

ABSTRACT

JONES, JOANNA MEDLIN. Challenging Gender Roles in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. (Under the direction of Leila Silvana May.)

Clothing reinforces gender roles culturally assigned to men and women by emphasizing individuals' biological sex and encouraging them to behave in specific ways based on their sex. However, individuals can manipulate their clothing to challenge the gender roles assigned to them. The primary characters in Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* wear gender-deviant clothing to point out the constructed nature of gender and to assert their own identities independent of specific gender roles.

**CHALLENGING GENDER ROLES IN WILKIE COLLINS'S *THE WOMAN IN
WHITE* AND VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO***

by
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DEDICATION

To Stephen, who loves the strong woman I am.

To Brenda, who showed me the kind of woman I wanted to be.

To my mom, who deserved more.

PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY

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Introduction

In *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Judith Butler argues that, despite cultural assertions that certain attitudes, behaviors, or traits derive naturally from one's biological sex, gender actually functions as an artificial social construct entirely separate from sex to structure individuals' behavior and to reinforce cultural norms (6). Because society establishes gender roles and assigns meaning to the acts that signify gender, an individual can manipulate the social performances a culture recognizes and requires as gender-appropriate in order to subvert this gendered system (33-4). For example, since the culture imposes gendered expectations on the clothing deemed appropriate for women and men, the individual can use clothing that defies gender expectations to assert personal identity and to critique the culture's values and methods of enforcing those values. Two novels, Wilkie Collins's *The Woman in White* and Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, explore women's challenges to prescribed gender roles as they seek to redefine their culture's narrow definitions of how women should act and live.

Previous research on *The Woman in White* has investigated the characters' gender fluidity for a variety of purposes. Nina Auerbach views Marian Halcombe as the story's most important protagonist despite the presence of a primary male character (140), while Richard Collins sees Marian as important only insofar as she models for Walter Hartright the masculine role he struggles to fulfill (133). U. C. Knoepfelmacher discusses the characters' slipping gender roles as the author's deliberate assault on Victorian principles of orderliness (362), and Elana Gomel and Stephen Weninger explore how the novel uses clothing to depict the precarious

nature of gender itself (30). However, while these critics use the novel's blurred gender boundaries to discuss broad aspects of gender and culture, none of them reads the novel in terms of how the characters' consciousness of their own roles affects their gender performances. This omission leaves room to discuss ways the individual characters claim (or forfeit) agency in their own lives based on their willingness to create their own public identities and to assume control over the roles they play.

Critics discussing Woolf's *Orlando* have also surveyed a variety of aspects of both culture and gender. Laura Marcus views clothing as a way of performing both gender roles and sexual identity (121, 127). Lisa Rado insists that Orlando's androgynous nature within her body leaves her unable to experience her body sexually once she has become a woman, in effect leaving Orlando detached from part of herself (165). Suzanne Young discusses how clothes mask the body and therefore challenge the notion that gender roles naturally arise from biological sex (173), while Christy Burns insists that, while Orlando's sex change leaves her internal self unaffected, society forces her to accept a change in gender (351). All of these critics point out how Orlando must craft a public identity consistent with her experienced inner self, but rarely discuss the significance of the fact that Orlando must appropriate a masculine role different from her biological sex in order to achieve agency and independence. Her struggles to experience all aspects of a nongendered identity in a deeply patriarchal society force her to choose the external appearance of a sex unlike her body's, which in turn both limits and empowers her. As with *The Woman in White*, however, it is ultimately Orlando's awareness of her

own performance of a role that allows her to reclaim her life from limiting societal expectations. These bodies of research leave ample room to explore ways in which women's conscious performance of nontraditional gender roles allows them to achieve greater personal agency.

Theoretical Foundations

Judith Butler argues in *Gender Trouble* that a distinction between men and women is “unnatural and unnecessary” (38), and that the gender roles prescribed for men and women derive not from inherent differences between men and women but rather from the repetition of simple social acts that makes gender distinctions appear natural, at least until they are challenged. Butler argues that these “acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means” (136). Specifically, according to Butler, the fact that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances means that the very notions of an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity are also constituted as part of the strategy that conceals gender's performative character” (141).

While the need to mold and monitor these roles belies their naturalness, the cultural gendering of individuals continues primarily because it appears transparent.

According to Butler,

Gender is, thus, a construction that regularly conceals its genesis; the tacit collective agreement to perform, produce, and sustain discrete and polar genders as cultural fictions is obscured by the credibility of those productions—and the punishments that attend not agreeing to believe in

them; the construction 'compels' our belief in its necessity and naturalness. (140)

While most individuals are unaware that they are (or are becoming) gendered, individuals can establish personal agency by manipulating those gender roles. If gender is created by a repetition of acts, Butler argues, "'agency,' then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition It is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (145). Essentially, individuals seeking to escape gender can play with the rules that create it in order to claim their own meanings for those social acts.

Clothing plays a crucial role in this gendering of individuals. Diana Crane asserts in *Fashion and Its Social Agendas: Class, Gender, and Identity in Clothing* that "clothes as artifacts 'create' behavior through their capacity to impose social identities" (2). More specifically, she claims that "Fashionable clothes are used to make statements about social class and social identity, but their principal messages are about the ways in which women and men perceive their gender roles or are expected to perceive them" (16). Individuals do not choose clothing based on innate gender preferences, but rather are encouraged to wear clothes that will reinforce the gender roles society encourages them to play. Crane points out that, during the Victorian era, "a basic premise of the dominant ideology concerning women was the belief in fixed gender identities and in the existence of major differences between men and women" (16), and clothing clearly reinforced the narrowly-defined roles deemed appropriate for women and men. Far more than mere personal ornamentation, clothing emphasized the differences between men and women and

thus “exemplified the doctrine of separate spheres that was supported by other social institutions” and, more specifically, “suited the subordinate and passive social roles women were expected to perform” (100). According to Crane, “Dresses were composed of several separate garments and enormous quantities of fabric These clothes constricted the body and made any form of movement difficult” (100). In addition to the physical burden these heavy and restrictive clothes placed on women’s bodies, they also devoured women’s time, because “each occasion required a specific type of dress, necessitating constant wardrobe changes” (100). In a cultural system that privileged men’s roles over women’s, clothing reinforced those distinctions by restricting women’s bodies and leaving little time for meaningful social contributions and thus “symbolized women’s exclusion from male occupations and their economic dependence on husbands and male relatives” (100-1).

Dani Cavallero and Alexandra Warwick take a similar approach in *Fashioning the Frame: Boundaries, Dress, and the Body*, where they claim that “dress is instrumental to the collective orchestration of cultural experience through its ability to cast the body into moulds that correspond to certain socially agreed definitions of an intelligible reality” (7). In a society that enforces a strict dichotomy between men and women, masculine and feminine, clothing reflects this difference in a way that not only affects external appearance but also psychologically influences the people wearing the clothes. Cavallero and Warwick assert that “dress does not enact its framing strategies merely as a form of external control, by means of corsets and germane instruments and garments, as those strategies are internalized to the extent that the subject is fashioned from the inside no less than from the outside”

(15). However, if clothing can successfully 'fashion' the individual by reinforcing the gender roles required of him or her, the individual may also be able to challenge those prescribed gender roles through the conscious manipulation of gender-deviant clothing.

Obviously, clothing serves as only one component of gender construction. *The Woman in White* deals with other behavioral markers of gender, whereas *Orlando* places greater emphasis on personal attire. In each of these novels, however, conflict arises when female characters challenge the limited (and limiting) gender roles assigned to them.

Chapter One
**“Anomalies and Contradictions”: Ambiguous Gender Markers
in Wilkie Collins’s *The Woman in White***

In Wilkie Collins’s sensation novel *The Woman in White*, the two main characters, Walter Hartright and Laura Fairlie, act out typical Victorian gender roles while other characters assert their personalities outside of traditional gender roles. Richard Collins says, “Collins is careful to place each principal character along a continuum between masculine and feminine poles” so that “the wooden Walter and the anemic Laura are poles of standard Victorian notions of gender . . . by whom we measure the more interesting characters of mixed gender who transgress the usual boundaries and subvert Victorian standards” (144). Collins uses his “more interesting characters” to explore gender and, ultimately, to submit his own challenge to stultifying gender roles by crafting characters that seem “pieced together from contradictory fragments of personality and anatomy” (R. Collins 148).

Wilkie Collins accomplishes much of this gender slippage through the characters’ use of clothing. According to Gomel and Weninger,

Clothes function in *The Woman in White* as a locus for the instabilities and tensions that the novel explores: the frightening slippage of all identity, most especially the precariousness of gender and class. It becomes a tool for exploring the issues of nature and artifice, of the biological body and the (im)possibility of its social reading. The ‘tell-tale surface’ of the clothed body appears both a confirmation of its inherent instability and as an attempt to master and delimit this instability through the masquerades of social power. (30)

As the characters choose specific articles of clothing, they can exhibit personal agency by fashioning themselves contrary to social custom and thereby challenging Victorian concepts of fixed gender roles.

The study and expression of gender focuses on clothing before one even opens the novel. The title, *The Woman in White*, “prefigures the clash of body and clothes in the constitution of identity” (Gomel and Weninger 30). For the Victorians, the word “woman” signified not only biological sex but a gendered meaning so specific that the titular woman would not require an individuating name. In addition, the woman’s white clothing takes on significance precisely because there is a woman wearing it; for the Victorians (and even for modern readers), the title would take on an entirely different meaning as *The Man in White* or even *The Person in White* because of the cultural assumptions inherent in the word “woman.” Unnamed and identified only by gender and clothing, the title character alerts us to the importance of these two signifiers before we begin to read.

