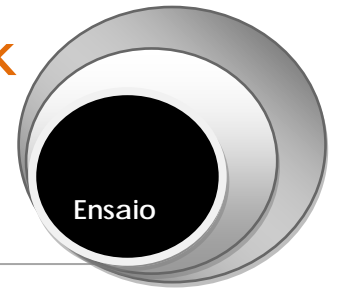


“What a wonderful piece of work is a woman!”: *Orlando* and *The Enigma of the Sexes*



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In the opening pages of *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf speaks of “the great problem of the true nature of woman” not only as a difficult question, but also as a problem she cannot solve. In itself a farsighted opening, it became a longer-term issue which underpins most of her novels and essays: and if she did not approve of conclusions, “that great problem” positioned Woolf as a spokesperson for her gender, and therefore many readers throughout the world appropriated her in feminist terms during the 1980s. In this paper I want to suggest how Angela Carter was able to expose these unsolved states of being through her opera libretto *Orlando: or, The Enigma of the Sexes*, an estranging homage to Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) which remained unfinished at the time of her death, but appeared in her collected dramatic works in 1996.

“For books continue each other, in spite of our habit of judging them separately”.²

1. ‘The great problem of the true nature of woman’³

In the opening pages of *A Room of One's Own* Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) speaks of “the great problem of the true nature of woman” not only as a difficult question, but also as a problem she cannot solve. In itself a farsighted opening, it became a longer-term issue which underpins most of her novels and essays, namely *Orlando*,⁴ written between the Autumn of 1927 and March 1928; the themes of symbiosis, ambiguity, metamorphosis, ambivalence, androgyny,

transvestism and cross-dressing in the representation of female identity carried over into literary Modernism itself.

Most early admirers placed *Orlando* and its adventurous, unstable bisexual subject outside the main body of Woolf's work – notably psychological realism and her development of stream-of-consciousness narrative in such works as *Jacob's Room* (1922), *Mrs Dalloway* (1925), and *To the Lighthouse* (1927) –, a judgment with which numerous critics have since disagreed, viewing *Orlando* not only as a glimpse at her more politicized feminist essay *A Room of One's Own*, but also as its legitimate fictional complement, and seeing in *Orlando's* themes, and in its rejection of literary conventions, similarities with Woolf's more prominent works, namely, the visibility of the difficulties pertaining to an exploration of femininity as difference: “We may take some 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” (*O* 87). The novel, which has been the subject of numerous scholarly essays, sold 8,104 copies in the first six months after its publication in October 1928 (cf. Briggs 212), a turning point in Woolf's career as a successful novelist, and an attempt to establish a living relationship with her near past.

Subtitled “A Biography”, Woolf's parody shows her interest in the boundaries of gender (in spite of the ironic voice of the narrator, who states that: “let *other pens* treat of sex and sexuality; *we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can*” [*O* 87, my italics]), and describes Orlando's undamaged self and his adventurous life in time, as a means of detaching the subject from the distorting categories imposed by the dominant socio-economic groups. It stalks its aristocratic protagonist for more than three centuries, opening when the shy eponymous hero is only sixteen years old, and “the sixteenth century had still some years of its course to run” (*O* 11).

In the novel, time unaccountably and swiftly passes as Orlando pursues his literary aspirations concerning an old composition, “The Oak Tree: a Poem” (1586), is awarded a peerage, engages in a love affair with a Russian princess (the impossible and perfect love-object “Sasha, as he called her for short, and because it was the name of a white Russian fox he had had as a boy” [O 28]), is named British ambassador to Constantinople, earns a Dukedom, and, as a young woman of rank, goes beyond the constructs of Victorian chastity, modesty and purity.

Now, if a woman is an undefined organism, it calls the plot of her life into question. If Woolf did not approve of final conclusions, “that great problem of woman” positioned her as a visible spokesperson for her gender; hence, many readers throughout the world appropriated her, departing from the feminist theory of the post-Second World War period and through later feminist theorists during the 1970s and 1980s, who, departing from *Orlando*, exposed sophisticated methodologies and interpretations concerning the complex nature of gender and women’s experience, somehow leaving apart from Virginia’s multiple personalities and her complex ideas of subjectivity the real person who wrote the novels, criticism, letters and famous Diary. In fact, Woolf was an ‘intellectual aristocrat’, fascinated by the aristocracy as embodied in the careless magnificence of her friend Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962), socially privileged by her upper-middle-class and family backgrounds, a pretentiously frivolous ‘Bloomsbury’ hobbling through gender.

