

EXPLORING THE ART OF QUEER LIFE WRITING THROUGH VIRGINIA WOOLF'S

ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY

by

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is a fictional literary biography that archives the lived experiences of a queer, non-dying person, a novel that would understandably complicate fact, fiction, truth, life writing, theory, and empiricism within academia. However, queer theory has often been inattentive to queer life writing such as *Orlando: A Biography*, though the materiality of queerness is ubiquitous in the text. In many ways, *Orlando: A Biography* queers the very genre of life writing while simultaneously providing a model of the queer hero of the past that does not disappoint. Thus, in the following paper I will address the potential limitations, expectations, and contributions of the genre of life writing, outline contemporary developments of the genre through interdisciplinary analysis, examine why academic fields steer away from life writing, and provide a potential lens through which to frame and explore all of the aforementioned inquires in an effort provide insight into the future of queer studies by looking to what has been lived and livable in the past through *Orlando: A Biography*.

Published in 1928, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* details the life of the eponymous Lord Orlando, who at the start of the novel is a young nobleman in Elizabethan England with a penchant for poetry and dramatics. The story of Orlando's life is told through a complicated first person narrator, understood to be the biographer, who is iterating Orlando's life to the reader. The character of Orlando was based heavily upon Woolf's lover and fellow writer Vita Sackville-West, and much of Orlando's characteristics, lineage, and material possessions mirror that of the Sackville-West family, such as the estate in which Orlando resides. It is this knowledge that brought Nigel Nicolson, son of Vita Sackville-West, to name *Orlando: A Biography* "the longest and most charming love letter in literature," which Elizabeth Meese then corrected to "lesbian love letter" (Nicolson 218; Meese 102). The circumstances under which the novel was created set up the text as, at the least, contextually queer, and the narrative that follows cements it as such. After a turbulent adolescence riddled with love, heartbreak, rejection, depression, and artistic failure, Lord Orlando falls into a deep sleep, only to be awakened by three spirits and their trumpets of Truth and to find himself to be a woman. Unperturbed by this change, Orlando's reaction to her newly transformed physical embodiment cements the idea that there is a certain and constant fluidity to the identities in Orlando, which Nancy Cervetti attributes to "[Orlando's disdain for] the loss or partialness implicit in a single gender identity; she refuses the anxious need to clearly define" (Cervetti 116). This instantaneous sex change is not the only fantastical instance of this so-called biography, however. The text spans from the reign of Queen Elizabeth to the reign of King Edward, roughly three hundred years, yet Orlando is still alive and relatively young when the novel ends.

Orlando: A Biography is universally understood to be a means to poke fun at gender roles, conventions, and biography as a genre. However, the effect and validity of this novel's literary play with elements of fantasy woven in amongst the "biographer's" narration of Orlando's everyday life lead many who have studied the novel to question the importance and effect of parody and satire in the text. Woolf scholar Christy L. Burns calls *Orlando: A Biography* "a parody through an emphasis on period fashions, cross-dressing, and undressing of 'essential bodies,'" heavily emphasizing the parody and humor of the external transformation (Burns 343). Esther Sánchez-Pardo González seems to agree, concluding that Woolf used parody to "[criticize] the concept of femininity as it was conceptualized then by early twentieth century discourses on women" (González 83). Pamela Caughie, however, understands the novel to be deeper and more widely transformative than a critique of external gender performativity, stating that "*Orlando* serves as the prototype of the *transgenre*, one that reconfigures in life writing narratives not only notions of gender but also of time, identity, history, and the very nature of writing and reading" (Caughie 502). Regardless how seriously the role of parody is understood in the novel, Woolf's intent is clear: she wanted to critique and explore the conventions of gender and biography of her contemporary moment through a reconfiguration of the life writing genre.

The literary criticism about *Orlando* tends to cluster largely around issues of gender and biography, but for me, the following questions remain inadequately explored: what are the implications of a text like *Orlando: A Biography* in the larger field of life writing? And what is the value of an obviously queer text such as this to queer theory? In addition to what the novel aims to problematize, *Orlando: A Biography* also archives a history that is inherently queer in its own right through understanding the text as a work of life writing.

Pamela Caughie speaks to this, calling the novel a “model of modernist life writing in the era of transsexualism” (Caughie 502). “Transsexual life writing,” she continues “disrupts conventions of narrative logic by defying pronominal stability, temporal continuity, and natural progression,” stating that the text uses “transsexualism as an organizing metaphor in the construction of a life” (503). For Caughie, understanding the text as queer is essential to understanding it as a work of life writing, and vice versa. These two components to this text go hand in hand. For Reed Whitemore, however, Woolf’s complicated interactions with biography drastically shape the understanding of the text. He shares how “[*Orlando*] was instantly rejected as biography by critics even as they praised the book, rejected by the simple device of denying that it was biography at all” (Whitemore 388). The historical reception of the text, because of its fantastical and fictional elements, prevented it from being understood as life writing all together. In observing these two very different readings of the same text, it is evident that conversations surrounding *Orlando: A Biography*’s role and importance in the field of life writing and literary biography are contentious at the least.

Even though work has been done, by Caughie and others, to explore and expand the importance of *Orlando: A Biography* as a work of life writing, and maybe more importantly, a work of queer life writing, I believe more can be said about the text’s value to scholarship as a whole, but particularly to queer theory. As a biography of a queer life, there is much to be said about the queering of convention in the novel, specifically in regards to gender performativity, time, narration, and transcendence, that would seem invaluable to existing conversations in queer theory, yet the field too often turns its back on the lessons of lived experience, fictional or otherwise. Although a work of fiction, I argue that Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* is an effective example of queer life writing, a genre often neglected by queer

theory, that serves as a platform to rediscover queer heroes through narrative work and understand their importance to scholarship today. To establish this claim, I will first explore the history of life writing as a genre, then address why academia, queer theory in particular, have ignored the insight of lived experience. In understanding how *Orlando: A Biography* then fits in to the genre of life writing, I will examine how it fulfills traditional characteristics, then look at what it does differently, or what it queers. To conclude, I will address how Orlando fulfills the role of what Wendy Moffat calls the “queer hero of the past” and how the text serves as a model of excavation and reclamation of queer existences that have largely been neglected by queer theory (Moffat 213).

WHAT IS LIFE WRITING?

As a genre, life writing itself is quite broad, encompasses many different forms and styles, and is utilized across many disciplines. The term itself emerged out of the eighteenth century, predating the popularity of the use of “biography” as a word and practice, which Marlene Kadar outlines in her book *Essays on Life Writing: From Genre to Critical Practice* (1992). Now, biography, autobiography, literary biography, memoir, and even diary entries are all understood to be examples of life writing. Life writing, Marlene Kadar asserts, “has always been a more inclusive term,” thus having some “critical advantages over ‘biography’ and ‘autobiography’” (Kadar 4). Because of its broadness and inclusiveness, life writing is often hard to pin down. What makes a text a work of life writing? The defining characteristics are rather fleeting and subjective. Kadar broadly categorizes the dominant conception of life writing, if we are to understand it in the critical sense as a vast umbrella of works, as “writing about the ‘self’ or the ‘individual’” (Kadar 5). If life writing simply means

the writing about life, then a better question might be: what is not life writing? Kadar then counters this generalization by giving her own definition of life writing:

Life writing comprises texts that are written by an author who does not continuously write about someone else, and who also does not pretend to be absent from the text himself/herself. Life writing is a way of seeing, to use John Berger's famous phrase; it anticipates the reader's determination on the text, the reader's colour, class, and gender, and pleasure in an imperfect and always evolving hermeneutic - classical, traditional, or postmodern. (Kadar 10).

To explain this definition, she outlines characteristics a work should fulfill to meet her own understanding of life writing, stating that life writing should encourage "the reader to develop and foster his/her own self-consciousness" in order to "humanize and make less abstract (which is not to say less mysterious) the self-in-the-writing" (Kadar 12). For Kadar, life writing mends the "depersonalization and abstraction" that are often closely associated with "superior intellectual pursuits (Kadar 12). What one can glean from Kadar's understanding of life writing in the contemporary moment is that life writing is inherently personal and allows space for the self, of both the reader and the author to be present in the text. Life writing closes the gaps between lived experience and critical theory, which is an important, yet widely underutilized place of academic exploration.

