

# “Gender Fiction”: Critiquing Performativity and Queerness in *Orlando*

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This paper initially uses Judith Halberstam’s notion of “gender fiction”—which typically “indicates the futility of stretching terms like *lesbian* or *gay* or *straight* or *male* or *female* across vast fields of experience, behavior, and self-understanding” (Halberstam 1994, 210)—as a framework for analysing Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*. In doing this, I examine two ways that Woolf can be read as engaging with notions of gender performativity as a means of “queering” the text. That is, by mocking “gender” as a scripted identity, Woolf also mocks, by extension, the heterosexuality these stereotypes enforce. Of course, by deconstructing the normativity of these identity scripts, Woolf implicitly constructs a non-normative narrative space that allows for the representation of non-heterosexual, or “queer,” desire. By rejecting stylised gender identities (achieved largely through her extravagant engagement with early “sexual inversion” theories), Woolf instead asserts a “sexual identity [which] is always fluid, evanescent and subject to change” (Joannou 1995, 118); a sexual identity which is, largely, “queer.”

My aim in this paper is to examine two ways that Virginia Woolf, in *Orlando*, can be read as engaging with notions of gender performativity as a means of “queering”<sup>1</sup> the text. “Queer,” for the purposes of this paper, will follow Alexander Doty’s definition, and refer to “a range of nonstraight expression . . . [which] includes specifically . . . lesbian, and bisexual expressions; but . . . also includes all other potential (and potentially unclassifiable) non-straight positions” (1993, xvi). To this end, “queering the text” will refer to any method and/or effect that can be read as subverting or “queering” hetero-normative assumptions.

I argue that Woolf can be read as “queering” *Orlando* through her critique, and parody, of early twentieth-century “sexual inversion” models of homosexuality. To highlight this, I briefly detail “sexual inversion” theories, before focusing on Orlando and the Archduke Harry in relation to the exhibition of opposite-sex character traits, and the different uses of cross-dressing. While such a focused analysis may seem problematic, I consider this the

most appropriate method to facilitate an analysis of suitable depth in an article of this length. In doing this, I will also briefly highlight Woolf's "queering" of *Orlando* as a literary example of what Judith Halberstam terms "gender fiction." Halberstam's notion of "gender fiction" will be useful inasmuch as it will function to contextualise the main effects of reading Woolf's critique of gender performativity as a means of "queering" the text. "Gender fiction," according to Halberstam,

breaks with a homo-hetero sexual binary and remakes gender as not simply performance but also as fiction. . . . The end of identity in this gender fiction . . . indicates the futility of stretching terms like *lesbian* or *gay* or *straight* or *male* or *female* across vast fields of experience, behavior, and self-understanding. (1994, 210)

Consequently, I will argue that in *Orlando* Woolf highlights both gender and sexuality "as styles rather than life-styles, as fictions rather than facts of life, and as potentialities rather than as fixed identities" (Halberstam 1994, 211). The effect of this, according to Judith Butler, is that such representations of gender render the category of "identity," "in whatever form, permanently problematic" (1990, 128).

Significantly, the emergence of "homosexuality" as a social identity is widely held as a relatively recent phenomenon. That is, towards the end of the nineteenth century a number of discourses—initially dominated by medical discourses—began assigning a social and political identity to individuals on the basis of their (often only assumed) sexuality, for as Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues,

[what] was new from the turn of the century was the world-mapping by which every given person, just as he or she was necessarily assignable to a male or female gender, was now considered necessarily assignable as well to a homo- or a heterosexuality, a binarized identity that was full of implications, however confusing, for even the ostensibly least sexual aspects of personal existence. (1990, 2)

Indeed, as Foucault argues, "homosexuality is necessarily a modern formation because, while there were previously same-sex sex acts, there was no corresponding category of identification" (cited in Jagose 1998, 10). This advent of "homosexual" social categorisation—of a "type of person" (Jagose 1998, 2), rather than a type of sexual activity—can be read as a result, at least in part, of its increasing prevalence in emerging medical disciplines. Most notably, the early twentieth century saw the emerging discipline of sexology—undoubtedly the leading intellectual discourse on homosexuality of the period—attempt to categorise "congenital homosexuality" as "sexual inversion."

