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Author

Robles, Lillian

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Undergraduate

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, LOS ANGELES

"THE SPASMODIC, THE OBSCURE, THE FRAGMENTARY, THE FAILURE":

THE NEGATIVE FORMATION OF CHARACTER IN *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN* AND

ORLANDO

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO

THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

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BY

LILLIAN ROBLES

ADVISOR: LOUISE HORNBY

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ABSTRACT

"THE SPASMODIC, THE OBSCURE, THE FRAGMENTARY, THE FAILURE":

THE NEGATIVE FORMATION OF CHARACTER IN *A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN* AND

ORLANDO

BY LILLIAN ROBLES

This thesis reads *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* by Virginia Woolf as presenting a theory of literary character, which I call the negative formation of character. Underlying this theory is literary character's struggle to properly portray the multiplicity and possibility that Woolf saw as being essential to understanding human beings. Therefore, Woolf found the process of writing people to be problematic. For Woolf, this was not only a formal challenge, but an ethical one as well. The negative formation of character is a possible solution. I argue that the process of forming a character negatively includes a doubling, in which another, inaccurate version of the character is created. Then, that doubled version is rejected. What results is a statement of the character's identity that does not limit them. I explore the negative formation of character through three case-studies: Mary Beton in *A Room of One's Own*, the biographer in *Orlando*, and finally, Orlando. These three characters each demonstrate that the process of rejection, in the context of the negative formation of character, can be a conduit for self-determination. This thesis concludes by exploring the relevance of this theory of character to real life.

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Introduction

Tolerate the spasmodic, the obscure, the fragmentary, the failure. Your help is invoked in a good cause. For I will make one final and surpassingly rash prediction—we are trembling on the verge of one of the great ages of English literature. But it can only be reached if we are determined never, never to desert Mrs. Brown.
— Virginia Woolf, "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown"

In the late 1920s, Virginia Woolf was preoccupied by a particular issue: the difficulty of effectively writing people. It was an issue, for her, with implications about how to interact with others, and how a person can determine their own sense of self. Most importantly, it's an issue of literary character. The sub-issues are as follows: How can narration ever represent a person in a way that is not overly simplified and reductive? How can description of a character leave open possibility? How does understanding character relate to understanding people? In her writing, Woolf was thinking through the limitations and possibilities of literary form. To her, writing people was a matter of great importance, and a significant challenge as a craftsperson. Although I frame the subject here as an issue— writing character is a difficult task— Woolf was not at a loss. Indeed, my focus on these questions comes out of what I read as the answers. From 1927 to 1929, Woolf was writing *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own*, which, I argue, model a theory of negative character formation, in which characters are defined by what they are not. I present the negative formation of character as Woolf's attempt to liberate literary characters from restrictive, simplified ways of writing people.

I draw on a strong scholarly tradition of reading *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* as a pair. Woolf began *Orlando* late in 1927, and finished it about a year later. Her work on *Orlando*, however, was interrupted when she began "Women and Fiction" (later retitled *A Room of One's Own*) in February of 1928. It was published in 1929.[1] It's not just chronology, however, that ties

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[1] This chronology comes from Woolf's diary.

the texts together. Both texts consider women's place in history, especially literary history. *A Room of One's Own* does this through speculating about women's lost work and the lack of a female literary tradition. In *Orlando*, Woolf creates a mock-history of a woman writer, critiquing the modes of history that focus purely on great men. (Orlando's gender is debatable. My point here is not to make an all-encompassing claim about it, but to note that Orlando is feminized, and is presented as a woman writer at the end of the novel.) Jane De Gay fits the texts together by arguing that *Orlando* answers the call in *A Room of One's Own* for a new literary history ("Historiography" 62-63). Both texts criticize the historical focus on great men and their deeds, as well as forms of scholarship that are predicated on masculine authority and an objective understanding of the truth. As *A Room of One's Own* is a lecture and *Orlando* calls itself a biography, each text infiltrates and satirizes scholarly form. Beth Boehm sees metafiction as the engine of Woolf's critique, across both texts, with a specific focus on self-conscious narrators (196). The self-conscious narrators are Mary Beton in *A Room of One's Own*, and the unnamed biographer of *Orlando*, both of whom continually discuss the act of narrating itself. Not only does this similarity draw the two texts together, but the open discussions of craft lend themselves to reading *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* as literary experiments. Here, I aim to build on the relationship between the two texts, and bring out of them a theory of character.

 In this thesis, my argument is that *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*, read together, present a theory of the negative formation of character. The specifics of defining a character negatively are as follows: An incorrect version of the character is created, which emerges as a kind of double. The character rejects the double. This two-pronged act— doubling, then rejecting— serves as a form of self-determination. The double (which is also an ill-fitting, inaccurate way of understanding the character) can be reconfigured into a tool toward a sense of

selfhood. Of course, the sense of selfhood that emerges is not simple, nor is it singular. It is wild and it is multiple. Above all, the negative formation of character is useful. Negation balances the necessity of defining a character, with the limitations inherent with any definition. Rejecting one version of a character allows all other possibilities to remain open. With open possibilities, the negative formation of character is a way to characterize without simplification. I develop my theory of the negative formation of character out of three examples: Mary Beton in *A Room of One's Own*, the unnamed biographer in *Orlando*, and Orlando themself.[2] These three case-studies will build on one another to illuminate the ways that a negative formation of character affords freedom to the process of writing a person.

Before proceeding with the negative formation of character, however, another issue must be addressed: what is literary character to begin with? According to *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, "Character is a text- or media-based figure in a storyworld, usually human or human-like" (Jannidis). A character seems like a person, but is made out of text. In studies of the nature of literary character, the relationship between a character's two parts often poses a problem. How do you rectify the person-like qualities, with the text-based form? In the *Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, Uri Margolin discusses character under three broad

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[2] In this thesis, I will use gender-neutral pronouns to refer to Orlando, who magically transforms from male to female in the novel. Woolf's narration switches from masculine to feminine pronouns. I use gender-neutral pronouns for convenience, to avoid relating pronoun-usage to a specific location in the text. Furthermore, this thesis argues against an artificially singular representation of a character, when the truth is more complex. I will not be referring to Orlando as merely one thing. For more on Orlando's androgyny, see González, "'What Phantasmagoria the Mind Is': Reading Virginia Woolf's Parody of Gender."

conceptualizations: "character as artifice", in which abstraction and constructedness are emphasized as the most important elements of literary characters; "character as non-actual individual," in which characters reflect the qualities of a real person; and "character as readerly mental construct," in which characters exist mostly in the reader's imagination (67, 70, 76). Through these broad topics, some tension emerges as to what a character is. Does a character originate entirely from the author's work, or do they come to fruition in the mind of the reader? What relationship do characters have to real people? In his book *Character and Person*, John Frow attempts to answer the latter question, writing that characters and people are "ontologically discontinuous (they have different manners of being) and logically interdependent," therefore creating a dualistic structure (vii). In examining the relationship of a character to a person, it is sometimes seen as taboo to discuss a character as though it is a person. There exists in literary studies a general belief that discussing characters like people is not intellectually rigorous. A recent study, *Character: Three Inquiries* rejects this notion: "In contrast to much scholarship on character, we see this tendency not as an error to be corrected but as a fascinating topic to be explored" (Anderson et al. 12). This call-to-action seems to ask what characters do. As I see it, there are now two ways to discuss character here. The first is more ontological: the nature of character, with respect to people. The other is functional: how do characters work, and what do they do, with respect to people. It is on this note that I return to Woolf, and her writing on character, which forms the intellectual basis for the negative formation of character.

