seksueel ambigue personen in werken van adaptatie. Omdat het klinisch en kritisch misbruik van de term “seksuele ambiguïteit” sinds de late jaren 1950 opvallend is, is mijn project noodzakelijkerwijs een conceptuele heroriëntatie van het concept, weg van zijn functie als een bepalend kenmerk voor de seksuele anatomie van het menselijk lichaam, omdat dat zeer subjectief en potentieel schadelijk is. Dus de eerste stap in dit proefschrift ligt in het produceren van een argument dat het productiever zou zijn om seksuele ambiguïteit te zien als zowel een transitief flankerend hulpmiddel dat wordt gebruikt voor het onttrekken of omlijsten van de ontologische kernen van de individuele seksualiteit, èn als een tastbaar kenmerk van de slecht gedefinieerde druk die nog willekeurig bij het determinante proces van seksuele subjectivering in het algemeen doordringt. Aldus, mijn scriptie omvat zowel kritiek op de seksuele ambiguïteit als diagnostisch troep, als een verkenning van de narratieve inzet van seksuele ambiguïteit als een politiek-esthetisch systeem. Een aantal belangrijke vragen begeleidden mij in deze zoektocht. Via welke stijlfiguren en hulpmiddelen zijn de grenzen en de kenmerken van seksuele ambiguïteit gearticuleerd, en hoe zijn seksueel ambigue karakters te definiëren? Hoe worden dergelijke karakteristieken gepositioneerd ten opzichte van andere persoonskenmerken, en wat is de uitkomst van hun verwachte interacties? Welke stappen kunnen dergelijke karakters ondernemen, (of juist niet in sommige gevallen)? En hoe kan seksuele ambiguïteit niet alleen als een esthetisch onderscheid ontstaan voor menselijke personages, maar ook als middel van een contextualiserende seksuele eigenheid en zelfs de menselijke seksualiteit in het algemeen?
De bevindingen van dit proefschrift suggereren een duidelijk verschil tussen de

staaten van seksuele ambiguïteit en de praktijk van seksuele ambiguïteit. Vanuit het verleden fungeert seksuele ambiguïteit vaak als een kader voor vormen van seksuele singulariteit, en mede als een gebrek aan erkenning – of een beweerd gebrek aan erkenning – van de kant van een toeschouwer (de arts die niet kan of wil erkennen, de lezer die “niet begrijpt”). Maar de praktijk van seksuele ambiguïteit is geen toestand, het is een op het lijf geschreven act die neerdaalt op de karakters, en vanaf daar zijn invloed uitoefent op geprojecteerde lezers, waarbij het de bedoelde ontvangers stimuleert in te stemmen met zijn verhalende voorstellen. Als zodanig is seksuele ambiguïteit een literaire techniek waarbij esthetische stijlfiguren van seksuele ambiguïteit – kwaliteiten van onbepaaldheid en onvolledigheid, categorieën van de marges en er tussenin –worden ingezet om de acties niet alleen van trans- en inter- tekens te articuleren of tekens die eenvoudige identificatie tarten binnen een man-vrouw binaire, maar ook de zogenaamde “normatieve” seksen: jongens, meisjes, vrouwen en mannen. Het verhaal rond ambiguïteit van het geslacht van een personage heeft altijd een resultaat, het doet altijd wel iets. En omdat het enige contact dat veel mensen met “seksueel dubbelzinnigen” hebben door middel van literatuur, kunst en film is, en door de manier waarop de menselijke personages seksueel ambiguous handelen, heeft het een politiek effect; zulke projecties en esthetisch handelen worden geïnterpreteerd alsof dit op de een of andere manier representatief is voor het gedrag en de eigenschappen van echte mensen.