Sexual inversion was a theory explored and popularised most famously by Havelock Ellis in the late nineteenth century, in his seminal work *Sexual Inversion* (Weeks 1977, 57, 59). Sexual inversion, or "trapped soul

theory,” describes homosexuality as a congenital or “fixed condition” (Ellis 1948, 190), where the “soul” (or non-physical attributes) of one sex are trapped in the body of the opposite sex. Jeffrey Weeks (1977, 61) suggests that Ellis’s aim in publishing *Sexual Inversion* was “to present a case for homosexuality.” One of the main ways Ellis attempted to present this “case” was to provide a theoretical justification for homosexuality that he hoped would ripple over into social acceptance, or at least sympathy.

The main way Ellis did this was by defining sexual inversion as a congenital condition—very like a physical disability, accepted as an error of nature or “creation”—akin to “biological determinism as applied to essential sexual characteristics” (Weeks 1977, 61). Barbara Fassler suggests that congenital theories of sexual inversion typically argued that homosexuality is caused by the embryo’s development of its “emotional and nervous regions” . . . along a masculine line, while the outer body develops along a feminine line and vice versa” (1979, 241). The hope was that by presenting sexual inversion as congenital, moral blame would be removed from the homosexual who was presented as having no choice in their sexual “deviance,” and who was, rather, simply a product of their genes (Fassler 1979, 241). In this sense, Ellis’s work was consciously aimed at normalising homosexuality by presenting it as a “natural” biological occurrence deserving of “pity rather than persecution” (Jagose 1998, 27). Woolf herself was familiar with Ellis’s theories, for

Ellis was being read and discussed in Lytton Strachey’s circle, including Virginia and Vanessa Woolf . . . [many] of whom, since 1908, had known of, and freely talked about, the homosexuality of Lytton and other Bloomsbury members. Virginia and Leonard Woolf’s library contained a number of Ellis’s works. (Fassler 1979, 240)

Moreover, symptomatic of sexual inversion was the supposed exhibition of opposite-sex characteristics (Fassler 1979, 242; Henry in Foster 1956, preface). For example, a homosexual man would be assumed to exhibit “feminine” qualities, like heightened sensitivity, or sexual passivity and/or disinterest; a homosexual woman, on the other hand, would be expected to exhibit “masculine” characteristics, like aggression or physical ability, for as Ellis suggests,

[in] male inverts there is a frequent tendency to approximate to the feminine type, and in female inverts to the masculine type; this occurs both in physical and in psychic respects, and though it may be traced in a considerable number of respects, it is by no means always obtrusive . . . Among female inverts, there is usually some approximation to the masculine attitude and temperament. (1948, 199)

In this sense, by regarding opposite-sex character traits as indicative of sexual inversion—as a unique combination, whether physical or “psychic,” of “male” and “female” characteristics in the one person—sexual inversion can be read, in many respects, as closely akin to androgyny. This is a long-

acknowledged parallel, for as Ellis notes, "Ulrichs, so long ago as 1862, declared that inversion is 'a species of hermaphroditism'" (1948, 197).

From this perspective, it becomes possible to read fictional representations of androgyny and/or sexual inversion as conscious counter-discursive attempts to implicitly assert homosexuality in an otherwise homophobic social environment (Hamer 1996, 96). As Fassler insists, "[in] the context of such theories about homosexuality, the scholar must recognise that . . . novelists undoubtedly understood that opposite-sex character traits would almost inevitably carry intimations of homosexuality" (1979, 243).

In *Orlando*, Woolf initially uses "sexual inversion" to associate Orlando's androgyny—noted by numerous critics<sup>2</sup>—with homosexuality. This is most apparent when, as a young man—an age, and gender, associated with aggressive virility—Orlando is sexually passive with the Queen. The Queen, herself significantly androgynous ("male" sexual aggression and experience, in a "female" body, for example), sexually advances upon Orlando:

At the height of her triumph when the guns were booming at the Tower and the air was thick enough with gunpowder to make one sneeze . . . she pulled [Orlando] down among the cushions where her women had laid her . . . and made him bury his face in . . . her dress . . . He rose, half suffocated from the embrace. "This," she breathed, "is my victory!"—even as a rocket roared up and dyed her cheeks scarlet. (Woolf 1993, 11)