Perhaps Woolf's most famous discussion of character is her essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," published in 1924. Here, Woolf argues that a realist approach to character is inadequate, and that describing the facts around and about a person serves to "hypnotise us into the belief that, because he has made a house, there must be a person living there" ("Mr. Bennett" 16). The

point in the essay is that there is something else beyond a character's circumstances that is fundamental, that is the core of character. Finding this core is how Woolf describes the process of writing character, going as far as to portray it as a chase ("Mr. Bennett" 3). In "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf draws on a real person, and does not frame character as something that the writer creates, but something that the writer is trying to find, understand, and portray. Woolf sees writing character as the same as interpersonal interaction, writing: "Indeed it would be impossible to live for a year without disaster unless one practised character-reading and had some skill in the art. Our marriages, our friendships depend on it; our business largely depends on it; every day questions arise which can only be solved by its help" ("Mr. Bennett" 4). So, in trying to decipher the relationship between character and person, Woolf sees writing character as analogous to knowing people. Therefore, it seems that writing characters could be helpful to understanding people.[3] Finally, in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" Woolf describes "intimacy" between the reader and the character (17). She writes that the most important calling in writing character is to facilitate meeting and intimacy between the reader and the character. For one thing, this further brings forth the idea that characters sometimes function similarly to real people. Secondly, it brings up a tentative function of character as a whole: that Woolf sees character as a way to understand people. It is a kind of interpretive tool.

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[3] Anderson emphasizes this point in *Character: Three Inquiries*: "For Woolf, what engages both writers and readers is a fundamental and everyday interest in people and the characters they present. Second, there is an understated yet absolutely basic emphasis on the centrality of moral character to human relations" (128).

In "Life and the Novelist," published posthumously in *Granite and Rainbow* (1958),

Woolf provides further insight into her thinking on character. She writes:

> But the novelist never forgets and is seldom distracted. He fills his glass and lights his
>
> cigarette, he enjoys presumably all the pleasures of talk and table, but always with a
>
> sense that he is being stimulated and played upon by the subject-matter of his art. Taste,
>
> sound, movement, a few words here, a gesture there, a man coming in, a woman going
>
> out, even the motor that passes in the street or the beggar who shuffles along the
>
> pavement, and all the reds and blues and lights and shades of the scene claim his attention
>
> and rouse his curiosity. (*Granite* 41)

Just as in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf conceptualizes writing character and

understanding people as absolutely intertwined. Once again, fictional characters draw from real

people, like Mrs. Bennett. In this essay, writing fiction is a response to real life that allows for the

consideration and interpretation of real people. Thus, writing characters becomes a framework

for understanding people. In "The New Biography," also published in *Granite and Rainbow*,

Woolf outlines a theory of character (in biographical works) that focuses on the duality of truth

and personality: "On the one hand there is truth; on the other there 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" (*Granite* 149). Here, then, a character must walk a

balance between realism and symbolism, which is the kind of immaterial representation of

character she argues for in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." Although using an essay on

biography may seem out of place in a discussion of fictional characters, it is worth noting that

Orlando claims to be a biography. Further, I engage it here because Woolf is highly interested in

blending fiction with fact in biography. The value of this marriage of opposites is the main point

of "The New Biography." Reading "The New Biography" and "Life and the Novelist," together,

I read the "rainbow-like intangibility" as a way of interpreting and understanding people through

writing character. Similarly, in "The Narrow Bridge of Art," Woolf argues that for the novel to

properly represent both life and character, details and realism must be left behind: "standing back

from life, because in that way a larger view is to be obtained for some important features of

it…free it from the beast-of-burden work …of carrying loads of details…rising high from the

ground...in touch with the amusements and idiosyncrasies of human character in daily life"

(*Granite* 22). So, writing about character effectively means portraying a larger picture, not

details, and leaving behind facts. It is this method that allows characters to be written well,

according to Woolf. Thus, it is this method that allows writers to think through and understand

people.

  Finally, I will briefly address character and the reader in Woolf. Her lecture "How Should

One Read a Book?" (1926) explores the joys in and value of reading literature; it was addressed

originally to schoolgirls, and later published in her collection of literary criticism, *The Second

Common Reader* (1932). Woolf claims that, "To read a novel is a difficult and complex art. You

must be capable not only of great fineness of perception, but of great boldness of imagination if

you are going to make use of all that the novelist - the great artist - gives you" (*How Should One*

28). Woolf frames reading as an act of interpretation, imagination, and even creation. Again, in

this lecture, Woolf writes of some level of intimacy between the reader and character: "Then we

are consumed with curiosity about the lives of these people…Who are they, what are they, what

are their names, their occupations, their thoughts, and adventures?" (*How Should One* 29). Not

only does the process of knowing characters mirror the process of knowing people, but here, the

desire to read mirrors the desire for human connection. In *The Common Reader*, she writes: "Above all, he [the reader] is guided by an instinct to create for himself, out of whatever odds and ends he can come by, some kind of whole - a portrait of a man, a sketch of an age, a theory of the art of writing" (1). Woolf's writing about character and the reader emphasizes that the character is something to be interpreted and analyzed. If the reader is supposed to interpret and think for themselves, and character is a way of thinking through people, then reading should help readers think about and analyze people. A character lies in the hands of the person reading and understanding them. I will summarize some key elements of Woolf's engagement with literary character as an essayist, lecturer, and critic. Woolf believed that tangibility and intangibility were necessary to writing character. She saw a close relationship between character and people, in which understanding one is tied up with understanding the other. She wrote that characters come from life, and that readers do interpretive work in reading character. Thus, both writing and reading character is an interpretive tool for understanding people. I locate the negative formation of character as an extension of the possibility that Woolf saw for literary character. It is a way of understanding both character and person.

