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Virginia Woolf's Fictional Biographies, *Orlando* and *Flush*, as Prefigures of Postmodernism

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A thesis

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Literature and Language

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Master of Arts in English

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by

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## ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's Fictional Biographies, *Orlando* and *Flush*, as Prefigures of Postmodernism

by

Jacob Castle

This thesis examines the way in which the fictional biographies of Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* and *Flush*, prefigure central tenets of postmodern fiction. To demonstrate the postmodern elements present in *Orlando* and *Flush*, this thesis focuses on how the fictional biographies exhibit three postmodern characteristics: concern for historiography, extensive use of parody, and the denaturalization of cultural assumptions. Born from Woolf's desire to revolutionize biography by incorporating elements of fiction alongside historical fact, these two novels parallel later works of historiographic metafiction in several key respects. Woolf's extensive use of parody in *Orlando* and *Flush* prefigures how postmodern parody foregrounds the many ways in which all narratives are inherently constructions. Woolf also expresses a postmodern attitude by denaturalizing cultural assumptions about sexual difference and social class. When taken together, these three traits reveal how *Orlando* and *Flush* possess an ontological philosophy indicative of postmodern literature.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

When approaching Virginia Woolf's fictional biographies, it is difficult to see past their peculiarity. After all, it is hard to contest the notion that these works are thoroughly strange. *Orlando: A Biography* details the life of a man who turns into a woman and lives for centuries. *Flush: A Biography* tells the life-story of a cocker spaniel that belonged to Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The peculiarity of these books is only heightened when one considers when they were written. By the time of the publication of *Orlando* in 1928, Woolf had already established herself as an eminent author and leading figure in the Modernist movement. Her two best-known and most critically acclaimed works, *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), directly precede *Orlando*. *Flush* (1931), treated by many critics as a light, almost throwaway novel, was Woolf's next major publication after *The Waves* (1931), her most ambitious and experimental book. In this light, it can often be tempting to view Woolf's fictional biographies as curious aberrations or diversions from her more important work.

Viewing these works as aberrations, however, poses two important problems. First, viewing these works as anomalies has caused them to be disregarded as secondary or less important. Although many scholars have written about *Orlando* and *Flush*, their relative underrepresentation in Woolf scholarship suggests that many critics do not give them the full consideration they warrant. Second, viewing these works as aberrations can lead to their being considered solely within the context of Woolf's broader body of work. While this can yield insightful analysis, it ultimately provides a limited perspective.

A telling example of the possible consequences of this limited perspective can be demonstrated by a look at how critics have often been hesitant to use the term "novel" when describing *Orlando*. As Genevieve Kovalesky points out, *Orlando* has been referred to as "a

fantasy, a poem, an antinovel, literary history, biography, autobiography, all of the above, none of the above, a hybrid, or perhaps, as Pamela J. Transue suggests, something best called ‘a thing Virginia Woolf wrote’” (Kovalesky 34). While thorough, this summary only hints at the extensive proliferation of terms used to describe *Orlando*; descriptions of *Flush* display a similar trend. This preoccupation with nomenclature inspires an important question: what prevents these works from being novels? Although highly original, these are not the first novels to employ the fictional biography conceit, and their complex blending of fact and fiction are reminiscent of later works of historiographic metafiction which are nonetheless considered novels. Ultimately, it seems that the main reason many critics hesitate to call *Orlando* and *Flush* novels is because they do not resemble other novels by Virginia Woolf. However, this lack of resemblance does not mean that they are not novels, only that they are a different kind of novel.

In fact, *Orlando* and *Flush* bear a striking resemblance to an entirely different category of novel, one that is easily overlooked when focusing too closely on their relation to Woolf’s other works. As this study will show, *Orlando* and *Flush* exhibit numerous characteristics that are widely considered to be hallmarks of postmodern fiction. To demonstrate this, this study focuses on the way *Orlando* and *Flush* embody three major postmodern traits: concern for historiography, extensive use of parody, and the denaturalization of cultural assumptions. These traits are in no way intended to serve as a ‘checklist for postmodernity’; instead, they have been carefully chosen as three representative areas in which the postmodern position of these novels is most clearly expressed. While this study focuses specifically on *Orlando* and *Flush*, this is not meant to suggest that they are the only two of Woolf’s writings to prefigure postmodernism. Rather, I believe them to be the most clearly postmodern of Woolf’s works and, since a definitive study of postmodern attributes in *Orlando* and *Flush* has not yet been undertaken, I

have chosen the focus that I believe will best capture Woolf's postmodern attitudes and techniques.

Finally, the goal of this study is not to proclaim these works as postmodern novels or to proclaim Virginia Woolf the 'First Postmodernist.' Instead, this study's look into the many ways in which these works embody hallmarks of postmodern fiction is intended to open new avenues of discourse that will bring scholarship closer to unlocking the full potential of these sometimes neglected and misinterpreted works. At the same time, it is my hope that this examination of the emphatically forward-thinking *Orlando* and *Flush* will prove valuable to broader considerations of elements of postmodernity within Woolf's work as whole. Ultimately, I hope that this study brings more critical attention to *Orlando* and *Flush*, important works that warrant closer study and remarkable expressions of Woolf's perennial and progressive art.

## CHAPTER 2

### REVOLUTIONIZING BIOGRAPHY: FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY AND HISTORIOGRAPHIC METAFICTION

One dominant feature of postmodern fiction is its concern for historiography. As Jean Francois Lyotard writes, “Simplifying to the extreme, I define *postmodern* as incredulity toward metanarratives” (Lyotard xxiv). Of the many types of narratives, historical narratives contain the most conspicuous potential to become totalizing metanarratives. Linda Hutcheon describes how a narrative becomes totalizing through “the process [...] by which writers of history, fiction, or even theory render their materials coherent, continuous, unified—but always with an eye to the control and mastery of those materials” (*Politics* 59). In other words, controlling metanarratives are intrinsically bound to the historiography. Because of this, postmodern fiction often foregrounds historiographic practices in order to demonstrate the inherent fictiveness of historical narratives.

While critics have become attuned to the relationship between fiction and history, they have often overlooked the way that this relationship plays out in biography, itself a historiographic genre. This play between a “historical” life and the individualized presentation of such was important to Virginia Woolf, whose two fictional biographies, *Orlando* and *Flush*, are both deeply concerned with foregrounding the often elided methods of historiography present in any biographical work. Both novels directly reflect Woolf’s attitudes toward traditional and contemporary biographical practices, using biographical frameworks to provide historiographical commentary. However, before examining the historiographical commentaries of *Orlando* and *Flush*, it is necessary to briefly examine the deep relationship that Woolf had with historiography and biography throughout her life.



The genre of biography was part of the atmosphere of Woolf's family. In 1882, the year Woolf was born, her father Leslie Stephen began work on *The Dictionary of National Biography* that earned him a knighthood ten years later (Hussey ix). Stephen's status as a biographer, critic, and scholar was an important influence on Woolf's early life. In a short commemorative essay about her father, Woolf praises him for "allowing a girl of fifteen the free run of a large and quite unexpurgated library," an experience that played a crucial role in Woolf's development as a writer ("Leslie Stephen" 79). Among the wide variety of texts she consumed during this time were biographies and memoirs. As Audrey Diane Johnson summarizes, "Many have noted that Woolf grew up reading history and biography as part of her father's plan for her to be his intellectual heir and that this concern with history finds its way into Woolf's writing" (Johnson 2). Despite this paternal encouragement, Woolf's views were frequently in conflict with the form her father's work exemplified, namely Victorian biography. In fact, this conflict with Victorian biography is likely a major reason that Woolf's enthusiasm for biography remained with her throughout her life. The specific importance of biography in Woolf's life is succinctly summarized by Genevieve Kovalesky, who notes that "her diaries and reading notebooks record a steady diet of biography, her contributions to periodicals include reviews of biographies, and biography represents a considerable portion of her own writing" (Kovalesky 2).

Lytton Strachey provided another noteworthy influence on Woolf's perspectives on biography. As author of highly influential biographical works like *Eminent Victorians*, Strachey was a pioneering member of the new school of twentieth century biographers which Woolf celebrates in essays like "The New Biography" (1927). The New Biography that Strachey helped establish challenged conventions of Victorian biography and helped bring new critical relevance to the genre as a whole. As an important member of the Bloomsbury Group and a close personal

friend, Strachey undoubtedly exerted considerable influence on Woolf. In “The Art of Biography,” Woolf writes “The figure of Lytton Strachey is so important a figure in the history of biography that it compels a pause” (“Art” 222). Perhaps the best example of this influence comes from the first series of Woolf’s *Common Reader*, a collection of her essays and critical writings which she dedicated solely to Strachey.