In his chapter "Life-Writing, Cultural Memory, and Literary Studies," Max Saunders agrees that much of the contention surrounding life writing as a valid and useful mode of scholarship is that "it covers a wide range of texts and forms...it seems, to some, to cover too many" (Saunders 321). He also argues that "to some extent, [the authors] are writing displaced autobiographies" (Saunders 321). This again echoes much of what Marlene Kadar

voiced regarding the presence of the self in life writing more specifically than other literary genres. However, what Max Saunders interprets a bit differently than Kadar is the usefulness of a possibly “too broad” genre of writing:

If other genres or sub-genres or forms can be read as life-writing—such as novels, poems, short stories, travel writings, topographical books, historiography—they can all be used as routes into cultural memory. But of course if we are to use such literary texts as evidence for cultural memory studies, clearly we cannot use them naively, as historical “documents” or “sources” of first-hand testimony. Indeed, we must approach them as literary critics, aware that what we are dealing with are, precisely, texts...rather than giving us direct access to unmediated memory, what such texts reveal is, instead, memory cultures. When we study life-writing as a source for cultural memory, that is, our conclusions will also be literary-critical ones: interpretations of the ways in which memory was produced, constructed, written, and circulated. (Saunders 322-323)

For Saunders, the usefulness of life writing lies less in individual subjectivity, but instead emphasizes constructing memory cultures that examine how knowledge and identity is produced and archived in literature.

In *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, authors Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson define life writing as “a set of shifting self-referential practices that, in engaging in the past, reflect on identity in the present” (Smith and Watson 2). They claim that “life writing has been vigorously challenged in the wake of postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the Enlightenment subject” but with this, they counter the assumption that “many other kinds of life writings produced at the same time have lesser value” (Smith and Watson

3). Life writing, thus, offers what autobiography does not, better describing the “historical range and diverse genres and practices” of life writing forms “not only in the West but around the globe” (Smith and Watson 3). For these authors, life writing constitutes a form that is transnational, one that transcends academic or literary standards of “the West” and encompasses a more global and universal practice of scholarship.

In examining the contributions of these sources, it is clear that life writing as a practice and a genre brings a lot of important conversations to light. Life writing reconfigures subjectivity in authorship, not only permitting but welcoming the presence of the self in the text. Additionally, it archives how identity and culture are constructed in writing, creating a memory culture that is evident on the page. It also provides a more inclusive space for different kinds of stories to be told, amplifying voices and experiences on a more global, transnational level. When looking at all of the characteristics and exploring how they interact in one given work, it is easy to understand how important this kind of writing would be to documenting and grappling with marginalized lived experiences. In “Toward a Pedagogy of the Other: Interculturalism, Inclusiveness, Interdisciplinarity,” postcolonial scholar Shehla Burney highlights “the dire need to interject the World and its worldliness, or circumstantial reality, into the teaching and interpretation of texts. That is, the academy and pedagogy need to descend from their ivory tower to the level of the World and its peoples” (Burney 201). I believe life writing can aid in this descent to worldliness, and this claim is substantiated in turning to the uses of life writing in other fields of academia, specifically feminism and LGBT studies.

Upon its creation in 1970, The Feminist Press, according to Peggy Rosenthal, dedicated itself to the interests of feminist biography, their mission statement claiming that,

in reprinting neglected feminist works of life writing, they were helping to “recreate the history of *women*, in discovering how *women* have been educated and what *they* have achieved” (Rosenthal 180). For feminist thought and movement, life writing is acknowledged as an important way to recapture and reclaim lost or silenced histories, echoing much of what Saunders, Smith, and Watson spoke to regarding the excavating and collective power of life writing, one that creates a cultural memory and explores how identity is constructed on the page. Though in a different vocabulary, this same sentiment has been adopted by many prominent feminist thinkers. In “The Laugh of the Medusa” French feminist thinker Hélène Cixous writes:

Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies - for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text - as into the world and into history - by her own movement. (Cixous 875)

For Cixous, the reclamation of writing and language practice, which Cixous later calls *l'écriture féminine*, or women’s writing, is also a reclamation of the body and a transcendence outside of the phallogocratic order. Again, reiterating Marlene Kadar, subjectivity, visibility, and voice constitute the powerful effects of life writing, but Cixous asserts that it must go even further. To use phallogocentric language - to write phallogocentrically - is to perpetuate the domination that has continued to silence women. Yet, it is difficult to imagine what writing outside of phallogocentrism might be like. A new language, a new way of writing and obtaining subjectivity, visibility, and voice are essential to creating *l'écriture féminine*, and to achieve these things, Cixous asserts that “women must write her self.”

Judith P. Zinsser, however, conceptualizes feminist, or feminine, life writing a bit differently than Cixous. In “Feminist Biography: A Contradiction in Terms?,” she advocates not for the total transcendence of the tradition itself, but for a reconfiguration of what was deemed worthy of documenting. She writes “biography, by tradition, if not by definition, has been about the extraordinary person, a particular individual who in some manner did something deemed noteworthy by the conventional canons of significance” (Zinsser 44). What is interesting in this statement is “the conventional canons of significance.” The use of these words intentionally raises questions regarding the authority upon which these canons are constructed: who decides what is significant and noteworthy? Upon what convention are these significant actions determined? It is, what Zinsser calls “the fact of ‘men’s worlds’” that determine the worthiness of a subject to be document, and thus is what should be problematized. She asks,

What were women doing while men's history went on its way? What was the same and what different when seen from women's perspectives? Women's biographers, even if not feminists, have participated in this “recovery history,” as it is sometimes called today...they have broadened the definition of the extraordinary...each life is presented as in some way indicative of women's choices more generally: acceptances, accommodations, compromises, and rejections.” (Zinsser 44-45)

It appears, to Zinsser, that to create a feminist life writing is to understand what is actually deemed worthy of being written about, why it has been deemed as such, and dismantle the constricting standards of noteworthiness that have historically silenced figures of women in the genre.

Though feminist scholars may have conflicting opinions regarding what characteristics are needed to truly create a revolutionary form of life writing that does justice to feminist figures of the past and writing of the feminine self moving forward, it is undeniable that the conversations and discoveries that life writing facilitates and lends itself to are important to what Zinsser calls “recovery histories” (Zinsser 44). Life writing creates a space to redefine what it means to write the self, the body, and the past, all acts of reclaiming identity and subjectivity on the page. This practice is not limited to feminist thought, however. LGBT studies, the study of the historical experience of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and the roles of these aforementioned identity politics in the cultural and political landscape, also makes use of life writing in comparable ways. As a general response to subjugation and silencing of marginalized peoples, life writing thus affirms itself as a viable outlet for explorations into what has been lost to hetero-patriarchal writing.

Before moving on, I would like to make the distinction between LGBT studies and queer theory. Though inextricably related, the two fields of study are not synonymous for a variety of reasons which I will outline. I refer to them separately and examine how life writing interacts with each in different, and usually oppositional ways. Building off of the previous definition given for LGBT studies, queer theory emerged, in many ways, as a response to the institutionalization of LGBT studies. In the introduction to the book *LGBT Studies and Queer Theory: New Conflicts, Collaborations, and Contested Terrain* (2006), Karen Lovaas addresses how queer theory’s logic embraced

both a critique of lesbian and gay studies and as potentially opening up the field of sexuality studies. Queer theory broke from the tradition of lesbian and gay studies by

framing identity in consistently relational terms...the key point is that sexual meanings are not fixed or determined by the nature of desire or behavior but by understanding such concepts in a network of texts and discourses. (Lovaas xxiv-xxv)

She continues on to say how the overarching field of scholarship surrounding LGBT/queer identity “has been divided between a lesbian and gay studies approach and queer theory,” because queer theory finds itself concentrated in the humanities and comparative literatures while LGBT studies is concentrated in histories and social sciences. (Lovaas xxv). However, Lovaas concedes that this division and contestation between the two is not necessarily a bad thing, it really means that “these two approaches tend to operate with different analytical languages and intellectual conversations” (Lovaas xxv). Because the two fields operate with these different analytical languages and intellectual conversations, life writing is thus conceptualized very differently to each field. Moving forward, it is these definitions, distinctions, and language I will rely on to frame discussions surrounding LGBT studies and queer theory.