While Woolf herself wrote extensively on the subject, the field of study on character and Woolf is reasonably limited, though similar topics, such as consciousness or the self, abound. Studies of character in *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* are exceedingly rare. Exactly one book exists that focuses exclusively on character in Woolf: *Virginia Woolf: Experiments in Character* by Eric Sandberg. It is not particularly argumentative, but is more of a longitudinal study of her career. However, some key elements that Sandberg identifies are expressing the self's multiplicity through literary character; open, dynamic forms of consciousness; and the close relationship between expressing character and expressing the self (5, 15, 278). Sandberg

identifies Woolf's struggle to write character without imposing on them a singular narrative, which is the main problem that the negative formation of character, as a technique and theory, seeks to solve. The final point is also particularly interesting for my purposes. Sandberg writes, "For Woolf, character exists simultaneously as a literary structure and as a reference to the real world of selves. Thus a discussion of character in Woolf blends inevitably into a discussion of subjectivity in Woolf. To neglect either element is to distort the whole" (277-78). Rightly, Sandberg does not confine his discussion of character in Woolf to the text itself. The connection between character and subjectivity is the connection between writing about characters and the experience of being a person. Though obviously different entities, characters and people are interdependent in Woolf.

Woolf's experiments with literary character do not exist merely in her published fiction and essays. Porter Abbott analyzes Woolf's diary as the place where she worked through and theorized character in his article, "Character and Modernism: Reading Woolf Writing Woolf." Abbott finds a connection between character and selfhood: "On the one hand, Woolf sets not only her art but her own sense of personhood against the occluding operations of character; on the other hand, she engaged throughout her life in a daily pursuit of character in the pages of her diary" (397). In this study, the relationship between character and person is key. Abbott identifies a tension between character as a kind of simplification to which a person is forced to conform, and character as a rich way of understanding the self. Ultimately, he finds Woolf's engagement with the idea of character to be "the vital signs of free self-invention" (Abbott 402). So, writing character can be a route to self-determination and autonomy. Once again, Woolf uses the notion of character to understand a person: herself. There is a level of transmissibility between the two.

Woolf's concern about character being an oversimplified container, for something as complex as selfhood, is essential to my conception of the negative formation of character.

Situating *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* in their appropriate literary historical period, modernist scholars provide further insight into character and Woolf. In his book *Self & Form in Modern Narrative*, Vincent Pecora writes on "the exhaustion of the autonomous self as a formal principle in modern English narrative" (1). Summarizing briefly, he writes on the end of the self as a literary construct, which he identifies as a bourgeois, capitalist idea. His narrative about the self is one of decline. Therefore, Pecora outlines the modernist innovation of no longer representing the self as a clear, stable, autonomous construct in narrative form. Michael Levenson, in *Modernism and the Fate of Individuality*, also problematizes selfhood in modernist writings. He focuses especially on the role of "'intrinsic' values that characters are made to embody and the 'compositional' laws to which they must conform" (Levenson xii). That is, the internal and external forces that shape character, that may erode the idea of the autonomous individual. The negative formation of character evident in both *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* may be viewed in the context of these ideas of the dissolution of the self and (extrapolating) of character. The negative formation of character does not present a singular idea of who a character is, but is open-ended and complex.

As multiplicity is a vital aspect of the negative formation of character, I draw on Julian Murphet's work on character in modernism, in which he examines Joyce's *Ulysses* and Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* to develop a theory of character in modernism that is focused on multiplicity: "Modernism has been unjustly misconstrued as a movement concerned with the representation of individual subjectivity. Its sublime peaks are, however…moments of linguistic intensity at which any conventional notion of the subject is displaced and evacuated by the multiple" (Murphet

265-66). For Murphet, the multiple shows how selfhood is ever-changing, and is ultimately more powerful than any kind of temporary, artificial stability (258). He does not argue for the decline of character as a concept, but does argue that the notion of "one" is something of a mirage, containing and concealing the multiplicity that is selfhood. The negative formation of character is something that, too, embraces the multiple.

In this thesis, I will argue that, through *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*, Woolf creates and explores a theory and practice of negative character formation. The characters are doubled, then they reject the doubles. Here, the act of rejection is a negated statement of identity. This is an effective way of writing character, situated in Woolf's concerns about simplifying people, as well as her aspirations for character functioning as self-determination and/or interpersonal interaction. I will proceed with a series of case-studies, which are not isolated examples of the same process of characterization, but dynamic explorations of the possibility of character. They will build on each other to constitute a theory of character. First, I will discuss the narrator of *A Room of One's Own*, Mary Beton. I will demonstrate how she constructs her own double through her pseudo-interactions with the audience, only to reject it. For Mary, the negative formation of her character is a way to circumvent the lack of precedent that she is confined by. Mary achieves freedom and self-determination, especially in her writerly choices. She will serve as the paradigm of the negative formation of character. The second case-study will be the biographer of *Orlando*. The biographer is formulated negatively, by both rejecting and failing at the role of the biographer. As a writer-figure, he exemplifies the power of simplifying and containing another person's life.[4] He demonstrates the possible dangers of writing character. The control that the

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[4] Although unspecified in the novel, the scholarly consensus is to read *Orlando*'s biographer as a man. I agree.

biographer exerts over Orlando comes from his doubling maneuver, which is a source of freedom. The third case-study will be the character Orlando. Orlando's doubling comes out of the biographer's narration, specifically, his misperception of Orlando. In rejecting the double, Orlando escapes out from under narration. Orlando is able to practice self-determination after removing themself from the tyranny of being narrated wrongly. Running through these case-studies are several key themes: doubling the self, as the beginning of a negative formation of character; doubling others, through mis-readings and misperceptions of other people; the ethical dangers of misperception; and variable language, in which passages with multiple meanings emerge are important to the negative formation of character. By way of conclusion, I will return to *A Room of One's Own* and Woolf's emphasis on character as a functional way of knowing real people. I argue that Woolf, using Mary, seeks to confine the audience into a role so that they can perform their own acts of rejection and self-determination. In this way, a theory of fictional character becomes transmissible to real people.

Mary Beton's Doubling Maneuver

The character Mary Beton is formulated negatively. She is defined by what she is not, and the expectations that she does not meet. I identify this negative characterization as being key to her self-determination in *A Room of One's Own*. It is through Mary, therefore, that I begin to explore a negative formation of character as related to personal autonomy. This section begins with a discussion of how Mary creates a doubled version of herself through interacting with the audience, and assuming that they hold unreasonable expectations of her. Mary's doubling maneuver requires that she is misperceived by the audience in some way. The gap between Mary and her double is key to conceptualizing a characterization of Mary that does not make her into a simplified, singular, or artificially stable form. Mary's rejection of her double allows her to be defined, though not restricted. I identify Mary's relationship to her double, and the negative formation of character more broadly, as performative, especially as a way to understand its instability. This section will conclude with a discussion of Mary as a shapeless character.