Even this admittedly cursory glance at Woolf’s background in biography shows how, when Woolf writes to Vita Sackville-West of when “it sprung upon me how I could revolutionize biography in a night,” she does so as an expert in the genre who is fully aware of the methods, conventions, and history of biography (*Letters* 429). Understanding Woolf’s deep background with biography is essential for understanding her decision to create fictional biographies. Indeed, it is important to emphasize that *Orlando* and *Flush* are much more than personal responses to particular subject matter. As biographical subjects, Vita Sackville-West, Flush, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning provide crucial DNA for Woolf’s fictionalized biographies, but *Orlando* and *Flush*, much more than whimsical portraits, are determined attempts to “revolutionize biography” by pushing it past its boundaries and into new territory. In doing so, Woolf simultaneously uses techniques now associated with the postmodern novel. In other words, by bringing fiction to historical figures, she prefigures the same mixture that postmodern novelists would later use in bringing history to fiction.

Woolf’s essay “The New Biography” best encapsulates the progressive biographical philosophy enacted in *Orlando* and *Flush*. Although some scholars look to 1939’s “The Art of Biography” for Woolf’s perspective on the genre, this approach is problematic in discussions about *Orlando* and *Flush* because Woolf’s stance about the revolutionary potential of biography softened over the course of her life. While there are certainly elements shared by both essays,

“The Art of Biography” reflects Woolf’s attitudes at a later stage when she was considerably less optimistic about biography’s potential. The perspective reflected in the latter is likely a product of Woolf’s struggles with writing *Roger Fry*, which was published the following year.

Kovalesky supports this position with her suggestion that “The Art of Biography” reflects a time when, “struggling with her biography of Roger Fry, Woolf now focuses on biography’s limitations” (Kovalesky 15). The earlier essay, “The New Biography,” first appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* on October 30, 1927, the same month that Woolf began writing *Orlando* in earnest (“New Biography” 229). As a result, “The New Biography” is a much more appropriate guide than “The Art of Biography” when analyzing *Orlando*’s complex biographical discourse.

In “The New Biography,” Woolf declares what she sees as “the whole problem of biography as it presents itself today” (229). She continues, positing that

On the one hand there is truth; on the other is personality. And if we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one and that we need not wonder if biographers have for the most part failed to solve it. (229)

To solve this problem, Woolf argues that biography must alter its relationship with fact; to properly transmit personality, “facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded” (229). Woolf praises “the new school of biographies” by twentieth century biographers like Lytton Strachey for helping to redefine biography’s relationship with documentary fact. No longer “toiling slavishly in the footsteps of his hero,” the New Biographer “chooses; he synthesizes; in short, he has ceased to be a chronicler; he has become an artist” (231).

Woolf selects Harold Nicolson's *Some People* as a particularly sterling example of the innovations being made by the New Biographers. This selection provides another example of the deep connections between *Orlando* and the New Biography; Nicolson was the husband of Vita Sackville-West. As Woolf describes, the success of Nicolson's work is directly related to his willingness to incorporate fiction into biography. She writes that "*Some People* is not fiction because it has the substance, the reality of truth. It is not biography because it has the freedom, the artistry of fiction" (232). Not coincidentally, these statements could easily be made of *Orlando* and *Flush*. Like Woolf's fictional biographies, *Some People* pushes the boundaries of biography to blur the line between fact and fiction. By doing so, both *Some People* and Woolf's fictional biographies acknowledge a relationship between fact and fiction that many postmodern novels would later explore. For example, Tom Crick, the narrator of Graham Swift's *Waterland*, devotes his life to the study of history "only to conclude forty years later [...] that history is a yarn" (Swift 62). When Tom quits teaching official history and begins telling students of his own life instead, his story is not a series of concrete facts, but an imaginative, novelistic narrative of his own personal history. Similarly, Yann Martel's *Life of Pi* reveals how, since we often "can't prove which story is true and which is not," (317) the only real difference between a narrative based on "dry, yeastless factuality" (63) and one that treats facts with the imaginative tools of fiction is which one we choose to believe.

After detailing the successes of *Some People*, Woolf writes that its "victory is definite enough to leave us asking what territory it has won for the art of biography" (232). In Woolf's eyes, Nicolson had pushed biography into new territory by demonstrating the potential of combining the arts of fiction and biography. Woolf does not, however, view this as a final victory, but rather one that opens a door to new challenges and obstacles. She addresses the

dangers of “trying to mix the truth of real life and the truth of fiction” by noting that these truths are “antagonistic; let them meet and they will destroy each other” (234). She then reframes the chief difficulty faced by biographers as the challenge to blend fiction and fact. Woolf describes the New Biographer’s dilemma: “Truth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible; yet he is now more than ever urged to combine them” (234). She closes the essay by acknowledging that the method for properly combining these antagonistic truths “still remains to be discovered” (235).

In *Orlando* and *Flush*, Woolf boldly ventures into this new territory, attempting to discover a method for capturing the “queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” which she describes in “The New Biography” (235). Her fictional biographical mode allows Woolf to explore her vision of biography’s unrealized potential. However, before examining the parallels between “The New Biography” and *Orlando* and *Flush* specifically, it will be helpful to examine the connections between this essay and a key piece of postmodern theory: Linda Hutcheon’s “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History.” The parallels between these two essays reveal that the central tenets of postmodern historiography that shape current critical discourse are prefigured by, and indeed exist at the very foundation of, Woolf’s experiments with fictional biography.

As author of important works such as “Historiographic Metafiction” and *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon is a highly influential figure in postmodern theory. In “Historiographic Metafiction,” she argues that definitions of postmodernism which focus solely on “intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality” omit an essential facet of postmodern fiction (“Historiographic” 3). To correct this omission, Hutcheon asserts that “we must add something else to this definition: an equally self-conscious dimension of history” (3).

With this amended definition, she then outlines historiographic metafiction as a genre that combines metafictionality with a deep historical awareness. She asserts that “the term postmodernism, when used in fiction, should [...] best be reserved to describe” works of historiographic metafiction. An examination of the connections between “The New Biography” and “Historiographic Metafiction” reveals how the category that Hutcheon outlines could easily include Woolf’s fictional biographies.

In “The New Biography,” Woolf writes

it would seem that the life which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than the act. Each of us is more Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, than he is John Smith of the Corn Exchange. Thus, the biographer’s imagination is always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expand the private life. (234)

In this passage, Woolf’s statements about the difficulties facing the New Biographer closely mirror the postmodern condition in which the intertextuality of history gives fictional texts a level of authenticity that equals, or even challenges, the supremacy of historical texts.

Accordingly, the response of the biographer mirrors that of the postmodern novelist who, according to Hutcheon, incorporates the historical into the literary “to satisfy such a desire for ‘worldly’ grounding while at the same time querying the very basis of the authority of that grounding” (“Historiographic” 5). Similarly, the New Biographer is compelled to incorporate the literary into his history to harness fiction’s ability to capture “that inner life of thought and emotion which meanders darkly and obscurely through the hidden channels of the soul” (“New Biography” 229-30). Although they come at the problem from opposite directions, fiction and biography seek both the public realm of the worldly and the private realm of the individual, and

the only way to access both is through the “inscribing of both historical and literary intertexts” (“Historiographic” 10). Thus, Woolf’s *New Biographer* and the postmodern novelist both arrive at the same combination of the literary and the historical.

These historiographic principles are directly reflected in *Orlando* in several crucial ways. As previously noted, “The New Biography” was first published on October 30, 1927. This fact bears repeating because it demonstrates the essay was most likely composed when Woolf was in the deepest throes of *Orlando*. Her diary entry from October 22, 1927, reads, “I have done nothing, nothing, nothing else for a fortnight; and am launched somewhat furtively but with all the more passion upon *Orlando: A Biography*” (*Writer’s* 115). This close connection demonstrates how “The New Biography” and *Orlando* are both products that emerge from Woolf’s views on New Biography at the same specific point in time.

At a global level, *Orlando* is a direct attempt to create a biography that combines history and fiction as outlined in “The New Biography.” As Maria DiBattista writes in her introduction to the novel, “*Orlando* is Woolf’s s outlandish solution to the biographer’s problem of welding the rainbow and granite, the aura of personality and the truth of fact” (DiBattista xlvi). In this case, Woolf was obviously concerned with capturing one specific personality: Vita Sackville-West, and *Orlando* is an amalgamation of Woolf’s personal experience with Vita and a broad swath of sources about the Sackville family and their estate at Knole. At this global level, then, *Orlando* is an attempt to write a biography of a real-life person using the tools of both the biographer and the novelist. In this way, it echoes “The New Biography”’s similarities to historiographic metafiction, which “works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction” (“Historiographic” 4). This statement applies seamlessly to what Woolf does with *Orlando*; she situates her biography of Vita Sackville-West in hard fact

but, by retaining the autonomy of fiction, allows herself to invent and, ultimately, make the work something much greater than the portrait of a friend and lover.

The intrusive biographer of *Orlando* provides some of the most compelling parallels between “The New Biography” and the novel. Like his subject, the biographer undergoes a dramatic transformation over the course of the novel. While Orlando transforms from man to woman, the biographer slowly transforms from the Victorian-style chronicler that Woolf criticizes to the kind of New Biographer that Woolf celebrates in her essay. In this complex historiographic transformation, the biographer gradually escapes from a crippling reliance on documentary fact and demonstrates a growing willingness to incorporate literary features like “the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expand the private life” (“New Biography” 234).