Drawing a portrait of Vita and of her wildfire romanticism through a combination of chronology, fact and imagination, *Orlando* parodies the preconceptions which readers had got into the habit of taking for granted in Victorian biography, particularly in *Orlando’s* mockery of the choices a biographer must make when stitching the pieces of a life into one coherent whole, showing the multiplicity of possibilities when she/he wants to create an

accurate likeness of a specific private life from the references and articles that linger after death.

In this paper I want to suggest how in 1980 Angela Carter (1940-1992), a learned and prolific postmodernist writer belonging to British dissident feminist counterculture, produced a draft of an opera libretto, *Orlando: or, The Enigma of the Sexes*, where, through ‘speculative fiction’⁵ and intertextuality, she was able to expose these unsolved states of being: tradition, cross-dressing and masquerade are used to criticize the constructed nature of gender, and to undermine conventional notions of love and sexual hierarchy. Both an imaginative literary space for creativity, new changes and possibilities, and an estranging homage to Woolf’s 1928 *Orlando*, Angela Carter’s *Orlando: or, The Enigma of the Sexes* remained unfinished at the time of her death, twenty years ago, only appearing in her collected dramatic works, in 1996,⁶ at a time when her early loss to cancer raised applause for her demythologizing of the mother figure (a construct that she herself experienced at forty three) and for her discussion of the social construction of woman.

Also, since the second draft was left incomplete, Angela Carter gives us a text as a construct in progress, assuming Woolf’s belief in the necessity of a literature in the making in a changing world, in a non-authoritarian relationship between an author’s intellectual strategies and literary techniques and a reader, both theses explained in Woolf’s controversial essays “Hours in a Library” (1916) and “How Should One Read a Book?” (1926) – both serious apologies for the open nature of the literary work, and for the freedom and imagination of the reader.⁷ Carter was a writer who knew the ropes, and a “good reader” in the sense Woolf defined in “How Should One Read a Book?”:

Clearly, no answer that will do for everyone; but perhaps a few suggestions. In the first place, a good reader will give the writer the benefit of every doubt; the help of all his

imagination; will follow as closely, interpret as intelligently as he can. (...) [He] will judge with the utmost severity. (“HRB” 398)

2. ‘I have done with men’⁸

Woolf noted in her Diary in the Autumn of 1927 that writing about the kaleidoscopic Orlando, an English nobleman from the Elizabethan era who, as seen, survives numerous uncommon adventures (and whose “fathers had been noble since they had been at all” [O 9]), provided her with a light-hearted “writer’s holiday” after completing the difficult *To the Lighthouse*.⁹ The long-needed *Orlando* impressed many early readers and critics as little more than an entertainment written primarily by the self-absorbed Woolf to amuse her family and many well-read friends, not only because of her several technical innovations, which do not violate the integrity of the novel as a coherent whole, but also due to the revival of the question of women in society (bound by cultural subordination and biological determinism, by laws and conventions), and in Science (with its physiologically and psychologically ruled differentiations). Woolf lives intermittently in the pages of her writings; so, in fact, many vital themes in *Orlando* reflect concerns that pervade all her previous works, including women’s poorly recorded actions, marriage and the equality of the sexes, exclusion, the enigmas of human experience, individual personality, momentary vision, and imagination.

Woolf’s unconventional presentation of time allows a portrayal of the developing character of Orlando in the context of nearly four centuries of English literary and social history, an expansiveness which also reflects the vast geography of the plot. In rendering each specific historical period, Woolf adopted a different, particular narrative style to reflect the most predominant literary and social conventions of the times, but in each one there is a lightness of touch for story-making. No wonder, then, if biographical conventions have shifted in this

novel, and we are faced with improbable stories, gaps and absences, and ambiguities surrounding the blurred boundaries of the main subjects. Furthermore, laughter is largely achieved through deep humour, exaggeration and ironic contrast: *Orlando* thus serves to examine how a transgender subject and his/her relationship to culture and to the art of narrative may involve the revision not only of the conventional discourse of biography, but also of the language of western romance.