Uitvoering van dit soort onderzoek – onderzoek van verhalen over aanpassing vanuit diverse theoretische invalshoeken – verlangde inter-en transdisciplinariteit. Mijn toegepast studiecorpus beslaat drie werkonderdelen: de toepassing van sibillijnse
profeet/esses uit de klassieke Grieks-Romeinse literatuur van Virgil en Petronius op
Federico Fellini’s *Fellini-Satyricon* (1969), de *Orlandos* van modernistische Virginia
Woolf en postmoderne filmmaker Sally Potter, en Michel Foucault’s editorialization van
Camille Barbins memoires in zijn collectie *Herculine Barbin, zijnde de recent ontdekte
memoires van een negentiende-eeuwse Franse hermafrodiet*. Maar terwijl deze
toegepaste werkonderdelen mijn primaire studieobjecten zijn, vereist het in contact
brengen met even interdisciplinaire kritische en wetenschappelijke werken het vermogen
om vast te stellen dat er sprake is van theoretische tractie tussen academici uit
vakgebieden die soms wordt gezien als niet-verwant of zelfs onverenigbaar. Hoewel ze
centraal lijken te staan in verschillende wetenschapsgebieden, bijvoorbeeld, het in
discours brengen van psychoanalytische theoreticus Julia Kristeva’s denkbeelden over
laagheid met queer theoreticus Judith Butlers opvattingen over hetzelfde, resulteerde in
een meer robuust begrip van de relatie tussen de ambiguïteit, (mis)erkenning en
vernederiging. Op dezelfde manier, terwijl mijn begrip van de complexe krachtrelaties die
spelen in seksuele subjectivering stevig gevormd werd door het poststructuralistische
werk van Michel Foucault in *De geschiedenis van de seksualiteit*, was de taak van het
analyseren van zijn werk in *Herculine Barbin* als een corpus van studie in Hoofdstuk Vijf
een interessante omschakeling; het volgen, zelfs na het afstemmen van de eigen analyses
met Foucault’s opvattingen over seksuele subjectivering, is iets heel anders dan het
evalueren van zijn schrijversmissie als een staaltje van adaptieve bewerking. Langs deze
lijnen, de nuances opsporend van een uiterst intertekstuele corpus kon ik productieve
verbindingen traceren tussen Kristeva’s werk over intertekstualiteit (die ze afleidde van
Mikhail Bakhtin), het werk van hedendaagse adaptatie theoretici zoals Thomas Leitch, en
formele structurele studies in narratologie zoals die van Mieke Bal en Gerard Genette – en niet te vergeten specifieke bijdragen in de filmtheorie van Gilles Deleuze, Slavoj Žižek en Teresa de Lauretis. Bovendien, als de vertegenwoordiging van gemarginaliseerde anderen zowel verstevigd als/of controversieel is in adaptieve sets van kunst, literatuur en film, – vanwaar het invloed uitoefent op de erkenning en de distributie van de mensenrechten – heeft mijn kritische benadering geprofiteerd van een verwevenheid van de culturele analyse in Žižek, Homi K. Bhabha, Kaja Silverman, Jacques Rancière en Marjorie Garber. Andere theoretische richtlijnen in dit proefschrift, dat voor complexe interdisciplinaire connecties over mijn specifieke belangenbehartiging van een uitgebreide definitie van seksuele ambiguïteit zorgde, omvatte begrippen die onderzocht zijn in eerdere werken van wetenschappers uit uiteenlopende gebieden als sociologie, filosofie, queer studies, vrouwenstudies en psychoanalytische theorie (cf. William Wilkerson, Geneviève Morel, Judith Halberstam en anderen).