The first words of the novel’s Preamble also set the tone for the author’s dissection of gender roles: “This is the story of what a Woman’s patience can endure, and of what a Man’s resolution can achieve” (1). The capitalization of “Woman” and “Man” signifies that the narrator, Walter Hartright, agrees with his culture’s strict delineation of individuals based on biological sex. Furthermore, the roles the two archetypes assume in the Preamble, of womanly “patience” and manly “resolution,” demonstrate Hartright’s belief not only in separate sexes but in distinct genders and gender roles. If women must have “patience” and “endure,” Hartright limits them to roles of passive observers with limited agency. On the other hand, men with “resolution” who “achieve” their ambitions can use their desire to make things happen, actively transforming their environment to accomplish their purposes. However, while Hartright believes strongly in this binary division of genders, one

predicated on strong Victorian notions of gender differences, Nina Auerbach reminds us that the Preamble's "poles of conventional masculinity and femininity are reasonably good introductions to Laura Fairlie, the nebulous, incompetent heroine, and her colorless suitor, Walter Hartright" (136). Because the two main characters remain vapid and uninteresting as they perfectly fulfill their prescribed gender roles, Collins's novel as a whole challenges rather than reinforces the assumptions put forth in the Preamble by focusing the reader's real interest on the many characters who defy cultural expectations of gendered behavior.

Along the spectrum of gender roles, Laura Fairlie and her half-sister, Anne Catherick, most fully embody Victorian idealized femininity, a set of roles outlined by Lynn Pykett to include "the domestic ideal, or angel in the house; the madonna; the keeper of the domestic temple; asexuality; passionlessness; innocence; self-abnegation; commitment to duty; self-sacrifice; the lack of a legal identity; dependence; slave; victim" (16). Just as this categorization moves smoothly from sacred idealism to childishness to lack of personhood, so both Laura and Anne become assimilated by others' desires, never acting on, and rarely even expressing, wishes of their own. For instance, neither Laura nor Anne writes her own narrative; instead, their stories are told from other characters' points of view, further emphasizing the voicelessness and lack of agency perpetuated by their embodiment of the Victorian feminine ideal.

Hartright first meets Anne Catherick at the crossroads on the way to London and immediately begins to interpret her appearance, behavior, and motivations in a way that will affirm his own masculinity: "There, as if it had that moment sprung out

of the earth or dropped from the heaven—stood the figure of a solitary Woman” (14). As in the Preamble, his capitalization of the word “Woman” both replaces her name and, in his mind at least, tells us all we need to know about her. She appears agitated and lost, but Hartright seems intent on discerning not the cause of her need but whether that need places them in the suitably gendered roles of vulnerable woman and protective man. He describes her as “dressed from head to foot in white garments” (14), verifying her body is suitably covered for a public encounter and at the same time remarking on its whiteness, a blankness on which he writes his own interpretation of her. As he examines her clothing, he remarks to himself that “her dress—bonnet, shawl, and gown all of white—was, so far as I could guess, certainly not composed of very delicate or very expensive materials What sort of woman she was, and how she came to be out alone in the high-road, an hour after midnight, I altogether failed to guess” (15). Hartright attempts to read her social status and even her moral character simply by looking at her clothes, and is astounded that he cannot determine whether they, in fact, represent the innocence and vulnerability he expects of young women. Despite his reservations, Hartright says, “The loneliness and helplessness of the woman touched me. The natural impulse to assist her and to spare her, got the better of the judgment, the caution, the worldly tact, which an elder, wiser, and colder man might have summoned to help him” (16). Even as he mentions his “natural impulse” to assist her, indicating his chivalric belief that men should protect women, he also acknowledges that older and more experienced men can successfully suppress that “impulse,” thus causing one to question whether it is, in fact, “natural.” When she thanks him for his offer to help her, “The first touch of

womanly tenderness that I had heard from her, trembled in her voice as she said the words; but no tears glistened in those large, wistfully attentive eyes” (16). In the midst of uncertain danger, Walter concerns himself as much with whether this woman correctly plays the role of helpless damsel as with determining the cause of her distress. While she fails to cry, she does look at him “with a pleading fear and confusion,” which apparently satisfies him that, because “Here was a stranger utterly and helplessly at my mercy—and that stranger was a forlorn woman,” he should continue to assist her and thus play his own role as gallant protector (16).

After Hartright helps the woman find a cab, he overhears a man tell a police officer that the woman has escaped from an asylum. Hartright immediately sifts through his memories, wondering whether she was truly insane and if he did right to enable her escape. He tells himself her earlier behavior “suggested the conclusion, either that she was naturally flighty and unsettled, or that some recent shock of terror had disturbed the balance of her faculties” (22); Hartright remains oblivious to the fact that either possibility is gendered. His assumption that woman’s agitation must somehow be linked to mental instability, either natural or caused by traumatic events, reflects his own gendered biases more than it does her state of mind.

With the woman out of sight, he wonders, “What had I done? Assisted the victim of the most horrible of all false imprisonments to escape; or cast loose on the wide world of London an unfortunate creature whose actions it was my duty, and every man’s duty, mercifully to control?” (22). Again, Hartright creates a limiting binary that allows the woman little room for agency: either she is a “victim” or she must be under “every man’s . . . control.” These assumptions again serve only to

validate his own gender role; if she was a victim, he did right by helping her because she was powerless to help herself; if she were truly mad, he should have assumed his “duty” to “control” her. Hartright never questions his assumptions about men’s or women’s roles, because his own role grants him a personal agency he is unwilling to allow the mysterious woman to assume in her own life. Because he seeks to limit her agency, he also limits his ability to conceive of her as an individual with her own purposes; after his first night at Limmeridge House, Walter remarks to himself, “Although the woman in white was still in my mind, the image of her seemed to have grown dull and faint already” (24). Because he has successfully relegated her to a passive “image” rather than a fully autonomous human being, he begins almost immediately to forget her as his own plans to advance his career (and ultimately his social status) begin to take effect.

Throughout the novel, Anne Catherick remains inextricably linked to Laura Fairlie, whom Walter initially describes as “A fair, delicate girl, in a pretty light dress . . . with truthful innocent blue eyes” that “shine . . . with the light of a purer and a better world” (40). While his words might accurately be used to describe a child or adolescent, Laura is actually twenty years old, only a few months from legal adulthood. With her fragile appearance, her “simple muslin dress,” and her angelic appearance, Laura typifies the Victorian angel in the house (40). In fact, Hartright describes her effect on him in the terms of a religious experience: “The woman who first gives life, light, and form to our shadowy conceptions of beauty, fills a void in our spiritual nature that has remained unknown to us till she appeared” (40). However, even as he marvels at her perfect femininity and the way it seems to validate his

own masculinity, Hartright is struck by “another impression, which, in a shadowy way, suggested to me the idea of something wanting. At one time it seemed like something wanting in *her*; at another, like something wanting in myself, which hindered me from understanding her as I ought. The impression was always strongest . . . when she looked at me” (41). Confronted by ideal Victorian womanhood in the form of an angelic child, Hartright senses Laura lacks something even as he remains unaware that his incomplete mental picture of her diminishes her personhood. This inability to understand her, an unconscious acknowledgment that there is more to her than his superficial appraisal of her femininity, is both heightened and threatened by her direct gaze, which presents the possibility of an untapped, hidden will within her that challenges his understanding of her passivity and, subsequently, his own masculinity. As Jenny Bourne Taylor explains,

Hartright’s vision of Laura shifts between different implied kinds of projection as he switches between his recall of his first impression of her and his later analysis of it. But it is a shift between forms of absence, both of which mean that ‘Laura’ can only be perceived as . . . neo-platonic ideal; she remains a spirit, a ghost, a spectral illusion. Thus he can only know her through sensations which are but pale reflections of an internal ideal, and which are literally manifested as lack, as ‘wanting.’ (117)

Hartright does not want to know Laura because understanding her as a person outside of her limiting feminine role would threaten his own patriarchal assumptions which privilege men’s agency over women’s.

When Laura asks him not to compliment her “‘Because I shall believe all that you say to me,’” he insists that “‘In those few words she unconsciously gave me the key to her whole character” (42). Hartright does not try to understand Laura as more than a paragon of femininity, but rather tries to essentialize her within a gendered

worldview, using her statement to validate what he already believes about her femininity by claiming he now understands her completely. Of course, his limited version of understanding her means simply finding her in further agreement with his preconceived notion of what she should be. D. A. Miller explains how, despite Walter's claim to know Laura completely, he also makes statements which belie those words:

'I shrank,' says Walter at one point, 'I shrink still—from invading the innermost sanctuary of her heart, and laying it open to others, as I have laid open my own' [54]. His many such gallant pronouncements entail an unwillingness to *know* Laura, the better to affirm without interference the difference between him and her, man and woman Laura is a closed sanctuary, Walter is an open book, but it is Walter here who empowers himself to decide, by his shrinking reticence, what Laura shall be. (203-4)

Because Walter tells us Laura's story and explains his reactions to her without the possibility of her contradiction, he can essentially edit both of them to place himself in the best possible light while relegating her to the thoroughly gendered role he requires of her. Of course, this underlying condescension toward Laura remains evident to his readers if not to himself.

At their first dinner together, Hartright says, "Miss Fairlie was unpretendingly and almost poorly dressed in plain white muslin. It was spotlessly pure; it was beautifully put on; but still it was the sort of dress which the wife or daughter of a poor man might have worn . . . due to her natural delicacy of feeling and natural intensity of aversion to the slightest personal display of her own wealth" (44-5). Laura uses her white dress, similar in its simple design and poor fabric to the one Anne Catherick wore on the road to London, to make a personal statement regarding her reluctance to parade her wealth and position. Unable to take any

positive action in her life, either to do good with her money or to extricate herself from the family to whom the money belongs, Laura alters her clothing to present herself as a diminished version of her class. However, her manipulation of her clothing does not challenge gender roles, but instead keeps her embedded in the self-renunciating role of Woman as she chooses to appear to be less (economically) powerful than she really is.