After falling into a strange, seven-day trance in the seventeenth century, Orlando revives, transformed physically into a young woman, although otherwise unaltered. He is not what she seems, but what makes the female brain differ from the male brain? The androgynous character of Orlando, male and female in one single being (and particularly the fact that Orlando’s essential character is not altered though he changes from male to female) is seen to demonstrate Woolf’s belief that, although there are scientific, physiological and psychological differentiations, each individual has both male and female characteristics, and that intellectually men and women are indistinguishable, as they may employ diverse and even opposite ways of thinking in a normal state of affairs, in ordinary life, and in communication – scientific and religious, metaphorical and logical: “Orlando was strangely compounded of many humours – of melancholy, of indolence, of passion, of love of solitude, to say nothing of all those contortions and subtleties of temper which were indicated on the first page” (O 46).

Fleeing from seventeenth-century Constantinople to England, Orlando engages in a difficult legal battle to regain the property she had held as a man, the gigantic castle of Knole (the magnificent hall where Vita Sackville-West lived until she married), a quest that masculinises her: as in history and psychology, the attack on traditional, established categories led Woolf to a focus on the volcanic arena of existing political ideas and traditional laws concerning women:

(...) she was a party for three major suits which had been preferred against her during her absence, as well as innumerable minor litigations, some arising out of, others depending on them. The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) *that, she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing*; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons now declaring that their father was deceased, *claimed that all his property descended to them*. (O 105: my italics)

In the eighteenth century he, now a she, mingles in the society which fosters the Arts, and becomes acquainted with prominent literary figures as a rehearsal for her own career as a reader and a writer, a profession and domain not open to women. She takes a husband in England in the nineteenth century, and subsequently Orlando struggles to reconcile her desire to be a writer with the difficulties of a woman writer, the Victorian dynamics of dominance and the notions of feminine duty, discipline and restraint. In fact, this is a question Woolf pursued through the great works of her maturity, already a well-known plot since *Melymbrosia*, the original version of *The Voyage Out* (1915), where Woolf uses the self-reflexive nature of the narrative form to disrupt the long tradition of the ‘novel of manners’ with a strategic use of a journey as a symbol of the initiatory path for the heroine towards adulthood, knowledge and maturity. This first novel hence also disrupts the *Bildungsroman* matrix which had offered an imaginative construct that was almost entirely male-centred in spite of its masculine protagonist(s) being strongly marked by feminine traits.

Woolf’s *Orlando* concludes at the time of its publication, 1928, as the hero edits the poem written in her own boyish hand, which she has been revising for more than three centuries, delivers a fine boy, puts on a ring, is reunited with her husband, and achieves a unifying vision of life.

3. ‘Women no longer write novels solely’¹⁰

In spite of *The Passion of New Eve* (1977) and, specifically, *Nights at the Circus* (1984) being considered as heirs to *Orlando*,¹¹ Angela Carter belonged to dissident feminist counterculture and therefore had an ambivalent relationship to Virginia Woolf and towards her modernist legacy; “she partly dislikes her” (Lee 317).¹² A year before her death, Carter appeared on a Channel Four *J’accuse* programme and performed a satirical attack on *Orlando*,¹³ hence a diatribe against Virginia Woolf’s all-pervasive legacy. But Carter did not write on the basis of the criteria derived from the British realist novel; as a critic, she had read and worked on the novelist she had displaced, and was commissioned to write an opera libretto for *Orlando* in 1979, to be scored by the composer Michael Berkeley (1948-), as a kind of literary criticism on the constructed nature of gender and the notions of love and sexual hierarchy.

Virginia Woolf loved opera, a genre for which librettos have traditionally been written by *male* authors; but, discussing the novel and its central role in the female literary tradition, she stated in *A Room of One’s Own* that “women no longer write novels solely”. In “Modern Novels” (1919)¹⁴ and in “Mr Bennet and Mrs Brown” (1923)¹⁵ the modernist novelist asked them to find new modes for presenting characters and plots, to be free concerning new forms, and then claimed in *A Room of One’s Own*: “Therefore I would ask you *to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast*” (AROO 109, my italics). Hence, women’s alienation from patriarchal culture implied the possibility that women experience language differently from men, and write differently, too. The modernist woman writer imagined by Woolf (though she does not use this term) had to write a form whose sentences had “somehow to be adapted to the body” (AROO 78), a book both of realism and illusion, as in her *Orlando*.