Central to the construction of *A Room of One's Own* is a doubling maneuver. This doubling maneuver serves as the basis of the negative formation of character. Mary is defined when she rejects the doubled version of herself. In *A Room of One's Own*, Mary is a persona that Woolf adopts in the course of speaking to an audience of students at a women's college on "women and fiction." As Mary addresses the audience, there is an implied ideal created, then rejected, that looms over the text. Importantly, this ideal version of the lecture is nonexistent. See the very first line: "But what, you may say, we asked you to speak about women and fiction— what has women and fiction got to do with a room of one's own?" (Woolf, *A Room* 3). Immediately, Mary creates a binary and presents it to her audience of students: it is either "women and fiction" *or* "a room of one's own." Even though the latter is an interpretation of the

former, the titles are presented as though they are two mutually-exclusive paths that Mary might

take. "Women and fiction" is the expectation that the audience holds, while "a room of one's

own" is what Mary provides, that does not meet the audience's expectation. Mary insists that

there be a disjunct between the audience's perspective and her actions. It is this move that

justifies the essay, and its fictional techniques meant to subvert the expectations of lectureship, so

this maneuver proves essential to the text as a whole. Mary assumes that the audience is already

dissatisfied and that her lecture is already, necessarily deviant, not just from norms of

lectureship, but from what her audience of students expects. Indeed, Mary is confident enough to

anticipate the students' disapproving words. Although it seems that Mary gives the students the

first words, as though in a collaborative conversation, these are words she's put into the

audience's mouth. It is Mary who constructs this disapproval.

  Mary's rejection of the audience's expectation, and her insistence on the disjunct between

their expectation and her actions, imply that such an expectation exists in the first place. As Mary

rejects the title "women and fiction," she imagines the ideal version that the audience expects as

something with a definite form that is kept a secret from her. She speculates: "The title women

and fiction might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, women and what they are like; or it

might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that

is written about them; or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together

and you want me to consider them in that light" (Woolf, *A Room* 3). Mary's speculation on the

intended meaning of "women and fiction" presupposes that such an intended meaning exists. In

this way, precedent is a tricky subject in *A Room of One's Own*. The text as a whole is concerned

with a lack of precedent for female writers, and Mary seeks to deliver an unprecedented lecture.

At the same time, Mary relies on this ill-fitting precedent (the expectation that she rejects) as her

starting-place. Boehm writes that the title "women and fiction" is a "burden," and by switching

to a "poetic and symbolic" title, "Woolf transfers the burden of constructing the meaning of the

title to her reader" (198). As a title, *A Room of One's Own* utilizes the imagery of the room to

convey the idea of independence, as opposed to "women and fiction," which clearly states the

subject. I am inclined to agree with this: that in insisting on calling it *A Room of One's Own,*

Woolf constructs an indeterminate title for which she does not need to construct a definite

meaning.[5] Mary looks to dodge the very same burden, the key point being that she constructs the

burden herself. In dodging this burden, Mary dodges a singular notion of what her lecture is and

what she does. The indeterminacy of calling her lecture *A Room of One's Own* opens up multiple

meanings and provides a sense of possibility.

Mary's doubling maneuver relies on the audience and their perception of her, so it is

worth exploring the function of the audience as a pseudo-participant. While the audience has a

significant role in *A Room of One's Own*, it is not an active one, and Mary is quite presumptive

when it comes to what the students think. Still, she refers frequently to the fact that they will

disagree with her, which is framed as a generative process: "it is for you to seek out the truth and

decide whether any part of it is worth keeping" (Woolf, *A Room* 4-5). This is the basic

relationship that *A Room of One's Own* relies on: Mary knows that the audience is creating

something in their own minds. She does not know what that is, so she fills in with her own

assumptions, in order to have something to work against, or reject. This process, seen in *A Room*

of One's Own, may be more broadly connected to Woolf's theories of reading. When a work is

created (lecture, novel, essay, and so forth), Woolf values the receiver (reader or audience

member) as participatory, even though true participation is never possible. In "Phases of

Fiction," Woolf writes that the reader as creates something parallel through reading, asserting

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[5] Later on, I will re-read the title to symbolize restriction and containment.

that "what the reader has in common with the writer…: the desire to create" (*Granite* 94).

Writing broadly about Woolf's critical essays, Pamela Caughie argues that "Woolf is more

interested in how a reader responds to and shapes a text than in elucidating an author's thematic

statements" (*Postmodernism* 12). Considerable critical attention is paid to the ways in which it

seems that Mary invites the audience into the construction of her argument, and the production of

its meaning. Woolf does invite a reading process that includes disagreement. Randi Saloman

writes that "the ability of Woolf's audience to…disagree with her assertions is critical to her

overarching project," going so far as to refer to the "essay's interactive status" (54, 59). It is true

that this essay is not designed to hand down truth, but to encourage critical thought. The idea of

the audience's hypothetical participation is what drives the doubling maneuver. At this point, it is

useful to return to Margolin's discussion of the character as a readerly mental construct:

"Whether characters are considered artifacts or non-actual individuals, we must first form mental

images of them in order to be able to make claims about them" (76). That is to say, if characters

are perceptions developed by a reader, then the doubling maneuver is based on a misperception

on the part of the reader. The doubling maneuver I identify as the center of the negative

formation of character is predicated on the presence of a person who is receiving the character

and developing some kind of image of them. In the case of Mary Beton, the reception of the

character is largely imagined, and the relationship between Mary and the audience is a

multi-faceted one. The students are not only receiving the lecture, they have assigned it. Mary is

preoccupied by what they expect. Even though their presumed expectation is the very first

subject that the essay addresses, the audience is not given an actual voice. Instead, Mary plays

the ventriloquist. So, the audience is invited to disagree, but not to contribute. The audience does

contribute, but it is only Mary's imaginings of what the audience is thinking. Therefore, Mary is doubled by the audience's presence, within Mary's own mind.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Mary actively facilitates the creation of a separate, misperceived version of herself that the audience creates. As Woolf introduces Mary through a series of reportedly unimportant names, perception and misperception become key to Mary's doubling. As Mary continues to address the audience, she invites their input, without hearing it, contributing to the doubling of herself. There is her version of herself, and there is the audience's version. Woolf writes: "call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please— it is not a matter of any importance" (*A Room* 5). At first glance, this passage invites the audience to define Mary, while Mary's individuality recedes into the background, as somebody whose name does not matter. Only, this sentence is remarkably disingenuous from Mary, who will later assert herself as Mary Beton, and distinguish Mary Seton and Mary Carmichael as completely separate characters. The language here is unclear, with variable meanings. Mary has not asserted that her name is anything the audience pleases, but that they may call her anything they wish. Is it that her name is not important, or what the audience calls her is not important? While the latter reading seems counterintuitive, it lines up with how the essay proceeds. Mary may be saying that the audience's name for her is not important, because their perceptions of her don't actually impact her all that much. Language with multiple possible readings is key to my reading of a negative formation of character. As a pattern, these sites of variable language, in which the meaning is up to interpretation, tend to also be sites where roles are rejected, and character constructed. This variable language recalls the double-structure of a negative formation of character, because it opens up multiple versions of the same thing through a variety of (mis)readings. When Mary invites a multiplicity of names, she reproduces the double-structure

that she creates with the very first line. There is the audience's version of Mary and her lecture, which the audience expects, and that supposedly exists in their minds, and then there is the real version. This is not language that invites collaboration, but language that produces distance between Mary and her audience. It necessitates a distinction between what the audience expects, perceives, and believes about Mary, and Mary herself.