The biographer’s initial preoccupation with facts is present in the very first line of *Orlando*. The biographer begins by stating, “He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters” (*Orlando* 11). The biographer writes exactly one word before feeling the need to assert the absolute veracity of a fact: that Orlando is, unequivocally, a male. The biographer makes this assertion even though the reader has no reason to doubt Orlando’s sex at this point in the text. This allegiance to fact is later reflected in what he calls “the first duty of the biographer, which is to plod, without looking right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth” (49). The biographer aims to follow the “footprints of truth,” documentary facts that are the lasting marks made in the course of a subject’s life. By limiting himself to plodding in these facts, the biographer dooms himself to merely following in his subject’s “footsteps.” Later in the same paragraph, the biographer summarizes his position more directly, stating that biographers’



“simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what they may” (49). This directly conflicts with what Woolf calls for in “The New Biography,” where she encourages the biographer to manipulate facts “in order that the light of personality may shine through (“New Biography” 229). Furthermore, the biographer’s language at this stage echoes a disposition that Woolf criticizes in “The New Biography”: that of “the serious and sympathetic companion, toiling even slavishly in the footsteps of his hero” (231). In the early pages of *Orlando*, the biographer engages in this kind of hero worship. For example, he exclaims, “Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one!” (*Orlando* 12). The biographer’s pride in his subject outshines even that of a mother for her child.

It is not surprising, then, that Orlando’s fictitious biographer is both strictly loyal to fact and suspicious of literature. The biographer expresses his criticism of fiction quite vocally, describing Orlando’s love of literature as an “infection” that “was of so deadly a nature that it would shake the hand as it was raised to strike, cloud the eye as it sought its prey, and make the tongue stammer as it declared its love” (55). The biographer attributes Orlando’s desire to write to his harmful love of literature and his “disease of reading,” which causes him to fall prey “to that other scourge which dwells in the ink pot and festers in the quill” (56). For someone of Orlando’s privileged status, this even more dangerous “germ” often ends as the afflicted “falls into consumption and sickness, blows his brains out, turns his face to the wall” (56).

Ultimately, the difficult task of writing a biography of such a fantastic life shows the biographer the limitations of his beloved facts. At the beginning of Chapter Three, a crucial stage in Orlando’s life in which “he played a most important part in the public life of his country,” the biographer reveals that “we have the least information to go upon” (89). Faced by this gap in

documentary fact, the biographer admits that “often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (89). In other words, the biographer is forced to make use of the tools of the novelist to continue his biography. Despite the scathing disavowal of literature voiced earlier in *Orlando*, this dearth of information causes the biographer to recognize the shortcomings of relying on fact alone. In response, he begins to embrace fiction’s ability to invent.

Later in *Orlando*, the biographer’s attitude toward Alexander Pope reflects his growing enthusiasm about blending fact and fiction. While his admiration for Pope reveals a growing appreciation for literature in general, it also reveals an admiration for literature that specifically combines fact and fiction. The biographer quotes five lines from Pope’s *The Rape of the Lock*, a work that fictionalizes events that actually occurred. *The Rape of the Lock* is not a historical account solely based on facts. Instead, it is an account that uses historical facts as the basis for a fictional work. In this way, *The Rape of the Lock* is a text that combines “the truth of real life and the truth of fiction” as Woolf calls for in “The New Biography” (“New Biography” 234). The biographer’s inclusion of this specific type of work hints at a growing appreciation for works that are a mixture of fact and fiction, something that his own biography is increasingly becoming.

This trend in the biographer’s attitude is further revealed when Pope arrives at Lady R.’s assembly. The biographer omits Pope’s comments, writing:

Then the little gentleman said,

He said next,

He said finally, (148)

The biographer then declares “here, it cannot be denied, was true wit, true wisdom, true profundity” (148). Pope’s comments shatter the cultivated illusion of wit that those at Lady R.’s

assembly enjoy, throwing the company “into complete dismay” (148). In this scene, the biographer attributes a great power to Pope: the ability to speak truth which can destroy illusions. Although he writes in the footnote that he chose not to print Pope’s words because the “sayings are too well known to require repetition,” it is more likely that the biographer omits them because he is hesitant to unleash this power in his own text (148). The omission of Pope’s comments suggest that the biographer is aware that the biography he is presenting is itself an illusion which Pope’s words would endanger because it is fundamentally a combination of fact and fiction. By refusing to print Pope’s comments, he is attempting to protect the illusion of Orlando that he is in the process of creating.

Despite this changing attitude, the biographer remains a captive of his subject for most of the novel. He remains committed to the historiographic decision that “at her own pace, we will follow her” (115). This chronicler’s policy reaches a breaking point when Orlando sits down to finalize her manuscript of “The Oak Tree.” As she writes, her biographer remains with his subject, passing the time by recounting the names of the months as they pass (196). After a full year passes, he finally admits that “this method of writing biography, though it has its merits, is a little bare” (196). The biographer then decides to leave Orlando and goes exploring in search of the meaning of life. In this strange series of events, the biographer has finally broken free from his subject and begun creating on his own.

Although he soon returns to his subject and finishes his biography, Woolf’s biographer persona, having rejected the role of Victorian chronicler, has completed his transition to Woolf’s New Biographer. He has demonstrated that he no longer thinks “himself constrained to follow every step of the way” (“New Biography” 231). He has attained independence, and “raised upon a little eminence which his independence has made for him, he sees his subject spread before

him. He chooses; he synthesizes; in short, he has ceased to be the chronicler; he has become the artist” (231). As an artist, the biographer is now capable of understanding, reflecting, and engaging with his subject in richer, more complex ways. For example, the biographer soon reveals that “It was the eleventh of October. It was 1928. It was the present moment” (*Orlando* 219). In this moment, time catches up to him; as a result, the biographer is no longer writing about the past and is now capturing events as they happen. In many ways, he has ceased being a biographer at all because he is now writing about a life in progress.

Whether biographer or novelist, the narrator’s new position gives him fresh perspectives on his subject that clash with his earlier beliefs. For example, the once traditional biographer contradicts the conventions of his genre, and Woolf’s own father, by claiming that the “true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute” (224). As Hutcheon suggests in “Historiographic Metafiction,” “the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness” (“Historiographic” 10). Having recognized this illusion and attained self-awareness, the biographer can now see Orlando in a new way that offers a much more convincing portrait than his previous attempts. When he writes that Orlando “had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for,” he acknowledges both the potentially infinite multiplicity of her identities and his own fundamental inability to reduce those identities into a narrative of one life (*Orlando* 226).

Ultimately, the portrait of Orlando that the biographer captures at this stage of the novel is the image of Orlando that endures: a being composed of multiple selves that express themselves in response to the various stimuli of life that occur at any given moment in time. Prior to this point, the biographer was unable to capture this profound aspect of his subject’s

identity; instead, his efforts could only capture fragments, individual iterations of Orlando at particular stages in time. Thanks to his transformation from chronicler to New Biographer and his willingness to embrace the tools of the novelist, the biographer is finally able to capture his subject in a way that truly reflects the inexhaustible nuances and vicissitudes of human identity.

After so masterfully examining biography's attempts to capture human identity in *Orlando*, Woolf's next fictional biography focuses on the life of a non-human subject. The unique challenges of writing a biography of an animal result in several significant differences between the two novels. In many ways, the biographer of *Flush* is much less visible than the frequently intrusive biographer of *Orlando*. *Flush*'s biographer does not undergo the kind of biographical transformation that occurs in *Orlando* and rarely interrupts the narrative to provide historiographic commentary. However, the comparative subtlety of *Flush* makes it, in many ways, a clearer example of how Woolf inscribes both literary and historical intertexts in the fictional biographies. As Hutcheon writes, "History and literature provide the intertexts [for historiographic metafiction] but there is no question of a hierarchy, implied or otherwise" ("Historiographic" 28). Like historiographic metafiction, *Flush* also relies equally on historical and literary intertexts. This is partly due to the fact that information about Flush exists almost entirely in Barrett Browning's poems and existing letters. With such a limited amount of sources from which to draw, the biographer is encouraged to lean more heavily on literary intertexts, Barrett Browning's poems, for information about Flush.

Unlike *Orlando*, *Flush* has an "Authorities" page at the end of the novel where Woolf lists the sources she used to create the biography. Although she writes that "it must be admitted that there are very few authorities for the foregoing biography," the list she provides yields valuable insight into her use of texts (*Flush* 117). Specifically, the first two works on this list are

two of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poems, "To Flush, My Dog" and "Flush, or Faunus" (117). The sources listed on the Authorities page are not in alphabetical order; this shows that these poems are not given first priority simply for alphabetical reasons. With the alphabetical possibility excluded, it becomes clear that Woolf lists these works first because they are of particular importance among the texts she used to compile her biography. This provides a clear example of how Woolf not only incorporated literary texts into this biography, but treated them with the same measure of importance as the traditional historical texts represented by the several cited volumes of letters.