After dinner, Walter notices Laura in a new way, as “a white figure, alone in the moonlight; in her attitude, in the turn of her head, in her complexion, in the shape of her face, the living image, at that distance and under those circumstances, of the woman in white!” (50) What has been obvious to the reader, that Hartright has written on Laura his own version of how she should perform her gender role just as he did with Anne Catherick, suddenly becomes obvious to Hartright himself. Instead of challenging his own limited viewpoint of Laura or of women’s roles in general, however, Hartright uses this realization to entangle Laura further with his condescending attitude toward Anne Catherick. “That ‘something wanting’ was my own recognition of the ominous likeness between the fugitive from the asylum and the heiress of Limmeridge House!” (50). Just as he narrowed Anne Catherick’s role to that of victim or madwoman needing a man’s control, so he limits Laura to her economic position, one from which she herself has tried to create a distance by wearing a simple dress. However, her use of the white dress does not accomplish her purpose in Hartright’s mind, but rather invites a comparison with another woman in white over whom he has already assumed the right to control.

Once Hartright makes the connection between the two half-sisters, the

novel's plot plays with their physical similarity and willingness to perform the gender roles assigned to them to make important statements about the perilous nature of constructed gender roles. Ironically, this excessive femininity enabled Anne Catherick's escape from the asylum; Anne herself says, "It was easy to escape, or I should not have got away. They never suspected me as they suspected the others. I was so quiet, and so obedient, and so easily frightened" (84). After her escape, Anne consistently chooses white clothing because Laura's mother, Mrs. Fairlie, told her "little girls of her complexion looked neater and better in all white than in anything else" (49) and passed on to her Laura's cast-off clothes. Taylor claims, "What is weird about Anne is her obedience and docility, her perpetual childlikeness," which "suggests the pathologization of feminine passivity" (105, 106). By clinging to the clothing of her childhood, Anne, who is older than Laura and already legally a woman, positions herself permanently as a little girl.

Anne's tenacious clinging to the simple white dresses reminiscent of her childhood unwittingly demonstrates the ridiculousness of the cultural expectation that women remain perpetual children, yet this is precisely how others see Anne's half-sister, Laura. In fact, as she recovers from the trauma of her illegal incarceration in the asylum, "Laura's growing self-possession is marked by her realization that she is economically and sexually powerless and treated like a child" (Taylor 129). However, this "realization" only extends so far as her immediate circumstances within her home; Laura never seems to realize that, by continuing to play the gendered role required of her, she forfeits the possibility of meaningful independence.

Much of the convoluted plot occurs through a simple change of Laura and Anne's clothing, a seemingly superficial change with astounding psychological consequences: "Just as Laura later becomes Anne Catherick by dressing in her clothes, Anne becomes Laura by dressing in hers, a slippage of both women's identities" (Gomel and Weninger 45). Because the comportment of both Anne and Laura typifies Victorian gender roles, they have no independent identity outside those roles, and so become interchangeable bodies in an elaborate plot beyond their making. This plot succeeds in creating suspense, but also becomes subversive by using "Laura/Anne as an exploration of the cultural and psychological meaning of Woman-as-Blank" (Gomel and Weninger 47). In this reading, the white dress takes on a prescribed gender role independent of Anne or Laura's purposes for their own clothing. Instead of allowing Anne to reclaim her lost happiness or Laura to hide her wealth,

the white dress is femininity as a negative identity that excludes its wearer from the matrix of social relations, makes her nameless, speechless, incarcerated, buried alive. It is a shroud of the social self. But—and this is where Collins's deployment of fashion has truly far-reaching implications—the novel does not rest with depicting femininity as lack. It shows that femininity becomes usable by patriarchy precisely through the cultural inscription of woman as something that 'cannot be' . . . Her white dress becomes an empty slate on which to inscribe the desired identity: Laura Fairlie, Lady Glyde, Anne Catherick, Laura Hartright. (Gomel and Weninger 47)

Because Laura has no identity of her own outside the gender role prescribed her, she can become anyone that others, especially men, desire. Miller points out how in fact her incarceration in an asylum under Anne's name, which "renders Laura's body docile, and her mind imbecile, also fits her to incarnate the norm of the submissive Victorian wife" (Miller 202). Laura's lack of meaningful self-created identity outside

of culturally-defined femininity serves first to place her in a madhouse and then in a marriage to Hartright where the only expectation of her is that she continue to play a limiting feminine role.

Laura's other half-sister, Marian Halcombe, exhibits a stark contrast to Laura and Anne's debilitating passivity. Our first introduction to Marian is through Walter Hartright's eyes when, on entering a room, he finds Marian looking out the window and takes the opportunity to make a leisurely study of her figure: "I was struck by the rare beauty of her form, and by the unaffected grace of her attitude" (24). Richard Collins points out that "Walter's initial description of Marian shows a painterly eye for detail . . . the more he stares at her, the less she is a woman and the more she becomes his metaphor for her, a statue, a work of art" (R. Collins 146). By appraising her as a piece of art, Hartright simultaneously depersonalizes her and establishes himself as rightful judge; as a drawing-master, he presumes a superior knowledge of the suitability of her body as art, even as he frankly appreciates her body from a masculine perspective: "Her figure was tall, yet not too tall; comely and well-developed, yet not fat . . . ; her waist, perfection in the eyes of a man, for it occupied its natural place, it filled out its natural circle, it was visibly and delightfully undeformed by stays" (24).

Gomel and Weninger point out that the stays, or corset, "was not merely a ridiculously uncomfortable undergarment but the principal marker of femininity in the fashion code of the time" (33). Hartright, whose encounter with Anne Catherick demonstrated an expectation that women precisely follow established gender roles in order to confirm his own masculinity, seems not to mind when "Marian's disdain of

the corset flouts this sartorial code and sends a signal about her gender ambiguity . . . Her uncinched waist is seen by Hartright as erotic precisely by virtue of its difference from the norm” (33). As long as she looks out the window and does not return his appraising gaze, he gladly allows Marian some literal flexibility with gendered clothing in order to increase his sexual enjoyment of her form.

However, while content to allow Marian’s body to be uninhibited by stays and the social constraints they enforce, he does expect her to remain feminine in every other detail. Excited from staring at her body, he experiences a “flutter of expectation to see her face clearly. She left the window—and I said to myself, The lady is dark. She moved forward a few steps—and I said to myself, The lady is young. She approached nearer—and I said to myself (with a sense of surprise which words fail me to express), The lady is ugly!” (24). Miller says, “the passage develops all the rhetorical suspense of a striptease . . . when, at the climactic moment of unveiling, the woman’s head virtually proves her a man in drag” (205); one can practically hear Hartright’s sexual interest deflate. However, his description of Marian’s “ugliness” reflects more of Hartright’s gendered expectations than it does of Marian’s actual physical form: “The lady’s complexion was almost swarthy, and the dark down on her upper lip was almost a moustache. She had a large firm, masculine mouth and jaw; prominent, piercing, resolute brown eyes; and thick, coal-black hair, growing unusually low down on her forehead” (24-5). Leila May says that “Marian is ‘ugly’ only insofar as she is masculine” (132), and that Hartright himself admits he is “almost repelled by the masculine form and masculine look of the features in which the perfectly shaped figure ended” (25). For Hartright, Marian’s

greatest crimes against his sensibilities seem to be not her physical face and head but the unfeminine, even masculine, traits he ascribes to her resolute jaw and her open gaze: “Her expression—bright, frank, and intelligent, appeared—while she was silent, to be altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability, without which the beauty of the handsomest woman alive is beauty incomplete” (25). Walter expects women to be “gentle” and “pliable” to verify their need for his own masculinity, and so discredits Marian’s beauty when he realizes she does not fit his expectations of how a woman should look to him (or at him). While Walter feels threatened by “Marian’s sudden transformation from the object that Walter looks at into the subject whose ‘piercing’ eyes might look back at him,” his “recoil carries the ‘instinctive’ proof . . . both of his competence in a male code of sexual signs (which Marian’s monstrosity, far from compromising, offers the occasion for rehearsing and confirming) and of his own stable, unambiguous position in that code (as a man, who judges with ‘the eyes of a man’)” (Miller 206). Marian’s looking at him undercuts the artistic and patriarchal superiority he assumes over her and all women by suggesting his masculinity, rather than a natural and necessary emblem of his will to power in the world, can be manufactured at will by the very women over whom he assumes authority. Walter rejects Marian as a suitably feminine woman not because of her “almost” moustache but because her face reflects an inner strength which challenges his understanding of his own masculinity.

Richard Collins says, “Marian’s moustache is the key to the shock Hartright feels in his first meeting with Marian and the key to Collins’s observation of

ambiguous gender” (137). However, her moustache, a physical attribute Marian cannot change, is not the only source of ambiguity here. Gomel and Weninger remind us that, “Unlike her swarthy face, Marian’s uncinched waist is a product of culture, not nature” (29). Marian’s decision not to wear stays does not make her masculine, but is rather a conscious rejection of the feminine role required of her:

Marian’s ‘undeformed’ natural body becomes involved in a complex cultural negotiation of gender codes in which its very naturalness is read as both deviant and provocative. Her fashion statement neither resolves the paradox of her body nor hides its real gender but rather reduplicates the ambiguities: she is female but not feminine, alluring but not beautiful, masculine but not male. (Gomel and Weninger 33)

What Hartright perceived as a delectable view of her unrestrained form is actually Marian’s conscious rejection of Victorian femininity, a deliberate act whose underlying motives Hartright would certainly not approve.

Facial hair notwithstanding, Marian cannot be a man, but she remains unwilling to play the feminine role required of her. In fact, her disdain for Victorian standards of femininity echoes throughout the text. In her first conversation with Hartright, she tells him that Laura “is in her own room, nursing that essentially feminine malady, a slight headache” (25). This statement cues Hartright that, because Laura conforms more exactly to feminine roles, she may be a more acceptable woman in his sight. It also signifies that Marian is aware of the gender roles required of women, but unlike Laura does not simply play the role given to her; she instead makes deliberate choices about whether to follow the prescribed feminine role. Marian does not mock Laura for hiding away because of a headache, as evidenced by her love and concern for her half-sister’s well-being throughout the remainder of the text, but rather mocks the standards of behavior which require

women to play a retiring, passive role Marian has no desire to fill.