Mary's rejection of the audience's expectation (or, imagined expectation) produces a rejection of singularity in notions of selfhood. James Harker supports the key difference between Mary and her double. He argues that disjunction "between the inner and outer worlds," in other words, misperception, is a key facet of Woolf's work, across her fiction and essays (Harker 1). Although he does not address *A Room of One's Own*, Harker provides one way to conceptualize the relationship here. Mary exists one way in the "outer world," but exists differently in the audience's "inner" worlds. Still, this is complicated because it seems that the audience's "inner" worlds actually exist in Mary's "inner" world, as she is the one imagining their perception of her. Or, at least, she is assuming that such a perception exists, going so far as to invite, or even necessitate, its creation. Similarly, Molly Hite suggests that Woolf's crowning literary achievement is her work's "tonal ambiguity…a situation that leads to multiple conflicting interpretations and, indeed, a number of conflicting Virginia Woolfs" (ix). For Hite, multiple readings of the same text is a hallmark of Woolf's work, which would encourage disjunction between a character, and how they are perceived, as is the case with Mary. Indeed, the disjunctive relationship here recalls the earlier discussion of the simultaneous, though separate, creative practice involved with reading. Key to *A Room of One's Own* is the disjunction between Mary and the audience's perception of her. Furthermore, on Mary's multiple names, Murphet points out the importance of the name to the illusion of singularity in an ultimately multiple

character: "the proper name sutures us into identification via its unique supplement to the sheer accretion of semes. This is the 'one' into which all that multiplicity is resolved and sublated, an alchemical transubstantiation of compositeness into unity" (256). This passage in *A Room of One's Own*, in which several names are tossed about, then settled into a singularity, momentarily reveals character to be multiple, not unitary. Mary even qualifies her use of a personal pronoun, acknowledging that its definitive singularity is artificial: "'I' is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being" (Woolf, *A Room* 4). Here, the normal referential practices for an individual are subverted. It is the doubling maneuver, and the rejection of the double, that defines character in such a way that embraces multiplicity and possibility.

The disjunctive element of the negative formation of character (in which there are two versions of the same character, at odds with one another), is also a performative element.[6] More broadly, the negative formation of character is a performative way of understanding and formulating character. Performance, here, helps to theorize how an individual may interact with a role, or and how a relationship with a role shapes an individual. I use the notion of performance to better explore how a double, which is not the character, can still help to define the character. One theorist, Richard Schechner, writes that to perform is to enact and alter a behavior that exists separately from any individual, or its origin.[7] These behaviors are always, necessarily, changing as they are repeated (35, 36). Another scholar, Marvin Carlson, writes of performance as a "struggle in vain," in which the performer tries to embody another, but always fails (75).

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[6] Pamela Caughie argues that performance is present in Woolf's work through her concern with the reader. See *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* (12).

[7] Schechner calls these behaviors "restored behaviors," though the terminology is not essential here.

Meanwhile, Joseph Roach argues that performance seems to presuppose "something prior,"
(such as a role, or a precedent) even when nothing "prior" exists (85). Similarly, Peggy Phelan
writes of performance as "attempts to reproduce what is not there," that is, presupposing
precedent, even when it does not exist. (450). Finally, Judith Butler's conceptualization of
performance (gender performance, here taken out of context) presents a similar process, in which
performance appears to express an "interior 'self,'" when the performance is not actually
reflecting anything that exists "inside" the person in question (216). In this brief and cursory
review, an important point about performance, for my purpose here, emerges: disjunction
between the person and their role. Performance emerges in the gap between the person and the
role, in which what the performer tries to embody or enact is different from what the performer
is. To perform is to presuppose that you are playing a role, reflecting something that exists, even
when nothing of the sort exists. The performance makes it seem as though it does. I use
performance here as a means to understand Mary's relationship with her double, or, the
relationship between the expectation of her and the reality of her, or, the the relationship between
the role and the performer. So, performance is one way to tentatively answer the question that
Woolf attempts to answer as well: how to define a person using something that is not the person
in question? How to characterize while evading categorization? Finally, I bring in performance—
not merely because it reflects what Woolf's characters do in *A Room of One's Own* and
Orlando— but because of performance's instability. Thinking of the negative formation of
character as performative, then individual moments of characterization do not solidify the
character into a single thing. A performance is ephemeral, unstable, and invites constant change.
I contrast this with narration, in which there is an air of stability. Instability is one element that
defines the negative formation of character.

Beyond performance as an outside theoretical perspective, Woolf took interest in performance and how people fill roles. In his book *Virginia Woolf and the Theater*, Steven Putzel points out Woolf's enduring interest in the "ontology of acting…seeking the boundaries of artistic identity as well as the locus of the self, scrutinizing the on-stage and off-stage personae, and concluding that life is constantly a process of enacting roles" (88-89). This points to the same general idea referred to by the scholars of performance above: that performance takes place in the gap between the self and the role. The role— in this case, the expected version of Mary— does not need to be filled perfectly, and can even be changed in the process of enacting it. It does not need to exist, for the performance will make it seem as though it does. While it may seem that reaching for the ideal or the role would obscure the self, this is not the case in *A Room of One's Own*. When Mary performs, she does so to differentiate and define herself, keeping open changeability and multiplicity. Even as she defines herself, Mary does not construe the self as a stable form. Mary performs the lecture, in that her actions presuppose an idea of what she ought to be, or ought to do, that does not exist. Mary's role is not something definite, but appears so in her rejection of it. As discussed previously, Mary assumes that the audience has a clear idea of what "women and fiction" is supposed to be, which is withheld from her. She invites the audience to perceive her, to call her what they want, even though it's of no true relevance to her. Mary wants a double: an alternate version of herself that she can reject, because this rejection is what animates the essay.

As the double of Mary is created through a perception of the audience's perception of her, the audience is emptied of whatever thoughts or perceptions they may have had. The audience is

refigured into a kind of vessel.[8] As Mary considers how the audience sees her, the source of their judgements proves unclear: "I dare not forfeit your respect and imperil the fair name of fiction by changing the season…Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction— so we are told" (Woolf, *A Room* 16). As Mary addresses this basic idea— that realism constitutes good fiction— it becomes unclear where it is coming from. First, she worries over the audience's "respect." Mary assumes that the audience cares about fiction's realism. Although these may be reasonable assumptions, Mary speaks on them with surprising certainty considering her lack of evidence. Although the earlier part of this quotation separates Mary from the audience and assumes them to have conflicting ideas from her, she then groups herself with them, asserting that "we are told." The audience's views on fiction are framed first as a closely-held belief, to something they have been told, quite quickly. This rhetorical bait-and-switch is a maneuver that Woolf uses throughout *A Room of One's Own*. She frames the same idea twice, differently, in the same sentence. On this note, Anne Fernald writes that "subversion, rather than confrontation, is Woolf's preferred mode of argument throughout *A Room of One's Own*" (182). Woolf's quick reframing proves to be a powerful tool for subversive thought. Mary's consideration of the audience's expectations for her has shifted since they were first introduced. Although, initially, Mary was interested in what they wanted from her, now she is considering the audience as a vessel for formal conventions they have likely learned. A passage like this raises the question of what is actually being said. The language and the precise meaning here is, again, unclear, or variable, encouraging multiple readings and misreadings. Ultimately, however, Mary does not