Understanding the multiple literary possibilities relating to language and genre that Woolf's 1928 novel had prefigured, its theatrical atmosphere, the blurred boundaries of gender, and the irony on the certainties of Britishness, the renowned feminist Angela Carter gives us a playful, innovative and amusing text, of about 27 pages, not 'narrated' from the perspective of a female voice, but giving us multiple voices, departing from the traditional opera libretto structure, with its choruses and duets. In her appropriation, Carter departs from what was done before by Woolf, not as mimesis, but by opening *Orlando's* loose form to different experimentation: internal relations are undermined, mocked and re-imagined.

We know the plot before the curtain rises, as *Orlando* is a fundamental intertext in Carter's libretto, when we watch not Great Britain and Knoles as *locus* and a stable centrality of place, customs, and religious and national spirit, but the Great Bed, an ex-centrality, somehow a country historically and geopolitically foreign to the viewer. Androgyny belongs to the domain of the imaginary: in the "Prologue" of the libretto, abandoning dichotomy and starting from the philosophical roots of Plato and Aristophanes, the exploration of identity is set up: "But, before we speak of love, said Aristophanes, / we must speak of the great tragedy of our natures, / how once we were perfect and are no longer" (*EOS*, "Prologue", 155), a state which the young woman Sasha could have embodied some centuries before.¹⁶

In her unfinished text, Angela Carter tries to show these themes in a theatrical manner – she preferred a mode of writing closer to fantasy, which is not typical of English 'realist fiction': it enacts a four-act pageant beginning in 1928 in the great bedchamber at Knoles, the hall prepared for "the weary, wary" Gloriana (*EOS*, l.i. 160), who will transform the young character Orlando into her Treasurer and Steward, and, above all, into "the child of [her] heart / who will sing [her] to sleep" (*EOS*, l.i. 161).

Orlando is just a boy from a country estate stepping out from a frame of the main bedchamber at Knole, displaying the relationship between the country house, the pastoral and the history of England, and also imposing the theme of the dissipation of identity and gender, since frames and mirrors are canonical representations of the feminine, and a social creation of femininity. While giving him a ring from her finger and placing it on Orlando's index finger, where it will remain for the rest of the action, the character Elizabeth I introduces this ring as the symbol of changing time, during which Orlando's essential character will not be altered, though he changes from male to female;¹⁷ also, from the point of the narrative art, this ring reminds the viewer that time does not stand still, although the writer imitated a time, in which the plot unfolds, that seems to be in that state. Carter's text dialogues with Woolf's novels, notably with the dramatic act-structure of *Between the Acts* (1941), and also fuses with British theatrical tradition¹⁸ in the use of the Early Modern context of Shakespearean plays, that is, the tradition of a boy actor in different female roles (disguised in the plot as a girl; recognized; and then disguised as a boy again).

Orlando returns to England as a woman in the reign of Queen Anne and has great trouble with her gender body language when an Archduchess (Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorm and Scand-op-Boom in the Roumanian territory) proves to be an Archduke. But, in fact, the Archduke (just Harry) is a woman always in love with Orlando and stalking him through the centuries and sexes till finally finding him, in Georgian times, in her most perfect self, that is, as young *Lady Orlando*. The Archduchess then asks a woman to reveal herself simply as a man, to marry and love her forever, and solve the complex enigma and that strange pursuit (*EOS*, II.ii. 174). As a man, Orlando had pursued the beautiful Russian princess Sasha two centuries before. Then, as a lady of rank, she fled from fortune, the safety of marriage, and a title, as she refused to marry against her will, and to be kept in a big house with a nursery, in futile occupations.