She then informs him two other young ladies left the previous day to escape an atmosphere of excessive quarreling. Marian asks him, "How can you expect for women to dine together alone every day, and not quarrel? We are such fools, we can't entertain each other at table. You see I don't think much of my own sex, Mr. Hartright . . . no woman does think much of her own sex, although few of them confess it as freely as I do" (26). Again, Marian is aware of a distinction between herself and the other women. She includes herself in the "we" of women who quarrel because of a lack of "flirtable, danceable, small-talkable" (and presumably marriageable) men (25), but at the same time distances herself from other women who seek fulfillment in superficial relationships with men because she does not. When Marian says women cannot get along with each other, Hartright assumes she means because they are jealous of male attention and of each other's alleged feminine accomplishments; Marian, however, "does not think much" of women because they continue to play the insipid roles required of them, roles that pit them against each other in a competition for male attention and marriage rather than allowing them to engage in more worthwhile and meaningful pursuits. Her direct discussion of these issues also challenges Hartright to reevaluate his own understanding of women's roles in society, a challenge of which he remains embarrassingly unaware.

Marian's keen awareness of the difference between herself and other (feminine) women also reveals itself when she catalogs the distinctions between herself and Laura: "I am dark and ugly, and she is fair and pretty. Everybody thinks

me crabbed and odd (with perfect justice); and everybody thinks her sweet-tempered and charming (with more justice still). In short, she is an angel; and I am—Try some of that marmalade, Mr. Hartright, and finish the sentence, in the name of female propriety, for yourself” (26-7). Marian acknowledges Laura as an “angel” in the house while she, in refusing to play that feminine role, becomes literally the opposite. However, “female propriety” dictates that Marian cannot voice aloud what the opposite of an “angel” would be. Forced to operate from within a gendered system, Marian asserts her own non-feminine identity through ironically self-deprecating humor, essentially acknowledging her own failure or unwillingness to play the feminine role as “she incarnates that wit which men familiarly direct against women who are ‘altogether wanting in those feminine attractions of gentleness and pliability’” (Miller 206). Miller sees her refusal to be gendered as a criticism of cultural distinctions based on sexual difference: because Marian is neither male nor female, she offers a direct challenge to ways in which the idea of strict gender roles “neutralized, in the root as well as derived sense of the word, . . . any sexuality—female and/or male—that cannot be reduced in either term of a phallic binarism” (206-7).

This binarism takes on particular importance as Marian deliberately sets herself apart from women and their pursuits and aligns herself firmly with men: “Miss Fairlie plays delightfully. For my own poor part, I don’t know one note of music from the other; but I can match you at chess, backgammon, écarté, and (with the inevitable female drawbacks) even at billiards as well” (27). The pastimes Marian prefers and has mastered involve mental or physical prowess women are assumed

not to possess; by informing her new visitor that she can effectively challenge him in these activities, she establishes herself as not only a formidable woman but also a decidedly nonfeminine relative of Laura.

Aware of Laura's social vulnerability as an innocent Victorian woman, Marian assumes the (masculine) responsibility of protecting Laura's interests. After Walter and Laura fall in love, Marian must inform Walter that Laura is already engaged, essentially taking on the role of a male family member by determining his ineligibility as a suitor. Marian confronts Hartright's love for Laura man to man, with directness and forceful purpose: "Her large black eyes were rooted on me . . . 'Crush it!' she said. "Here, where you first saw her, crush it! Don't shrink under it like a woman. Tear it out; trample it under foot like a man!" (59). By establishing eye contact and encouraging Hartright to face his own troubles "like a man," Marian appeals to his belief in a gendered system in which she herself has refused to take part. However, her admonition "clearly reveals the 'constructedness' of gender terms: while their mutual delimitation is clear, the signifiers 'man' and 'woman' do not operate in a naturally fixed constellation when Marian is being 'manly' and Walter is acting 'womanly'" (Hall 160-1). As with Anne and Laura, Hartright depends on Marian to validate his sense of his own masculinity. However, the fact that Marian realizes his need for this type of encouragement ultimately undermines the validity of the masculine role he seeks to play even as it further reveals her own distance from the gendered system; a gendered Victorian woman would passively try to influence a man's behavior by carefully fulfilling her own role instead of overtly instructing him as to how to play his part.

Marian's ultimate refusal to play the feminine role occurs when she spies on the novel's villains, Sir Percival Glyde and Count Fosco¹. While needing to eavesdrop on their conversation in order to protect Laura's interests, Marian nonetheless admits that, "Strongly as I was fortified in my resolution by the desperate nature of our situation, I hoped most fervently that I might escape this last emergency. My courage was only a woman's courage, after all; and it was very near to failing me" (282). Even as Marian challenges gender roles by taking action her culture would never allow women to pursue, she must rely on cultural notions of gendered emotions to express her apprehension; although Marian experiences a lack of courage not bound by sex or gender, she lacks the language to explain her fear in nongendered terms.

Marian's plan consists of removing her feminine articles of clothing and climbing onto the roof to eavesdrop on Percival and Fosco's plans. She explains why she changes her clothing to climb onto the roof:

A complete change in my dress was imperatively necessary, for many reasons. I took off my silk gown to begin with, because the slightest noise from it, on that still night, might have betrayed me. I next removed the white and cumbersome parts of my underclothing, and replaced them by a petticoat of dark flannel. Over this, I put my black traveling cloak, and pulled the hood on to my head. In my ordinary evening costume, I took up the room of three men at least. In my present dress, when it was held close about me, no man could have passed through the narrowest spaces more easily than I. (283)

By removing the markers that define her as female and by wearing dark clothing and hiding her head, Marian becomes invisible, allowing the darkness to hide both her

¹ While Fosco challenges traditional masculinity with his feminized clothing, fondness for small animals, and excessive love of sweets, a gender-deviant man still possesses more political power and personal freedom than any woman, as demonstrated by Fosco's taming of his formerly strong-willed wife.

subversively clothed body and her decidedly unfeminine actions. In order to claim the right to action, even action that will protect a female family member in a dynamic in which she has previously functioned almost as a brother, Marian must hide what she is doing, to protect her both from the men's detection and the censure of her culture. Auerbach says Marian

must be fiction's first female detective, and she is certainly the most versatile, for in addition to skill as acrobat and eavesdropper she gains salient information in oracular dreams and trances. In fact, Collins can prevent her physical and mystical prowess from ending the novel prematurely only by striking her down with a violent illness just as she is about to spoil the suspense. (137-8)

To avoid disturbing the gendered expectations of his Victorian readers, Wilkie Collins uses Marian's undressing, the most decidedly subversive act of mis-dressing in the novel, to reestablish a superficial gender hierarchy which he secretly mocks. Marian's expedition onto the roof causes her to develop a serious illness which leaves her feverish and incapacitated for most of the remaining pages of the novel. This diminishing of his unfeminine heroine allows Collins to return Walter Hartright to the forefront and to create a traditional domestic ending which, ironically, also subverts gender roles.

Just as the Victorians had a list of attributes for properly feminine women, they also outlined suitably masculine traits. According to Karen Volland Waters, "The Victorian gentleman should be courteous, affable, kind, deferential, temperate, unassuming, clean, pure, considerate, courageous, understanding, inoffensive, unobtrusive, socially adroit, truthful, civil, circumspect, sympathetic, respectful, unaffected, and adaptable—a difficult description for any man to live up to" (21). While this list is itself intimidating, Waters points out that being "a gentleman is a

condition, not a process" (28). Despite the Victorian belief that gender roles flowed naturally from biological difference, the many available "conduct and self-help books paradoxically imply, if instruction in gentlemanliness is needed, then the gentleman cannot be a natural state" (28). In fact, "the superficial qualities of gentlemanliness—dress, demeanor, deportment, and education—could be imitated or acquired by individuals with the means to do so"; because the role of gentleman could be assumed by someone to whom it did not naturally belong, and thus posed a challenge to cherished notions of class and gender, "men were encouraged to dress according to their true position in life so as to identify clearly their rank; in so doing, they were perpetuating the class system" (31). Attempts to define masculinity merged both social custom and economic class and in turn yielded a paradoxical construction in which

a gentleman was defined in both 'masculine' and 'feminine' terms Gender instability gives rise to yet other paradoxes—paradoxes of submission and power, control and lack of control, initiative and restraint, selflessness and egoism—which further call into question the gentleman's traditional mantle of authority by revealing that this important figure of masculinity was defined, in part, by feminine attributes. (34)

Deliberately constructed by social practice and reinforced by gender-appropriate clothing, Victorian masculinity ultimately disintegrates under the weight of its contradictions and reveals itself as "no less a masquerade than femininity" (Gomel and Weninger 50).

Waters' reading of Victorian masculinity is pertinent to discussing Hartright's assumptions about his own masculinity, a gender role created during the course of the novel rather than existing within him from the beginning as he would like (us) to

believe. In fact, D. A. Miller's seminal work "*Cage aux folles*" makes the convincing argument that Walter's excited nervousness when he first meets the woman in white reveals a feminine side that Hartright works hard to suppress throughout the remainder of the novel. At Limmeridge House, he falls in love with the childish Laura, but has not yet fully assumed his masculine role. Taylor points out how "at the beginning of his narrative Hartright is a domesticated artist, . . . a male governess figure, drained of sexual and social meaning or effectiveness" (108). Despite his tameness and limited sexuality, Hartright wants to believe he is a gentleman, and so clings to any woman's affirmation of his masculinity. For instance, he tells us that Marian says, after hearing how he treated Anne Catherick during their encounter in the road, "Your management of the affair . . . showed the self-control, the delicacy, and the compassion of a man who was naturally a gentleman" (58). Hartright's narration of this discussion serves to bolster his threatened masculinity. Later, when Marian tells him to "crush" his love "like a man," he focuses on the way she massages his masculine feelings: "the warm, high-minded, fearless sympathy which met me on such mercifully equal terms, which appealed to me with such delicate and generous abruptness straight to my heart, my honor, and my courage, overcame me in an instant" (59). Even in this embarrassing and painful situation, Hartright focuses on Marian's words, not to guide him along a course of sensible action, but to reaffirm his own belief in the value of fulfilling a masculine role.