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[8] Ultimately, I will argue that Mary's treatment of the audience is another doubling: the beginning of the audience's self-determination. Although that point is not yet relevant, it should qualify this argument.

care to differentiate between what the audience desires of their own accord and what she assumes they have been taught. She does not entertain the possibility that the members of the audience are critical of what they are "told." Mary's role, then, originates both from the audience as people, and what they have been taught or exposed to. If this is the case, Mary does not only feel she is misperceived by the audience but by the literary or academic patriarchal authority, or, whoever decides that "fiction must stick to facts." The disjunction and misperception that is central to the negative formation of character is put into a new light. A character may be misinterpreted on an individual level, or by a group, or by a set of social norms overall. Not fitting into larger societal standards is a way of being doubled.

The kind of role-play present in *A Room of One's Own* is also modeled by Woolf in her diary. Woolf demonstrates an interest in another, doubled version of the self as a kind of guide. Ella Ophir writes: "Old Virginia often appears in the diary as a kind of historiographical Superego, judging, chiding, and demanding of her wayward younger self the proper materials from which to compose a proper memoir" (198). In the course of her private thoughts, Woolf imagines the ideal self, one which does not exist (herself, in the future), and wonders about the gap between her and "Old Virginia." It seems, then, that this difference is the space in which the diary is written. Woolf seems to find something generative in the process of not living up to an ideal version of herself. If "Old Virginia" is "judging, chiding, and demanding," then Woolf is failing at what "Old Virginia" wants. The relationship between Woolf and "Old Virginia," has a kind of performative structure, in which the individual does not quite fill the role assigned, though action necessitates the role's existence. Performance emerges from this act of striving. Or, in other words, this performative element of *A Room of One's Own* and Woolf's diary exist in the interplay between a person and their role. In both cases, a role is assumed to exist that does not

quite fit. Perhaps, as Caughie would agree, Woolf was so resistant to any standards of what she ought to be, even her own, that she created them simply to reject them (*Postmodernism* 20). I am given to speculating, then, if Woolf saw "Old Virginia" as a means toward her own self-definition, with the same kind of rejection she writes for Mary in *A Room of One's Own*? Either way, "Old Virginia" demonstrates an interest in how a person may be defined in the gap between the expectation and reality.

The fruitfulness of the gap between expectation and reality is clear, as Mary uses her doubling and rejection process to create her own path forward. This is shown when Mary seems to equivocate, unclear on what her role is, or should be. She moves to discuss "the future of fiction," then steps back:

> I must leave them, if only because they stimulate me to wander from my subject into trackless forests where I shall be lost and, very likely, devoured by wild beasts. I do not want, and I am sure that you do not want me, to broach that very dismal subject, the future of fiction, so that I will only pause here one moment to draw your attention to the great part which must be played in that future so far as women are concerned by physical conditions. (Woolf, *A Room* 77-78)

Mary seems to refer to a contract between herself and the reader that stipulates that she should not delve into "dismal subject[s]" they would not enjoy or find relevant. After implying that a contract exists, Mary proceeds to break it by discussing a "dismal subject." The language of getting lost by her own interest portrays a kind of passion in Mary, an individual desire that "stimulate[s]" her. Mary is caught between what she wants and her duty, as outlined in relation to the audience. When she pulls back from discussing the future of fiction, then, she has decided on self-sacrifice, ignoring her own desires, even her own passion, in service to her audience. To

return to my essential point, Mary has invented the contract that she breaks, then changes her mind about. If Mary seems inconsistent, that is true, although consistency is not the goal here. Changeability is the norm for characters that embrace multiplicity. When Mary plays within and without the boundary of what is expected of her, she is able to draw the boundary in question. The rules include that the "future of fiction" may fall under the category of "women and fiction," all of "the future of fiction" is unacceptable, Mary's individual desires are unacceptable, and the audience's desires are important. These rules do not govern Mary's actions, but rather distinguish her when she breaks the contract, at which moments Mary is able to carve out her own space for herself, with her rejection acting as a kind of reference. This passage illustrates the process at hand perfectly: Mary does the unexpected on purpose, but the unexpected necessitates an expectation, which she also constructs. *A Room of One's Own* creates a world, within the text, in which everything is utterly dependent on context. Action must be a reaction; Mary's identity must reject another identity; *A Room of One's Own* must not be "women and fiction." Thus, Mary doubles, creates versions of herself that are necessarily not-her, because she needs them to exist in order to speak, in order to create anything that is her own.

Mary Beton chases the process of the negative formation of character. She doubles herself, though she relies on her imagination of the audience's perceptions of her. Out of this, she is able to carve her own path forward. Central to the argument of *A Room of One's Own* is the fact of the lack of precedent for women writers who have few historical models to work from. Mary sees herself as not having a model to work from either, except the role of the lecturer, which is mixed up with what she perceives the audience's expectations to be. She takes these general ideas of what she ought to be, and refigures them into something she can work with toward self-determination. In presenting a theory of character formation, Mary is not much of a

character herself. Readers do not learn very much about her, though they are given insight into her mind: how she thinks, what she cares about, what she likes, what worries her. This is likely enough to constitute the "intimacy" that Woolf discusses in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (17). But does Mary have a shape? Frow identifies figure, or a kind of shape, as a key part of character (8).[9] If defined by what she is not, then nearly endless possibility opens up as to what she is, which refrains from taking a clear shape.[10] This negative formation of character, then, is not a closed form, but an open one. It is not determinative of what Mary is, but rather gestures toward the future. Indeterminacy is a kind of freedom. Recalling the performative element here, Mary's characterization comes from action, not labeling, so never has the guise of stability or any ultimate identity. Daniel Dahlstrom, in a metaphysical discussion of negation, writes that "negative judgment, as the conclusion of the inference, is not the denial of some other judgment. Instead, the negative judgment is the affirmation of a negative fact. So this inferentialist interpretation…underscores that knowledge of negative facts is derived" (265). To interpret this in the context of Woolf and character: negation leads to inference. Negation is the beginning of knowledge. For Mary, this negative characterization is the beginning of an open future.

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[9] Despite Mary's shapelessness (which would not make her much of a figure), she does align quite well with part of how Frow defines figure as "stand[ing] out from a narrative ground" (8). Mary's acts of rejection certainly makes her stand out from her textual surroundings.

[10] An alternative reading of Mary's shapelessness is that it avoids an egotistical conception of character. Low writes that "Woolf's abhorrence of egotism is the underlying theme of *A Room of One's Own,*" which without a doubt is true (263). A shapeless character cannot really impose its own ego.