Een dergelijke interdisciplinaire benadering van de kritische theorie werd bovendien weerspiegeld in mijn methodiek voor het vormgeven van deze groeperingen van intertekstuele werken in proefschrift hoofdstukken, dus, terwijl er een aanzienlijk verband is tussen hen, zijn mijn werkwijze en bevindingen in de Hoofdstukken Een en Twee iets anders dan mijn analyses in de Hoofdstukken Drie en Vier, of mijn bespreking van de aanpassing van Camille Barbins memoires van Foucault in Hoofdstuk Vijf. Mijn onderzoek van het eerste werkonderdeel wil aan de ene kant een historisch en cultureel precedent scheppen voor de verhalende aanpassing en implementatie van lichamelijke ambiguïteit in het algemeen, het onderzoeken van de manieren waarop fysieke ambiguïteit vaak wordt geplaatst in een kader van verachting, en de verbanden en
verschillen ontwarren tussen de ambiguïteit van een vrouwelijk personage (de Sibille) in de klassieke literatuur en de aanpassing van “hetzelfde” karakter door Fellini in de hermafrodiete profeet/ess van Fellini-Satyricon (1969). Aan de andere kant, het in breder zin nader tot elkaar brengen van het corpus van Orlando-lore als mijn studieobject in de Hoofdstukken Twee en Drie, levert een ander soort bevindingen op dan het evalueren van Orlando's strak afgebakend moment van seksuele ambiguïteit in Woolf’s roman vanwaar/waarin het articuleren van de manieren die “normatieve” seksualiteit ( zoals girlhood ) de verlammende polarisatie van seksuele normativiteit in het algemeen kunnen verstoren– ongeacht of deze binaire polarisaties zijn hetero – of homonormative. Mijn vierde en laatste hoofdstuk evalueert de adaptieve relatie tussen de memoires van Camille Barbin en Foucaults adaptieve incorporatie van haar memoires in Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite. Hoewel vele geleerden hebben geschreven over het politieke belang van Camille’s ‘interseksualiteit’ (zoals ik heb opgemerkt, deze categorie bestond niet in de negentiende eeuw), beschouw ik Foucaults plaatsing van Camille’s memoires in intertekstuele discours met documenten van haar gesprekspartners als een kans om te analyseren hoe de geschriften van eerdere meisjesjaren tot kritiek kunnen aanzetten op het medicolegale apparaat dat een dergelijke meisjestijd doodde met zijn inadequate systemen van seksuele erkenning.

Op een bepaald niveau, analyseert het proefschrift in Hoofdstuk Een de aanpassing van de Sibille van Cumae uit haar eerste verschijning in de Aeneis van Vergilius en bij haar opkomst in de Petronian Satyricon in Ovidius' Metamorphosen meer dan honderd jaar later. Hoewel geen van deze auteurs hun Sibyl expliciet markeren als seksueel
ambigue, dit hoofdstuk stelt dat elke auteur verantwoordelijk is voor het _ambigueren van_ het karakter zoals blijkt uit elk van deze teksten in een groter geheel van Sibyl-lore. Met het argument dat haar escalerende lichamelijke dubbelzinnigheid aanzienlijke gevolgen heeft voor haar seksuele herkenbaarheid in het latere adaptieve traject, stel ik de moreel-ethische fabulae vast die voortvloeien uit de Sibyls toenemende zwakte, achteruitgang en vervreemding, hoe verder ze zich verwijdert van visuele herkenning. Terwijl ik mijn corpus van studie in contact breng met Kristeva’s kijk op de verachting in _Powers of Horror_, vraag ik mij af hoe diffuus het menselijk lichaam kan worden voordat het onaantastbaar is voor de systemen van negatieve sociaal-economische druk die wordt uitgeoefend op hen in de marge die minder herkenbaar worden geacht door de poortwachters van seksuele normativiteit.