Forced to leave Limmeridge House because of his inappropriate attachment to Laura, Hartright seeks to develop his masculinity through his own efforts. After

spending some time in Central America, he returns to England and considers himself a new man, one full of resolution and intent on salvaging Laura's identity from the predators who seek to destroy her. He says, "I came back, as I had hoped, prayed, believed I should come back—a changed man In the stern school of extremity and danger my will had learnt to be strong, my heart to be resolute, my mind to rely on itself. I had gone out to fly from my own future. I came back to face it, as a man should" (363). Hartright enters those trials believing they will mold him into the masculine role he seeks to fulfill; he returns from his adventures with the assumption that simply having survived those experiences proves he has succeeded in becoming the man of resolution his culture values. However, the masculine resolution he so desperately tries to assert is in fact as artificial as the feminine roles he imposes on the three sisters.

Waters points out how "the superiority of the perfect gentleman is frequently bought at the expense of women; women who are present in the fiction must be controlled because their power threatens male authority" (146). Just as Hartright depends on Anne and Laura to serve as foils to his masculinity, so he benefits from Marian's illness, reentering the world of the novel in order to solve the mystery she no doubt would have unraveled if not struck down by illness. With Marian bedridden and Laura incarcerated in an asylum until she loses what faculties she had, Hartright can assume a role of masculine resolve and action not through his own merits, but rather because the female characters have been rendered impotent. In fact, it is precisely his own fear of impotence that leads Walter to take on the fictional name of Hartright and to assign false names to the other participants in order to structure, not

just these women's lives, but the very telling of their experiences. He claims he has changed names to protect Laura from scandal: "for her sake, still, I tell this story under feigned names" (487). Consistent with his unconscious belief in fixed gender roles, however, Walter's stated desire to protect Laura's privacy effectively privileges his own masculine authority while casting Laura in the vulnerable feminine role he consistently demands that she play. Taylor says:

As his name obviously and emphatically suggests, Hartright operates as the voice of safety, normality, and 'right feeling' in the novel. He is the narrative figure who enables fictional and ideological resolutions to be achieved by presenting them as the outcome of his own resolution. At the same time *The Woman in White* is the more equivocal history of how Hartright's new subjective identity is constructed in order to achieve this closure; how he learns to control the past and thus the present . . . [and so] becomes both his own and Laura's moral manager. (108)

By giving himself the fictional name of Hartright and then collecting and organizing the narratives that justify his own efforts and subsequent rise to economic power, Hartright essentially clothes himself with a shroud of Victorian masculinity in order to validate his choices and their consequences.

These elaborately falsified elements of the novel not only reinforce Hartright's development into the Victorian masculine ideal, but also reveal the hollowness and complete subjectivity of the masculine and feminine gender roles he espouses. U.C. Knoepfmacher points out how Hartright, "by giving the name of Petrarch's beloved to Laura Fairlie, the conventional, blonde, disingenuous heroine so unfairly treated by the villainous Sir Percival Glyde, and by calling attention to his own sound heart, . . . resorts to obvious conventional precedents" (362-3). The novel's traditional conclusion, in which the spinster Marian smiles on as Laura and Walter's son becomes heir of Limmeridge, runs counter to what we know of Marian's character

and therefore subverts Hartright's interpretation of the scene. Hartright's dismissal of Marian's feelings at the novel's conclusion thus reveals his own entrenchment within the gendered system and functions as a criticism of the very values he espouses.

Critics often view Marian's refeminization and Hartright's rise to power as a negation of the intriguing gender ambiguities suggested in the novel. For instance, D. A. Miller claims that "*The Woman in White* 'ends' only by recurring to that family circle which will continue to relay—with no end in sight—a plot that still takes many people's breath away" (213) because of its disturbing return to gendered domesticity. On the other hand, Donald Hall claims the ending "prophesies a happy, unanxious future shared by empowered women and nonpatriarchal men" (Hall 157). However, it is precisely the domestication of Collins's strongest character, especially as narrated by the man who has the most to lose by challenging his society's gender roles, that renders both of these interpretations inadequate. Hartright obviously "sees others in accordance with their conformity to established conventions" (Taylor 117) and so remains oblivious to the ways in which his success has disempowered the women in his family.

Because his sense of masculinity requires that he pursue social and financial success even as he silences and encloses his wife and sister-in-law, Hartright's inability to recognize his gender biases or to consider these women as social equals compromises his narratorial authority and undermines his idealistic rendering of the novel's conclusion. In the closing scene, Laura looks on as Marian explains to Walter that Baby Hartright has become heir of Limmeridge. By this point, "Walter's

masculine destiny is perfected. He has slain the dragon, rescued the maiden, and sired a child, but these mythic signs of maturity are not enough to prove his manhood in the Victorian economy” (R. Collins 157). While Walter has sought to become a gentleman by emerging from trials and acting on his resolve, he actually “comes fully into his manhood only when Frederick Fairlie’s death conveniently gives him his financial ‘independence’ (a word ironized by his having married money) and his six-month-old heir something to inherit” (158). The fact that Walter’s role as gentleman is “perfected” only by increased economic status gives Walter yet another reason not to allow Laura or Marian to speak, lest they challenge the idealized and thoroughly gendered family situation he presents.

Specifically, Hartright does not want Marian to speak, and writes that, once his son has been named the heir of Limmeridge, “I have written all. The pen falters in my hand; the long happy labour of many months is over! Marian was the good angel of our lives—let Marian end our story” (564). This rushed conclusion proves Hartright’s ultimate unreliability as a narrator; his own testimony of the events of time used to solve the mystery and to restore Laura’s identity reveals the months were certainly “long” but far from “happy.” Because Hartright has already begun to idealize his experiences in the light of his recent good fortune, his reading of the scene remains suspect. Instead of allowing Marian to share her own story or to assert her own identity, which the reader suspects includes more than the role of maiden aunt, Hartright reads Marian as he has the other women in the novel, as a “good angel,” taking away from her the ungendered identity she has sought to create. He also eradicates her ability to write her own life, even though Marian has

already written a significant portion of the narrative he claims will justify his own extra-legal acts. Instead of allowing her to speak further, he claims to give Marian the last words, but as Miller points out, “what follows is dead silence” (215). If Marian has anything to add, she must write it in her private diary, because Walter has taken over the role of family patriarch and is content for her to remain as silent and passive as his wife.

This ending is deeply disturbing, not because Collins has failed to deliver on a promise of exploring women’s subversion of gender roles, but rather because Hartright, in his effort to prove his masculinity and to justify the rise to economic power which has allowed him to play more effectively the gendered role required of him, has silenced every woman who might have challenged his interpretation of narrative events. For the Victorian reader and Hartright himself, this conclusion would have been viewed as a perfectly natural outcome of Hartright’s hard work, but Collins consistently shows how Hartright’s beliefs about gender lead him to silence women, to limit their agency, and ultimately to render them mere pieces of elaborately-dressed furniture in the home he has claimed for himself and his son. Because Victorian ideas regarding gender forced men and women into separate spheres which limited their ability to relate to one another, Hartright finds himself the patriarch of a family in which he cannot recognize the full personhood of its female members. Hartright’s narrative ends not only with a disturbing domestication of its women but with the dehumanization of Hartright himself. By choosing to perpetuate the values that enabled his social and economic success, Hartright effectively cuts himself off from meaningful social bonds with the very women he has manipulated to

gain his newfound status. Collins's ending is anything but happy, for it demonstrates the distorted values of a culture that arbitrarily privileges one group over another.

Chapter Two
**“Keep the Satins from Slipping”:
Clothing and Social Control in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando***

Although Marian Halcombe’s moustache and clothing choices allow her to challenge culturally-constructed femininity, her narrative becomes largely overshadowed by masculine narrators as Hartright and Fosco interpret and reinterpret the events of her own life. Even as she works to protect her sister, Marian finds herself under these men’s control until she becomes thoroughly feminized, as powerless and silent as Laura. The novel’s final sentence, in which Hartright offers to let Marian “end our Story” and then refuses to write any more words, permanently silences one of the most interesting characters of the novel (564). In the novel *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf prohibits this type of patronization by assuming the voice of a wise yet irreverent narrator with a keen awareness of the intricacies of gender politics. In this gender-bending pseudo-biography, Woolf uses the titular character’s change from a man to a woman to explore the interplay between biological sex and culturally-constructed gender roles while asserting the essential genderlessness of the individual. Her interest in Orlando’s psychological well-being as both a man and a woman and her insistence that Orlando’s story offers valuable insight into the human experience leads her to explore Orlando’s thoughts and experiences from his/her point of view even as she uses those experiences to assert her own opinions about gender and identity. While Woolf has as many reasons to criticize gender roles as Hartright has to perpetuate them, she presents Orlando’s inner life with an emotional and intellectual honesty which Hartright cannot imagine either for himself or for the women he portrays.

An essential element in Orlando's story is the concept of a nongendered identity that transcends time, culture, and the physical body. Elaine Showalter describes Woolf's vision of a "full balance and command of an emotional range that includes male and female elements" (263). Woolf uses this blending of gendered traits to create her vision of a nongendered identity, a person not bound by gender roles but instead open to all aspects of human experience and personal expression. In exploring the interplay between clothes and gender roles, Woolf insists that individual identity exists separate from gender. She sees clothing, not simply as a way to reinforce gender norms, but also as a way to realize a genderless ideal.

As she explores the boundaries between sex and gender, Woolf investigates how clothing functions as a normalizing social agent and a medium of exchange between the individual and society. Fully aware of how clothing shapes the self-perception of men and limits the agency of women, she remarks:

The man has his hand free to seize his sword; the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same too. (188)

To explore what would happen if men and women wore the same clothes, her title character experiences life as a man, then as a woman, and finally reclaims the privilege and sense of personal identity she experienced as a man by wearing men's clothing over her female body, an act that emphasizes both the social power of clothing and the personal agency one can claim by subverting clothing's normal social uses.