In particular, the biographer's use of "Flush, or Faunus" directly dramatizes the events of the poem as part of the biographical narrative. In *Flush*, the biographer portrays the events of the poem as stemming from an episode in which Barrett Browning asks herself "Can words say anything? Do not words destroy the symbol that lies beyond the reach of words?" (26). Like Barrett Browning, the speaker of "Flush, or Faunus" begins to cry, but a reason is not given. The biographer invents the entire reason that Elizabeth Barrett Browning cries during this scene of the novel. In both the poem and the novel, Flush then leaps up to comfort Barrett Browning as she cries. The surprised speaker in the poem shares that she "started first, as some Arcadian / Amazed by goatly god in twilight grove" (Barrett Browning 9-10). Similarly, Barrett Browning in *Flush* "started. Was it Flush, or was it Pan? Was she no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek nymph in some dim grove in Arcady?" (*Flush* 26). Once again, there are subtle variations between the source text and the biographer's representation of that text. For the speaker of the poem, these events result in her "thanking the true Pan, / Who, by low creatures, leads to heights of love" (Barrett Browning 13-14). For Barrett Browning in *Flush*, the result is characterized as something much more profound. Flush's action gives her a brief moment of

escape from her isolated existence as “an invalid in Wimpole Street.” In *Flush*, this scene portrays the relationship between Barrett Browning and Flush as one that provides solace from, and even briefly transcends, the limitations of both language and physical space.

Clearly, “Flush, or Faunus” may very well be an autobiographical account of an actual event that took place in Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s life. However, this event could also quite easily be one that Barrett Browning invented specifically for this poem. This dilemma demonstrates how the historical authenticity of all texts is necessarily dependent upon the interpretations a biographer or historian makes when faced with questions precisely like this. Furthermore, this example demonstrates how a biographer’s interpretations of a text fundamentally influence the way that text is represented when inscribed in another. Just as it dramatizes the events of “Flush, or Faunus,” this scene from *Flush* dramatizes the way that the interpretative nature of historiography problematizes the authority of historical texts.

At the same time, this example provides a representative example of the complex metafictionality of *Orlando* and *Flush*. Both texts are transparently and unapologetically fictional while simultaneously making claims to historical authenticity through their genre placement and by their use of historical and literary texts. Because of this, these texts simultaneously tell their readers two contradictory things: that they are fiction and that they are fact. This textual duplicitousness clearly demonstrates a level of self-awareness indicative of metafiction. In “Historiographic Metafiction,” Hutcheon asserts that “the term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should [...] best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional *and* historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past” (“Historiographic” 3). Because of the way that *Orlando* and *Flush* combine their self-reflexive metafictionality with a deep concern for historiography, these texts strongly exhibit both of the elements required to qualify as

historiographic metafiction, the category to which Hutcheon claims the term postmodernism should “best be reserved.” When Hutcheon gives examples of “popular and familiar novels whose metafictional self-reflexivity (and intertextuality) renders their implicit claims to historical veracity somewhat problematic, to say the least,” it is clear that *Orlando* and *Flush* easily belong within this categorization of postmodern novels (3).



## CHAPTER 3

### PARODYING BIOGRAPHY: FICTIONAL BIOGRAPHY, THE PAST'S OBSCURITY, AND HISTORICAL NARRATIVITY

As with historiography, parody is a common hallmark of postmodern fiction. As Hutcheon notes, parody “is usually considered central to postmodernism, both by its detractors and its defenders” (*Politics* 89). In this way, parody is one of the most recognizable features of postmodern fiction; at the same time, it is also a feature of postmodern fiction that is commonly misunderstood. Parody alone does not signify that a text is postmodern; instead, the *manner* in which parody is employed and the *reasons* for which it is employed are what make it postmodern. This study employs Linda Hutcheon’s use of the term “parody,” which she broadly defines as something that is also “often called ironic quotation, pastiche, appropriation, or intertextuality” (89). Note that this definition of “parody” also incorporates pastiche. In “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” Fredric Jameson suggests that “pastiche is blank parody, parody that has lost its sense of humor” (Jameson 16). Here Jameson helps us differentiate postmodern parody from other, chiefly comic forms of parody, and this distinction is particularly important when discussing Woolf’s use of parody in *Orlando* and *Flush*.

As Chapter 1 demonstrates, the historiographic commentary embedded in Woolf’s fictional biographies mark these works as pieces of historiographic metafiction. Additionally, Woolf’s use of parody in *Orlando* and *Flush* invites further comparisons with the kind of historiographic postmodernism we have been discussing. According to Hutcheon, parody “offers a sense of the presence of the past, but this is a past that can only be known from its texts, its traces—be they literary or historical” (“Historiographic” 4). In this way, historiographic

metafiction uses parody to acknowledge the past while simultaneously reminding us that the past cannot fully be known as something separate from our textual framing of it.

Since our knowledge of the past is fundamentally based on literary and historical texts, it is always incomplete. As a result, the past is ultimately obscured through textual representation even as it is illuminated. Historiographic metafiction uses parody to accentuate this fundamental attribute of textual history and its ramifications toward a narrative's claims to historical authenticity. Historiographic metafiction

demands of the reader not only the recognition of textualized traces of the literary and historical past but also the awareness of what has been done—through irony—to those traces. The reader is forced to acknowledge not only the inevitable textuality of our knowledge of the past, but also both the value and the limitation of that inescapably discursive form of knowledge. (“Historiographic” 8)

Highlighting the intertextuality of history through parody, pointing out “what has been done” to texts in order to craft a fictional narrative of the past they represent, is an inherently metafictional act. It is also an act which draws attention to how totalizing metanarratives manipulate texts. In this way, postmodern parody is closely linked in its concerns to historiography, and while postmodern fiction often foregrounds the historiographic practices used to craft narratives of the past, it also frequently takes this foregrounding a step further by actively parodying these historiographic practices.

*Orlando* and *Flush* each use parody for this postmodern purpose. Specifically, the fictional biographies parody many of the conventions of Victorian biography. Woolf's call for incorporating fiction alongside fact in “The New Biography” is framed as a direct response to prominent Victorian biographer Sidney Lee. In “The New Biography,” Woolf criticizes Lee for

only seeking “truth in its hardest most obdurate form; [...] truth as truth is to be found in the British Museum” (229). As Kovalesky notes, Woolf “recognizes the importance of the kind of truth to which Lee refers. Hard facts, the products of careful research, are worthy of respect. But biography requires more than a collection of facts” (Kovalesky 12). According to Woolf, relying solely on documentary fact poses several significant problems for biography. An overreliance on verifiable truths is largely the reason that “Sir Sidney’s life of Shakespeare is dull, and that his life of Edward the Seventh is unreadable” (229). More importantly, however, focusing on verifiable facts alone makes it impossible to capture “that inner life of thought and emotion,” the essence of personality that biography aims to capture. Furthermore, the documentary facts that Victorian biographers cling to are always subject to error and interpretation, which suggests that factual truths are not intrinsically more valuable than the truths fiction can provide. In *Orlando* and *Flush*, Woolf parodies Victorian biography in ways that fundamentally question the truth-value assigned to documentary fact.

In *Orlando*, this parody often comes at the biographer’s expense. One of the strongest examples of this comes during the biographer’s discussion of the unreliability of memory. In many of her works, Woolf weighs the implications that the fallibility of memory has for our conceptions of identity and reality. This issue is foregrounded in the fictional biographies because of the important role memory plays in all forms of historiography. Orlando’s biographer writes,

Nature, who has played so many queer tricks upon us, making us so unequally of clay and diamonds, of rainbow and granite, and stuffed them into a case, often of the most incongruous, [...] has contrived that the whole assortment shall be

lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that. (*Orlando* 58)

Here, the biographer acknowledges the fundamental role that memory plays in ordering the human experience. The biographer parodies memory by caricaturing it as a capricious seamstress that “runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither” (58). Apart from the palpable sexism of this caricature, which mirrors the prevailing tone in the type of Victorian biography Woolf is parodying, the biographer’s portrayal of memory’s fallibility is convincing. However, Woolf saturates the passage in irony; the biographer does not appear to have considered the complications that his own argument presents for historical narratives like the one he is in the process of contriving. Woolf is therefore parodying existing biographies and pointing out their dangers even as she is making an important point about memory as it relates to historiography. In this she is clearly using techniques that are more commonly associated with postmodern literature.

Many of the most important sources a historian or biographer draws upon rely directly on memory as the locus of their authenticity. Diaries, interviews, and eye-witness accounts are important documentary sources, and each of these relies solely on a person’s recollection of events. By pointing out the inadequacy of memory, the biographer reveals the underlying inadequacy of these commonly accepted sources for historical narratives. Furthermore, this passage underscores how the body of texts that comprise our collective memory of the past are themselves based on memory, which further challenges the claims those texts make for historical authenticity. Ultimately, Woolf’s use of parody illuminates another daunting obstacle between the present and the past, namely that, like narrative, memory provides yet another level of representation through which the events of the past may be obscured. When Woolf’s fictional

biographer writes that, due to memory's capriciousness, "we know not what comes next or what follows after," he perfectly captures the critical problem that memory poses for history's portrayals of the past (59).