In *Writing Desire: Sixty Years of Gay Autobiography* (2007), Bertram Cohler argues that life writing plays an irreplaceable role in “recognizing the significance of telling one’s life story as a means for realizing enhanced personal integrity when struggling with the impact of major adversity” (Cohler 4). He argues that this personal integrity achieved through life writing is a way in which those who have experienced trauma, discrimination, and subjugation because of the way their identities, here specifically, their queerness, interacted with world, to write a “coherent narrative” that is “followable,” “philosophically profound,” and “psychologically fulfilling” (Cohler 4-5). Specifically to LGBT studies, Cohler stresses the essential need for many to find solace in the experiences of others. He

notes that “it is inevitable that the reader seeks an connection between his or her own life and that of the author,” a phenomenon of extreme importance to reconstructing the lost histories of lived experiences, silenced through decades of homophobia. Cohler lists several specific examples that outline this importance,

for example, gay and lesbian readers look to the personal accounts of other gay life-writers in order to help us understanding the meaning of sexual desire in their own lives, to learn about how others have dealt with issues of coming to terms with a gay identity, how they have disclosed their gay identity to family and friends, how they have dealt with stigma at school and in the community and, alas, how gay men have managed issues related to the AIDS pandemic (Cohler 6).

For a field of scholarship with a genesis as recent as 1970, narrative lived experience is essential to constructing queer histories, and in many cases, constitutes the only work that can be found in regards to certain events and moments in time.

In collaboration with Phillip Hammack, Cohler builds on these ideas in a later work, “Lives, Times, and Narrative Engagement: Multiplicity and Meaning in Sexual Lives,” where the authors focus in on personal narrative as a specific and integral style of life writing. They claim that, in the discourse on sexuality in a given sociohistorical context, “the personal narrative thus becomes more than an individualized document of life; it is, rather, a reflection of the lexicon available to make meaning of [same-sex] desire” (Cohler and Hammack 454). Echoing sentiments of Cixous and *l’écriture féminine*, there is a push to pick apart the very language of meaning making, in this case in the context of queer desire, identity, and how they are constructed in personal narrative. The authors continue on to say that “the personal narrative that constructs identity is, therefore, best understood as a *product*

of linguistic possibility; it always relates to some master narrative of identity accessible in a culture” (Cohler and Hammack 454). Unlike Cixous, Cohler and Hammack do not necessarily call for a new construction or lexicon in which to write personal narratives of the marginalized self; instead, they advocate for a different kind of interruption. They note that their work has been “to integrate narrative and life course perspectives on identity to construct a theoretical account sensitive to the context of human development,” that is, to utilize personal narrative in theoretical work that more fully encompasses human experience.

Between these conversations regarding the use and value of life writing in feminist and LGBT studies related discourse, it has been established that life writing as a critical source is not to be disregarded. It opens avenues and platforms to many different, interdisciplinary, and integrated learning experiences that are transformative and revolutionary in their ability to give voice to those who have been silenced by the dominant dialogues surrounding biography and life writing. Whether it be through reconfiguring the very language used to write the self to redefining the standard of what it means to be archived, through using life writing as an excavating process that explores one’s own identity to expanding on academia and pedagogy to create a more accessible lexicon, life writing can be utilized in a number of ways to broaden conversations, and even create new ones, on marginalized identity. However, there is a field of study where life writing has had almost the opposite effect. Queer theory, which I defined earlier as having a separate and often contentious relation to LGBT studies, has long turned its back on life writing as both a valid and valued source of material. After examining how important those archives of writing have been to related studies such as feminism and LGBT studies, it is thus a confusing and often complicated effort to explore the pushback from queer theory. But, to make the case for why

life writing should be important queer theory too, I must first examine why it is largely undervalued and overlooked.

WHY HAS LIFE WRITING BEEN NEGLECTED BY QUEER THEORY?

In “Introductory Notes: Performing Queer Lives,” Francesca T. Royster examines what she calls “life writing queerly.” Throughout her article, she makes a case for the confluence of life writing and queer theory, highlighting several points that substantiate an argument for queer personal narratives being of use to queer theory. She notes that queer life writings “blur boundaries of form, moving fluidly between autobiography and fiction, political treatise and personal manifesto, memoir and theory” (Royster vi). The writing of queer lived experiences that embraces and relies upon blurring boundaries, fluidity, and interdisciplinary integration seems it would constitute the very crux of queer theory. However, Royster cedes that this is overwhelmingly not the case. She asks that if “life writing and queer theory have traditionally been places for individual and collective exploration, ways of understanding the self through the larger fabric of culture and history and relationality,” then “how are life writing and queer theory at odds with what we've come to expect in autobiographical narratives?” (Royster vi). In many accounts previously examined, life writing not only encompasses autobiography, but expands it. So why then, when queer experiences are added to the mix, does the form of life writing become what Royster calls deviant and taboo? Tony E. Adams and Stacy Holman Jones build upon this similar question of life writing and queer theory as oil and water in “Telling Stories: Reflexivity, Queer Theory, and Autoethnography.” They call the bringing together of autoethnography, a kind of research grounded life writing and exploration of anecdotal and

personal experience, and the “paradigm of queer theory” “(re)turning,” which they define as “the confessional/autobiographical embrace of subjectivity, contingency, and connection” (Adams and Jones 108). The very fact that the authors deem the integration of subjectivity and anecdote into queer theory “(re)turning” implies that there was a distinct and deliberate separation from lived experience by queer theory in need of mending. They speak to the taboo nature of telling and retelling the stories of queer lives as well, asserting that

Perhaps telling such stories is necessary precisely because they are not sanctioned and, therefore, considered legitimate stories worthy of our attention and respect. And perhaps this is what a reflexively queer autoethnography adds up to, just stories, texts that tell and don’t tell about “bodies literally affecting one another: human bodies, discursive bodies, bodies of thought” (Stewart 128). Recent stories of bodies literally affecting one another tell and don’t tell about swinging, penetration, catastrophe, heresy, and closets, to name just a few. (Adams and Jones 109)

Again in these instances, writing the body and unearthing stories are the defining characteristics of these queer autoethnographies, similar to discussions surrounding why life writing was an integral part of feminist and LGBT studies discourse. But to reiterate earlier points, if these practices clearly seem of importance to queer theory, then why are they not utilized and conceptualized as such?

In “The Narrative Case for Queer Biography,” literary scholar and biographer Wendy Moffat examines the processes of queer theory’s development that led it to “puncture the *grands recits* of criticism and history” in an effort to “get real,” or dismantle and expose cultural assumptions and critique subjectivity (Moffat 210). In doing so, she notes that “it’s a particular irony that despite queer theory’s focus on real bodies and material culture, it cut

itself off from some of its richest evidence,” that evidence being queer life writing (Moffat 211). Biography, she claims is “but an electrical ground between theory and history” (Moffat 221). To establish itself, Moffat understands, queer theory rejected the subjective nature of life writing and lived experience, in many ways disembodied a school of theory that should deal intimately with embodiment. Moffat continues on to investigate how exactly queer theory complicated and suffocated itself from its “richest evidence,” as she puts it, citing the goal of establishing queer theory “to illustrate how *constructed*, how *unnatural* essentialist assumptions about identity were, not merely to observe how power worked on the subjects” (Moffat 213). But, in attempting to deconstruct these assumptions, the importance of lived experience and life writing, which could be reductively defined in this context as indeed observing, and archiving, how power works on subjects, was erased.

Moffat does, however, qualify her argument that, on the whole, seems to critique queer theory as being high theory, by saying that “the queer resistance to the narrative of actual gay lives is not that they are too conventional...rather, the depressingly consistent evidence of homophobia reminds the theorist of the complex and often limited agency of the queer subject” (Moffat 213). Her point here is extremely salient; why would queer theory want to constantly be reminded of the visceral trauma and years of homophobic violence that has been acted upon queer communities? “Rare is the evidence of unfettered freedom,” she continues, “of utopian escape from the narrative pull of pathos or tragedy. Queer heroes of the past *disappoint*.” (Moffat 213). Here, Moffat is addressing the monolith of queer existence that ties them inextricably to death, paints them saturated in tragedy, and on the whole are without a sense of subjectivity. Though yes, historical violence against queer communities cannot be ignored when discussing queer lives and histories, the idea that queer

lives are misery is a generalized stereotype that has been capitalized upon and perpetuated. Queer characters in media are often portrayed in relation to drug use, hopeless pining after straight companions, and untimely deaths. Again, there is no denying there is a truth to these assumptions given the material conditions of discrimination and marginalization under which these characters have been created, but there is much more to shaping queer existences than the “narrative pull of pathos,” as Moffat calls it. Joy, friendship, love, creativity, and prosperity are not mutually exclusive to queer lives. To conclude her chapter, Moffat argues that “the future of queer theory is in the past” (Moffat 225). What she means by this in the context of her discussion around queer life writing is that, to find these queer heroes of the past that do not disappoint, we must work backwards, since “we can’t rush on to the future of queer studies because we don’t know the story yet” (Moffat 225). Exploring queer narrative histories and life writings, a space of telling and sharing queer stories that queer theory has largely erased, is a way to excavate and rediscover important and genuine queer lived experiences that had previously been excluded from conversations.

