Published in 1928, Orlando was, as Leonard Woolf called it, the turning point in Virginia Woolf's career as a successful novelist. To the Lighthouse had sold 3,873 copies in its first year; in its first six months, Orlando sold 8,104 copies, earning enthusiastic letters and praise. Money worries were over, and when Woolf went that same year to Cambridge to lecture at Newnham and Girton, there was "an atmosphere of triumph . . . [and] ovation."1 Orlando's protagonist is a young poet with shapely legs and a handsome body, a transgressive figure who remains amazingly youthful—sixteen on the first page and thirty-six on the last—lives through four centuries and experiences a sex change halfway through the narrative. In her Diary, Woolf wrote that she wanted Orlando to be "truthful; but fantastic," and the tone "has to be half laughing, half serious: with great splashes of exaggeration."2 While fantastic it is, critics usually read the novel as biography or view it as a love letter. However, lifting Orlando out of the particulars of Woolf's life—refusing to talk about it in those terms—allows other aspects of this versatile and contraband text to materialize, revealing Orlando's revolutionary view of gender, identity, and the body and the way in which critical response has tended to quell the rebellion. Initially for the part of Orlando, Woolf imagined a character who somewhat resembled Lucy Snowe in Charlotte Brontë's novel Villette. Woolf wrote in her diary:

I sketched the possibilities which an unattractive woman, penniless, alone, might yet bring into being. I began imagining the position—how she would stop a motor on the Dover road, & so get to Dover: cross the channel &c. It struck me, vaguely, that I might write a Defoe narrative for fun.3

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3 Woolf, A Writer's Diary, p. 131.
But Woolf abandoned these initial plans, choosing instead to confer on Orlando beauty, charm, aristocratic lineage, and hereditary wealth. And to make certain that, in contrast to Lucy Snowe, her protagonist had every advantage, Woolf allowed Orlando to inhabit the first hundred pages of the narrative as an attractive “boy/man,” with all the privileges those words entail. By eliminating the potential problems caused by lack of status, wealth and beauty, Woolf could focus all the more sharply on issues of gender.

Orlando’s first sentence begins, “He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it . . . .” Calling the reader’s attention immediately to gender, Woolf seems to protest too much, creating the very doubt that her words would deny. As J.J. Wilson notes, in the first word Woolf says “just what she does not want us to think.” Judy Little writes that the narrative’s “first word announces a masculine subject,” yet the male subject “is immediately and comically dismantled by the interruptive qualifications. . . . The first sentence is what every sentence in the book is about and what every sentence continues to produce and unproduce in rhetorical play” (p. 183). Even when external dress clearly signifies “man” or “woman,” the text delights in erotic confusion regarding what “body” is under the garment, how that “body” has come to be, and how it performs. Wild women at Wapping Old Stairs perch on Orlando’s knee and fling their arms round his neck, “guessing that something out of the common lay hid beneath his duffel cloak” and “as eager to come at the truth of the matter as Orlando himself” (p. 29).

After serving as treasurer to Queen Elizabeth and as British ambassador to Constantinople, and almost midway through the story, Orlando wakes up “a woman” and remains one, more or less, to the end. While the reader may be startled or amused, Orlando remains uninterested in her sex until she decides to sail from Turkey to England and so must dress as a “lady.” She has been living with the gypsies and wearing Turkish trousers, and Gypsy women, “except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men” (p. 153). The narrator comments that it “is a strange fact, but a true one that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought.”

These words—“had scarcely given her sex a thought”—indicate a significant difference between Orlando and the transsexuals and transvestites whom Marjorie Garber describes in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety: they are “more concerned with maleness and femaleness than persons who are neither transvestite nor transsexual. They are emphatically not interested in ‘unisex’ or ‘androgyny’ as erotic styles, but rather in gender-marked and gender-coded identity structures” (p. 110). In contrast, Orlando disdains the loss or partialness implicit in a singular gender identity; she refuses the anxious need clearly to define. S/he never feels or suggests “a woman trapped in a man’s body” or “a man trapped in the body of a woman.” Orlando codes his dress according to practicality or sexual desire.