3.1. Of gipsies lost and servants found

Her opposition to bourgeois individualism led Angela Carter to include in her opera libretto an ‘impossible’ Woolfian set of subjects, who swear and curse while working: two good and faithful servants connecting past and present and opening all doors towards the future, who are able to surprise their master’s secrets. Closer to the audience, they never change through the centuries (in Woolf’s novel, Mrs Grimsditch, the housekeeper, and Mr Dupper, the chaplain, are substituted by Widow Bartholomew and Louise) (*O* 188, 146). Two servant subjects are included in her libretto not as the poor, suffering the extremity of want and servility (whom Woolf’s Orlando grew tired of because of “the primitive manner of the people” [*O* 20]), but as the opera chorus and *genii loci* of the Knole plot: its housekeeper (Mrs Grimsditch) and the butler (Dupper). An innovation that establishes a profound gap between Woolf’s novel, as her elegy for the English aristocracy,¹⁹ and the use of two characters close to stand-up comedians, who stress the new social meaning implied by formal experiment in the libretto’s duets. Initially “standing at either end of the stage, down front, like a pair of pot dogs on either end of a mantelpiece” (*EOS*, I.i. 162), the two servants give good advice to Orlando in Jacobean times, when he is ruined and compromised by a tremendous woman, old enough to be his mother, after too much Madeira drinking, and thinks of going to a place where there shall be no temptation: Virginia, The Virgin Islands; or Turkey, where all the women are veiled. Constantinople, “where all women are locked up together” (*EOS*, II.ii. 167), seems a safe escape for a character faithful to respectable prejudices, an escape that will even earn him a Dukedom and the robes of the Garter.

The Embassy at Constantinople, an example of Britain’s global control and colonial space, is then another new beginning: there, in amazement, Orlando rises as a woman from his profound sleep after a palace coup and the night

performance that had honoured him as a British emissary (*EOS*, II.iv. 170). Another night performance, presented in the novel's and in the libretto's plot as a fabulous dream, as Orlando is still asleep, is again (an)other transgressive masquerade, where his gender, constructed by law and society ('the British Ambassador at Constantinople'), is liberated by three allegorical figures: Modesty, Chastity and Purity.

In Woolf's *Orlando*, as Ambassador he used to mingle disguised with the crowd on the Galata Bridge, an exotic spectacle where the narrator, using false universals and western women's clothing as the signifier of cultural difference, says that "the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men" (*O* 96). On the night that saw the Turks rebel against the Sultan, a deed of his marriage to a dancer was found: "father unknown but reputed a gipsy, mother unknown but reputed a seller of old iron in the market-place over against the Galata Bridge" (*O* 82-83, 83-95), a piece of information ridiculing patriarchal, colonialist western myths and social and cultural processes – being an Ambassador was not a matter of aesthetics (male clothing and gaze), but of law and social class (an imperial gaze) (*O* 83).

Which seems to indicate that not only sex, but also localization, geography, law, class and race turned out to be great problems in this quest for "the true nature of woman".

And at this point Angela Carter's libretto omits one of the most important elements concerning the representation of women of the fabulous Constantinople in Woolf's *Orlando*: the strange one-day marriage of the Ambassador to the Sublime Porte, filled with his own fantasies concerning Constantinople, to an unknown gipsy, on the very same day of the Turks' rebellion against the Sultan, a rebellion that put "every foreigner they could find, either to the sword or to the bastinado" (*O* 83), a coup mirroring the collapse of empire and British colonial ambition. This constitutes an important omission,

then, in Angela Carter’s rewriting, not only bearing in mind Carter’s egalitarian ethics and her parody of the constructed nature of gender, but also because of her full awareness of the artificiality of cultures and of cultural differences, especially in relation to the fringes, and particularly noticeable following her stay in the USA,²⁰ in Japan,²¹ and in Australia²² – a series of important steps in her radicalized sense of the foreignness of her own culture, revealed in her novels.

We have to keep in mind that somehow this particular Constantinople episode of Woolf’s did use historical and biographical evidence, as *Orlando* shows that her inspiration was the aristocrat and author to whom the work is dedicated,²³ and it also shows the real story of Woolf’s romantic liaison, from 1922 onwards, with a real woman, whose husband was a diplomat at Constantinople: Victoria Sackville-West,²⁴ the model for her protagonist. And we cannot delete the evidence that the parodic *Orlando* was inspired in part by Woolf’s desire to experiment on the novel. She wanted to experiment on the nature of fiction itself and ‘revolutionize’ biographical writing not only as a critic, but also as a writer who accommodates new ideas of human nature (cases of dual personality exist, in which feminine and masculine traits alternately preponderate) and the tension between fact and fiction (between the “granite” and the “rainbow” of life, as Woolf designates it in her review essay “The New Biography”, from 1927),²⁵ a genre which Woolf discusses critically in the essay “The Art of Biography” (1939), and in *Orlando*: “the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth” (O 41).