The Biographer's Interpretive Control

If *A Room of One's Own* demonstrates what it is to be a shapeless character, then *Orlando* represents a drama about shape, with the imposition of shape embattled against the kind of autonomy afforded by shapelessness. The biographer spends the entire novel imposing a shape upon Orlando. Ultimately, Orlando escapes the imposition of shape which is, in my view, the biographer's objective. The biographer's way of encountering Orlando is to give them shape, to simplify and control. Even though the biographer imposes a shape on another person, he, like Mary Beton, is a shapeless narrator, meaning that the biographer's character is formulated negatively, and takes advantage of the open-endedness this provides him. Unlike Mary, whose shapelessness affords her autonomy (in other words, control over herself), the biographer leverages his shapelessness further, toward control over another: Orlando. Comparing Mary and the biographer brings to light the key difference between the ways that Woolf writes these two narrators. Mary is an outsider, and the biographer is an insider. Mary exists outside the academic establishment, while the biographer (presumably) is within it, taking advantage of the privileges this affords him. Overall, Mary is starting from a place of powerlessness, relative to the biographer.[11] So, my second case-study of a negative formation of character is the biographer, who should provide a contrast to my initial discussion of Mary. This section will begin with the ways in which the biographer works to obtain interpretive control over Orlando, and the ethical

[11] Comparing Mary and the biographer, Mary is certainly the outsider, though the question of Mary's outsider-status may be debated. How much of an outsider is a writer who is invited to lecture at a college? Even though Woolf uses the outsider-position, does she really occupy it? For a robust discussion of this, see Rosenman, especially chapter 5, "Women and Society: Patriarchy and the Place of the Outsider."

dangers of narrating another life, according to Woolf. Then, I will argue that the biographer has the power to control the narration of Orlando partially due to his own maneuvers of doubling and rejection. Ironically, the biographer's multiplicity allows him to simplify Orlando. The biographer's rejection, unlike that of Mary Beton, is not a whole-sale rejection, but rather working within and without the confines of his role. His role turns out to be an unstable construct.

The biographer's narration of Orlando forms a subtle disjunct, between who Orlando is and what the biographer portrays. In the novel, the biographer (who is a bumbling parody of a biographer) works to maintain interpretive control over Orlando. His presence is large— larger than reasonable— calling attention to his own voice. In the very first line, he must make his voice heard: "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 at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (Woolf, *Orlando* 13). Any sense of immediacy between the biographical subject and the reader is impossible with the biographer right there. In the middle of action, he imparts a needless clarification: "there could be no doubt of his sex." Now, this foregrounds the fact that there is a good reason to doubt Orlando's sex throughout the novel, and while Orlando's gender is multi-faceted, the biographer insists that it is singular. Furthermore, the line serves to call attention to the person behind the biography. The biographer's digression continues even further to a note about fashion, which is unnecessary as well. The biographer stops an action in its tracks. The historical fashion note is not even a description. It does not help the reader understand the scene, or the action, but it does make clear that the reader and Orlando are centuries apart. The biographer is portrayed as a translator who is absolutely necessary to bridge a gap between eras. In doing so, the biographer positions his voice above the flow of the

narrative. He converts an act, the slice, into a state of being he can pause to interrupt: "was in the act of slicing." The syntax here takes the immediacy of Orlando's life out, and replaces it with the biographer's presence. So, from the very first line of *Orlando*, the biographer reaches for control over the narrative, and control over how Orlando is perceived. This first passage raises some important questions: if the biographer's presence is so large, is it really possible he is objective? Through the primacy of the biographer's voice, Woolf shows that reportedly objective scholarly works are written by fallible people, whose perspectives are subjective. Of course, the same point is demonstrated by the irrational male academic in *A Room of One's Own* (Woolf 31).The biographer's fallibility makes him, categorically, an unreliable narrator.[12] His presence makes it difficult to know Orlando as a reader, because a reader cannot remove the biographer, who filters everything. The burden of deciding what to believe and what to be skeptical of falls on the reader. For one thing, then, different readerly choices leave open different ways of interpreting Orlando, perhaps encouraging subjective approaches to the character. Overall, the reader cannot know Orlando, only the biographer's interpretation of Orlando, and they must guess what that means.

The biographer even wrests interpretive control of Orlando from characters within the novel itself. There are correct interpretations of Orlando, and there are incorrect interpretations of Orlando. For example, see the way that the biographer qualifies a description of Orlando: "'Here,' she said, watching him advance down the long gallery towards her, 'comes my innocent!' (There was a serenity about him always which had the look of innocence when, technically, the word was no longer applicable)" (Woolf, *Orlando* 24). Even within the text, the

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[12] For a discussion of the unreliable narrator, see Olson, "Reconsidering Unreliability: Fallible and Untrustworthy Narrators."

biographer resists any other person viewing and interpreting his biographical subject. The parenthetical here takes the guise of a historical correction— a misstatement of Orlando's virginity. What is happening, however, is that the biographer must situate other interpretations of Orlando in the context of his own. There is no room for subjectivity, no room for inaccuracies that go uncorrected, and the biographer is the only authority. He insists that Orlando can be understood as one singular thing, which he alone defines.

When the biographer takes interpretive control of Orlando, Woolf is not neutral. The biographer's interpretive control is portrayed definitively as a bad thing. Narrative characterization is shown here to have significant power, able to overwhelm the life of another person. Indeed, Abbott writes of Woolf's hesitancy around encapsulating a person through writing character: "Of those formal operations under her control, the most problematic is that of character since, whatever the originality with which Woolf deployed the device, is always involved in the symbolic appropriation and containment of another life" (399-400). In this novel, the act of misrepresenting another person can be an ethical wrong. Orlando ultimately escapes from this, but narration can and does reduce its subject, as Sandberg writes: "for Woolf the question of character is not one of limited literary significance, but is rather a question with real-world ethical repercussions…is the reduction of the other to a type an ethically acceptable approach?" (266).[13] The same issue arises in *A Room of One's Own*, when male academics misrepresent women. The biographer epitomizes the male academic claiming objectivity through gendered privilege, which Woolf so disdains in *A Room of One's Own*. The biographer attempts

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[13] Sandberg's conclusion is that, with the right balance of reducing character to a type, while still acknowledging and respecting an individual's complexity, writing character can be an ethical way of knowing another person (280).

to reduce Orlando to a heroic, biographable figure, which is a reduction of Orlando into something simple and singular, closed off from possibility. Angeliki Spiropoulou connects the biographer's simplification of Orlando to the biographical form as a whole, in that "biographies give their subject a name and singular identity" (104). The biographer's narration of Orlando, with its emphasis on singularity, is closely related to the form of the biography overall. The biography imposes a definite shape onto Orlando.