Clipping the trees, he wears breeches, and desiring the love of a woman, he wears the suit

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of a nobleman. In order to sail for England, Orlando, as a man—changed—into—a—woman who has been wearing Turkish trousers, must dress like a “lady.” In this triple configuration, the “lady” signifies woman as an artifact designed from an assembly of parts. According to the text, Orlando changes to “a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank that she now sat on the deck of the Enamoured Lady” (p. 153). Such an outfit might include a walking dress with corset and under-skirt edged with ribbon, a linen vest with collar, short jacket belted with a sash, hat with feathers, and parasol and kid gloves. Not only does Orlando feel constrained, but because being “female” and “woman” are contingent and relational performances, men now treat her in radically different ways.

The captain of the ship offers “with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck” and at dinner asks, “‘A little of the fat, Ma’am? . . . Let me cut you just the tiniest little slice the size of your finger nail’” (pp. 153, 155). Orlando remembers

how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. “Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires . . . for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain those graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline. . . . Heavens!” she thought, “what fools they make of us—what fools we are!” (pp. 156–58)

The voyage from Turkey allows for an extended satirical treatment of the dress and performance of being female, but upon arrival in England, dress pales in relation to the power of the law to determine identity.

In England, Orlando faces three major legal charges: that she is dead, that she is a woman, “which amounts to much the same thing,” and that she is an English Duke who has married a dancer and has three sons. Thus, “it was in a highly ambiguous condition, uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her country seat” (p. 168). The law’s deferral provides Orlando with the liberty to continue to experiment with a variety of costumes and roles, and she occupies numerous gender zones through the course of each day. Each role implies an instance of cross-dressing except that no one role presumes to be the true Orlando, the original ground from which she crosses over.

At no other time in the narrative is there so much play and destabilization as during this juridical uncertainty. Knowing both gender codes, Orlando’s sex

changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. From the probity of breeches she turned to the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (p. 221)

In the morning, dressed in a China robe of ambiguous gender, she reads her books; in the afternoon, in knee breeches, she clips the nut trees; in the late afternoon, in a flowered taffeta,
she is off for a drive to Richmond and a proposal of marriage from some great nobleman; then, in a snuff-colored gown like a lawyer’s, she visits the courts to hear how her case is doing; and at night, “more often than not,” she walks the streets in the black velvet suit of a nobleman (p. 221). Throughout Orlando, dress is a persistent theme, different clothes addressing different desires and sexual relations. Gender becomes a cultural performance shown to be historically, even geographically, contingent and in the service of the regulatory systems of reproduction and compulsory heterosexuality. Anticipating Judith Butler’s claim that gender identity is a stylized repetition of acts through time, the novel demonstrates possibilities for gender transformation in the arbitrary relation of these acts and in their parodic repetitions.\(^8\)

One evening, Orlando meets the prostitute Nell, and to “feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm” rouses all the feelings that become a man (pp. 216–17). Perceiving that Nell’s timidity, hesitation, and fumbling are all put on to “gratify her masculinity,” Orlando looks, feels, and talks like a man. Still, this meeting between Orlando and Nell represents only a slightly exaggerated version of ordinary relations between men and women. Different types of clothing signal masculinity or femininity and set in motion personal relations of control and submission. When Orlando tells Nell that she is a woman, Nell’s manner changes quickly, and she drops her “plaintive, appealing ways” (p. 218).

Orlando’s gaming way with clothes, sex, and love repeats itself in other characters such as Harriet/Harry and Sasha. The Archduchess Harriet, six feet high and resembling “nothing so much as a hare,” passionately pursues Orlando the man. When Orlando returns from Turkey a woman, the Archduchess Harriet reappears, and in the few seconds it takes Orlando to turn to the cupboard and back again, Harriet becomes a man while a “heap of clothes lay in the fender.” Alone with a man and “Recalled thus suddenly to a consciousness of her sex, which she had [once again] completely forgotten,” Orlando feels faint. The Archduke kisses her hand as Orlando sips wine; in short, “they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse” (pp. 178–79). When Orlando wants something—to sail for England, for example, or the love of a woman, or to be able to write—she plays the parts of “man” or “woman” well, knowing how to make her body legible in either language. Still, at other times “in the robe of ambiguous gender” she appears outside and forgetful of these roles.

