

"SOMETHING HIGHLY CONTRABAND" : WOOLF, FEMALE SEXUALITY AND THE VICTORIANS

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In the first volume of *The History of Sexuality*, Michel Foucault gives an account of the so-called repressive hypothesis—a "story", as Foucault terms it, which describes the "mute, and hypocritical sexuality" of the Victorian period that has governed post-Victorian assumptions about the earlier period.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century a certain frankness was still common, it would seem. Sexual practices had little need of secrecy; words were said without undue reticence, and things were done without too much concealment; one had a tolerant familiarity with the illicit. Codes regulating the coarse, the obscene, and the indecent were quite lax compared to those of the nineteenth century . . . it was a period when bodies made a display of themselves But twilight soon fell upon this bright day, followed by the monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie. Sexuality was carefully confined; it moved into the home. The conjugal family took custody of it and absorbed it into the serious business of reproduction. On the subject of sex, silence became the law. (3)

Foucault's account of the "story" of repression has strong affinities with Virginia Woolf's delineation of the transformation from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century in her fantasy historical novel *Orlando*. Woolf's ageless, eponymous heroine changes sex from man to woman around the end of the seventeenth century and, throughout the eighteenth century, maintains a certain sexual freedom, resisting proposals of marriage from ludicrous if ardent suitors and cross dressing as a man to traverse the city in order to share punch and gossip with her close friends, the prostitutes in a London brothel.

However, the "bright day" of eighteenth century freedom is extinguished by "the dark nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie"—to apply Foucault's useful summary. On the last day of the eighteenth century Orlando becomes conscious of an oppressive turn in the weather:

As the ninth, tenth, and eleventh strokes struck, a huge blackness sprawled over the whole of London. With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The eighteenth century was over; the nineteenth century had begun. (156)

The cloud does not disperse, but hangs for the rest of the century, accompanied by a pervasive damp. Both are metaphors for a repressive and intrusive moral climate which will dramatically constrain the heroine's sexual, physical and intellectual freedom.

Woolf's engagement with history in *Orlando* is notable for its metafictional explorations of formal and thematic transformations within literature. In her choice of the trope of pervasive darkness to mark the centuries turn, Woolf draws on Samuel Butler's *The Way of All Flesh*. In the beginning of that novel the final curtain is drawn on the eighteenth century with the death, in 1812, of the octogenarian John Pontifex, a skilled tradesman whose kindly good humour, as Butler's narrator Overton implies, exemplifies the spirit of his age. Old Pontifex is last seen by the narrator's father looking towards the evening sun and sighing: "Good-bye sun; good-bye sun" (15). The next morning he is dead.

For Woolf, Butler's savage, irreverent critique of Victorian family life, written between 1872 and 1885 but first published in 1903, was one of "the first signs" of that profound change in the aesthetic and moral sensibility of her own immediate post-Victorian generation. A change which, Woolf argued in "Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown," set the hierarchies of "masters and servants, husbands and wives, parents and children" tumbling. For the enlightened post-Victorian, the horror of married life was exemplified by Thomas and Jane Carlyle. Woolf writes of the Carlyles in her 1923 essay: "One can only bewail the waste, the futility for him and for her, of the horrible domestic tradition which made it seemly for a woman of genius to spend her time scouring saucepans . . . instead of writing books" (71). And Woolf, the daughter of Victorian man of letters Sir Leslie Stephen and his self-sacrificing wife Julia, was to bewail the marriage of Mr and Mrs Ramsay as just such a waste in the strongly autobiographical *To the Lighthouse*.