In another ironic move, the biographer, despite his awareness of the fallibility of memory, later relies exclusively on memory-based sources in his reconstruction of the night Orlando receives his Dukedom in Constantinople. In this way, the novel parodies the biographer's own stubborn reliance on conventional historiographic methods despite his apparent awareness of their flaws. In piecing together the events of this fateful night, the biographer synthesizes a variety of sources: "the diary of John Fenner Brigge, [...] an English naval officer" (93), an account of the night from a letter by "Miss Penelope Hartopp, daughter of the General of that name" (94), a description of the ceremony from "the Gazette of the time" (96), "the testimony of the sentries" (97), and the account of a washerwoman (98). All of these sources rely directly on memory. Nevertheless, the biographer asserts that "we are on the firm, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth" (97). This methodology is clearly inconsistent with the biographer's earlier statements about memory and, like those statements, parodies the inconsistency and fallibility that Woolf finds in biography.

This inconsistency in the biographer's attitude toward memory can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, the biographer may not have fully considered the implications of his statements about the fallibility of memory. On the other hand, the biographer could also be knowingly overlooking the flaws in these sources in his effort to craft a narrative of past events. In the latter case, the biographer would be doing more than simply representing the past; in his attempt to master these textual traces into a convincing narrative, he would be actively misrepresenting it. Given the unsolicited and outspoken nature of his criticism of memory, the

latter case seems more likely. This close examination of the biographer's use of sources reveals that he is most likely manipulating these sources into a narrative which he asserts to be based on "ascertained truth" despite the presence of considerable flaws in the source materials (97).

To further problematize the biographer's methods, all of these sources are damaged in various ways. For example, the diary of John Fenner Brigge is "full of burns and holes, some sentences being quite illegible" and the letter by Miss Penelope Hartopp is "much defaced, too" (93, 94). Despite this further blow to the legitimacy of these accounts, the biographer cannot resist the urge to order these "tantalising fragments" into a unified narrative (93). In doing so, he exhibits the "totalizing impulse that postmodern art both inscribes and challenges" (*Politics* 61). To inscribe this impulse, Woolf gives the reader access to the sources the biographer uses to reconstruct this night alongside his subsequent conclusions; by parodying his manipulation of these sources, Woolf simultaneously challenges the biographer's totalizing drive. In this way, this part of *Orlando* uses parody to foreground "the paradox of the desire for and the suspicion of narrative mastery—and master narratives" (61).

This particular night of Orlando's life is crucial to the biographer's narrative given that immediately following the events of that night, Orlando enters into a weeklong trance from which he emerges as a woman. As a result, the flimsiness of the account presents a serious problem for anyone, including the biographer, seeking an explanation for what causes Orlando's transformation, which most likely lies hidden somewhere in the events of that night. Even if this is not the case, one thing is clear: despite his efforts to construct a convincing narrative from these source materials, the biographer's narrative of Orlando's life is incomplete. He appears to be painfully aware of these shortcomings, lamenting how "obscurity descends, and would indeed that it were deeper! Would, we almost have it in our hearts to exclaim, that it were so deep that

we could see nothing whatever through its opacity!” (*Orlando* 99). Woolf’s parody of conventional historiographic methods in this section of *Orlando* makes the fundamental inadequacy of historical narratives so obvious that even the biographer must acknowledge the past’s ultimate obscurity. In this way, the scene exemplifies the way “postmodern parody ... uses irony to acknowledge the fact that we are inevitably separated from the past today – by time and by the subsequent history of those representations” (*Politics* 90).

For its part, *Flush* begins by immediately parodying the way that historians, much like *Orlando*’s biographer, often exhaust themselves in attempts to uncover details that are ultimately lost to obscurity. Since Flush is a cocker spaniel, his biography begins with a lengthy examination of the origin of the name of this breed. In the opening two lines, the biographer states, “It is universally admitted that the family from which the subject of this memoir claims descent is one of the greatest antiquity. Therefore it is not strange that the origin of the name itself is lost in obscurity” (*Flush* 1). And yet, despite this admission, the biographer cannot resist probing this “obscurity” for possible explanations:

Some historians say that when the Carthaginians landed in Spain the common soldiers shouted with one accord ‘Span! Span!’—for rabbits darted from every scrub, from every bush. [...] Span in the Carthaginian tongue signifies Rabbit.

Thus the land was called Hispania, or Rabbit-land, and the dogs [...] were called Spaniels or rabbit dogs. (1)

While this dubious theory is certainly interesting, it is completely unnecessary; the biographer has already admitted that the “origin of the name itself is lost in obscurity,” so such explanations are clearly frivolous conjecture. This, however, is precisely what Woolf parodies in this passage: the way that historians often refuse to accept the obscurity of certain details and, instead, spin off

into endless speculation. Just as the biographer in *Orlando* refuses to yield to the inadequacy of his sources, the biographer in *Flush* refuses to let this trivial etymology rest in obscurity.

After asserting the Carthaginian origin theory, the biographer continues with another speculative theory:

There many of us would be content to let the matter rest; but truth compels us to add that there is another school of thought which thinks differently. The word Hispania, these scholars say, has nothing whatsoever to do with the Carthaginian word span. Hispania derives from the Basque word *españa*, signifying an edge or boundary. If that is so, rabbits, bushes, dogs, soldiers—the whole of that romantic and pleasant picture, must be dismissed from the mind; and we must simply suppose that the Spaniel is called a spaniel because Spain is called *España*. (1-2)

The biographer claims that truth compels him to share this information but has already admitted that the truth has been lost to obscurity. Ultimately, these lengthy descriptions of etymological theories only obscure the truth further and underscore the way that laborious attempts to explain things about the past often reveal just how lost those things truly are. Instead, the biographer's compulsion to explain the unknown, not the pursuit of truth, appears to be the driving force behind this speculative diversion. After all, this is the very beginning of the book, and the biographer already seems to have forgotten both his subject and his reader. Distracted by such trivialities, he exerts himself on these obscure details while casually accepting claims that are even more ridiculous. For example, the biographer thoroughly interrogates the origins of the term spaniel while declaring that “where there is vegetation the law of Nature has decreed that there shall be rabbits; where there are rabbits, Providence has ordained there shall be dogs. There is nothing in this that calls for question, or comment” (1). There is, of course, much “in this that



calls for question,” but the biographer appears to be distracted by speculative theories. By parodying this tendency, Woolf highlights the way historians that dwell in obscurities risk losing sight of the bigger picture, effectively making their own work as trivial as the details they seize upon.

Later on in *Flush*, the biographer’s propensity to become lost in tangents is parodied once again. After revealing that “Lily Wilson fell passionately in love with Signor Righi, the guardsmen,” the biographer attaches a footnote that consumes the next several pages. The length of this footnote prefigures a technique used in postmodern novels, where “Chinese-box-structured metafiction [...] upsets (and therefore foregrounds) the normal or conventional balance of the primary text and the traditionally secondary paratextual notes or commentary” (*Politics* 82). In the footnote, the biographer declares, “The life of Lily Wilson is extremely obscure and thus cries aloud for the services of a biographer” (*Flush* 81). While the biographer admirably draws attention to Wilson and her many endearing qualities, the extreme obscurity surrounding her is precisely what might make a biography of her, even in the New Biographic style, impossible. And yet, the biographer proceeds to speculate extensively about her life and character. This diversion provides another parodic look at the biographer’s refusal to accept that some parts of the past are simply lost, and by foregrounding the footnote, Woolf once again calls attention to the text as a narrative construction.

However, this parodic interlude also serves other important metafictional functions. Over the course of the footnote, as the biographer extends his speculation about Wilson to the point that he begins to invent, Wilson becomes a character of her own, albeit a highly fictional one. In this way, the biographer displays the New Biography’s willingness to incorporate literary devices to expand and develop portraits of past lives. That is, *Flush*’s biographer combines

literary *and* historical modes to partially reclaim Lily Wilson from obscurity. In this way, the biographer constructs a Lily Wilson that is based on both literary and historical texts.

At the same time, however, the footnote also foregrounds one of the major limitations of biography: the pictures of history that biography offers are inherently periscopeic. By focusing on one subject's life, the biographer inevitably distorts events and people that surround the subject by filtering them through their relation to the subject. Ultimately, they are pushed to the side as this example demonstrates; the compelling character of Lily Wilson is literally pushed to the margins of the narrative. This parallels what Hutcheon suggests is a major problem of representation "regarding the nature and status of the 'fact' in both history-writing and fiction-writing. All past 'events' are potential historical facts, but the ones that become facts are those that are chosen to be narrated" (*Politics* 72). Lily Wilson offers a valuable example of this issue of representation in biography, a specific type of history-writing: the events of any life can be the subject of a biography, but Lily Wilson is reduced to the footnotes of history simply because her life is not chosen to be narrated.