This scene is clearly rife with, at the very least, sexually ambiguous imagery. While this scene is significant for a number of reasons—for example, the Queen situated amidst a community of women, the parodic construction of the Queen as a "queen," or the Queen as an androgynous icon—I am most interested, however, with the consistent construction of Orlando as "feminine" in his sexual passivity. Indeed, both the images of war—and if the war is a suggestion of England's war against the Spanish Armada, then there is also the implication of near-victory for the English Queen—and the rocket that "dyes her cheeks scarlet" (implying sexual arousal), serve to highlight Orlando's sexual and physical passivity. That Orlando's face is "half suffocated" in the Queen's skirts also suggests, albeit indirectly, the practice of oral sex. The implication of oral sex is particularly significant, for it situates Orlando in a powerless position where his primary role is to sexually satisfy the Queen, which significantly inverts the conventional "sexually dominant male" over "sexually passive female" binary. Against such sexual innuendoes, Orlando's only response is to, almost meekly, remove his face from the Queen's skirts, which connotes a particularly inexperienced and "feminine" reply to the Queen's "masculine" sexual advances. This is enforced when, as her cheeks are "dyed scarlet," the Queen claims Orlando as her "victory"; her sexual conquest. In this scene then, Orlando's exhibition of "opposite-sex" characteristics, can be read as a distinct method of hinting at his sexual inversion.

Indeed, "sexual inversion" was a useful means of "safely" hinting at

Orlando's homosexuality in an environment hostile to positive representation.<sup>3</sup> After using "sexual inversion" to allude to Orlando's homosexuality, however, Woolf radically subverts inversion theories by parodying their inherent limitations in accounting for same-sex desire, for—paradoxically—Ellis always assumed the inverted-sex/trapped-soul to be "heterosexual" (Fassler 1979, 242). Woolf achieves this by using Orlando's sex change as an extravagant "liberation" (Marder in Joannou 1995, 113) of Orlando's trapped "female" soul, flagged through his "feminine" character traits as a boy and young man (Woolf 1993, 6, 11). By repeatedly asserting the sex change to be purely *physical*—"Orlando had become a woman . . . [but] in every other respect . . . remained precisely as he had been" (87)—readers are left to assume that Orlando retained his/her "female" soul, which had simply been "liberated" to flourish physically. Orlando's resplendent, and highly subversive, sex change thus exceeds traditional parameters of "sexual inversion" for, by presenting Orlando—post-sex-change—as a woman with a "female" soul, who continues to sexually desire women (103), Woolf renders "sexual inversion" incapable of accounting for Orlando's *non*-inverted same-sex desire.

Another interesting use of sexual inversion is its concurrent association with cross-dressing for, as Fassler (1979, 243) considers it, "[the] link to transvestite dress is obvious, and, indeed, transvestism was, to the theorists, a common mark of homosexuality." In *Orlando*, cross-dressing (a phrase which problematically implies a binarised demarcation between "male" and "female" clothing; as mutually exclusive possibilities), functions both as an extravagant parody of gender performativity and as a disruption to conventional heterosexual romance. The Archduchess, for example, who initially courted Orlando (then a man) so obsessively that Orlando "fled all the way to Turkey to avoid her seductions" (Woolf 1993, 114), re-visits Orlando (who is now female). As a woman, however—no longer presenting the "threat" of heterosexual romance—Orlando is happy to see the Archduchess, and indeed was

overcome with merriment. For it was a familiar shadow . . . the shadow of no less a personage than the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster Aarhorn and Scand-op-Boom in the Roumanian territory . . . Not a hair of her head was changed. . . . At the thought that she had fled all the way to Turkey to avoid her seductions (now become excessively flat), Orlando laughed aloud. . . . After . . . a certain time, there was nothing for it but to ask her in, and soon the two ladies were exchanging compliments. (114)

Clearly, the removal of the heterosexual romance plot has relaxed Orlando, who now appears genuinely pleased to see the Archduchess. After turning to pour some wine, however, Orlando turns to find a man standing amidst a heap of clothes, only to realise that the "Archduchess" is a cross-dressing "Archduke" (Woolf 1993, 114). In part, this discovery functions as a parody

of the performativity of gender stereotypes. That is, the couple's polarised reactions to each other—before, and after, the discovery of the Archduke's cross-dressing—"make a point about the hypocrisy which sexual polarization imposes" (Transue 1986, 122). Indeed, Orlando moves from enjoying the Archduchess's company to, on discovering "her" to be a "him," being "[recalled] . . . suddenly to a consciousness of her sex . . . In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse" (Woolf 1993, 114–115). By focusing on the "acted" roles of "man" and "woman," Woolf reveals gender, as Butler may have predicted, as

repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being . . . The reason "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender" is that identity is performatively constituted by the very "expressions" that are said to be its results. (cited in Jagose 1998, 84)

Moreover, Woolf not only mocks "gender" as a scripted identity but, by extension, the heterosexuality these stereotypes enforce. Indeed, "[heterosexuality] is naturalised by the performative repetition of normative gender identities" (Jagose 1998, 85). Thus, by parodying heterosexual romance—to the extent that the Archduke and Orlando's abortive courting process occurs over a game of dead flies, sugar cubes and a toad (Woolf 1993, 116–118)—Woolf deconstructs the dominant hetero-romantic narrative, and implicitly constructs space for the representation of non-heterosexual desire. That is, by rejecting stylised gender identities, Woolf "queers" *Orlando* by asserting an identity that "is always fluid, evanescent and subject to change" (Joannou 1995, 118).