In *Orlando*, as the nineteenth century progresses, the heroine becomes uncomfortably conscious of a new tone of moral seriousness over sexual matters, signified by the all pervasive spectacle of the bourgeois married couple enforcing the law that marriage, like justice, must be seen to be done: "Wedding rings were everywhere. . . . Couples trudged and plodded in the middle of the road indissolubly linked together. The woman's right hand was invariably passed through the man's left and her fingers were firmly gripped by his" (166). For Orlando "this indissolubility of bodies" is initially "repugnant to her sense of decency and sanitation" (166), but she nevertheless succumbs to a profound sense

of inadequacy at her anomalous marital status and to a nagging pain in her ring finger which makes it impossible to continue writing her epic poem, "The Oak Tree." Here Woolf provides a parody of the endless maladies which constrain women's bodies in Victorian fiction. Orlando wanders onto a moor, twists her ankle, collapses, and is rescued by a mysterious figure on horseback—the heroic Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine: "'Madam,' the man cried, leaping to the ground, 'you're hurt!' / 'I'm dead, sir!' / A few minutes later they became engaged" (257).

Sandra Gilbert notes that this scene reworks the initial meeting between Rochester and Jane Eyre in Charlotte Brontë's novel. Rochester falls from his horse, prompting Jane's first words to him: "Are you injured sir?" (*Orlando* 257n22). Indeed, in the co-mingling of engagement with physical disability and (implicitly) death, Woolf isolates the eternal return in the narrative structure of the woman-centred and frequently woman-authored Victorian *Bildungsroman*, to what Penny Boumelha, in her study of closure in George Eliot's work, has called "the crossroads" of "marriage or death" (86). The heroine's fate will be either marriage, as in Jane Eyre's case, or death, as in George Eliot's Maggie Tulliver's. Moreover, using Eliot's Dorothea Brooke as an example, marriage may mean—as Boumelha's analysis implies—the death of another possibly more fulfilling life. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* notes about Dorothea's marriage to Will Ladislaw: "Many who knew her, thought it a pity that so substantive and rare a creature should have been absorbed into the life of another . . . and be only known in a certain circle as a wife and mother" (576). And as Woolf herself notes in her essay on Eliot's novels, Eliot's heroine's are burdened with "a demand for something—they know not what" (159).

Yet Orlando, through a sleight of hand which is highly revealing of Woolf's contradictory construction of the Victorian period and which I will discuss further below, manages to write beyond her respectable Victorian ending. Her marriage, however, does result in a tangible change in her legal status. Since her mysterious metamorphoses from man to woman, a legal suit to determine her true sex and hence her right to inherit a title, fortune and country estate, has dawdled through the courts with little effect. With marriage, the case is suddenly settled. Orlando is presented with "a legal document of some very impressive sort, judging from the sealing wax, the ribbons, the oaths, and the signatures" in which her sex is "pronounced indisputably female"—her estates to descend through the "heirs male of [her] body" (176). Her body now officially female, Orlando can fulfil her function as wife and mother.

The surprising completion of Orlando's case and the parody of bureaucratic paraphernalia and pomposity which accompanies the decision, might usefully be related to Foucault's major objection to the validity of the repressive hypothesis. For it is, of course, Foucault's contention that, however compelling the "story" of repression—the simple notion of "a general prudishness in language"—a straightforward repression of sex must be set beside the emergence, as he puts it,

"around sex" of "a whole network of varying, specific and coercive transpositions into discourse" (33). What Foucault refers to here is the rapid increase through the nineteenth century of the categorisation and regulation of sex, a "transposition" into legal and bureaucratic discourse, but above all, into the discourse of the burgeoning sexual sciences: sexology and psychology as well as the related disciplines of biology and eugenics. The narrator of *Orlando*, noting that Orlando has shown little surprise on discovering her metamorphoses into a woman, comments that "people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando has always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man." The narrator, however, counsels acceptance of the "simple fact," leaving speculation to the experts: "Let biologists and psychologists determine" (98).