One such work of life writing that narrates the lived experiences of a queer past can be found in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*. This text narrates the mundane and the adventurous, the depression and the joy, the heartbreak and the love, and the rejection and creation that shapes a queer existence of the past. The tale of Orlando is one that complicates convention in the most generalized and all consuming way. Gender roles and performativity, love, marriage, creative art, time, history, and even the very structure and genre of the novel itself all reveal the deconstructive tradition of the text. Through an atmosphere of parody and satire, *Orlando: A Biography* deliberately pokes holes and makes cracks in all that it narrates, playing with assumptions and literary traditions. Though understood and often categorized

exclusively as a work of fiction, I argue that the authenticity of queer lived experiences can be found in this text, and in examining why *Orlando: A Biography* can be perceived as model of queer life writing, I hope to illuminate how it also is an important work to queer theory as an academic field.

HOW IS *ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY* A WORK OF TRADITIONAL LIFE WRITING?

As I previously discussed, defining what exactly life writing is, does, and creates can be tricky and difficult to discern. It encompasses a lot of different styles of work across time, space, and discipline, thus narrowing down specific and universal literary characteristics that define life writing as a coherent body of work is a troublesome task. However, across various sources and spaces of analysis, one aspect of life writing that remains consistently observed and analyzed is the presence of the self in writing. As Marlene Kadar notes, the life writer does not “pretend to be absent from the text” and does not assume a certain objectivity in the events they detail (Kadar 10). In Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*, this aspect of life writing that categorizes the works is more than evident in the presence of the biographer. The biographer is a fictitious, unreliable, and highly subjective entity in the novel, and though he is written by Woolf, is not necessarily supposed to represent Woolf herself. Like Orlando, the biographer is very much a character. However, this does not mean Orlando is not a subject and the biographer is not the life writer at work.

The point of the view of the biographer in *Orlando: A Biography* is, to say the least, complicated. The first characteristic of the biographer that really alerts the reader to his presence in the text, and is carried all the way throughout the novel, is the stylized narration. The biographer adopts a voice that mediates the ground between first, second, and third

person points of view in a fluid and interesting way. Though often referring to himself as “the biographer” in third person and not “I” in first person, he frequently addresses the reader both directly and indirectly in a way that complicates his role. He draws attention to his own position in the text and acknowledges when he himself experiences moments of confusion and insecurity, such as the revelation of their predicament that

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando’s life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfill the first duty of the biographer, which is to plod, without looking right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth. (Woolf 49)

In this passage, the biographer is navigating his own presence in the text as the “self” that Kadar refers to by distancing himself. He refers to himself as “the biographer,” though the reader knows well that the biographer is the one writing those words in the context of the novel. In the “indelible footprints of truth,” the biographer cites his duty to documenting the truths of Orlando’s life on the page. But, his subjectivity shines through with the action of plodding, which implies undesirable and tedious work. He complicates his duty to the truth, or, the duty of the biographer, but revealing his unenthusiastic feelings about the task.

Additionally, he often uses language that groups himself in with the reader, as if writing the readers a personal letter. Early on in the novel when the biographer, the reader, and Orlando are still getting acquainted, the biographer claims that the Elizabethans “had none of our modern shame of book learning; none of our belief that to be born the son of a butcher is a blessing...no fancy that what we call ‘life’ and ‘reality’ are somehow connected with ignorance and brutality” (Woolf 23). In grouping addressing the reader with “our” and

“we,” the biographer encourages the reader to identify with him, and in many ways, assumes they will. Through associating Orlando with the Elizabethans and himself with the reader, he creates a hierarchy of Orlando as the subject to be written and himself as the self doing the writing. This subject position is different than the one in which he refers to himself in the third person, but nonetheless, it acutely draws the reader's attention to the very present biographer, who Woolf has created to be the life writer, in this novel.

The biographer is also unafraid to admit his trepidation and mistakes to the reader in the text. Though he follows Orlando around and documents nearly every detail, the biographer still finds moments where he is at a loss with how to proceed and what to write. Orlando's main occupation and pastime in the text is writing, so when Orlando is writing prose inaccessible to the observer, what does the biographer document? The biographer asks that himself, questioning “But what can the biographer do when his subject has put him in the predicament in which Orlando has now put us?” (Woolf 196-197). His outright admittance of his subjectivity and his humanness to his audience, which he is indeed aware is his audience, again reminds readers that they are conversing with a biographer who knows they are there.

The very last mention of the biographer by name, or rather by “the biographer” is a petulant complaint wherein the biographer again is forced to evaluate their own position in regards to Orlando, realizing that he has his work cut out for him in trying to pin Orlando down. He whines “If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! What is more irritating than to see one's subject, on whom one lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one's grasp altogether” (Woolf 197). Here, the biographer is treating the readers as his confidants, asking them to emphasize

with his frustration with Orlando. This act not only fosters a deeper relationship between the reader and the biographer, but between the reader, the biographer, and Orlando.

In “Reading Readers in Virginia Woolf’s ‘Orlando: A Biography,’” Kathryn N. Benzel complicates this already complicated narrator/biographer voice that is directly present in the novel in claiming that Woolf’s intention was to introduce the same plurality into the reader. She states that “Woolf creates a double-visioned reader, a reader who realizes the plurality in the text through his/her own multilevel reading” (Benzel 171). Through her unreliable meta narrator, she creates two levels of reader interaction: “the more obvious conventional biographical voice speaks to the narrative audience, setting down a historical-biographical rendering by introducing Orlando; however, another voice simultaneously speaks to the authorial audience” (Benzel 173). Woolf’s construction of such a multilevel narrative invites, and nearly demands, this deeper reading that makes both her own intentions and the voice of the biographer simultaneously present. In doing so, she renders any conceptualization of the objective, absent life writer obsolete. The characteristic of life writing that Kadar posits as defining and essential, that the writer is present in the text and does not pretend to be otherwise, is found to be true in a deeply layered and complex way in *Orlando: A Biography*. This presence from both Woolf herself and the biographer she creates thus forces the reader to examine their own subject position and how they interact with the text. Readers are reminded of this fact consistently throughout the novel in the language the biographer uses and the ways in which he address both the audience and Orlando.

Another characteristic of life writing that more often than not works to define the genre, or at least find commonalities between the works, is a single subject that is deeply and intimately attended to in the writing. Though it may feel like an arbitrary distinction to make

when discussing works written about a life, it is regardless a distinction that sets apart life writing from other works that focus on many characters and subjects and address many points of view. This idea of the subject, however, is a contentious construction within life writing. Judith Zinsser, critiques the notion that life writing must focus on the “extraordinary person,” where the qualifications of “extraordinary” have been largely determined by an androcentric canonical lineage (Zinsser 44). She advocates for the feminist work of redefining the extraordinary and including more of the mundane into what constitutes a subject for life writing. In the case of *Orlando: A Biography*, the eponymous subject Orlando works to meet the qualifications of the traditional biographical subject and the more contemporary biographical subject.

First and foremost, Orlando is, in fact, Lord Orlando. From when the novel begins, Orlando is only 15 years old and is already a nobleman and favorite of Queen Elizabeth. He resides in a massive estate, is waited on by servants, and serves in the Royal Court. His wealth, success, and popularity at the rise of the British empire certainly established Orlando as an extraordinary subject to be archived. Orlando is described initially as having “a pair of the finest legs that a young nobleman has ever stood upright upon; and violet eyes; and a heart of god; and loyalty and manly charm - all qualities which [the Queen] loved” (Woolf 18). Even the makeup of his body and his character distinguishes Orlando as extraordinary, destined to be admired by many. Even so young, Queen Elizabeth trusts and relies on him. In her old age, Orlando was “the oak tree on which she leant her degradation” and “plotted for him a splendid ambitious career. Lands were given him, houses assigned him” (Woolf 20). Many women of England were “ready to show him their favours” and he courts three women, Clorinda, Favilla, and Euphrosyne, all who are unique and impressive in their own

ways. In any sense, it is not a leap to say that Orlando had an extraordinary life; one full of wealth and power that would distinguish any subject as one worth writing about. But Orlando is also extraordinary in many ways that are less conventional than possessing capital and having a proximity to governmental control.