Uitgaande van de voorstellingen van de Sibille in de Grieks-Romeinse literatuur naar een analyse van Federico Fellini’s hermafrodieta profeet/ess in _Fellini-Satyricon_, gaat Hoofdstuk Twee om een close reading van de beeldende en literaire stijlfiguren die de filmmaker inzet om seksuele varianten van zijn karakter aan te wijzen. Alberto Moravia’s dwingende kritiek volgend op de missie van Fellini’s “herstel van heidendom naar de heidenen,” onderzoek ik hoe Fellini een _mise-en-scène_ opvoert van fragmentatie, gedrocht, en vervreemding als brandpunt van de “tweeslachtige” spil van het verhaal, beargumenterend dat Fellini een facsimile van de oudheid creëert dat de perceptuele kloof tussen zijn geprojecteerd publiek en een even geprojecteerd verleden accentueert. Met het nadrukkelijk plaatsen van de Hermafrodiet in deze kloof, toont Fellini tegelijkertijd zijn karakter als een zachte profetes en een seksueel ambigue gedrocht. Deze adaptieve aanpassing van het Sibillijnse karakter escaleert het paradigma van
vernedering dat het karakter in eerdere versies neerzet als “monster.” Maar de reactie van
de de films protagonisten op de geprojecteerde ambiguïteit van het personage biedt ook
een gelegenheid om de spierbundel “helden” van het verhaal te bekritiseren, wiens
optreden als nog monsterlijker en barbaars worden afgeschilderd. Terugkerend naar
Kristeva’s begrip van verachting zoals ik ze in Hoofdstuk Een besprak, breid ik mijn
analyse van de Sibille uit om te kunnen onderzoeken op welke manieren de
verachtelijkheid van dit personage zich als een “monsterlijke” samensmelting
positioneert in een overkoepelende heterocentrale seksuele normativiteit als het monster
van het monster, zelfs wanneer het de grotere discursieve hulpmiddelen in abjecte
discours ontketent, waarbij het monster een kans krijgt om zichzelf betekenis te geven.

Mijn studiecorpus in Hoofdstuk Drie is de roman van Virginia Woolf, *Orlando: A
Biography*. Beginnend met een close reading van Woolfs Moors head reeks, breng ik
Bhabha’s conceptualisering van de barbaar en Žižek’s ideeën over het monsterlijke in
verband met Kristeva's standpunten over verachtelijke discours, om zo de stijlfiguren van
gedrocht en barbaarsheid te analyseren die het kader vormen van de mannelijke Orlando,
een karakter dat Woolf aanvankelijk uittektent als een bevoorrecht barbaar, een
patriciarchaal monster met geld. Gaandeweg de stijlfiguren van seksuele ambiguïteit
bespreking waarbij Woolf ertoe overgaat om van dit karakter “het geslacht te
veranderen” halverwege het verhaal (via verschuivingen in voornaamwoord,
veranderingen in het standpunt van de verteller, enz.), weerk ik de populaire bewering
dat Orlando een aanzienlijk androgyn karakter is. Nauw het spoor volgend van de
gebeurtenissen die hun schaduw vooruit werpen op het korte moment van seksuele
ambiguïteit van het personage, onderzoek ik Orlando’s oorspronkelijke
“ondubbelzinnige” mannelijkheid als een representatieve figuur dat het meer “plausibel” lijkt te maken voor stijlfiguren van seksuele ambiguïteit om mogelijkheden te openen voor Orlando om te leven, niet alleen als een vrouw, maar als een feministe later in het verhaal. Terugkerend naar het concept van de vernedering zoals besproken in de hoofdstukken een en twee, breng ik Kristeva's inzichten over abjecte discours in contact met Butlers inzichten betreffende sociale uitsluiting en seksuele herkenbaarheid. Ter afsluiting van het hoofdstuk met een close reading van Woolfs tactiek voor “het bewijzen” van Orlando’s legitimiteit als een vrouw door haar “vermogen” om een kind te dragen, stel ik voor dat Orlando niet alleen de aanpassing van een man in een vrouw als een geval van seksuele ambiguïteit presenteert, maar de aanpassing van de patriarchale *escriture* in een specifiek vrouwelijk en zelfs feministisch schrijven: Woolfs schrijven.