Throughout the novel, Woolf insists that human beings are inherently nongendered despite their biological sex. To explore this idea further, she has her male character literally change sex and become a woman. In the midst of a successful career as ambassador to Constantinople, Orlando falls into a weeklong trance and, upon waking, discovers he “had become a woman—there’s no denying it” (138). Even after this change in biological sex, Orlando’s “form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman’s grace” (138). Not only has Orlando changed sex, a supposed impossibility, but her new body consists of elements considered both masculine and feminine in complete contradiction of her culture’s essentialist views of the distinctions between male and female and the relationship between physical sex and gender. By conflating both male and female traits within one person, Woolf insists that identity is not determined by biological sex, as her culture asserts, but rather exists within the individual independent of the gender labels society seeks to impose.

Even though Orlando’s sex has changed, “in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been” (138). Not only does Orlando’s identity contain elements considered both masculine and feminine, but his sense of self does not change at the moment his body becomes female. Orlando retains a sense of personal identity despite shifts in biological sex because she perceives herself as independent both of her physical body and the gender roles assigned to her based on that body’s sex. Woolf tells us, “the change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (138). Orlando does experience personal change and increasing awareness of both herself and her culture during the course

of the novel, but she changes and grows as the result of intellectual study and life experience unrelated to the physical change she experiences in her body. Moreover, the use of the pronoun “their” demonstrates Woolf’s conception not merely of one identity within a person’s body but of the existence of multiple selves, of which “there may be more than two thousand” (314). These multiple selves, depicted as neither male or female, seem to meld together into a coherent and nongendered identity, “what some people call the true self” (310). Woolf’s conception of identity includes not only this multiplicity of selves but a vision of almost unlimited human potential as she imagines this “true self” composed of “all the selves we have it in us to be” (310). Unfortunately, while Orlando’s identity is multifaceted and ever-emerging and exists without reference to gender or the physical body she inhabits, she must learn to negotiate the boundaries of her identity within a society which insists gender distinctions are natural and normal and seeks to limit personal agency based on those distinctions.

After her miraculous transformation, Orlando decides to return to England. To prepare for her return home, she buys “a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore” (153). While we could assume she bought women’s clothing because it seems to correspond with her sex, we discover instead that “it was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and a woman’s sex” (188). While this change is not explained, several months have passed since her transformation into a woman, so it is unrelated to her change of physical sex. Instead, this statement refers to an unknown change and implies that, by continuing to dress as a man, Orlando could have continued both to live as—and

literally to be—a man. This idea that identity can literally permeate the body, not arising from but rather creating one's sex, completely contradicts the biological determinism on which cultural concepts of gender depend so heavily. Despite society's tendency to gender the individual based on sex and to reinforce gender roles by defining appropriate clothing for men and women, Orlando's identity can exist independent of her sex because it is fundamentally nongendered; she can appropriate gender and use it to respond to her culture by putting it on and taking it off as simply as a change of clothes. Christy Burns explains that, while "Orlando's body may be altered by the sex change, . . . her *gender* change cannot be effected until clothing—that external social trapping—pressures her to conform to social expectations of gendered behavior" (Burns 351). Orlando chooses these clothes for her own purposes, but quickly becomes aware that women's clothing carries with it a variety of social obligations that limit her personal agency.

On board the ship to England, Orlando begins to experience that social pressure when she feels "the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offer[s], with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck" (153). The skirt's coil and the Captain's politeness are inseparable: the skirt reinforces the Captain's agreement with cultural assumptions about women's dependence on men, so he offers her an awning both to accommodate what he believes to be her feminine frailty and to fulfill his own role within that gendered system. This version of patriarchy, what Karen Kaivola describes as the "political and ideological structures that naturalized the (white) male domination of women" (242), allows men to feel

both powerful and paternal, reinforcing their belief in women's weakness while defining their own identities as helpers of impotent women.

While Orlando later comes to resent this gendered hierarchy, she initially enjoys the Captain's condescension. After flirting with him and experiencing the passivity of the feminine role for the first time, she thinks, "I'm not sure . . . that I won't throw myself overboard, for the mere pleasure of being rescued by a blue-jacket" (155). She then remembers men have a word for women who do that. Within this gendered system, men agree to rescue drowning women, but become resentful when women take the initiative and create a situation that demands rescue. As Orlando realizes she does not want to be called that word and must learn to confine herself to behaviors socially accepted by men, she asks herself, "must I then begin to respect the opinion of the other sex, however monstrous I think it?" (156) The idea that the opinion of men is "monstrous," even though she herself was so recently a man, indicates Orlando's loss of power since becoming a woman in this gendered system. Men use their power not only to rescue women from drowning, but also to destroy the reputations of women who do not fulfill men's expectations of how women should behave. Despite her fierce independence, Orlando is expected to take on a woman's passive role without question and realizes, "If I have skirts, if I can swim, if I have to be rescued by a blue-jacket . . . I must!" (156) Orlando's skirts invalidate any swimming ability she may have, and a man's desire to rescue her supercedes any ability she has to rescue herself. Even as she drowns, a woman's skirt forces her into the same passive and vulnerable social roles that suggest women need to be offered awnings on the decks of ships. Her skirt, as well as the

cultural assumptions about femininity it represents, makes men feel powerful in their ability to act precisely because that gender system prevents her from acting for herself. As Orlando realizes the limiting power of her skirt, “a gloom fell over her” (156). Because this gendered system requires men to rescue women and women to submit to being rescued even when they could save themselves, Orlando becomes depressed by her loss of agency.

As Orlando begins to feel bound by these cultural restraints, she reflects on her previous complicity within the gendered system that now oppresses her: “As a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled” (156). As a man, she had never questioned these cultural dictates because the fact that women did meet those expectations implied those traits were natural to them. Of course, she now realizes “women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely dressed by nature” (156-7). Because these marks of femininity do not come naturally for Orlando, she must work hard to fabricate them and “can only attain these graces . . . by the most tedious discipline” (157). Orlando describes hours of personal care, including dressing her hair, scrutinizing herself in a mirror, and changing clothes for a variety of occasions, and so realizes how unrealistic her earlier expectations of women’s “graces” truly were.

Suzanne Young notes that “the femininity [Orlando] finds she must attain is the product of schooling and studied artifice” (177), and emphasizes how this complete undermining of the naturalness of feminine traits invites a reevaluation of the entire gendered system. The amount of time women spend on dress and

personal appearance serves to reinforce the patriarchy, for every hour spent in front of the mirror or otherwise conforming to society's standards of feminine appearance is an hour she cannot spend studying, working, or developing relationships with people outside of her immediate family—freedoms which men of the period enjoy without question. Physical appearance, including clothing, thus becomes an oppressive force, continually drawing attention to itself, demanding that it be refreshed and renewed, and preventing women from pursuing the kinds of daily activities men take for granted. In this way, clothing reinforces women's dependence and limited social and political engagement with the culture precisely because it forces them to spend time on meaningless acts that affirm their femininity in men's eyes.

This vital connection between cultural expectations of physical appearance and women's obligation to conform can be used to punish women who do not participate in the gendered system. Women who do not conform to society's values, who do not behave and smell and dress as society requires, will be penalized so they enjoy "none of the delights of life" (157). In this way, clothing works to prevent women from discovering or pursuing their true desires and perpetuates patriarchal denial of women's right to agency; women who do not accept their culture's values will not be allowed to participate in the culture's benefits. Even if society's version of what women should find delightful differs from what women would choose for themselves, they still face extreme social pressure to conform.

As Orlando ponders her situation as a woman in this gendered culture, she unwittingly exposes her ankle and almost causes a sailor to fall to his death.

Pointing out both the cultural significance of women's clothing and how women are taught to perpetuate a feminine appearance with a type of religious fervor from an early age, Woolf says Orlando made this mistake because she had never been taught "the sacred responsibilities of womanhood" as a child (157). The fact that these responsibilities must be taught disproves the notion that biology determines gender. Significantly, it also demonstrates how the culture intrudes and begins to teach its own distorted concept of gender roles, thereby perpetuating those roles from one generation to another until those roles indeed seem natural to individuals who have never questioned them or experienced an alternative.

As Orlando reflects upon the subjugation she has experienced due to her culture's concepts of gender, she realizes this system also dupes men. The sailor's reaction to her exposed ankle makes him "the slave of the frailest chit in petticoats," underscoring how the same gendered system that requires women to cover their ankles with skirts also makes men vulnerable to women who do not conform (158). Because their society requires that women clothe their bodies completely, a woman's failure to do so could literally kill the men. Orlando thinks, "what fools they make of us—what fools they are!" (158) Because this gendered system makes both men and women foolish, Woolf points out Orlando's ambiguity: "she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither . . . she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each" (158). This unique knowledge, resulting from living as both a woman and a man, puts Orlando in the ideal position to criticize the gender roles required by society precisely because she knows how inadequately those roles reflect the desires of the true, nongendered

self. However, as she confronts this gendered system, Orlando is still “not sure to which she belonged” (159). Her biological sex is certain, but her gender is not, because she does not want to assume the social role required of her as a woman or a man.

As the ship approaches England, Orlando finds herself feeling “culpable; dishonoured; unchaste” (162). As a woman, she now faces a definition of honor very different from the one she sought to uphold as a man, one now based solely on her sexual behavior. Even after admitting chastity does not come naturally to her as a woman, she begins to feel the weight of society’s judgment on her previous sexual activities, even though those experiences were implicitly approved when she pursued them as a man. This new burden of guilt, “for one who had never given the matter a thought, was strange” (162). As a man, Orlando felt no guilt about pursuing sexual impulses. Now, as a woman, she possesses those same impulses but is expected to resist them because her culture requires chastity of women even though it does not require it of men. The painful realizations begun when the Captain offered her an awning now magnify as she approaches the England that instituted the Captain’s values, and Orlando doubts whether she wants to live as an Englishwoman. While Orlando has experienced some changes in identity since becoming a woman, those changes are unrelated to her new physical body, and she cannot accept the possibility of living as an entirely new type of person simply because women’s clothes point out her role as a member of a specifically-defined, culturally-limited sex. “If it meant conventionality, meant slavery, meant deceit, meant denying her love, fettering her limbs, pursing her lips, and restraining her

tongue, then she would turn about with the ship and set sail once more for the gipsies” (163). Overwhelmed by the inequities of the gendered cultural system that would codify her behavior based simply on her sex, Orlando seeks to escape to the gipsies’ genderless society.