Quite possibly the most extraordinary thing about Orlando has little to do with riches and social status: Orlando wakes up one morning as a woman. While serving as an ambassador in Turkey, he falls asleep for several days, trapped in a trance from which he cannot be disturbed. Doctors were summoned, rioters looted his home, but still, “Orlando slept on” (Woolf 98). One week later, three “austere Gods who keep watch and ward by the inkpot of the biographer,” Truth, Candour, and Honesty call upon the Ladies of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty ascend onto Orlando to wake him and “blow one terrific blast: The Truth!” (Woolf 99-101). Up until this point, there were few elements of fantasy or divinity in the novel, and though this specific event of gods and goddess coming down from heaven to wake Orlando is deeply metaphorical, the outrageous and magical scene this description sets up is certainly out of the ordinary yet greatly important to usher in extraordinary things to come. After Orlando awakens, he has become a woman.

What is perhaps most interesting about this transformation, one that is but briefly explored by the biographer, is how unaffected overall Orlando is by this sudden and seemingly unprovoked physical transformation. After examining now herself in the mirror, “without showing any signs of discomposure” she simply gets up and gets in the bath. The biographer elaborates on her unperturbed disposition, saying

Orlando had become a woman - there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their

future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same....her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle (Woolf 102-103).

Waking from a week long, unbreakable trance to the sound of goddess' trumpets only to find one's self transformed into a different sex is certainly out of the ordinary, but Orlando's non reaction to this event exacerbates the fantasy even further. Though the intentionality on Woolf's part seems highly metaphorical, playing with truth and identification in the context of the novel, she still creates a fantastical scene of divinity and magical realism that further constructs Orlando's life and subject position as one worth writing about.

Though in many ways extraordinary, Orlando is still human, and his/her humanness is explored and documented as well as his/her lavishness and magical attributes. His/her faults, shortcomings, and the mundaneness of his/her daily life are archived in as great of quantities as his/her extraordinary attributes, perhaps even more so. This act of detailing life in ways that stretch outside of what traditional life writing may call for more adequately satisfies Zinsser's call for a reimagination of the life writing subject. For instance, often biographer gets bored with Orlando. In a moment of direct interaction with the readers, the biographer states

It was now November. After November, comes December. Then January, February, March, and April. After April comes May. June, July, August follow. Next is September. Then October, and so, behold, we are back at November again, with a whole year accomplished. This method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare, perhaps, and the reader, if we go on with it, may complain that he

could recite the calendar for himself and so save his pocket whatever sum the publisher may think proper to charge for the book...thought and life are as the poles asunder. Therefore - since sitting in a chair and thinking is precisely what Orlando is doing now - there is nothing for it but to recite the calendar, tell one's beads, blow one's nose, stir the fire, look out of the window, until she has done." (Woolf 196-197)

The biographer is so unenthused by Orlando's everyday life and mundane endeavors that he begins to recite the calendar to himself and stare out the window. This passage could have easily been omitted, but it was purposefully written to capture the more human attributes of Orlando, the less extraordinary ways of existence. The biographer twiddles his thumbs while Orlando writes and sits and thinks for months at a time. Internally, and shared with the reader, he wants Orlando to do more extraordinary things, and Orlando refuses to comply.

In addition to Orlando's long bouts of boring and uneventful behavior, Orlando's own self-declared profession is an overall failure. The most notable instance of Orlando's dissatisfaction with his work is in the wake of a visit from writer Nick Greene, who slanders Orlando's work in a poem "A visit to a Nobleman in the country," in which he ridicules and parodies Orlando. Orlando is distraught, and in response, he burns fifty-seven of his own poems and declares literature to be a farce (Woolf 70-71). He is not a great writer, and upon his return from Turkey as a woman, he is no longer a nobleman. He loses much of his power and money and has no discernable talents that set him apart. By the end of the novel, there are few traits that deem Orlando extraordinary.

Though initially a remarkable young man who undergoes a fantastical physical transformation, Orlando ends up as disenfranchised royalty with a failed writing career. However, does this not mean Orlando is a worthy subject? Is his/her journey not enticing and

captivating? Where Orlando's life truly establishes itself as a work of life writing is in the middle ground between the extraordinary and the mundane, between what is worthy of being written and what should have been glossed over. As Peggy Rosenthal notes, too often, biographers "do not seem to have been interested in the complicated inner life of [their] subject," citing instances where biographers have been more interested in the rejection of familial histories than the actual characteristics of the subject (Rosenthal 181). But when the subject's history is rejected, what is left? As in the case of Orlando, what is left is embodiments of failure, transformations, and that which can be found in the everyday life. These blurred boundaries between the traditional subject and the reimagined subject both situate *Orlando: A Biography* as a work of traditional life writing and complicate the notion, provoking even deeper thought from the reader as to what creates a life writing subject.

The third and final characteristic of life writing that I argue *Orlando: A Biography* explores, meets, and opens up, is what Zachary Leader calls, the "life-changing encounter" (Leader 2). This trope, as he explains, is one found frequently in the life writing of different types of subjects across the genre and *Orlando: A Biography* is no exception. Though Orlando's existence and maturation is turbulent in many ways and encounters many major life changes, there is one moment in particular that fills this trope of the life changing encounter and that I argue sets up the changes and development in both the plot of the novel and Orlando as a character.

During the Great Frost, a storm that blanketed London in ice and snow that King James turns into a carnival, Orlando goes skating upon a frozen river towards where the Muscovite Embassy is camped and encounters

a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the

Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with the highest curiosity. The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish-coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person...he did not know whether he had heard her, tasted her, seen her, or all three together.” (Woolf 27)

Orlando encounters an androgynous figure, obscured by ungendered clothing, and is enticed and seduced by them. Upon further pondering, Orlando concludes this figure must be a boy and “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” (Woolf 28). However, as he and the figure skated closer and closer together, Orlando realizes “legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had those eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea” (Woolf 28).

In this brief, initial encounter with who he will learn to be Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovtich of the Muscovites, Orlando experiences many heightened emotions; he “trembled; turned hot; turned cold; longed to hurl himself through the summer air (Woolf 28). Through his first impression of the Muscovite princess, who will come to be affectionately nicknamed Sasha, Orlando complicates everything he once knew about sexuality, gender, and attraction. In many ways, this interaction is Orlando’s first introduction to much of what will shape his future: queer attraction and love, non binary and fluid gender, and gender ambiguity achieved through clothing. As Nancy Cervetti argues in “In the Breeches, Petticoats, and Pleasures of *Orlando*,” through Sasha we can see how “gender trouble is contagious in *Orlando*, a playful trouble that questions the

possibility, the need, or the advantage of any stable notion of identity” (Cervetti 169).

Throughout the course of the novel, Orlando will be ushered deeper and deeper into the possibilities of this unstable identity, but what allows for this change is meeting Sasha, witnessing her androgynous figure on the ice, and being enticed by it. Thus, I believe this moment is what constitutes the trope of the “life-changing encounter” for Orlando, another characteristic that cements *Orlando: A Biography*’s place as a work of traditional life writing.

In this section, I have addressed several major attributes of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* that solidify its distinction as a traditional work of life writing, as outlined by scholars in the field: the author is present in the text, it has one subject that is deeply explored, and it contains a life-changing encounter. However, this conclusion alone is not enough to substantiate my claim that *Orlando: A Biography* is an example of how life-writing and narrative work are of value to queer theory. In many ways, though *Orlando: A Biography* conforms to many of the expectations for traditional life writing, confirming that it is in fact a work of the genre as I argue, it also disrupts this tradition and queers it. Part of my initial claim has been proven: that *Orlando: A Biography* is indeed a work of life writing despite its fictional origins. In the next section, I will clarify and prove how the text is of use to queer theory as an academic field by illustrating the aspects of life writing *Orlando: A Biography* queers, and thus, explore examples of subversive queerness that can be found in documented lived experiences.

HOW DOES *ORLANDO: A BIOGRAPHY* QUEER LIFE WRITING?

In Pamela Caughie’s “The Temporality of Modernist Life Writing in the Era of Transsexualism: Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and Einar Wegener’s *Man Into Woman*,” she

calls *Orlando: A Biography* a prototype of the *transgenre*. *Transgenre*, as Caughie explains “reconfigures in life writing narratives not only notions of gender but also of time, identity, history” (Caughie 502). Though “*Orlando* has all the trappings of a biography” as a highlighted earlier, the inherent queerness of not only the subject but of the very structure of *Orlando: A Biography* allow for the text to serve as this reconfigured life writing narrative wherein queerness permeates the page (Caughie 512). However, the ability for the text to straddle both spaces, to be both a queer novel and a life writing narrative is imperative. I argue that to realize what life writing could offer to queer theory through the example of *Orlando: A Biography*, it must first be understood as a work of life writing, and only then as a work of queer life writing. Thus, moving forward, I will examine what *Orlando: A Biography* queers about life writing in the context of Caughie’s *transgenre*, the first element being time.