Finally, the manner in which Woolf closes each of her fictional biographies parodies the closure of traditional biographies to accentuate the ultimate incompleteness of the life narratives they represent. When *Orlando* ends, Orlando is still very much alive, having just reunited with Shelmerdine who has returned in his aeroplane. In fact, the elation of their reunion suggests that Orlando may be about to embark on one of the happiest chapters in her long life. The final lines of the novel then declare that "the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight" (*Orlando* 241). This is the precise date on which the novel was initially published. In this way, the novel

ends at the present moment with Orlando still alive in the world. Despite his attempts to capture Orlando's life, the biographer's narrative is fundamentally incomplete.

In a letter to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf describes the original ending of *Orlando*, asking, "Did you feel a sort of tug, as if your neck was being broken on Saturday last [17 March] at 5 minutes to one? That was when he died, or rather stopped talking, with three little dots . . ." (*Letters* 474). While the final ending appears to have changed slightly from the original, it maintains this intended anticlimax. In her final line of dialogue, Orlando looks into the sky and exclaims "It is the goose!" Orlando cried. "The wild goose..." (*Orlando* 241). In this way, *Orlando* ends with an ellipsis, an acknowledgment that something has been *omitted*. In this way, *Orlando*'s ending accentuates the fundamental incompleteness of all biography.

Though it ends quite differently, *Flush*'s ending provides the same effect. Unlike Orlando, Flush receives a deathbed scene. As Kovalesky notes, "Richard D. Altick identifies 'the deathbed' as 'the one obligatory scene in nineteenth-century biography'" (192). As Flush lies next to a reading Barrett Browning, the biographer reveals that "an extraordinary change had come over him. 'Flush!' she cried. But he was silent. He had been alive; he was now dead. That was all. The drawing room table, strangely enough, stood perfectly still" (*Flush* 116). Flush's death is decidedly not heroic or world-altering, and Woolf's parodic treatment of the deathbed scene intentionally defies the conventional climax of Victorian biography. However, even though these are the final lines of the novel's main text, they are not its final word. In a corresponding footnote, the biographer reveals "It is certain that Flush died; but the date and manner of his death are unknown" (116). This footnote leaves the reader with a final reminder of the fictiveness of the narrative by pointing out that its final scene is purely invented, a complete historiographic fabrication. In this way, *Flush* emphatically mirrors postmodern fiction in which

the “narrativization of past events is not hidden; the events no longer seem to speak for themselves, but are shown to be consciously composed into a narrative, whose constructed—not found—order is imposed upon them, often overtly by the narrating figure” (*Politics* 63).

These endings parallel another important way that Woolf demarcates the inherent inadequacy of biographical narratives. Both fictional biographies and her biography of Roger Fry carry the same subtitle “A Biography”. Describing the importance of this distinction, Kovalesky writes,

Woolf did not write "the" biography of any person or even of any dog. She often noted the limitations and the "futility" of all biography, and her subtitle *A Biography* for her "lives" of Orlando, Flush, and Roger Fry suggests a consistently nonauthoritative stance. Any biography, whether it claims to be "the" definitive biography or merely "a biography" among a multitude of possibilities, is nevertheless one version presented by a necessarily subjective biographer.

(Kovalesky 27)

In using the indefinite article with each of her own biographies, Woolf parodies both conventional biographical practices and the notion that any narrative can claim to offer an authoritative vision of a life. Implicit in this action is also a rejection of any narrative’s totalizing claims. This sentiment, woven directly into the titles of Woolf’s biographies, expresses a distinctly postmodern perspective in which “knowing the past becomes a question of representing, that is, of constructing and interpreting, not of objective recording” (*Politics* 70). As their extensive parody of the biography genre reveals, *Orlando* and *Flush* prefigure postmodern attitudes from beginning to end, from their titles to their closing lines.

## CHAPTER 4

### SUBVERSIVE BIOGRAPHY: DENATURALIZING CULTURAL ASSUMPTIONS IN ORLANDO AND FLUSH

Early in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Hutcheon writes that “the postmodern’s initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as ‘natural’ ... are in fact ‘cultural’; made by us, not given to us” (*Politics* 2). As this study has shown, both *Orlando* and *Flush* denaturalize assumptions about historical narratives and their fact-based claims to offer authentic visions of the past. These novels accomplish this by undermining the privileged position of historical texts, by exposing the historiographical machinations used to construct them, and by unearthing the totalizing impulses hidden below their neat narrative surfaces. In doing so, the fictional biographies demonstrate how common beliefs about history, namely that historical texts convey authentic truth about the past, are actually cultural assumptions. Paradoxically, the primary source of authority for historical texts appears to lie in a widespread belief that these texts hold authority. In a distinctly postmodern way, *Orlando* and *Flush* reveal that historical narratives are “made by us, not given to us”; they are things that are crafted, not found, and their power comes not from fact but from the culture that accepts them as fact. As they do with history, *Orlando* and *Flush* also denaturalize several other dominant features of our way of life. Specifically, each of these works interrogates common assumptions about sex and class to expose these beliefs as cultural products and not essential truths. In doing so, *Orlando* and *Flush* once again exhibit postmodern attitudes by confronting dominant conceptions and revealing them to be constructions.

In *Orlando*, Woolf uses the protagonist's sexual transformation to question widely held assumptions about sexual difference. As Maria DiBattista asserts, "Sex in *Orlando* is never treated as an indisputable fact of biological and social life" (*Fables* 117). This is apparent in the very first line of the novel, in which the biographer writes, "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (*Orlando* 11). As DiBattista notes, "The certitude of Orlando's sexual identity is immediately qualified even as it is asserted" (*Fables* 117). Throughout the novel, sex is portrayed as something much more complicated than cultural and essentialist assumptions about sexual difference allow.

This is illustrated, and further complicated, as the biographer describes the moments just after Orlando's transformation:

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his,' and 'she' for 'he'—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (103)

Orlando's change in sex subverts cultural expectations about gender because, at the most fundamental level, she remains unchanged. In this way, Woolf denaturalizes assumptions about the fundamental difference between the sexes by suggesting that biological sex has little to do with a person's true identity. In fact, the only measurable change in Orlando appears to be the pronouns used in reference to her. This linguistic change points us to the true impact of Orlando's transformation: the major changes that result lie in how she is perceived by and

referred to by other people. Her new sex does not alter her identity; instead, it simply alters her relationship with the culture in which she lives. This further demonstrates how perceived differences between sexes are “made by us, not given to us” at birth. As DiBattista eloquently writes, Orlando’s transformation “does not so much reveal the truth and nothing but the truth about innate differences between men and women as demystify and de-objectify the assumptions commonly held about sexual natures” (*Fables* 120).

In fact, Orlando dramatizes the way that cultural influences force individuals into accepted gender roles. Orlando “had scarcely given her sex a thought” while with the gypsies because “the gypsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from gypsy men” (113). In other words, their culture is less assuming about sexual difference. However, this changes once Orlando reenters English culture, with its much more pronounced beliefs about sexual difference. Bound for England aboard the *Enamored Lady*, Orlando accidentally reveals an inch or two of her calf and nearly causes a sailor to fall from the ship’s mast (116). This immediate reminder of the potential danger she may cause by acting outside of social convention forces her to acknowledge the restrictions of gender expectations and modify her behavior accordingly. In terms of sex, Orlando becomes a woman after her trance in Constantinople; however, she does not take on an expected “female” gender role until she reenters British society. In this way, Woolf demonstrates that gender roles are a cultural product, not a biological one.

It is clear, however, that, even though she often conforms to gender expectations and accepts the fact that she must “begin to respect the opinion of the other sex,” Orlando does not accept these beliefs as her own (115). Instead, she “censur[es] both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither” (117). Although she outwardly conforms to expectations of female

behavior, internally “she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman” (117). Despite this, Orlando’s reluctant acceptance of the gender role demanded by her culture culminates with the decision to marry during the nineteenth century. Although she remains unmarried for centuries after her transformation, she is no match for the overwhelming pressure for women to marry within Victorian culture. Under this intense social pressure, she “was forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband” (178). In other words, Orlando’s decision to marry is fundamentally a product of her society and culture at this time in her life. The act of taking a husband is the result of the culture in which Orlando lives and not a manifestation of biologically inherent characteristics of her sex. Thus, when she finally verbalizes her desire to marry, “it was not Orlando who spoke, but the spirit of the age” (179). This spiritual possession dramatizes the way in which cultural pressures mold individuals into accepted gender roles and their corresponding behaviors.

Although Orlando does gradually adopt an accepted gender role, she actively transgresses gender boundaries early in her life as a woman. As DiBattista claims, “Orlando initially challenges society’s rigid law of sex by surreptitiously taking an androgynous holiday,” one that takes up much of the eighteenth century (*Fables* 121). During this time, Orlando uses crossdressing to freely inhabit the roles of both sexes. By understanding and manipulating social codes about what is acceptable behavior for men and women, she again undermines gender assumptions and reveals them to be cultural products that can be circumvented with tact. Her manipulation of clothing and its role in shaping an individual’s identity is just one example of *Orlando’s* extensive discourse on clothes. As DiBattista claims, “Clothes are invested with extraordinary novelistic value in *Orlando*. The history of Orlando’s sexual and social identity is



inseparable from the history of his, then her, attire” (“Introduction” lxiii). In other words, Orlando “wears” cultural expectations, and her sexual identity is inherently a product of the culture she inhabits at any given period. As the biographer asserts, clothes “wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (*Orlando* 138). With this claim, the biographer points out how our feelings, thoughts, and behaviors are products of the clothes we wear, themselves products of the culture we inhabit, and not always the result of a fundamentally male or female identity.