While Woolf depicts England as having rigidly gendered assumptions incongruous with Orlando’s nongendered self, she portrays the gipsies as a successfully genderless culture. Orlando’s own culture ascribes personal traits based on sex and therefore limits women’s activities and interactions, but “she had scarcely given her sex a thought” among the androgynous gipsies because the gipsy women, “except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men” (153). The gipsy culture does not differentiate between its men and women and acknowledges its members’ nongendered identities by allowing them to wear clothing that does not specify their biological sex. After changing sex, Orlando had calmly accepted her new body and gone to live with the gipsies, whose clothing includes “those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex” (139). Because her fundamental identity is genderless and does not depend on her biological sex, she chooses the gipsies’ gender-neutral clothing precisely because it is “indifferent” and does not carry the social weight of gender assumptions which her own culture insists on ascribing to men’s and women’s clothes. Since Orlando’s identity does not change in ways related to her body’s change of sex, she can take refuge in clothes that ascribe gendered expectations to neither sex, but instead allow the genderless self to flourish. Orlando finds with the gipsies a society in which she can successfully experience life as a woman without

the burden of clothing that imposes and reinforces limiting cultural stereotypes, and Woolf offers the nongendered gipsy culture as a feasible alternative to what she considers England's deeply-flawed gendered system.

While Orlando meets great social pressure to conform to the rigid gender roles of her age, Woolf undermines the validity of Victorian gender assumptions by pointing out how English conceptions of clothing and gender have changed over time. For instance, the Elizabethans did not rely as heavily on clothing as a gender marker, although they did expect different behavior from women and men. The novel's opening words describe Orlando as a "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (13). Woolf points to this clothing—which includes elements such as lace and ruffles that later generations would regard as decidedly unmasculine—as a reminder that men and women's preferences regarding clothing, instead of being a fixed product of sex or even gender, actually change over time. Suzanne Young explains how nongendered clothing is "threatening because it obscures recognition of the external world and, what is more, calls the stability and naturalness of that world into question" (173). By depicting a time when clothing revealed gender preferences different from the ones she seeks to challenge, Woolf can criticize cultural assumptions of fixed gender while asserting the existence of the nongendered self.

However, while Orlando's clothes may lead the reader to question the validity of gender roles, Orlando himself has not yet begun to question them. Since his clothes do not prove him to be male, his actions must, and we see him holding a sword and "slicing at the head of a Moor" (13). If his clothing leaves his sex

somewhat in question, Orlando asserts his masculinity by acting out the aggression and violence expected of males in his society instead of using his genderless clothing to express his ungendered self.

When Orlando meets the Russian ambassador's daughter, he initially cannot determine whether she is male or female because "the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex," and the uncertainty of Sasha's gender "filled him with the highest curiosity" (37). Orlando wants to determine her sex because he believes knowing it will define her in terms of their society's strict gender roles. However, even before he is certain of Sasha's sex, Orlando is struck by "the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person" (37). Lisa Rado says Sasha's "extraordinary seductiveness' . . . consists not in her sexual body, but in her transcendence of conventional categories of identity" (153). By refusing to wear gendered clothing, Sasha attempts to express outwardly the essential "whole person" she experiences herself to be, one whose identity is bound neither by her biological sex or the cultural gender role assigned to her. Despite Rado's assertion, Orlando does feel sexually excited even when he does not know for certain Sasha is female, but resists those feelings because the idea that a man can feel attracted to a person of unknown sex defies the heterosexual binary on which strict gender distinctions depend. Because Orlando has not yet begun to question the gender roles Sasha seeks to escape, he interprets Sasha's presentation of her nongendered self as a mere novelty; however, once Orlando becomes a woman, she duplicates Sasha's manipulation of clothing as a way to

express an essential self at variance with the roles required of women based on their physical sex.

In trying to determine Sasha's biological sex, Orlando first guesses she is male since he believes "no woman could skate with such speed and vigour" (38). Here, Woolf plays with the stereotype established in the opening scene: that strong and confident action will certainly prove a person male. Because Orlando accepts the cultural delineation of gender roles emerging from a strict heterosexual model, he assumes that Sasha is male and, as a result, that "all embraces were out of the question" (38). Orlando feels attracted to Sasha even when she does not dress or act in accordance with his culture's gender roles, but uses those gender roles to try to determine her sex and clearly requires her to be female in order to consider her a prospective sexual partner. Orlando, originally clothed in a way that challenges the notion of fixed gender, is attracted to the genderless Sasha and considers the possibility of nonheterosexual desire. Ultimately, however, he submits to his culture's assumptions about gender and sexuality, refusing to consider a person of unknown, potentially male sex as sexually attractive. While this choice depicts Orlando's unwillingness to challenge society's values at this time, it also demonstrates how cultural expectations of gender roles and sexual expression limit individual agency by encouraging Orlando to suppress his natural desires.

As Sasha approaches, Orlando considers her body more carefully and decides the "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" (38). Strictly speaking, only her breasts should show that Sasha is female, yet Orlando neatly divides her body

parts into male and female, unconsciously using his culture's strict delineation of gender roles to try to determine her identity based on her physical sex. Since his culture limits the activities of women while privileging the activities of men, he believes Sasha's strong limbs and confident bearing must prove her male. On the other hand, Orlando thinks her face must be female just because he finds it beautiful and can only conceive a sexual attraction for women. Because Orlando acts as his masculine role requires, he unsuccessfully attempts to understand Sasha's nongendered self using gendered terms.

At this point, the narrator casually remarks on the presence of Orlando's fiancée Euphrosyne, who embodies the qualities her culture values in women. She speaks Italian, has perfect teeth, sings sweetly, and loves dogs. While these accomplishments seem quite trivial, Euphrosyne is a model woman in her culture and "would have made a perfect wife for such a nobleman as Orlando" (33). However, despite his social attachment to this model of femininity, he physically responds instead to Sasha, whom he believes to reflect both masculine and feminine traits because she does not look or act as society requires. Sasha's androgynous clothing initially bridges the gap between man and woman to reflect a truly ungendered self, which Orlando prefers to Euphrosyne's narrow yet socially-endorsed femininity.

As his relationship with Sasha develops, "the change in Orlando himself was extraordinary" (41-42). While in the past he has chosen traditionally-dressed, feminine women, his relationship with Sasha helps him change from a clumsy boy "to a nobleman, full of grace and manly courtesy" (43). As he resists social

expectations and allies himself with a woman unfettered by the gender norms of his culture in terms of both dress and action, his “true self,” as genderless as his clothing, begins to make itself known. However, while his relationship with the genderless Sasha allows Orlando to acknowledge his own nongendered identity, onlookers interpret his newfound identity as masculine because of their own investment within the gendered system.

As Orlando continues to spend time with Sasha, Woolf tells us that “in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed” (47). Ironically, in pointing out this concealment, Woolf seeks to reveal Sasha’s true identity, and only after several menacing hints that Sasha’s love is untrue do we learn that she has shed her androgynous clothes and begun to wear an Englishwoman’s traditional “velvet and pearls” (48). By telling us about Sasha’s character flaws before describing her change in clothing style, Woolf reveals her as duplicitous and unfaithful without making those traits contingent on her sex or her femininity; Sasha is not an unfaithful woman, but simply unfaithful.

After Sasha proves herself untrue, Orlando isolates himself in an effort to recapture a sense of personal identity. “Orlando would sit by himself, reading, a naked man” (74). Because clothing his body would imply an acceptance of an arbitrary masculine role contrary to his emerging sense of nongendered identity, he removes his clothing to eliminate the disparity between his sexed body and the cultural forces that insist on gendering individuals based on their sex. By choosing nakedness, Orlando seems to recognize his clothing has hindered some important

self-knowledge and literally lays himself bare before his books in order to discover his nongendered identity.

However, when Orlando rouses himself from his books, he begins to forge bonds with society once again, and presumably begins wearing a man's clothes. One day, he meets "a very tall lady in riding hood and mantle" who introduces herself as Archduchess Harriet (113). Orlando believes Harriet is a woman because her clothes denote she is a woman, but we later discover the Archduchess Harriet is actually a man (178). Orlando, who has sought a naked ungendered self, notices Harriet is not a typical woman. She talks easily of firearms and sporting customs and has a "knowledge of wines rare in a lady" (115). Just as he found Sasha attractive when he could not determine her sex, Orlando finds himself attracted to Harriet when she does not conform to gender roles, dressing as a woman but conversing as a man. Again, Woolf challenges traditional heterosexuality by allowing Orlando to find a nongendered romantic partner sexually exciting. Orlando, however, remains limited by gendered beliefs about men and women and so conceives of Harriet as a mixture of masculine and feminine traits instead of questioning the value of those distinctions or seeking to understand her independent of the gender roles s/he assumes.

On one occasion, Harriet fastens a piece of armor around Orlando's leg, causing him to be "suddenly and violently overcome by passion of some sort" (116). The phrase "of some sort" implies that this is not a typical passion, but rather one based on a unique attraction between Orlando and Harriet. Woolf attributes this reaction to "the natural sympathy which is between the sexes" (116), deliberately

drawing attention to Orlando's assumption that Harriet must be a woman simply because she dresses as one. The fact that we trust this statement in turn reveals our own cultural assumptions about clothing, sex, and identity, as evidenced by our own surprise once Harriet's true sex is revealed.