Time in *Orlando: A Biography* is imagined, configured, and played with in many different ways through many different avenues. In Jack Halberstam’s *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, he dissects what it means to have a queer temporality. “Queer time perhaps emerges most spectacularly,” he writes “at the end of the twentieth century, from within those gay communities whose horizons of possibility have been severely diminished by the AIDS epidemic” (Halberstam 2). Like queer theory itself, understandings of queer time emerged fairly recently when it was realized that even time performs queerly under the pressures of a heterosexist society. Continuing on, Halberstam states that queer time has to do with much more than a reconfiguration of death, future, and immediacy; it is also about “the potentiality of a life unscripted” (Halberstam 2). Though Halberstam directly cites “conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing” as

relinquishment from this scripted life, I want to take this a step further. Fear and proximity to death dominated understandings of queer temporalities well past the AIDS epidemic; so, what does this fear and proximity mean for a queer body whose life has yet to end and possibly never will? When the text finishes, Orlando is still alive, has lived for four hundred years, and has only aged approximately thirty-two years. It is clear that time is treated very queerly in this novel, fitting and expanding upon the paradigm that Jack Halberstam discusses in his book, but how does this understanding work with expectations of life writing? What does it mean for a work of life writing for the life to continue past what is on the page?

In discussing pitfalls of the traditional life writing genre, Marlene Kadar notes that it leaves “less room for non-linear narratives and fragments, and unpublished documents” (Kadar 4-5). To conclude, she advocates for a reimagined life writing that “problematizes *Literature*” or “writerly writing,” a form that would allow for more fluidity than what Peter Nagourney calls “the premise of a unified life.” (Kadar 12, Nagourney 92). Nagourney cites “the need for unity and order” in the life and in the subject as a necessity for one to write about the life of another. What can be gleaned from these statements is that time in traditional life writing is generally orderly and spatialized with a sense of direction. There is a certain temporal wholeness associated with the traditional life writing Kadar and Nagourney cite, an understanding of time in the text as singular and mobile to a conclusive point. *Orlando: A Biography*, in embracing queering of time, does not follow this trend of traditional biography that favors a “unified life.” The biographer himself describes this disunification found in Orlando’s life stating that

Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with

amazing punctuality has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length...Some weeks added a century to his age, others no more than three seconds at most. (Woolf, 72)

It is clear from this explanation by the biographer that Orlando's life is not what Nagourney would call unified and is understood as such through examining how time functions in the novel. However, *Orlando: A Biography* strays even further from a unified life in the way it adopts Halberstam's definition of queer time, taking this disunified life and queering it.

As Halberstam observes, a distance from childbearing and inheritance is part of what characterizes queer time. Though by the end of the novel Orlando has married into a heterosexual relationship with a man, her sex change acts as a physical affirmation of her queerness and eliminates the possibility of a non-queer future. When she returns to England and it is discovered that she is no longer Lord Orlando, she must go through a lawsuit to have her identity and property affirmed.

“The lawsuits are settled,” [Orlando] read out... “some in my favour, as for example... others not. Turkish marriage annulled (I was ambassador in Constantinople, Shel,” she explained). “Children pronounced illegitimate (they said I had three sons by Pepita, a Spanish dancer). So they don't inherit, which is all to the good.... Sex? Ah! What about my sex? My sex,” she read out with solemnity, “is pronounced indisputable, and beyond the shadow of a doubt (what was I telling you a moment ago, Shel?) Female”....though she was infinitely noble again, she was also excessively poor. (Woolf 186)

In this one moment, this sole exchange between Orlando and her now husband Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, or Shel, Orlando loses her children, her own inheritance, and any inheritance she would have passed down. In exchange, however, her identity as a woman is validated. This instance, in short, captures how Orlando embodies Halberstam's understanding of queer time. She loses what would ordinarily construct a heterosexual, reproductive future that Halberstam outlines because her sex changed, a transformation that illegitimated her children and disowned her inheritance, two experiences that, in Halberstam's analysis, construct heterosexual futurity.

According to Wendy Moffat, "notions of time have always been at the heart of the queer. Queer theory's project helped to dismantle the myth of transcendent time and sequential time that had shaped humanist criticism for a generation....this warns those of us who care about the future of the queer to resist normativity in our framing of the story that is to come" (Moffat 211). This resistance to normative temporal framing that Moffat cites is much of what shapes the inherent queerness of the *Orlando: A Biography*. In addition to Jack Halberstam's analysis of the characteristics of queer time that Orlando's narrative embraces, there are also less concrete instances of resisting normativity in the queer, temporal framing of the text. The novel comes to a close with several pages of internal meditation from Orlando on her life, finishing with the line: "and the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight" after Orlando herself declared that "nothing has changed" (Woolf 240, 241). Often, the biography of a life ends with death, or as Nigel Hamilton calls it, "a beautifully symbolic ending" to a biographical work (Hamilton 261). However, *Orlando: A Biography* ends with a timeline that extends beyond the text itself, a life that persists beyond the

normative biographical framing. Approximately three hundred years have passed in total since the novel began with Orlando as a young boy, and those years do not come to a close with the last page. Moffat's argument that the dismantling of normative assumptions of temporality and the resistance to conformity to a traditional narrative framework that are central to understandings of queer time are particularly evident in the expansive life of Orlando that continues on after Woolf wrote the last sentences. Between Halberstam and Moffat's interpretations, time can be understood as an element of *Orlando: A Biography* that establishes its categorization as Caughie's *transgenre*, and thus, queers traditional life writing.

The next pillar of Caughie's *transgenre* found in *Orlando: A Biography* that queers life writing is identity. According to Caughie, *Orlando: A Biography* "offers new ways to read sexual and gender identity *as narrative*" (Caughie 502). Following this logic, by embodying a queer identity through experiencing a gender transition and having an ambiguous sexuality, Orlando's character also queers the narrative. Caughie cites specific characteristics present in both the identity of Orlando and the structure of the text that further asserts her claim of identity as narrative, and even more so, queer identity as narrative: "contemporaneous theories of sexual identity" that manifest themselves in clothing, a "heightened attention to pronouns" (Caughie 512). To understand how a queering of identity contributes to the queering of the narrative, I will first examine how clothing works first as an agent of identity in the novel, which also largely constructs the overarching critique of the heteronormativity and convention that Woolf pokes fun at in the text, constituting much of what situates the novel as a parodic.

In her 1988 essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” Judith Butler states that “gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 519). Continuing on to say that “the possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts,” Butler’s analysis of performative and repeated acts gendering the body is evidenced in Orlando themselves and in his perception of others (Butler 520). Clothing, an example of this “stylization of the body,” becomes a prominent tool in articulating Orlando’s gender and understanding of gender upon returning to England from Turkey, now presenting physically as a woman. Orlando encounters the Archduchess Harriet, a former love interest who Orlando came to dislike. Orlando observes her and to themselves thinks she resembles a “monstrous hare” and embodies “a plague on women,” certainly a different interpretation than their first meeting wherein Orlando was overcome by a passion for her (Woolf 131). However, once the Archduchess observes that Orlando has become a woman, she sheds her attire and reveals herself to, in fact, be the Archduke Harry. He shares that “he had seen a portrait of Orlando had fallen hopelessly in love with him; that to compass his ends, he had dressed as a woman (Woolf 132). Here, clothing is used as a factor in a cultural milieu and a tool to win the affections of an individual assumed straight, as were the expectations of Elizabethan England. The Archduke thought if he could conform to the expectations of a partner for Orlando, then he could win his affections, almost as an avenue to express non normative sexual and romantic desire. When the Archduke Harry realizes that Orlando is a woman, he loses his attire that stylizes his body as feminine and attempts to court Orlando in a different

way. Clothing for the Archduke is not necessarily gender affirming, but it does emphasize the cultural compulsion to be perceived as situated within a normative sexual binary while addressing Orlando's own fascination with gender nonconformity. Woolf uses the Archduchess/Archduke first as an avenue through which to play with the gendered assumptions and performances of the time period in which the text was written, a tool that assists in constructing her larger critique of gender roles in the novel, but additionally as another means to introduce queer identity into the text. The Archduchess/Archduke, regardless of how their behavior interacts with cultural norms, at the very least cross-dresses and has queer, romantic feelings for Orlando. But because their gender and sexuality also disrupts expectations that Woolf wants to critique, the Archduchess/Archduke also works as an agent to help queer the narrative as a whole.