Although DiBattista also claims that “there is much, however, to support the contrary view that clothes do not mold the man,” the novel ultimately confirms the power of cultural influences in shaping a person’s gender identity (“Introduction” lxii). However, clothes are not the *only* thing that mold the man because their impact on sexual identity is but one aspect of a much broader cultural force. While crossdressing allows Orlando to inhabit the roles of both sexes during the eighteenth century, her crossdressing does not continue into the nineteenth century, a time in which the social pressure to inhabit strictly divided gender roles was amplified to new levels. Orlando’s gradual acquiescence to the female role during this period, which culminates in her decision to marry and is solidified by her later giving birth to a child, demonstrates how the cultural forces that shape an individual into a specific gender role are often simply too strong to resist. At the same time, however, the very force of that Victorian ideology, which was not present in the previous century, shows that gender expectations are created by culture. Where some may point to the power of cultural norms as evidence of their essentiality, Woolf denaturalizes even the most powerful, widespread ideological “truths” about sex and gender and shows them to be cultural constructions.

Although Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Flush* does not undergo a transformation as dramatic as Orlando, she too exhibits a change that exposes how assumptions about sexual difference are ultimately products of one's culture. At her home on Wimpole Street, Miss Barrett lives essentially in confinement. Although Barrett battled several serious illnesses during her life, her confinement as portrayed in *Flush* is a harmfully extreme measure that her father institutes to protect her health. She is treated as an "invalid," a term which appears numerous times throughout the work. In the brief instances when she is allowed to leave her bedroom, it is only for very brief outings that are perceived as great risks. For example, having herself "drawn up Wimpole Street in a bath-chair" is characterized as a "daring exploit" (*Flush* 18). The confined nature of Miss Barrett's life starkly contrasts Flush's earlier experiences living with Miss Mitford at Three Mile Cross, where he had the freedom to roam the country and play in the fields. When Flush first enters Miss Barrett's bedroom, the biographer compares him to "a scholar who has descended step by step into a mausoleum and there finds himself in a crypt" (13). This comparison demonstrates both the severity of Barrett's sequestration and how that isolation would look to someone unacquainted with the culture of London's high society. Stripped of its cultural context, Barrett's isolation is as horrifying for the reader as it is for the uninitiated Flush. As an outsider, Flush reacts in a way that shows how Barrett's confinement is not at all natural, but rather a product of harmful cultural assumptions about women's physical vulnerability.

Likewise, Flush's status as a pet who is owned highlights the way in which Miss Barrett is, in many ways, owned. Like Flush, who could only go outdoors if chained on a leash, "she could not go out. She was chained to the sofa. 'A bird in a cage would have as good a story,' she wrote" (24). These parallels between Miss Barrett's and Flush's positions as possessions are

further cemented by the humorous similarity in their physical appearances. The biographer points out this resemblance almost immediately after they meet, observing how “heavy curls hung down on either side of Miss Barrett’s face; large bright eyes shone out; a large mouth smiled. Heavy ears hung down on either side of Flush’s face; his eyes, too, were large and bright: his mouth was wide. There was a likeness between them” (16). The biographer’s attention to this physical similarity, drawn out by the repetition of language in the two descriptions, primes the reader to identify the parallels between their social statuses as the novel progresses.

After eloping with Robert Browning to Italy, Barrett Browning is transformed. As the biographer observes,

She was a different person altogether. Now for instance, instead of sipping a thimbleful of port and complaining of the headache, she tossed off a tumbler of Chianti and slept the sounder. [...] Then instead of driving in a barouche landau to Regent’s Park she pulled on her thick boots and scrambled over rocks. [...] She delighted in the sun; she delighted in the cold. (80)

As this description reveals, Barrett Browning is a completely different person from the alleged invalid of Wimpole Street. She engages and revels in activity that would have seemed outrageous in London. Although this transformation may not be as drastic as Orlando’s, it is nonetheless profound. Leaving a London culture that views her as vulnerable and weak because of her sex frees her from the limitations that the assumptions of that culture enforced. The way she thrives in Italy denaturalizes the assumptions that governed her restricted life in London; she is clearly not, and likely never was, the helpless invalid that English culture insisted she was. In Woolf’s fictional biography, Barrett Browning’s “transformation” is not really a change of self, but of cultural circumstance. As such, it is a confirmation and liberation of the capable,

independent individual that has been repressed by English society's harmful cultural assumptions about sexual difference.

Of course, these social constructions about sex and gender are not the only harmful assumptions made by English culture, and they are not the only cultural features denaturalized by *Orlando* and *Flush*. Both novels, for example, confront widely held assumptions about class, specifically how class is tied to wealth and lineage. During her time with the gipsies, Orlando is in contact with a culture very different from her own. Just as the gipsies treat sex differently than what Orlando is accustomed to, they expose Orlando to very different views about class. Orlando comes from a privileged background and sees herself as a member of a wealthy and noble family. Since her family is one of the most powerful and wealthy in England, this is not a baseless assumption. The gipsies, meanwhile, take a very different view of Orlando's background. After Orlando proudly tells the gipsies of her distinguished heritage, "Rustum followed her out of the tent alone and said that she need not mind if her father was a Duke, and possessed all the bedrooms and furniture that she described. They would none of them think the worse of her for that" (*Orlando* 109). Orlando assumes her wealth is something of which to be proud, but for the gipsies "there was no more vulgar ambition than to possess bedrooms by the hundred [...] when the whole earth is ours" (109). This stark contrast demonstrates how the power and status that wealth commands are entirely dependent upon the value a culture attaches to material wealth.

The gipsies confront Orlando's view of lineage in a similar way. While Orlando sees her centuries-long family history as something that should convey status, the gipsies believe that "there was nothing specially memorable or desirable in ancient birth; vagabonds and beggars all shared it" (109). Furthermore, the gipsies reveal that their own families "went back at least two

or three thousand years” (109). By exposing Orlando to these alternate perceptions of wealth and ancestry, the gipsies force her to see how these building blocks of her class supremacy are not inherently sources of power and prestige. Instead, Orlando’s class position is based on cultural assumptions about the value of wealth and heritage. In this way, Orlando’s time with the gipsies denaturalizes her assumptions about her privileged class status.

In *Flush*, Woolf further denaturalizes the kind of cultural assumptions that Orlando harbors by putting them into the mind of a dog. Like Orlando, Flush is proud of his status as a member of “an aristocracy of dogs” and as a product of centuries of fine breeding (*Flush* 3). Even though there are strong parallels between Orlando’s and Flush’s assumptions about their superior status, these thoughts appear thoroughly absurd when held by a cocker spaniel. This denaturalizes these class assumptions by showing how they only make sense within cultures that accept them; in canine culture, these beliefs ring out as anything but natural. In this way, the absurdity of Flush’s notions of class superiority reveals the hidden absurdity in the elitism of noblemen like Orlando. For example, the biographer points out that “long before the Howards, the Cavendishes or the Russells had risen above the common ruck of Smiths, Joneses and Tomkins, the Spaniel family was a family distinguished and apart” (3). If the same standards of merit are applied, spaniels have an even stronger claim to social status than these noble English families because their family history extends back much further. This subverts the standard of merit that awards class superiority to those families that can trace their roots back farthest.

*Flush* further critiques human aristocratic assumptions by demonstrating how class systems in the human world have even less justification than those of the canine world. After describing how the Spaniel Club encourages desired qualities in its members through selective breeding, the biographer exclaims that “if we now turn to human society, what chaos and

confusion meet the eye! No club has any such jurisdiction upon the breed of man” (4). Even though systems of social class routinely award privilege based on family heritage, there are no regulatory bodies like the Spaniel Club in place to ensure that privileged bloodlines earn their preferred status. Clearly, there should not be a human equivalent of the Spaniel Club, but the fact that there is not reveals how truly baseless hereditary claims for social superiority are. In the absence of a Spaniel Club, the biographer points out how “our judges merely refer us to our coat of arms” (4). Of the many flaws in this system, the biographer notes how this standard of merit temporarily awarded the highest of status to powerful families like “the Royal Houses of Bourbon, Hapsburg and Hohenzollern” only to later see these same houses “now in exile, deposed from authority, judged unworthy of respect” (4-5). Faced with these deep flaws in human systems of class, the biographer concludes that “we can but shake our heads and admit that the Judges of the Spaniel Club judged better” (5). By arguing that the social hierarchy of dogs is more justified than human class systems, the biographer reveals the absurdity of cultural assumptions and privileges based on lineage.