When first introduced, Sasha’s extraordinary seductive figure, “whether boy’s or woman’s, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex,” fills Orlando with the “highest curiosity” (p. 37). As in the case of the Archduke’s initial attraction to Orlando as a man, the text marks seductiveness as independent of gender; it seems to be the very uncertainty that characters find so seductive. Orlando calls Sasha an olive tree, an emerald, and a fox, metaphors conveying elusiveness and carrying no signs of one gender or the other. When “the boy, for alas, a boy it must be—no woman could skate with such speed and vigour, swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question.” Yet, upon closer examination, “Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that . . . . She was not a handsbreadth off. She was a woman” (p. 38). These several and

\(^8\) Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (Routledge, 1990), p. 141.
sudden shifts create an uncertainty about Sasha that persists as “there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed” (p. 47). Gender trouble is contagious in Orlando, a playful trouble that questions the possibility, the need, or the advantage of any stable notion of identity.

In terms of both her pleasure and the law, Orlando’s sex is still in dispute well into the nineteenth century when, in contrast to her own situation, she observes all round her the necessity for heterosexual coupling in which people are

somehow stuck together, couple after couple. . . .It did not seem to be Nature. . . .

There was no indissoluble alliance among the brutes that she could see. Could it be Queen Victoria then, or Lord Melbourne? Was it from them that the great discovery of marriage proceeded? Yet the Queen, she pondered, was said to be fond of dogs, and Lord Melbourne, she had heard, was said to be fond of women. It was strange—it was distasteful; indeed, there was something in this indissolubility of bodies which was repugnant to her sense of decency and sanitation. (p. 242)

Historicizing the institution of marriage and condemning it as indecent, Orlando can, for a time, pretend that nothing has changed, “that the climate was the same; that one could still say what one liked and wear knee-breeches or skirts as the fancy took one” (p. 231). In the nineteenth century, nevertheless, matters have changed. With her sex still in dispute, without a husband and pregnant, Orlando’s naked finger is so “afflicted” that she cannot write. The spirit of the Victorian Age demands that one wear a wedding ring, and there “was nothing for it but to buy one of those ugly bands and wear it like the rest” (p. 243).

In the midst of all the irreverence and fluidity, Orlando’s writing sustains the narrative’s one constant fact. Woolf regularly returns to the importance of reading and especially writing—to Orlando’s need to write: “The taste for books was an early one. As a child he was sometimes found at midnight by a page still reading. They took his taper away, and he bred glow-worms to serve his purpose. They took the glow-worms away, and he almost burnt the house down with a tinder” (p. 73). He reads voraciously and writes “twenty tragedies and a dozen histories and a score of sonnets” by the time he is eighteen (p. 24). “Never had any boy begged apples as Orlando begged paper; nor sweet meats as he begged ink” (p. 76); and at twenty—five he has written “some forty—seven plays, histories, romances, poems; some in prose, some in verse; some in French, some in Italian” (p. 77). In the nineteenth century in order to continue writing, Orlando must submit and “consider the most desperate of remedies . . . and take a husband” (p. 243). The crinoline which she buys feels

heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves and straw. . . . The thin shoes were quickly soaked and mudcaked. Her muscles had lost their pliancy. (pp. 244–45)

The clothing not only impedes movement but alters the pliancy of the muscles—that is, alters the physical body.
Living as a Victorian woman, Orlando begins to feel her solitude as loneliness, and rather than “thrusting the gate open, she tapped with a gloved hand for the porter to unfasten it for her” (p. 247). Rather than striding through the park, she becomes fearful and apprehensive lest some animal or man attack her. Thus, the socio-cultural climate shapes her body, dress, and personality as well. In wearing the Victorian costume, in marrying, Orlando performs a deep obeisance to the spirit of the age, and “she heaved a deep sigh of relief, as, indeed, well she might, for the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy . . . . Now, therefore, she could write, and write she did. She wrote. She wrote. She wrote” (p. 266).