Fearful of his sexual response to Harriet's touch, Orlando leaves England to serve as an ambassador to Constantinople, a city with very different attitudes toward gender and sexuality. Just as he undergoes a period of solitary self-discovery after Sasha's abandonment, Orlando also isolates himself after he leaves Harriet. Despite his solitude, "He became the adored of many women and some men. It was not necessary that they should speak to him or even see him; they conjured him up before them . . . the figure of a noble gentleman in silk stockings" (125). While strangers assume his silk stockings represent his character as a man of high rank, the men of Constantinople fantasize about him in a way that Englishmen would not dare. Here in Constantinople, amidst less structured conceptions of gender and sexuality, Orlando defies English tradition and history by becoming a woman.

Upon returning home, she meets Harriet once again. However, when she invites Harriet to her room, "in [Harriet's] place stood a tall gentleman in black. A heap of clothes lay on the fender" (178). At this point, Harriet reveals he is actually a man named Harry. By shedding his clothes, he also sheds the passivity mandated for women in order actively to pursue his suit. As they talk, Woolf tells us "they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigor and then fell into natural discourse" (179). Just as Harry shed his clothes by the fender, so both of

them must shed their gendered roles so their genderless selves can act without hindrance, thereby allowing true communication to result.

However, Orlando wants more than marriage to Harry; she wants “life and a lover” (185). In seeking to fulfill these desires, she first turns to women’s clothing, putting on pearls and trying on dresses, but then realizes she can never attain the happiness she wants dressed as a woman and so removes her female clothing and instead puts on the “neat black silk knickerbockers of an ordinary gentleman” (184). Sandra Gilbert views Orlando’s decision to wear men’s clothing as a way of reinforcing her identity and says that “Orlando has the best of both sexes in a happy multiform which she herself has chosen” (405). Because her culture does not allow Orlando to find the life she desires while dressed as a woman, she turns to men’s clothing to pursue her goals and to meet her needs.

Orlando removes her female clothing in part because it has begun making her “a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and a little more vain, as women are, of her person” (187). After experiencing a loss of personal power by wearing women’s clothing, Orlando fears making that loss permanent by appropriating women’s clothing completely. Laura Marcus suggests, “In *Orlando* clothes are not only part of the furnishings by which historical ages are differentiated; they are used to suggest that . . . identity may well be a matter of costume, performance, and disguise” (127). However, this reading implies a conscious control of others’ perceptions that does not coincide with the negative effect of Orlando’s clothing on her sense of self. Instead, Rachel Bowlby views Orlando’s cross-dressing as “a strategy whereby as a woman she will have the best of both sexual worlds, posing at

whim as one sex or the other” (49); she can move from one gender role to another precisely because she perceives herself outside the gendered lens of her culture. Orlando replaces her dress with a man’s clothing, not to present herself as a different person as Marcus suggests, but rather to reject the limiting role encouraged by women’s clothes and to claim the freedom and personal agency enjoyed by men. If wearing a dress means accepting a woman’s limited role in society, Orlando will manipulate the politics of gender by dressing as a man to reclaim her sense of self and the right to assert her own nongendered identity.

Dressed in a man’s velvet suit, Orlando walks the streets of London as “the very figure of a noble Lord” (215). Because she dresses as a man, she seems almost to become one. One night, she meets Nell, a female prostitute, who considers Orlando a prospective client, “for a man he was to her” (216). Walking with Nell, Orlando reflects that “having been so lately a woman herself, she suspected that the girl’s timidity and her hesitating answers and the very fumbling with the key in the latch . . . were all put on to gratify her masculinity,” and she “could have sworn, from the tone of her voice, that her thoughts were elsewhere” (217). Orlando now realizes that women act differently for men than they do when they are alone, even though as a man she never considered that possibility. Interestingly, the idea that she has “been so lately a woman” implies that, by putting on a man’s clothing, she has actually ceased to be a woman and again become a man. Just as putting on women’s clothing began to make Orlando believe what those clothes represented about herself as woman, putting on a man’s clothing seems to make her think of herself as a man, in effect counteracting the negative effects of her woman’s

dress and proving once again that clothing functions both as a symbol of personal agency and as a prop in an elaborate play of socially-constructed gender roles. This element of acting rather than being a certain gender becomes evident when Orlando “flung off all disguise and admitted herself a woman” (217). Nell responds by laughing, and immediately “her manner changed and she dropped her plaintive, appealing ways” (218). Because Nell responds so differently to the different gender identities Orlando projects, Burns shows how “Orlando thus experiences herself as different in response to gender expectations inspired by means of cross-dressing” (351). Because Orlando uses clothing to navigate both masculine and feminine roles, Sherron Knopp discusses how “Orlando is not a woman acting ‘like’ a man: Orlando *is* a man. *And* a woman. The situation admittedly puts a strain on conventional language and thinking, but there is nothing ‘unnatural’ about it” (30). Orlando’s fluid movement between male and female in both clothing and sex demonstrates her nongendered identity while proving any value her culture places on gender distinctions patently false.

While Orlando has been constrained by women’s clothing and women’s roles, she can look to freedom among the gipsies’ nongendered society, England’s previous gender distinctions, and her own experiences with androgynous romantic partners. However, just as Orlando comes to find some measure of personal freedom by appropriating men’s clothing for her own purposes, the nineteenth century begins. As cultural notions of female behavior become increasingly codified (femininity is not as “natural” as it seems), Orlando is “forced to acknowledge that times were changed” (231). She begins to feel self-conscious about dressing as a

man and blushes whenever she considers her body. To ward off these feelings, she decides “she would have to buy twenty yards or more of black bombazine . . . to make a skirt” (235). Twenty yards of a fabric traditionally used for mourning-clothes seems ludicrous, but this very ridiculousness emphasizes the extreme limitations placed on women’s dress and behavior. By thoroughly covering her body and seeming to mourn its very existence, Orlando reveals the cost women pay when forced to remain hidden in their clothing and in their homes. This consciousness of her culture’s limiting view of women, embodied by “the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted,” seems “heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements” (244). Because she has adopted the clothing used to keep women in their oppressed place, “The spirit of the nineteenth century . . . took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands” (244). To try to salvage her nongendered identity, Orlando escapes to nature, her abiding love throughout the centuries.

In her walk outdoors, Orlando suddenly meets and decides to marry Shelmerdine. Clare Hanson claims it is the nineteenth century’s “process of insidious weakening and belittlement which brings Orlando to the point of seeking the protection of a man” (109). However, while Orlando has resisted marriage and would never consciously choose a man’s “protection,” Shelmerdine seems an ideal spouse for Orlando. They first have an unspoken understanding that they are more than they originally seem, until “an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously. ‘You’re a woman, Shell!’ she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried” (252). By naming each other with the exact opposite gender of their biological

sex, they recognize in each other a “true self” independent of sex or gendered clothing and expand the confinements of gendered language to allow each of them access to all human experience. As they talk, “it was to each . . . a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman” (258). Despite having lived many years as both a man and a woman, Orlando must continue to question the assumptions she holds about herself and others based on the gender roles imposed by her culture. As her relationship with Shelmerdine develops, Orlando realizes “she had never felt better in her life” (264).

Through the centuries, Orlando must continually challenge her culture’s assumptions about how men and women should behave. Although gender distinctions often seem rigid, she finds that different cultures and historical periods perceive gender differently, thereby undermining the notion of fixed gender roles and ultimately establishing that individual identity exists separate from sex or gender. As she seeks to define her identity despite the clothing that reinforces society’s gender roles, Orlando explores cross-dressing as a way of reclaiming the nongendered identity her gendered clothing has concealed. Ultimately, however, she finds personal freedom and fulfillment in acknowledging that the cultural roles that inadequately define her also fail to define others. In this way, she can enter an equitable relationship with a man, a relationship neither bound by gender roles nor prescribed by the gendered clothing they wear. As Orlando comes to see another person without the distorting lens of gendered vision, she comes one step closer to liberating her own ungendered self.

Conclusion

For both Wilkie Collins and Virginia Woolf, gender roles serve as unnatural limits on human behavior. These authors seek both to confound gender roles and to explore the limitations on female experience by pointing out the benefits and social repercussions when women challenge their roles and seek to lay claim to their own lives. These authors' different backgrounds and experiences allow them to comment on various aspects of gender roles in ways that encourage continuous rereading of cultural gender markers.

As a Victorian male author, Wilkie Collins offers a challenging yet understated reading of his society's gender roles. The fact that almost all of his characters fall outside of gender norms leads the reader to consider his novel as defying the gender binarism of his era, but *The Woman in White's* ending seems to reinforce those gender roles, at least superficially. Faced with the difficulty of selling a novel without completely alienating his audience, Collins's novel offers a subtle yet thorough criticism of gender roles in the guise of a traditional plot which his readers assumed reinforced their own values. This subtly subversive representation of gender roles continues to lead some critics to decry the domestication of Marian even as other readers view Collins's ending as an ironic commentary on his culture's values.

While Collins had the luxury of both criticizing and manipulating Victorian values, Virginia Woolf stood firmly against entrenched gender roles. As a bisexual woman she personally defied the limiting roles assigned to women. As a result, her novel is outrageous and hilarious and bold in its challenges to traditional conceptions

of sex, gender, and human sexuality. She uses an improbable plot twist and an impossibly long timeline to explore not only the sexism and narrowmindedness of the Victorian generation but of British history as a whole. Woolf's distinct lack of subtlety offers her a freedom to dissect cultural assumptions about gender, pushing them to their most ridiculous conclusions until readers cannot help seeing the damage this limited thinking has caused.

Although using vastly different approaches, both Collins and Woolf allow their female main characters to subvert gender roles and to assert that human beings behave more equitably and freely when not separated by artificial criteria of gender or sex. Judith Butler argues the individual must subvert cultural practices within the gendered system in order to express personal identity, and both Marian and Orlando successfully manipulate clothing to make public their private identities and to challenge the limiting roles required of them by society. As these women explore alternate experiences through gender-deviant clothing and begin to assume control over their own lives, they face challenges and disapproval, especially from the men who seek to reappropriate the power they have assumed over all women and individual women's lives. While these women experience varying degrees of success as they challenge cultural gender roles, they continue to challenge readers, both women and men, to define their lives, roles, and purposes for themselves.

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