Woolf’s denaturalization of cultural assumptions about sex, gender, and class in *Orlando* and *Flush* ultimately act to subvert a deeply ingrained convention in the biography genre as a whole: the “Great Men” standard. As Audrey Diane Johnson points out,

One approach to history during the Victorian era was to study the biographies of prominent people, primarily the “Great Men.” The view was that the lives of such persons and their accomplishments offered examples to be emulated. This biographical form was the one against which writers such as Woolf, Lytton Strachey, and Harold Nicolson reacted in varying ways. (Johnson 40)

Alongside the efforts of her New Biography contemporaries, Woolf's experiments with fictional biography actively interrogate the assumption that the lives of "great men" are the most appropriate and valuable subjects for biography.

In both fictional biographies, Woolf chooses subjects that defy the "great men" criterion. With *Orlando*, the biographer's subject thwarts his attempts to record the life of a great man by transforming him into a woman at the height of his social and political success. Although the biographer expresses a desire to end his biography several times after this transformation—itsself an acknowledgement that biography as a genre was almost exclusively focused on men—he perseveres through his own prejudices to record the life of Orlando the woman. The result is far from a trivial waste of biography; instead, the biographer's examination of a life that would otherwise go unrecorded provides valuable, if invented, insight into women's lives during numerous historical eras. In *Flush*, the biographer chooses a somehow even more unlikely subject in Flush the cocker spaniel. While certainly not a "great man," the biography of Flush once again provides historical insight into the nineteenth century. On one hand, *Flush* eviscerates the "great men" criterion by demonstrating that a valuable biography can be written about a subject that is not even human. On the other, *Flush* circumvents the "great men" tradition by permitting an indirect biography of Elizabeth Barret Browning. Or in an alternative interpretation, we might conclude that the extreme measures *Flush* takes to avoid being an outright biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning makes the "great men" standard appear even more ridiculous; to give historical representation to important women like Browning, the biographer must jump through considerable historiographical hoops.

Woolf later voiced her objection to the "great men" standard once again in the "The Art of Biography," asking "whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is it not anyone

who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography—the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious?” (226-7). In this passage, Woolf argues for a systemic reevaluation of what merits history’s attention and for the inclusion of all those underrepresented and overlooked groups left out of patriarchal metanarratives. She pursues this distinctly postmodern position in *Orlando* and *Flush* by denaturalizing the very cultural assumptions about class and gender upon which the “great men” standard is built. In doing so, she predates and prefigures the postmodern task of demonstrating how many dominant features of our way of life are “made by us, not given to us.” At the same time, her attempt to overthrow the “great men” standard of biography strikes a pre-postmodern blow for giving history back to us all by asserting that every individual deserves representation within the narrative of our shared past.



## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSION

As this study has shown, *Orlando* and *Flush* both display three important hallmarks of postmodern fiction: a concern for historiography, extensive use of parody, and the denaturalization of cultural assumptions. While demonstrating the presence of these characteristics in Woolf's fictional biographies helps answer the question of how these works are postmodern, it does not fully address the important question of *why*. To answer that question, these postmodern traits must be examined together. When considered together, these characteristics illustrate how *Orlando* and *Flush* represent a fundamental departure from the epistemological position of modernism to the ontological position of postmodernism. In other words, these traits do not denote postmodernism, but taken together, they reveal a philosophy and method in Woolf's work that is ontological at its core.

In *Postmodernist Fiction*, Brian McHale asserts that “the dominant of modernist fiction is epistemological” and “the dominant of postmodernist fiction is ontological” (McHale 9, 10). Where epistemological fiction seeks to convey essential truths about human existence, ontological fiction demonstrates how beliefs are granted the authority of truth by the institutions that order human existence. Each of the traits examined in this study exemplify the way in which ontological issues predominate in *Orlando* and *Flush*. As iterations of Woolf's conception of New Biography, they combine fact and fiction to create a richer representation of their subjects. By admitting fiction into the realm of fact, these works acknowledge the way in which our understanding of the past is fundamentally based on texts and on the historiographic choices made in crafting them. As their willingness to incorporate fiction reveals, these works operate on a view of history not as a record of epistemological truths, but as a body of knowledge in which

the truth of the past is ultimately obscured through textual representation. Through their extensive parody of historiographic methods, *Orlando* and *Flush* assault historical texts' claims to capture authentic truths by exposing the flaws of their fundamental narrativity. By denaturalizing cultural assumptions about sex and class, these works reveal how widely held beliefs ostensibly based on essential truths are often products of culture that are thoroughly and harmfully false. With each of these postmodern traits, *Orlando* and *Flush* actively problematize conventional sources of truth by revealing the source of their authority to be social and cultural, not epistemological.

Answering why Woolf arrived at this postmodern position proves to be a more difficult task. The answer most likely lies in the convergence of three factors: Woolf's interest in biography, her exhaustion with modernism, and her intensifying work with feminism. As previously noted, Woolf grew up with a deep historical awareness due to the influence of her father, eminent biographer Leslie Stephen. This interest in history was further refined by her relationship with New Biography figures like Lytton Strachey and Harold Nicolson. As this study has shown, her efforts to revolutionize biography by bringing together fiction and history place her in a similar position to later writers of historiographic metafiction, many of which draw upon her techniques. Furthermore, her interest in biography gave her firsthand experience with totalizing metanarratives and brought her into contact with the problematic claims that historical narratives make to truth. Her extensive experience in the field likely showed her that history was as much a site of factual manipulation as one of epistemological truth.

Secondly, Woolf's experiments with fictional biography were partially the result of exhaustion with the demanding nature of her previous novels. Of *Orlando*, Woolf remarked in her diary, "I have written this book quicker than any other ... [and] it is all a joke; & yet gay &

quick reading I think; a writer's holiday. I feel more and more sure that I will never write a novel again" ("Introduction" xxxvii). This remark demonstrates that Woolf regarded *Orlando* as something very different from her other novels. In fact, it suggests that she did not view *Orlando* as a novel at all, but rather as a "holiday" from the kind of "serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered" (xxxvii). And yet, calling something a "joke" is not necessarily to call it unserious; on the contrary, Woolf reflected in her diary that "The truth is I expect I began it as a joke and went on with it seriously" (*Writer's* 126). Either way, Woolf's less guarded "writer's holiday" appears to have unloosed some of her most experimental proclivities. In "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Frederic Jameson writes that postmodernism emerges largely "as specific reactions against the established forms of high modernism" (Jameson 13). In these literary holidays from her "serious poetic experimental books," Woolf prefigures the artistic frustration with modernist forms that postmodern writers would express later in the century. Paradoxically, Woolf appears to have been reacting against modernism while she was actively defining it. To understand this seeming paradox, consider Jameson's characterization of postmodernism as a reaction against the "dead, stifling, canonical, the reified monuments one has to destroy to do anything new" (14). After all, everything Woolf wrote after *Mrs. Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse* came with the pressures of living up to those masterworks, and she inevitably encountered them at the very moment she tried "to do anything new." Is it not natural that the burden of modernism's monuments would first be felt by their creators? In this way, the ontological focus of *Orlando* and *Flush* is a temporary holiday from the exhausting burden of uncovering and conveying epistemological truths.

Finally, Woolf's feminism must be recognized as a crucial influence on the postmodern positions taken in *Orlando* and *Flush*. Her awareness of the inadequacies of historical

representation and of the impact of cultural assumptions are, to a large extent, a direct result of her own experience with misrepresentations of women and the false cultural assumptions made about them. Just as they express postmodern attitudes, both *Orlando* and *Flush* exhibit clear feminist sentiments. For example, the motivation behind denaturalizing assumptions about sexual difference and the subversion of the “great men” standard in these works is often as much feminist as postmodern. This does not, however, mean that it must be either feminist or postmodern. On the contrary, Woolf’s possible feminist interests in *Orlando* and *Flush* intersect with postmodern interests in historiography, representation, and narrativity. Ultimately it is unnecessary, and perhaps impossible, to label the points where these influences intersect as either postmodern or feminist. Instead, it is best to view them as mutually reinforcing sets of principles that, at least in *Orlando* and *Flush*, work toward common goals. After all, Woolf’s next major work after *Orlando* was *A Room of One’s Own*, a classic of feminist discourse. Ultimately, Woolf’s feminism, when combined with her interest in biography and her need for a break from modernist composition, laid the foundation for the postmodern positions expressed in the fictional biographies, and, in turn, her feminism was further refined as a result of her work on *Orlando* and *Flush*.

Finally, one question remains to be answered: why does this study’s examination of the postmodernist traits in *Orlando* and *Flush* matter? This study shares a goal espoused by Pamela L. Caughie in her book *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*: to provide “a perspective that can free Woolf’s writings from the cage of modernism and the camps of feminism without denying these relations in her texts” (Caughie 2). As this study and broader conversations about postmodernism in Woolf reveal, Woolf’s fiction contains more than a purely modernist or feminist reading could ever uncover. She is absolutely both a modernist and feminist, and the

contributions she made in these capacities are immeasurable. However, circumscribing Woolf to any particular role obscures the full endowment that her genius offers. Only by continuing to explore the vast territory of inspiration that her work opens to us can we ensure ourselves of the full benefits of her singular brilliance.

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