This tongue in cheek indifference signals, as a number of critics have noted, that the novel parodies the genre of the case history, a genre in formulation during the later half of the nineteenth century through the research of Karl Ulrichs, Kraft-Ebbing, the early work of Havelock Ellis and, of course, Sigmund Freud. For Foucault, a key moment in the paradigm shift which sometimes saw punished but, not infrequently, ignored sexual practices transformed through categorisation and regulation, into sexual identities was the publication in 1870 of Carl Westphal's study of "contrary sexual sensations" in *Archiv fur Neurologie*: "Homosexuality appeared as one of the forms of sexuality when it was transposed from the practice of sodomy onto a kind of interior androgyny, a hermaphroditism of the soul. The sodomite had been a temporary aberration; the homosexual was now a species" (43).

It is, perhaps, revealing of the gender blindness for which Foucault has sometimes been criticised, that this reference to sodomy androcentrises his model of homosexuality, focusing it on the male body. And yet, as the historian Lillian Faderman notes, Westphal's work also includes a case study of a young woman who dressed as a man and who was primarily attracted to women. Faderman argues that this young lady's aberrations were treated in a markedly different way from female-to-male transvestites of earlier eras who had, depending on the circumstances of history, either been punished by public whipping, or else rewarded, when in time of war they dressed as men to fight. Westphal's case study was, Faderman suggests, "identified as a 'congenital invert,' whose abnormality was not acquired, not the result of a desire to transcend the boring, passive lot of women, but rather the result of hereditary degeneration and neurosis" (239). But perhaps, whatever her postulated aetiology, her absolute distinction was that she was, in Faderman's words, "a new type." Or more specifically that she was treated as a "type," a scientific artefact: a subject for study. To return to Foucault's words: "not a temporary aberration, but a species."¹

¹ It must be noted here, that whilst Woolf's construction of androgyny to which the depiction of Orlando's sex change is clearly related is on the one hand connected to discourses surrounding

Of course it is at this moment in history that Woolf's heroine has been firmly established as a "normal" woman. The easy acceptance of Orlando's marriage as a sign of her sex can clearly be seen as a comment upon the tendency of psychology and sexology to conflate culturally produced codes of gender with biological sex—or with sexual preference. Yet the "fixing" of Orlando as a woman makes any residual attraction to women immediately suspect. The absence of her sailor husband frees Orlando from domestic obligations and she returns to writing. A glimpse of her poem shows a simile which hints of her previous love affairs (whether as a man or woman) with other women: "Sullen and foreign-looking, the snaky flower, / Scarfed in dull purple, like Egyptian girls—" The dangerous slip brings immediate consequences:

As she wrote she felt some power (remember we are dealing with the most obscure manifestations of the human spirit) reading over her shoulder, and when she had written 'Egyptian girls.' . . . Are girls necessary? You have a husband at the Cape, you say? Ah, well, that'll do. And so the spirit passed on. (166)

Orlando, however, breathes a sigh of relief, for she is "extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine" (166).

The something "highly contraband" is, of course, lesbian desire: the body of the other woman. The spirit, an exemplary Victorian patriarch, represents those constraints which, Woolf, born in 1882, and herself an apprentice writer as a the century drew to a close, was to argue in the essay "Professions for Women," worked to restrict the pen of a girl who had: "thought of something, something about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men, her reason told her, would be shocked" (61). During Orlando's eighteenth century adventures the narrator is about to elaborate upon the discussions of the secret society of women which she forms with the London prostitutes. The narrative, however, is interrupted by "a man's step on the stair": "Women have no desires, says this gentleman, coming into Nell's parlour; only affectations. Without desires (she has served him and he is gone) their conversation cannot be of the slightest interest to anyone" (152). It is curious that Woolf employs an eighteenth-century brothel to explore the pleasures and problems of her idea (more coherently elaborated in the theoretical texts *A Room of One's Own* and *The Three Guineas*) of a society of women engaged in the pursuit of knowledge which will challenge the hegemony of patriarchal culture. Curious that is, because she does not choose to explore this idea during the period when Orlando's meeting

lesbian sexuality it is, nevertheless, crucially related to cultural constructions of male homosexuality. In this regard the complexities of Woolf's model of androgyny can be understood in terms of the process of "cross gender identification" explored in recent Queer theory.

with such a society of women might, in terms of historical verisimilitude, have been most likely.