In Hoofdstuk Vier verbreed ik mijn onderzoek van Orlando-lore door Sally Potters *Orlando* (1992), een filmische aanpassing die functioneert als een herziening– en lofzang op – Woolf’s politiek verontrustende tekst, te evalueren. Hoofdstuk Vier beginnend met een kritische lezing van de beslissing van Potter om Woolfs Moors head reeks te vervangen door een openingsscène die de twijfelachtige bewering dat actrice Tilda Swinton een man “is” centraliseert, stel ik voor dat Potters poging om de barbaarse mannelijkheid van Orlando’s jongensjaren te verschuiven naar die van een zichtbaar gefeminiseerd karakter, wordt bereikt door het verwijderen van dezelfde stijlfiguren van mannelijk geweld waar de filmmaker op vertrouwt om te insinueren dat man-op-man agressie de impuls is voor de seksuele transformatie van Orlando in een vrouw. Na het bespreken van dit esthetisch vlechtwerk van geweld en mannelijkheid, analyseer ik Potters herziening van Orlando’s sex-change opeenvolging, met name omdat de
filmmaker Orlando’s sex-change presenteert als reactie op patriarchaal chauvinisme. Verwijzend naar Butlers beschouwingen over verontrustende seksualiteiten in *Gender Trouble*, beweer ik dat Potters herhaald distantiëren van mannelijke agressie van haar hoofdpersoon geen verhaal produceert dat minder verontrustend is dan dat van Woolf, maar in plaats daarvan strookt met de prioriteit van de filmmaker om Orlando’s moederschap als verontrustend naar voren te laten komen voor een ander publiek, namelijk de geleerden en feministen die de aanpassing van Potter scherp veroordelen als een anti-feministische, “de-lesbiaanse” travestie. Nauwkeurig Potters beslissing analyserend om de locatie van Orlando’s geslachtsverandering van Constantinopel naar Oezbekistan te verplaatsen, onderzoek ik haar toevoeging van een nieuw karakter (De Khan) aan de broederschap van het geweld dat de aanzet is tot de seksuele transfiguratie van Orlando. De eliminatie herzienend van bovennatuurlijke personages en biografen van haar representatie van Orlando’s “in-between” fase, beweer ik dat de filmmaker elk spoor van dubbelzinnigheid van Orlando's seksuele transformatie verwijdert, en deze omturnt in een verandering van geslacht in tegenstelling tot een verandering van sexe – een herziening die er desalnietemin in slaagt de hoofdpersoon te appelleren aan een even productief abject discours als Woolfs brontekst. Suggereerend dat de aanpassing van Potters hoofdpersoon in een personage wiens snel evoluerende feministische politiek een ontologische deur opent in haar rol als queer moeder, betoog ik dat Potters film nieuwe corridors opent voor gender-problemen – en voor queer feministische cinema – door het geslacht van Orlando’s kind te veranderen in een meisje in plaats van een jongen. De intieme verbindingen uittekenend tussen afkeuring, meisjestijd en het concept van weerstand zoals Teresa de Lauretis deze beschouwt, besluit ik Hoofdstuk Vier met de
suggestie dat Sally Potter Orlando’s kind in een revolutionair meisje aanpast wiens ambiguïteit ons de toekomst van het feminisme en feministische filmmaken inloodst.