These two real(istic) biographical elements did not serve Carter’s opera libretto, and they are erased in her parody. Carter was mainly interested in the intersections between aesthetic and socio-cultural domains, in theatrical tradition and performativity, in the representation of self as a transitory spectacle and textual performance, and did not want to revisit Woolf’s life, but

to sail out freely from her specific biography (although Vita's family home is kept). She also erased other possible biographical elements connected with Virginia Woolf's public self-projection (cross-gender, cross-racial masquerades), of which I only give two examples. In order to experience the disentanglement of role from body and destiny from anatomy (in the long and fierce debate as to whether people are themselves or the characters whose costumes they are wearing), Woolf had been involved in two cases of cross-racial masquerade. She dressed up as a (nearly naked) Gaugin girl with her sister Vanessa for the Post-Impressionist Exhibition Ball (1910). And she blacked up as the Emperor of Abyssinia for the Dreadnought Hoax (also in 1910), deceiving the British Navy with the help of her brother Adrian Stephen. At that time she mocked the 'darkest race of the Ethiopian empire',²⁶ this enlightening experience as a coloured, bearded male person showing that the real world of white subjectivity and culture – contaminated by politics and strategies of power – was, in fact, a place of deception and many masks. Therefore, from the point of view of power relations and Englishness, Constantinople and the gipsies' flight, with Orlando as a woman married to one of them, is an important topic either in Woolf's meagre list of references to social outsiders in all her novelistic work, where they occupy a 'down-stage' position, and in her life.

When Orlando flees with the gipsies, he is not in disguise: he had become a woman; and, in her femininity as difference, "She prefer[ed] a sunset to a flock of goats" which "cropped the sandy tufts at her feet" (*O* 93, 204). Different though the sexes and races are, they intermix in social and cultural processes, this intermixing breaking the gap in cultural hegemony: the 'illiterate' gipsies did not think as Orlando did. They had social functions which regulated their lives and could not understand fluid gender roles, nor materiality, and she was not at peace with only the sky above her. Otherness was the conditioning force: where she found difference as self-making, they found female difference as

transgression. She was prepared to make new relationships with the gipsies' reality, which she had seen as a free, ancestral, wandering people, opposite to the western world; but they were not. She was 'unnatural'– 'removed from nature'. She was the Other of the Other. As an outsider, she had to sail again: "It was happy for her that she did so. Already the young men had plotted her death. Honour, they said, demanded it, for she did not think as they did" (*O* 95).

In Carter's libretto, true to her instincts, Orlando flees to England, longing for happiness and love in London, after listening to the voice of the old housekeeper, Mrs Grimsditch, who, in Carter's text, foretells that life can be owned, that her knowledge of the world and her intellectual freedom are at her will: "You've got all your life in front of you. / Pretty girl like you, why shouldn't you have some fun! / Your whole life in front of you! / Your life as a woman!" (*EOS*, III.ii. 175). Instead of Constantinople, Angela Carter stresses the importance of the eighteenth century and the Enlightenment; times when the British Empire was forged, and gender constructs appeared as definite truths in the recent Encyclopaedia. As Lady Orlando, she forces herself to accommodate to normal femininity, and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), Alexander Pope (1688-1744) and Joseph Addison (1672-1719) join her in a tea party at Knoles. Unlike Woolf's Orlando, Carter's Orlando does not care for reading, writing, or for the immortal masterpieces they pour out, but for something that brings her nearer to us, the audience: self-making, self-love, pain, suffering, the pleasures of life, and her desire(s). While listening to what they think of women (an amalgam of the Christian virtues and the concept of civilized life; chaste, scented, obedient muse and goddess), to the profound and universal, rigorous conceptions of these forefathers and their literary definitions (in fact, worthless scientifically, as their Otherness was a poetic attribute, a question of making up Our-Selves), Lady Orlando began to recognize that she was anybody but herself, and, at the same time, understood herself as (some)one outside these univocal Georgian

definitions. The masculine had always had the power to build itself; the feminine had not. It was relegated to the fringes of experience:

Orlando: (*Aside.*) What a wonderful piece of work is a woman!