However, even after Orlando meets her husband, Shelmerdine, gender trouble persists and prospers. “[A]n awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously. ‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ . . . ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’” (p. 252). And is Orlando really married? If her husband is always sailing around the Horn in the teeth of a gale, and if she likes him but also likes others, if what she wants “more than anything in the whole world [is] to write poetry, [i]s it marriage? She had her doubts” (p. 264). Under all the signs of conformity—a legal pronouncement, a wedding ring, a crinoline—Orlando feels something else, something “highly contraband” that if clearly visible would cause her to “pay the full fine. She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth” (pp. 265–66). In comparison to romance plots, the events leading to Orlando’s marriage—she becomes pregnant before she meets Shel; she marries in order to write; she considers it the most desperate of remedies—are highly irregular. When Orlando turns into Hyde Park, several park keepers look at her with suspicion and are “only brought to a favourable opinion of her sanity by noticing the pearl necklace which she wore” (p. 284). Like the marriage certificate and ring, the pearl necklace functions as a sign of respectability, capable of overcoming other threatening signs and transforming suspicion and distrust into acceptance.

In the critical conversations surrounding Orlando, there is a tendency toward what Garber calls an “underestimation of the object,” “a tendency to erase the third term, to appropriate the cross-dresser ‘as’ one of two sexes.” Garber herself is guilty of this underestimation, this tendency in relation to Orlando. In her brief treatment, she writes, “Whatever Orlando is, her clothing reflects it: the crossing between male and female may be a mixture (a synthesis), but it is not a confusion, a transgression. The inside always corresponds to the outside” (p. 135). Garber bases her interpretation on the comment: “Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and a woman’s sex” (p. 188). However, the text immediately corrects this simplistic view:

For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, which underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. Of the complications and confusions which thus result every one has had experience. . . . (p. 189)
In the same passage, we read: "there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (p. 188). Clearly, this entire passage represents conflicting points of view, and our experience of "complications and confusions" is the point. In discussing this "famous androgynous statement," Pamela L. Caughie writes that it is often taken out of context and cited as unambiguous truth: "The androgynous Orlando is appropriated as a symbol of the more unified self, or as a resolution to the problem of true self and conventional self. 'Androgynous wholeness' is the phrase Sandra Gilbert uses." Caughie argues instead that in the midst of the text's violent shifts in viewpoint, Woolf's androgynous statement is "a way to remain suspended between opposed beliefs," that Orlando questions not only conventional assumptions regarding sexuality but also conventional assumptions about language itself, challenging the reference theory of meaning. Clothing, identity, and rhetoric are not "an ornamentation of something prior, but an orientation to something else. What matters is not what they mask or mark, but what they enable the protagonist or the writer to accomplish."12 Herein lies the principal difference between Garber's psychoanalytic focus on absence and lack and Woolf's emphasis in Orlando on transvestism as subversive repetition, a practice and performance of rich possibilities and satisfied desires. Orlando does offer a critique of binary sex and gender distinctions, calling into question the whole notion of "inside"—core identity—essentialism, and

it is not because it simply makes such distinctions reversible but because it denaturalizes . . . signs. When a homosexual relation seems to trope off a heterosexual relation, what is revealed is that the signs by which heterosexuality had encoded and recognized itself have been detached from a referent with which those signs are thereby revealed to have had a conventional rather than natural connection.13

Cross-dressed as a nobleman, Orlando courts Nell the prostitute, and their relation mimics—"tropes off" in Garber's words—the heterosexual relation between the Captain of the Enamoured Lady and Orlando dressed as a lady. Orlando uses identity as a practice and performance, disrupting not only the categories of male and female, but the concept of category itself.14

Orlando, as Makiko Minow-Pinkney claims, is perhaps the most neglected of Woolf's novels.15 Frequently, when Orlando does receive critical attention, it is reduced to therapy, a "love letter" or a tribute to Vita Sackville-West. Like pearls and marriage certificates, signs such as "therapy," "love letter," and "tribute" can be read conventionally and "understood." Jean O. Love writes that whereas To the Lighthouse transcends particulars, Orlando is not quite able to do so: "In fact, it cannot be completely understood outside the context of her