Additionally, the biographer's treatment of Orlando's own gender is often addressed through clothing. As Esther Sánchez-Pardo González points out, clothes are used more often than not to "provoke Orlando's awareness of her femininity" since her clothes are "rarely described in his life as a man...clothes, however, play a very important role in Orlando's portrait as a woman" (González, 80). For example, upon her boat journey back to England from Turkey, she begins to notice the obvious change in her body and identity through adjusting to her clothing, saying "these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. But....never have I seen my own skin look to such advantage as now" (Woolf 114). Orlando now notices the way Captain Bartolus and the other sailors on board her ship back home perceive her and what is revealed by her clothing, emphasizing a new, unfamiliar femininity and the clothing that comes with this role, observing that "if the sight of my ankles means death to an honest fellow who, no doubt, has a wife and family to support, I must, in all

humanity, keep them covered” (Woolf 116). Though Orlando does not feel changed in her understanding of herself upon her transformation, the clothing she adorns makes her aware of her embodiment in different ways as the narrative moves through her queer experiences.

Alternately, later in the text when Orlando as a woman goes out in public dressed like a man, she finds herself conforming once again to masculine traits and qualities. When she finds a black velvet suit that “fitted her to perfection” and made her look “the very figure of a noble Lord,” she finds “the freedom of her legs” again that had been painstakingly obstructed by petticoats, and ventures outside (Woolf 157). She meets a prostitute named Nell on the street, and her reliance on Orlando sparks masculine feelings in her, saying “to feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become a man” (Woolf 158). This scene in particular solidifies Christy L. Burns statement that “although the clothes control Orlando as she adjusts to womanhood, she is well aware that she is the one who chooses the clothes” (Burns 531). Judith Butler concludes her essay saying “gender is what is put on,” which, in regards to *Orlando: A Biography*, neatly summarizes the extent to which clothing affects how Orlando is viewed, and how she learns to view herself (Butler 531). Butler is certainly not arguing that gender is solely understood through clothing, but rather, clothing is an agent through which gender is performed. In changing between dresses and suits, Orlando explores how her gender is constituted through the freedoms and restrictions of her clothes. When she dresses like a man after transforming into a woman, she understands what Butler means by putting on gender; she is aware of the existence she is afforded in performing masculinity. The fact that she is cognizant of the effects of her clothing upon the presentation of herself and her gender allows her to

manipulate the situation with Nell, and control her identity in other moments where she chooses breeches over skirts.

Through all these characters, clothing is essential in both constituting their gender while simultaneously complicating the gender binary around which Woolf constructs much of the narrative play. What they wear plays a role in their romantic endeavors, public perception, and understanding of self. Because of the widespread use of clothing in tandem with gender and performance, it is evident that Woolf is using these garments deliberately as a tool allowing and encouraging the reader to examine exactly how and why clothing is such an important part in the novel. Clothing parodies society's diligent adherence to gendered conventions, as exemplified in Orlando slowly understanding the intricacies, nuances, and struggles of being a woman through her clothing more than any other embodied experience she has after her transition. The biographer contributes to this entangled understanding of gender and clothing by only describing a character's garments when they can be used to complicate the gender binary or, as Esther Sánchez-Pardo González says, "provoke" an awareness of gender when necessary to furthering Woolf's intentional disruption of gender convention by queering both its subjects and its structure (González 80).

Another element that contributes to how Woolf queers *Orlando: A Biography* and how *Orlando: A Biography* then queers life writing is the way gendered pronouns are addressed in the text. Pronouns serve not only as an avenue through which Orlando's own identity is addressed, explored, and subsequently queered, but also as example of queer identity merging with and expanding the text itself through word choice, working to support Caughie's argument of identity as narrative. The opening line of the novel, "he - for there could be no doubt of his sex," rapidly introduces the idea that pronoun use in the text will be

a way to complicate, articulate, and play with gender, since doubt of Orlando's sex is exactly what the plot of the novel is built around. (Woolf 11). These instances where Woolf uses pronouns to both regard Orlando's sex change and to play with how gender is constituted in language as a whole are sprinkled throughout the text in a way that contributes to the parody of gender performance Woolf wants to create, as well as introduces a complicated queer character present in Orlando. Upon Orlando's transformation, the biographer notes that "in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he'" (Woolf 102-103). The biography not only outwardly addresses the pronoun change to the reader, but also acknowledges that Orlando must use different pronouns for "convention's sake." Through this observation from the biographer through their language and word choice, we get both a queer character and an acknowledgement of the convention of gender presentation that dictates Orlando to be addressed as such. When Orlando, now as Lady Orlando, returns to her estate in England after her long stint in Turkey, her housekeeper Mrs. Grimsditch greets her with "Milord! Milady! Milady! Milord!" (Woolf 125). Christy L. Burns calls this dialogue Woolf's "great fun" with pronoun usage, as this initial exclamation from Mrs. Grimsditch is the only instance of confusion amongst those who knew Orlando as a man and are now seeing her as a woman.

As Burns explains, "if one might assume that sex is one of the single most essential attributes of identity, the self here is a collection of many possible sexualities. Note that the pronouns - their, his, her - are comfortably accommodated in a single 'identity' determined by memory chains" (Burns 350). The multiplicity of identity and sexuality that Burns references is created through the language of the narrative; here, Woolf constructs a complicated, yet playful queer identity through word choice alone. Further, this "heightened

attention to pronouns” that Caughie cites helps in realizing Woolf’s own positionality in writing the text as a way to disrupt conventions that construct gender as binary. Caughie concludes her analysis of how queerness and identity shape the very fabric of the text by stating that “*Orlando* insists that writing and identity, textuality and sexuality, the grammatical and the gendered, are learned together” (Caughie 517). Through both clothing and gendered pronouns as tools to explore gender in *Orlando* and to critique gender norms in the context of *Orlando: A Biography*, Pamela Caughie’s concept of identity as a narrative process that aids in creating the *transgenre* remains true to *Orlando: A Biography*’s project in queering life writing through the *transgenre*.

The last element that I want to discuss regarding the *transgenre* that *Orlando: A Biography* embodies and uses to effectively queer life writing is history. In Pamela Caughie’s analysis of history in the novel, she argues that time and identity are queered in tandem through Woolf’s use of historical framing, stating that “Woolf makes the art of prose fiction, specifically temporality and narration, central to identity” through how she “breaks down arbitrary historical divisions, renews the past in the present, immerses us in time, dramatizes how life and literature acquire a shape, and a value, within multiple pasts and always in relation to a present moment” (Caughie 503). History in *Orlando* occupies a unique space. It modulates between the background and the foreground of the text, and though England’s history and monarchy appear ubiquitous in the narrative, Woolf makes it malleable, using history to highlight changes in *Orlando* then letting fade into backdrop once more. History does not frame the text; instead, Woolf uses changes in *Orlando*’s identity to frame history.

When *Orlando* is a young, prosperous nobleman, the Queen, the court, and their affairs are very central to the novel and the narration. As *Orlando*’s lordship becomes less

important in defining who he is, as does the historical context that frames his lordship. This strategy thus confirms Caughie's argument by intrinsically linking identity and history together. However, as Orlando's unhappiness grows and he becomes increasingly dissatisfied with his role in the world, so does his relationship with the historical moment. His disillusionment is reflected in the text. It is not until Orlando seeks remedies for his declining happiness does he become reengaged with the world around him, but only to his advantage. As the biographer explains, "thus realizing his home was uninhabitable, and that steps must be taken to end the matter instantly, he did what any other young man would have done in his place, and asked King Charles to send him as Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople" (Woolf 87).