As Orlando moves through the last two decades of the nineteenth century she has no encounters with that era's most extraordinary creature, the New Woman. In a novel whose primary mode of representing "history" is its metatextual engagement with contemporary genres, the heroine does not meet with, say, a school for training impoverished young women to become typists, run by two spinsters devoted to each other, a school like the one depicted by George Gissing in his exploration of the New Woman question, *The Odd Women*. Orlando's privileged life does not reflect, nor does she meet with, the struggling young women writers glimpsed in the work of New Women novelists like Ella Hepworth Dixon, Mary Chomondley and Mona Caird. Nor, despite the fact that her epic poem is successfully published in this era, does she seek the brilliant celebrity of George Meredith's *Diana of the Crossways*, or for that matter, find the close friendship with another woman that Diana shares with Emma Dunstan. A connection which Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, was to praise as a rare example of an "attempt" to represent women in fiction as friends (82). Orlando's relations with women, in the age of the New Woman, are, in fact, notable for an exemplary discretion; indeed, a total lack of connection at the level of narrative event. It is, rather, to her husband that she turns, expressing in a telegram her profound distaste for the swirling modernity which confronts her in turn-of-the-century London through the coded language of "Rattigan Glumphaboo"—a language which only he understands (196).

In *A Room of One's Own*, having roundly criticised the Victorian era, Woolf launches suddenly into a valorisation of romantic poetry in the period, as exemplified by Tennyson and Christina Rossetti:

Why has Alfred ceased to sing
 She is coming, my dove, my dear?
Why has Christina ceased to respond
 My heart is gladder that all these
 Because my love has come to me? (16)

Woolf blames the Great War, with its devastating exposure of human ugliness, for the disappearance of this harmonic balance between the sexes from the poetry of her own contemporaries. Yet she is also aware that her nostalgic reconstruction is, as she goes on to note in the same essay, an "illusion." Truth, perhaps, can now be put in its place for as Woolf's discussion continues: "truth . . . those dots mark the spot where, in search of truth, I missed the turning up to Fernham" (17). And she never elaborates on what the truth is.

Woolf's inability to put "truth" in the place of the "illusion" of Tennyson and Rossetti and her difficulty in *Orlando* in meeting the New Woman, is certainly due in large part to the constraints of censorship which would make filling in the dots

highly dangerous.² And yet the question is: which censor? The still pervasive voice of Victorian repression, or the new tone of Modernist liberation? Woolf's novel expresses a suspicion, I think, of the will to truth—that belief in the truth contained within sex—which, as Foucault has suggested, was unleashed by the speculations of the sexual sciences. And which, by the nineteen twenties, had reached fever pitch with the growing acceptance of Freud; the controversies surrounding D.H. Lawrence's religion of phallic sexual liberation; and the banning of *The Well of Loneliness*, Radclyffe Hall's portrait of a lesbian. In *Orlando*, a few pages after the heroine manages to smuggle "something highly contraband" past the censorious Victorian spirit, she encounters another imaginary obstacle:

Surely, since she is a woman, and a beautiful woman, and a woman in the prime of life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin at least to think of a gamekeeper (and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking). (187)

This passage, as James Naremore notes seems an implicit reference to D.H. Lawrence's controversial *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (209), a Modernist missile aimed at the "monotonous nights of the Victorian bourgeoisie" if ever there was one. "It's astonishing how Lesbian women are," proclaims Lawrence's gamekeeper, Oliver Mellors. "Seems to me they're nearly all Lesbian. . . . When I'm with a woman who's really Lesbian, I fairly howl in my soul wanting to kill her" (257). Lawrence's willingness to vilify all women whose bodies fail to respond submissively to assertive phallic male sexuality, and his outburst of bile against same sex desire, can, as many critics have argued, be seen as accumulated rage at the inroads which the movement for women's rights had made since the last decades of the nineteenth century.