How well he puts it!

Strange how I never think of myself

in this way!

Orlando: Yet, for all this brilliance, I feel such emptiness... (*EOS*, III.iii. 173)

These experienced and illuminated literary men must be right about that figure of speech, that Other with astonishing extremes of beauty whose vanities and peculiarities they poetically invoked, but *she* seems empty of self-confidence and needs action, trials and attempts to create a new kind of being, a new self, without constraints nor definitions, from discovery to discovery. Social gatherings and parties define her new identity then, till unfortunately the ballroom where she joins other women seducers to dance with Casanova, Rousseau and the Prince Regent is emptied when Lord Nelson kisses Lady Hamilton, and all the men go off in a rush to fight Boney in strange and foreign lands, leaving Orlando once more lost and alone. She will go off to the French Wars too, and be a boy again, who later goes home to Knole (a change, at this specific stage of the action, which does not exist in Woolf's plot, except for the disguise in Nell's lodging, in which (s)he could not, in fact, maintain the portrait of a seducer, although dressed as a man (*O* 135) – “Orlando was a man till the age of thirty, when he became a woman and has remained so ever since” [*O* 87]). At Knole, the wise housekeeper showed him how much easier life could be if he acted the parts of woman and put on red flannel petticoats and a crinoline cage such as Queen Victoria herself wore; so the butler finally married her (to

Marmaduke Benthrop Shelmerdine Esq.), when chance and a broken ankle finally settled her life:

Towering dark against the yellow-slashed sky of dawn, with the plovers rising and falling about him, she saw a man on horseback. He started. The horse stopped.

‘Madam,’ the man cried, leaping to the ground, ‘you’re hurt!’

‘I’m dead, sir!’ she replied.

A few minutes later, they became engaged. (O 156)

GRIMSDITCH: Oh, ma’am, I never thought I’d live to see the day!

(Enter DUPPER, in clerical gear, carrying an ostentatious prayer book).

ORLANDO: Neither did I. (EOS, IV.i. 179-180)

4. ‘Yet, for all this brilliance’²⁷

Many years later, Carter’s Orlando is seen as a woman in London in a bed-linen department of Marshall & Snelgrove’s wearing a very elegant Chanel; again another social part in 1928, when shoes, hats and suits made a woman, and each woman was bent on her own affairs in a world of decorum and sophistication generated by media. Finally in England, a ‘stable ground of reality’, she buys new linen at a store for the Knole bed that was always her own, a domestic universe where she will finally die, as a boy and woman, as “milady” and “milord” (EOS, “Epilogue”, 182); thus, she is not one genderless self, but many selves and experiences.

If Orlando always was a non-defined organism, the display of his/her life was called into question in both texts. Both forms implied the break from the old order; so, in this specific way, Angela Carter’s re-reading and her experimental re-writing of Woolf’s canonical text is a kind of continuity/continuum in the quest to express “that great problem of the true nature of woman”. The two texts offer two different ways of looking at the same idea: gender identity is the

product of display and spectacle. Both in the hypertext (Genette) and in the hipotext, identity, sexuality and gender are not fixed and stable in the way that scientific post-Enlightenment thinking had led us to believe; “woman becomes much more various and complicated” (AROO 83), *woman* does not exist, a vision of things that arises with the increasing certainty that, if we discuss the presentation of time as experienced differently by different individuals, literary texts are non-static forms that can translate one’s life and individuality not as fixed organisms or natures, but as very complex, erratic, unsystematic transformations.

Hence, we return to the first page of Woolf’s novel and its provocatively ambiguous subtitle (a biography), stating that the life of any woman who vanishes will continue to be (re)invented when expressed, but not as the truth, because the past and the memories already selected are distorted by the mind; new elements are bound to be discovered, new moments full of splendour, of daily labours, or frustrations, are to be disputed, even after the oak-tree bed disappears.

And, because of that, the nature of *woman* is a plurality that cannot be owned, either in a radical modernist chapter or in a duet of dissident feminist counterculture.

