Sexual ambiguity: Narrative manifestations in adaptation

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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

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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 androgyny,” 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 androgyny 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 androgyny 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 “androgyny 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 *androgynous*, as the prioritization those researchers have placed on both the reputed “androgyne” 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 Woollfian – 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.\(^{11}\) 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.12 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).13 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. 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. 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, 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. 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

14 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.
15 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).
16 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).
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 Ascyltus 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.\[^1\] 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 batting 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.

\[^1\] 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 wilful 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 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 never know: 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

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21 Because the conclusion of 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.

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).
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 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.\(^{24}\)

In *Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture*, Sylvie Gambaudo explains that, for the speaking subject, the sudden appearance of the abject “represents the boundary between nature and culture that the subject crosses in the process of symbolization [and] reminds the subject of its natural origins,” 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 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

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\(^{24}\) Preceding the triumphant grin of the Moor’s head, Orlando “vows” 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 *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 *Kristeva, Psychoanalysis and Culture*, Sylvie Gambaudo explains that the abject turns on the subject at the moment “the paternal function is failing, or if the contemporary subject’s ability for containment is failing” (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.
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 interstitice, 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 primal, 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 *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.27

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

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. Following the series of melonchaly 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

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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 (Roessell 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

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. 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:

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 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

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.”

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 Rajasthan (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). 38

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 androgyny and sexual ambiguity, which, etymologically speaking, are far from the same.39 The term androgynous (Latin: “man-woman”) was deployed until at least the seventeenth century as a counterpart of hermaphrodisism, and in that archaic usage, both hermaphrodite and androgyne referred to a person born with both male and female genitalia.40 But from the

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39 As I have mentioned, there are many scholars who have incorrectly or inaccurately prioritized the reputed presence of androgyny 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 “androgyny … a comic myth directed primarily, but not exclusively against the tyrannies of sex,” although aside from the fact that Woolf never mentions the word “androgyny” or “androgynous” 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 androgynous 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 androgyny” that “opens up new possibilities in the fixed division of gender” (1987: 130). While I am not sure what the term “Woolfian androgyny” 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 androgyny 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.

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41 Tracing the roots of androgyne 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 artifacts 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 androgyne for those born neither male or female?” (ISNA web materials 2010). According to the ISNA, the impression of androgyne 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.

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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).46 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.47 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

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 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

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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

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 morphology, i.e. the form of the body, is 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 abjectified 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.\(^5\) 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 retreat 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.

\(^5\) 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

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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 
rejection 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, 
deading 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 
thorizations 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 subjectivation, 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, triumphand 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.