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12 Caughie, p. 46.
13 Garber, p. 147.
14 Garber, p. 17.
friendship with Vita Sackville-West... It is best read, I think, as her ultimate comment on Vita and as her means of gaining perspective and detachment in order to continue their friendship on a different basis.16 Quentin Bell writes that Orlando "is interesting biographically, partly because it commemorates Virginia's love for Vita, and partly because we can trace so many of its elements to the incidents of Virginia's daily life in those years," and Bell comments, "I think that she saw well enough that Orlando was not 'important' among her works..."17 Nigel Nicolson calls Orlando "the longest and most charming love letter in literature," and this reduction appears on the book's cover, creating expectations in the reader.18 Mitchell A. Leaska explains his omission of Orlando from The Novels of Virginia Woolf by noting: "to have included a discussion of that brilliant but incongruous piece of phantasy between these covers would have been tantamount to committing a violation of literary kinship."19 Recognizing these common pitfalls in reading Orlando, J. J. Wilson writes that it is too easily dismissed as a jeu d'esprit or is taken too seriously, and she warns the reader to remain alert to Orlando's "subversive motives."20

While I do not mean to diminish the importance of Vita Sackville-West in Woolf's life or writing, the omission of Orlando from critical discussions because it is presumed to be a "biography"—or its reduction to an escapade or "love letter" works to silence this radical text. If the point of Orlando is reduced to the author's attempts at self-help or her relation to Vita, its subversion becomes a subversion of little social and political importance. This single-minded attention to two people rather than to the legal and political construction of the body dismisses or reduces to a ghostly presence Orlando's radical sexual transgressions wherein "the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied" (p. 221).

Elizabeth Meese celebrates Orlando as a lesbian "love affair of the letter": "Virginia sees, first and foremost, a lesbian, and invests in Vita, through the character of Orlando, the history of women 'like' her..."21 To mark and own the text in this way would be an exclusionary move, curtailing the text and denying access to others, to the non-lesbian, homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. Sherron E. Knopp comments, "Orlando is obviously not about the sapphic love of Vita and Virginia, even in a disguised way. The hero/heroine loves men and women over the course of four hundred years, but no one of these is the subject."22 One way to reinscribe a text into dominant culture is to rewrite it in critical conversations by reducing it to particulars, to the personal and romantic, to biography or therapy, to a certain gender ontology, for example. I argue that to contain or restrict a radical text such as Orlando is to discount its effect and prevent it from influencing and altering other texts and other discourses.

Rachel Blau DuPlessis writes about Orlando and Shel that "Androgynous characters cannot be assigned stable places in hierarchies of gender status, nor do they even adhere to physical

17 Bell, pp. 132, 138.
20 Wilson, p. 177.
norms: Shel is both dainty and brawny, for example.” Caughie writes that *Orlando* expresses “the difficulty of reaching conclusions about identity or language,” but Caughie, like DuPlessis, retains the word “androgyny,” defining it as “a refusal to choose.” Yet, the rest of this sentence probably reads: “a refusal to choose between male and female.” Caughie writes that “One must assume a sexual identity in order to take one’s place in language, in order to express anything. Sexual identity is assumed in language.” Perhaps sexual identity is assumed in language as known, but a language is not universal or unchanging. Caughie’s point could just as well be a question: how do we alter language and the other ways we make ourselves legible, like dress, to transform identity politics into a practice and performance?

“Androgyny” presupposes male and female: in the word’s definition—“having the characteristics or nature of both male and female”—“androgyny” continues to hold fast to and maintain the very binary system it would seem to escape. In the writing of Meese, DuPlessis, and Caughie, one senses *Orlando*’s dissolution of boundaries and subsequent excess. Still, such words as “androgynous,” “lesbian,” “bisexual,” and “ambisexual” continue to function within a binary frame and always recall male and female, A and not-A, “dainty and brawny.” While Woolf herself sometimes discusses Orlando in these terms—“this mixture in her of man and woman” (p. 189)—I argue that Orlando’s story which began as a joke and became serious, moves beyond and in excess of the narrator’s or Woolf’s understanding. Garber writes, “Even if we possess documentary ‘evidence’ that an artist has a certain ‘meaning’ in mind, the unconscious of the text . . . may be in conflict with the conscious purpose of its maker . . . [T]he two sets of intentions might well be expected to come into conflict with one another.” Rosemary Jackson comments that “fantasy characteristically attempts to compensate for a lack resulting from cultural constraints: it is a literature of desire, which seeks that which is experienced as absence and loss.” The desire in the case of *Orlando*, as Minow-Pinkney maintains, “is so radical that it was immediately repressed by the author herself as a ‘joke,’ and has subsequently been dismissed (i.e. repressed) by critics as non-essential.” To end sexual polarization, we can refuse labels and their corresponding restraints and exclusions; we can free ourselves from the “internal paradox of . . . foundationalism . . . that presumes, fixes, and constrains the very ‘subjects’ that it hopes to represent and liberate.”