Michel Foucaults adaptieve incorporatie van Camille Barbins memoires in een verzameling getiteld *Herculine Barbin* onderzoekend, neem ik het initiatief in Hoofdstuk Vijf door het traceren van het eigen rekenschap van Camille's religieuze opvoeding in Ursulinenkloosters en scholen. De voortgang volgend van haar lesbische seksuele relaties tijdens haar meisjestijd tot in de adolescentie, richt ik me op het nulpunt waarop Camille haar lichaam door artsen laat onderzoeken en wordt ontdekt dat ze een “pseudohermaphrodite” is. Het spoor volgend van haar latere geestelijke en lichamelijke ondergang in handen van de negentiende-eeuwse medicolegale “deskundigen”, pleit ik ervoor dat Camille’s verrichtingen niet overeen stemmen met de ervaringen van een seksueel ambigue karakter, maar in plaats daarvan haar poging bevestigt om over te schakelen van een eenduidige toestand van vrouwelijkheid tot een eenduidige toestand van mannelijkheid, een transformatie waarvan Camille hoopte dat deze haar de toegang tot het patriarchale voorrecht zou geven om het hebben van legale sex met meisjes te vergemakkelijken. Ironisch genoeg werd deze overgang aangehouden door dezelfde clini waartoe Camille zich wendde voor steun, omdat deze medisch deskundigen meer belang hadden bij het bestuderen van Camille’s hermaphrodisisme dan dat zij haar toestonden om te leven als ofwel een man, vrouw of meisje. Het was deze laatste staat (meisjesjaren) waarop Camille zich wenste terug te trekken toen ze eenmaal doorhad dat mannelijkheid geen aantrekking kracht voor haar inhield, maar zonder uitzicht op een aanvaardbare route voorwaarts of achteruit naar meisjesjaren, werd ze verlamd door een overweldigende heteronormatieve lawine van schandaal en sociaal-economische
vernederige, waarop ze besloot zelfmoord te plegen in plaats van verder te leven zonder de genietingen van de kenmerken van mannelijkheid die ze wilde bereiken. Bij het verder in contact brengen van Camille’s memoires en Foucaults intertekstuele collectie met het werk van de Lauretis in *Figures of Resistance*, neem ik de bewering van de Lauretis in aanmerking dat “excentrieke lichamen” een mogelijkheid bieden om de grenzen van de hegemonische orde te weerstaan. Met het argument dat de weerstand van Camille werd gebroken door het medicolegale regime en de zeer heteronormatieve cultuur waarin (en waarvoor) zij beschutting zocht, zoek ik toenadering tot haar resistente tekst. Foucaults karakterisering van Camille’s schrijven als “gezwollen schoolmeisjesproza” weerleggend, suggereer ik dat er tractie is tussen Camille’s memoires en de elegische bekentenissen van excentrieke religieuze figuren (bijv. St. Augustine, Sor Juana Inez de la Cruz, en Hadewijch d’Anvers). Bewerend dat Camille’s meisjesjaren niet slechts een aantal seksueel ambigue schaduwen waren van een oer dyadisch paar, maar in plaats daarvan een verboden maar complete sexbeleving met een eigen randje van dubbelzinnigheid was, beargumenteer ik dat Camille’s memoires een overkoepelende heteronormatieve noodzaak beletten stil te vallen. Ik besluit Hoofdstuk Vijf met een bespreking van de manieren waarop Camille's geschreven Foucaults herzieningen adaptief uitdagen om zo een resistente ruimte te creëren tussen het omschrijven van hun uitzondering zijn op de heteronormatieve regel, zowel als de het oprekken van de grenzen van het seksueel mogelijke.

In het epiloog van dit proefschrift, herhaal ik mijn overtuiging dat er sterke redenen zijn waarom we ingesloten blijven in ontologische optredens van seksuele specificiteit die zijn verwikkeld of verhuld in ambiguïteit, niet in het minst omdat er plezier is in het
weten, en er plezier is in het weerleggen van kennis. Geneugte komt niet alleen voort uit het in staat zijn om iets tot in de intieme puntjes te weten – het komt ook door het vermogen de sluier van ambiguitéit opzij te kunnen schuiven die het weten bedekt, en hetgeen wat verborgen of onontgonnen was te onthullen. Toch moeten we altijd in gedachten houden dat de geneugte van een nieuw seksueel terrein een terreur van hetzelfde kan opleveren in de flits van een moment. Want als we de ambigueuze sluier verwijderen die tussen elk gearticuleerd geslacht bestaat, zouden we kunnen ontdekken dat alleen de dunste sluier – als zo'n sluier überhaupt al bestaat–tussen de dyadische knooppunten staat van man en vrouw, hetero en homo. Er zijn altijd punten van contact, en een actieve, maar ambigueuze samenvloeiing van seksueel verschil is nauwelijks hetzelfde als een willekeurige scheidslijn die ertussenin staat.