¹ We regret to have to inform readers of the decease of Professor Maria de Deus Duarte on 31st May 2014. Professor Maria de Deus Duarte was an integrated research member of CETAPS, having actively collaborated with the projects *Relational Forms* and *Anglo-Portuguese Studies*. She wrote extensively on Virginia Woolf, on the novels about the Peninsular War and on Portuguese, Canadian, English and American authors, as well as on Romanticism and Travel Writing in Translation (18th and 19th centuries). She will be greatly missed.

² Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 80. Further references are parenthetically incorporated in the text and in the notes as AROO.

³ AROO 80.

⁴ Further references are included parenthetically and in the notes as *O*.

⁵ Cf. Peach, *Angela Carter*, 7. Carter was commissioned to write the libretto for an opera based on Woolf's *Orlando* in 1979 for the Glyndebourne Opera House (the venue of the annual 'Glyndebourne Opera Festival' since 1934), and wrote two drafts; it was never presented on stage.

⁶ Carter, "Orlando: or, The Enigma of the Sexes". Further references as *EOS*.

⁷ Woolf, "Hours in a Library"; "How Should One Read a Book?". Further references are parenthetically incorporated in the text and in the notes as "HRB". See also Bowlby, *Feminist Destinations*; Peach, *Virginia Woolf*.

⁸ *O* 60.

⁹ Cf. Woolf, *A Writer's Diary*, 154-9; Bowlby, *Virginia Woolf*, 121.

¹⁰ *AROO* 79.

¹¹ Isobel Armstrong sees Virginia Woolf as a precursor in "Woolf by the Lake", 270.

¹² See also Munford and Tucker.

¹³ Michael Berkeley's obituary notice for Carter in the *Independent* in January 1992 mentioned the "hilarious meetings" between the broadcaster John Cox, Angela Carter and himself, while working on *Orlando* for this Britain' Channel Four programme. Director: Jeff Morgan; Production Company: Fulmar Television and Film; Producer: Jeff Morgan; Series Editor: Jeremy Bugler; Presenter: Tom Paulin. Contributions: Angela Carter, A.S. Byatt, and the Marxist critics Terry Eagleton and John Lucas. Shown in the *Without Walls Series*, with Caroline Blakiston as Virginia Woolf.

¹⁴ Essay in the *TLS*, 10 April 1919, substantially revised and included, under the title 'Modern Fiction', in *Common Reader*, 1st series, 1925.

¹⁵ Essay in the *New York Evening Post 'Literary Review'*, 17 November 1923.

¹⁶ Cf. Aristophanes's speech from Plato's *Symposium and the Death of Socrates*, 23: "When man's natural form was split in two, each half went round looking for its other half. They put their arms round one another, and embraced each other, in their desire to grow together again. They started dying of hunger, and also from lethargy, because they refused to do anything separately. And whenever one half died, and the other was left, the survivor began to look for another, and twined itself about it, either encountering half a complete woman (i.e. what we now call a woman) or half a complete man. In this way they kept on dying".

¹⁷ See "the vast solitary emerald which Queen Elizabeth had given her" (*O* 150).

¹⁸ In 1962-5 Carter read English at the University of Bristol, specializing in the medieval period, and knew the capacity of Early Modern drama to activate fantasy and reality, blurring the boundaries between the two.

¹⁹ See “her extraordinary tribute to the English aristocracy”. Sanders 517-518.

²⁰ 1980-81: Visiting Professor on the Writing Program at Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island. Teaches in Austin, Texas, 1985. Teaches in Iowa City, Iowa, 1986. Teaches in Albany, New York State, 1988.

²¹ She visited and then lived in Japan during 1969-72.

²² Writer in residence, University of Adelaide, 1984.

²³ See Bell xii. Cf. also Nicolson; Glendinning, *Vita: The Life of Victoria Sackville-West*; Glendinning, *Leonard Woolf*.

²⁴ Sir Harold Nicolson (1886-1968), was Third Secretary at Constantinople from January 1912 to October 1914. Their marriage is drawn by Vita herself in an autobiography left behind at her death in 1962.

²⁵ Cf. Woolf, *Granite and Rainbow*.

²⁶ Because of their African slaves, the Abyssinian had Caucasian countenance but very dark skin; the Arabic word ‘Habesh’ meaning the melting of races and families in that specific part of the land.

²⁷ *EOS*, III.iii. 173.

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