Lawrence's tone is indicative of a climate of feeling which no doubt contributed Woolf's skirting, in *Orlando*, of the politically explosive ground of feminism's formative era. But this was also over-determined by her embrace of an apolitical modernist aesthetic—in itself resonant of class anxiety. Noting Woolf's modelling of the heroine on the aristocrat Vita Sackville-West, Cora Kaplan

² Woolf's use of ellipses and other rhetorical/grammatical devices can, with considerable validity, be seen to function as textual strategies which foreground, even obliquely express, what cannot be said. For instance see Benstock on lesbian sexuality in *Room*. However, concentration upon the effectiveness of such "coding" should not lose sight of the complex intermesh of medical, aesthetic and legal discourses about sexuality and sexual identity into which such strategies provide insight. Nor should we forget, and this is particularly applicable to *Orlando*, that such textual signs of incoherency stand as markers for the contradictions which the text cannot resolve, those factors with which it is uneasy. My interpretation here can be related to Eve Sedgwick's development of Foucault's work upon the status of silence within discourse on sexuality. Sedgwick writes that "'closetedness' itself is a performance initiated as such by the speech act of a silence" (3).

comments: "*Orlando* is at one level at least a celebration of, and fantasy about, an androgynously unified *class* subjectivity—aristocratic rather than bourgeoisie—unified by the continuity of place, an inheritance that was a peculiarly aristocratic privilege" (57). But it was, nevertheless "a celebration from the place of bourgeois culture, the site of the author's own class identity" (59). And it is the crisis of this identity, Kaplan suggests, which is the "absent presence" in *Orlando*. "Woolf's sense of the nineteenth century" Kaplan writes, was as "a patriarchy within whose subjugating domain the feminine as 'unnatural docility' is assaulted by an equally unnatural and aggressive feminism which destroys genius" (59). Whilst accepting Kaplan's point that this anxiety is displaced onto working class women like Orlando's housekeeper, who express the most despised aspects of the bourgeois Victorian spirit, I would suggest that this absence is also present in the elision of the accelerating conflicts of the New Woman era. In *Room*, Woolf criticised Charlotte Bronte for allowing her heroine's "anger" at oppression to momentarily invade the novel. In her critical essays she gave a measure of praise to the work of Olive Schreiner but argued that Schreiner's powers as a writer were diminished by didacticism within her texts, and by commitment to political activism outside them. Whilst Bronte can be adapted to *Orlando*, Schreiner, with her "passionate interest in the sex question," along with other New Women novelists, cannot ("Schreiner" 182).

The co-mingling of androgyny and aristocratic privilege also worked as a camouflage from the new and sometimes harsh light of emerging discourses of sexual identity. D.H. Lawrence's fascination in *Lady Chatterley's Lover* with the bodily acts of women, regardless of their marital status or even their apparent active heterosexuality, may reveal why Woolf, whilst ruthlessly satirising Victorian propriety for its literally crippling toll on the freedom of women, nevertheless hankered for a certain "illusion," a period where the performance of heterosexual romance in tune with approved standards of decorum might well be sufficient to satisfy a prying eye. Foucault's analysis questions whether there was really "a rupture between the age of repression and the critical analysis of repression" (10). Quoting Lawrence's almost religious faith in the power of sexual discourse: "Today the full conscious realisation of sex is more important than the act itself," (157) Foucault comments that "we must not think that by saying yes to sex, one says no to power" (157). Woolf's tracing of the fate of her heroine's body through the Victorian period is notable for its maze of contradictory constructions of her predecessors, an expression perhaps of her gender inflected recognition that, for women, the "yes" of the Modernist "priest of love" was no less repressive than the "no" of the Victorian "spirit."

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