His request to leave England to find contentment elsewhere is the first and last time King Charles is mentioned. This also means a great number of years have passed in just a few pages. From the reign of Queen Elizabeth where the novel begins with Orlando aged roughly 15 to King James to King Charles, Orlando had supposedly "reached the age of thirty" where "time when he is thinking becomes inordinately long" and "time when he is doing becomes inordinately short" (Woolf 72). In comparing the historical timeline to the timeline of Orlando's life, it quickly becomes clear that they do not match up. Later on, Orlando lists many of the monarchs that have come and gone in her time: "Elizabeth; James; Charles; George; Victoria; Edward" (Woolf 221). Hundreds of years pass between the reign of the aforementioned kings and queens, and it is small moments like this that inform the reader of just how strange the relationship between history and time in Orlando's life is. After Orlando returns from Turkey to England as a woman, the biographer comments that "the Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun," (Woolf 165). This line

is one of the few instance that really call the historical timeline into perspective, informing the reader that the novel is roughly 200 years into the future from where it began. Woolf thus manipulates England's history in the novel to, in a sense, queer Orlando's own history by shaping, halting, and stretching the years that pass to mimic Orlando's own personal transformations.

Caughie summarizes her analysis of history, time, and identity by arguing that history is as temporally manipulated as identity, and so, can be queered as such, claiming that Historicizing cannot itself be a transhistorical act, flattening out different temporalities in reading across historical time. That is not time as a crumpled handkerchief but time as a sequence of discrete eras....Further, the metaphoric use of transsexuality is precisely one means by which to negotiate such narratives and their historical differences. Metaphors enable us to read sexual identity as a historically-specific narrative. Woolf's transsexual metaphorically links temporality (*trans* as movement) with sex and sexuality. Such metaphors do not elide the past but encode it in the writing of the present and future. (Caughie 505-506)

This tie between history and time in the bigger picture of Orlando's own timeline is thus another avenue through which *Orlando: A Biography* queers life writing. According to Caughie "*Orlando* reemplots life writing by changing the value readers tend to attach to certain kinds of facts and events" those facts and events often being historical moments and monarchies (Caughie 517). She continues on to state that "*Orlando* models a reading of the past with an eye toward the future that opens the possibility of a new form of life writing, a way of encountering what has not yet been, what has not yet entered the historical record"

(Caughie 518). By queering history through the model of the *transgenre*, Caughie argues that *Orlando: A Biography* also succeeds in queering life writing.

Lastly, a recurring frame inside of the novel in which these queer times, identities, and histories intimately weave together can be found in Orlando's manuscript "The Oak Tree." This metanarrative that Orlando writes while simultaneously being written is arguably the most tangible example of how the *transgenre* manifests. Over the course of Orlando's fantastically long life, "The Oak Tree" is written, rewritten, abandoned, and loved by Orlando, providing snapshots of how the background and the foreground of the text coalesce. In many ways, "The Oak Tree" mimics Orlando's personal transformations while also reflecting on the temporal and spatial context in which it was written, thus archiving Orlando's interaction with the queered pillars of the *transgenre*. The manuscript first enters the novel as "[Orlando's] boyish dream and very short," a reflection on Orlando's age and inability to cement a writing style (Woolf 71). From then on, "The Oak Tree" undergoes many changes in tandem with Orlando and in tandem with the world, and because of Orlando's unusually long life span that sees many different formations of popular writing, those changes are plentiful; "seven editions (the book had already gone into no less)" (Woolf 237). Here, time and history shape not only *Orlando: A Biography* but Orlando's own work of life writing by exploring how the expectations of the moment at hand attempt to fashion "The Oak Tree."

Gaura Narayan calls "The Oak Tree" the locus wherein "all of Orlando's many selves cohere around 'a single self, a real self,'" (Narayan 132; Woolf 230). This single, real self, however, is not necessarily a unified self. In Orlando's multiple moments of rewriting, the impetus to shape "The Oak Tree" to match what is popular and what is selling drives the

revision process. This act in itself mediates queerness and convention in its multiplicity, much like Orlando does. “The Oak Tree” is pushed to adapt to the popular characteristics of writing at the time of each revision and fails to do so, revealing an inherently queer underlying thread to the manuscript’s inability to take on the desired normative structure. Through this analysis, the selves of Orlando and the selves of “The Oak Tree” reflect one another: queer and not queer, normative and not normative. By the end of the novel, Orlando is ready to put “The Oak Tree” to rest and bury it at the base of the oak tree she once found in 1588, now hundreds of years in the past. In this moment, she reflects and asks herself “what has praise and fame to do with poetry?” and “was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?” (Woolf 237-238). In her previous failures to write what she thought should be written, her desires to achieve fame as a writer are complicated. Ultimately, she decides to not bury the text and the novel closes with Orlando and “The Oak Tree” in much the same position: unburied and non-dying. She wants to bury her past writing and realizes she cannot, just as she cannot bury her past selves as she realizes in this moment. Failure is a reflexive and inextricable tie between Orlando and “The Oak Tree,” affirming that the work is not only a glimpse of how expectations time and history are queered through its failures to conform, but also that the work acts as mimesis for Orlando’s identity and self, another mode through which the conditions of the *transgenre* become materialized.

The simultaneous processes through which *Orlando: A Biography* actively queers life writing become most visible when examining the novel as a model of the *transgenre* that Pamela Caughie sets out, a form of life writing that exists “not as an account of a life lived, but as the deliberate shaping of a narrative of a life that might be lived, and livable. The modernist *transgenre* as represented by *Orlando* is not about being true to life in the factual

sense but about the consequences for living of telling a different kind of story” (Caughie 517). The different kind of story that Caughie refers to here is a queer one, one that archives the lived experiences of a queer subject inside a text that is highly critical of heteronormative, binary determinants of the society in which it was constructed. Through examining time, identity, and history as elements of life writing that are not only present but queered in the text, I solidify the argument that *Orlando: A Biography* is more than a work of life writing, but in fact, a work of queer life writing.

CONCLUSION

In order to understand how Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography* queers life writing as a genre and thus serves as a platform for which to explore the value of life writing and lived experiences to queer theory, first I wanted to affirm the claim that the text is indeed a work a life writing. As a novel regarded by many as simply fictitious, treating *Orlando: A Biography* as a work life writing and understanding how it meets qualifications of traditional life writing is essential to then realize how it queers life writing. Through the biographer’s presence in the text, the treatment of Orlando as a subject, and the “life changing encounter,” it is clear that the novel conforms to many of the overarching expectations of life writing that categorizes it as such. But, through Pamela Caughie’s concept of the *transgenre*, *Orlando: A Biography* also complicates life writing by taking elements and effectively queering them. Through time, identity, and history, the pillars that Caughie cites as constituting what is queered about life writing in the *transgenre*, the novel situates itself as a model of queer life writing.

To conclude, I return to Wendy Moffat's analysis of queer life writing and critique of queer theory. Moffat cites a need to transcend "the empirical, the inductive, the grounded" in queer theory, ways of knowing that she argues has "occluded part of the story" of queer theory (Moffat 220). In positioning these modes of analysis as the only modes of analysis to produce a legitimized queer theory, the field excludes the "textured lives and innovations" of queer subjects in life writing that are largely ignored in an effort to maintain an academic identity that is empirical, inductive, and grounded. This assessment of life writing's role in queer theory is not an attempt to put theory and life writing in binary opposition. In actually evaluating what life writing can bring to queer theory, the creation of what Moffat calls "a synthetic exercise of finding a middle ground between the past and the present, but an electrical ground between theory and history" is established between epistemologies (Moffat 220). Whether synthetic or electrical, the middle ground created to bridge queer theory and life writing should not be one of binaries or one that claims life writing can make up for what queer theory lacks. I argue instead to examine what is left to be desired and explored while assessing them in tandem, as one archive of queer experience manifested in many different ways of knowing and being.

One of these desires, as I previously stated, is the hunt for a queer hero that is not disappointing, one that can "escape from the narrative pull of pathos or tragedy," and I argue that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* is a good place to start (Moffat 213). When the novel concludes, Orlando is alive and in love, caught in a moment of peace and reflection on her own growth and life experiences, both the extraordinary and the mundane. This is not to say Orlando did not come face to face with tragedy and trouble; she certainly did. The novel of her life, however, does not paint the tragedy and trouble as inherent to her existence as

queer. To further summarize this desire in the words of Wendy Moffat, “we can’t rush on to the future of queer studies because we don’t know it yet...the future of queer theory is in the past. It will come in queer life work” (Moffat 225). Much of what constructs *Orlando: A Biography* as life work appears to feed directly into contemporary conversations of queer theory, such as queer temporalities, while still piecing together a documented experience that is very (queerly) human. It is not separate from queer theory, it is not queer theory’s predecessor. It is an example of queer theory’s future. I believe through this work of rediscovering, relearning, and reunderstanding queer pasts in potentially unexpected places, such as the life writing of a fictional queer subject, a collaborative future of queer theory that is attentive to those who have navigated the past queerly is a road on which queer theory moves forward.

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