Thus, Woolf's use of the "sexual invert" facilitated a construction of a "queer" identity that far exceeded both the limited parameters of "sexual inversion" and the normative heterosexuality it was based upon. That is, Orlando's sex change functioned as an extravagant parody of "sexual inversion" by connoting a dramatic "liberation" of Orlando's "inverted" soul. Woolf further transgressed "sexual inversion" for, as a (physical and mental) woman, Orlando continued to desire Sasha, again exceeding the parameters of inversion theories which fail to account for legitimate same-sex desire. Similarly, the Archduke's cross-dressing functioned as a parody of the performativity of gender which, in essence, highlights Woolf's more general parody of the institutionalisation of identity.

Clearly, Woolf's critique and subversive parody of gender performativity disrupts the hetero-assumption of normative gender identities and, in so doing, "queers" *Orlando* by asserting more fluid identity potentialities. In this way, as Halberstam might argue, *Orlando* can also be read as a literary example of "gender fiction." As Stephen Barber notes,

[the] task of problematizing the concept of "gay self" is crucial to

Woolf's queer aesthetic, since sexual identification and assignment (through processes of normalization) are at once consequences and functions of the government of individualization that continues to "trap us in our own history." (in Sedgwick 1990, 402)

In conclusion, I have situated the "queering" of *Orlando* as, at least partially, a culmination of Woolf's critique and varying parodies of gender performativity, achieved in part through her satirical engagement with "sexual inversion" theories. In parodying these models of homosexual identity, of course, Woolf "permanently [problematized]" (Butler 1990, 128) not only any fixed notion of *sexuality* or *gender* but also, by extension, any fixed notion of identity more generally. In doing so, as Halberstam may have predicted, Woolf's "gender fiction" highlighted "the futility of stretching terms like *lesbian* or . . . *male* or *female* across vast fields of experience, behavior, and self-understanding" (1994, 210). That is, in "queering" *Orlando*, Woolf exposed the artificiality and performativity of gender and sexuality; or, as Halberstam would have it, Woolf highlighted gender and sexuality as another type of fiction: "gender fiction."

## NOTES

- 1 Throughout this paper, it may initially appear as though I have used "queerness" and "homosexuality" almost interchangeably. My use of these terms is further complicated by issues of historical context, inasmuch as while "homosexuality" was a term used during Woolf's life, "queer" was not (certainly not in any form that may parallel contemporary understandings of "queerness"). For this reason, it is necessary for me to stipulate the parameters of use of these terms. Further to my definitions on the first page of this article, "[queer]" texts/textual elements, then, are those discussed with reference to a range or a network of nonstraight ideas. The queerness in these cases might combine the lesbian, the gay, and the bisexual, or it might be a textual queerness not accurately described even by a combination of these labels. (Doty 1993, xviii)  
In this way, my use of "queer" may overlap with my use of "homosexuality." This is perhaps inevitable given the flexibility of "queer." "Homosexuality," on the other hand, will be used more specifically, and will refer to "same-sex" desire *within the context* of early twentieth century British (primarily medical) discourses. In this way, throughout this paper  
rhetorical shifts between queer/queerness and [homosexual/homosexuality] . . . are less signs of contradiction than they are attempts to mediate between the impulse to deconstruct established sexual and gender categories and the feeling that these categories need to be considered because they represent important cultural[, historical] and political positions. (Doty 1993, xvi)
- 2 See, for example, Kaplan (1975, 100), King (1994, 408) and Curti (1998, 87).
- 3 The tensely homophobic environment Woolf wrote within became most apparent when in 1928, only months before the publication of *Orlando*, Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*—an explicit and sympathetic depiction of lesbi-

anism—was prosecuted within a matter of days of being published, “on the grounds of obscenity. The very nature of the book was judged obscene because it argued for the naturalness of homosexuality and hence for tolerance of homosexuals” (Hamer 1996, 96).

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