Six days before the publication of *Orlando*, Woolf went to court prepared to testify on behalf of another subversive text. Radclyffe Hall’s novel had been seized by the police, and at the hearing the magistrate found *The Well of Loneliness* to be obscene, ordered the seized copies destroyed, and fined the publisher and bookseller. In “Below the Belt: (Un)Covering *The Well of Loneliness*,” Michèle Aina Barale examines four different book covers of *The Well of Loneliness* to explain how dominant culture makes marginalized texts read as its own. Referring to book covers as “textual garment[s],” Barale writes that covers “fashion” how we

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24 Caughie, p. 42.
25 Garber, p. 275.
27 Minow-Pinkney, p. 119.
28 Butler, p. 148.
perceive the text, and like “all clothing, these garments reveal some parts and conceal others.” While initially The Well of Loneliness was seized and condemned, Barale’s point is that even after many subsequent editions and reprints, the narrative continues to be appropriated by dominant culture in order to enhance heterosexual desire. I am suggesting that a similar appropriation, achieved through packaging, labeling, and critical naming, has rendered Orlando’s subversion nearly invisible.

Woolf wrote about Orlando, “L. takes Orlando more seriously than I had expected. Thinks it in some ways better than the Lighthouse: about more interesting things, and with more attachment to life and larger. The truth is I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously.” As a literary work, the novel breaks with tradition in substantial ways, transgressing literary laws not only in the person of the protagonist but also in the novel’s form and style, fantastic plot and elaborate diction. Susan M. Squier writes that in terms of character Woolf inverted all the techniques of formal realism in order not to focus on identity, but to call it into question. Toril Moi claims that Woolf was sixty years in advance of Julia Kristeva in calling for the deconstruction of the opposition between masculinity and femininity and challenging the very notion of identity. Because Orlando lives through centuries, defies labels, and loves both men and women, it is impossible to define or identify with him/her in any traditional way.

As a consequence of the discourse of sexuality, certain areas of our body will signify eroticism, embarrassment, shame, or power. This is sexuality not as a natural given that power tries to hold in check, but sexuality as “an especially dense transfer point for relations of power.” Although we are taught to read physical features as existing outside language in a presocial ontology, through a process of repeated naming, gender identity produces and naturalizes itself in symbolic structures of anatomy. As we grow, we are conditioned to see and understand bodies in specific and political ways. Being female is not a natural fact, but a cultural code and performance, a repeated stylization of the body that congeals over time and produces the appearance of substance, of a natural being. The question, “Is it a boy or a girl?” is only the beginning of a process requiring incessant attention and hard work.

The idea that subjectivity is the effect of external circumstance is a serious matter, but as Butler points out, “laughter in the face of serious categories is indispensable for feminism. Without a doubt, feminism continues to require its own forms of serious play.” Laughter changes the face and the body, has its own sounds, and creates a distance from the object of amusement or ridicule. With laughter, the tone changes, undermining and diminishing the formidable nature of what is being laughed at. These changes in the body, tone, and location alter the relation; there is an exchange of power in laughter, and laughter is one way to take control. Humor is aggressive in its direct confrontation with dominant forces, and in Orlando

31 Woolf, Diary, p. 125.
35 Butler, p. 33.
36 Butler, p. x.
Woolf laughs in the face of the law, the "natural" body, codes of dress and behavior, and romantic love. Over and over the text mocks its own pursuit of Orlando, its own attempt to pin him down, to know the biographical facts of her life and define her essential person. The text marks subjectivity as multiple and shifting, and any attempt to define Orlando's identity is useless. Through laughter Woolf subversively repeats and ridicules convention and suggests the possibility of refusing an essentialist and binary mode of thinking. Through Orlando's pleasures and laughter, Woolf creates another location from which to evaluate and participate in the social construction of gender, the body, and our lives.