The biographer's interpretive control puts the reader in a difficult position, raising questions of what a reading process might look like, with a narrator who is a hindrance. Greta Olson identifies the act of reading an unreliable narrator as sorting out the relationship between "a personified narrator [and] the implied author or the fictional world created by the totality of textual signals" (99). So, in order to read *Orlando*, the reader has to see identify the biographer as separate from the text as a whole, and be able to distinguish the differences. In his analysis of the process of reading *Orlando,* Putzel calls the reader a "cocreator," citing the fact that the reader must "work for meaning" rather than having it handed to them ("Satzdenken" 140, 141). If the reader is a cocreator, it is because they must do their own interpretive work around the narrator. However, I would hesitate to go so far as to refer to a cocreator, as there is no actual collaboration. Boehm correctly notes that, in *Orlando*, "Woolf disdains both readers whose responses are whimsical and unattentive to the words on the page and readers whose responses are unconsciously conventional, based soley on prior reading experience" (197). What Boehm here refers to is the fact that readers who are not drawing meaning directly from the text, are not endorsed in *Orlando*. Even though the reader must be critical of the narration of *Orlando*, they cannot disregard what the biographer says. As a hindrance to the reader's reading of Orlando (the character), the biographer is antagonistic.

In *Orlando*, biographer exemplifies that the authority of narration can be a dangerous space. Richard Pearce frames Woolf's relationship with narrative authority as stemming from personal experience: "But as she developed into a self-conscious woman writer, she developed a different relationship to the authority of the epic and absolute past, the world of fathers and founding families, and traditional literary discourse" (131). This notion of authority is one of the primary reasons that I read the biographer as a man. In the context of Pearce and in the context of *A Room of One's Own*, the excessive narrative authority he exerts under the guise of scholarship is entrenched in patriarchal values. Further, Pearce writes that "Woolf came to recognize that language—or the ways words are organized (ordered) in sentences and then 'laid end to end'...is not natural or neutral" (145). The biographer's narration is hegemonic. His understanding of Orlando, however, is interpretive, not objective, so his perspective is merely one of many. It comes from him personally and his ego, which, as Lisa Low writes, Woolf hated: "For Woolf, egotism…is in many ways the root of social conflict, for the ego, unbearably self-centered, is always fascistic" (262). The biographer's obtrusive presence as a narrator is what facilitates excessive control over Orlando. Back to the subject of a negative formation of character, literary narration can be seen to double its subject, as the biographer creates a misreading of Orlando. The biographer doubles Orlando by his narration and exertion of interpretive control.

Even though the biographer is interested in interpreting, controlling, and simplifying Orlando, his own character is multiple. Drawing a parallel with Mary Beton, the biographer acts within and without his constructed role. He is constructed negatively, and does not live up to an ideal version of what a biographer is or ought to be. He creates the role of "the biographer," but his work actually flaunts the confines of it, which he seems to make up as he goes along. Woolf writes: "Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables

which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore. Sights disturbed him…sights exalted

him… all these sights, and the garden sounds too…began that riot and confusion of the passions

and emotions which every good biographer detests. But to continue—" (*Orlando* 15-16). In this

passage, the biographer differentiates himself from a "good biographer," performing the same

sort of doubling maneuver as Mary Beton in *A Room of One's Own*. The departure from the

"good biographer," here, delimits what a "good biographer" is. The boundary is drawn when the

biographer steps outside of it, and back in. Therefore, for the role to be created, it must be

flaunted, or failed at.

Woolf utilizes indeterminate language to obscure the lines between the biographer and his

role. I read the biographer's characterization as coming from a similar doubling maneuver as

Mary Beton's, though it is not so simple as rejection. The difference between *a* biographer, *the*

biographer, and *this* biographer is murky. The biographer does not have a name and does not use

a personal pronoun except, on occasion, "we." The boundary between *Orlando*'s biographer (the

character) and the ideal biographer (a role) is unclear. Overall, the ambiguity affords the

biographer power. Woolf writes: "There is perhaps a kinship among qualities; one draws another

along with it; and the biographer should here call attention to the fact that this clumsiness is often

mated with a love of solitude" (*Orlando* 18). Who is "the biographer"? Is it the person narrating,

or is it the ideal biographer that constitutes his role? What "the biographer should" do may mean

that *Orlando*'s biographer should "call attention" because it is important to Orlando's life, or it

may be that he wants to abide by the rules of the biographical form, and that *any* biographer

would want to do what he does here. Does "should" in this passage refer to an obligation of his

role, or does the task come from the biographer as a person? I cannot provide a singular reading

of this passage because Woolf renders the role of biographer malleable by employing unclear,

variable language. Indeterminate language obscures the biographer's role, so it can appear to be anything that the biographer (the character) wants it to be. Once again, indeterminate language is the site of the kind of doubling that occurs in a negative formation of character. Multiple readings mirror the multiplicity of self and doubled self, encouraging multiple or mis-interpretations. Multiplicity proves vital to the construction of the biographer, as a character, and the changeability of the role allows the biographer greater license to do what he wants. By subverting the notion of the biographer's role, the biographer expands it. De Gay reads *Orlando*'s syntax and sentences with multiple meanings as "analepsis," in which "syntax breaks down…[liberating] the reader to interpret the sentence in a variety of ways ("Rhythms of Revision" 57). This structure, De Gay writes, "creates a non-linear pattern of reading" (57). I agree with this reading and, indeed, by re-reading and opening up the multiple meanings of "the biographer," different readers may come to different conclusions about what the text refers to. It is important to note, here, how the biographer's open-endedness about himself is the opposite of his definitive descriptions of Orlando. The variability in meaning allows for the biographer's multiplicity, which is an important part of the biographer's interpretive monopoly over Orlando.

The malleability of the biographer's role comes from the fact that the role in question does not exist. The biographer's concepts of his own role shift, therefore allowing him to do whatever he wants. In the following passage, the biographer conceptualizes his role not as restraint, but as license to speak freely: "Here, indeed, we lay bare rudely, as a biographer may, a curious trait in him, to be accounted for, perhaps, by the fact that a certain grandmother of his had worn a smock and carried milkpails" (Woolf, *Orlando* 28). The biographer has moved from "should," in the previously discussed passage, to "may." Unlike *A Room of One's Own*, in which Mary sees her role as a burden, the biographer doesn't seem to think anything in particular of his

role. His perspective changes constantly. Both Mary and the biographer are doubled by the expectations of their roles (lecturer, biographer), but while Mary rejects hers entirely, the biographer seems to move back and forth, either unsure or noncommittal. The biographer's role has become permissive, rather than restrictive, therefore affording him the right to narrate Orlando's story however he pleases. It would not be quite accurate to argue, however, that this biographer develops the nature of the biographer's role throughout the text: what exists, instead, is contradiction. In a passage quoted previously, the biographer writes of the biographer's aim to ignore "disagreeables" (Woolf, *Orlando* 16). The biographer is supposed to cover up seemingly unsavory elements of the subject; however, in this passage, the role of the biographer is license for honesty. The only source in the novel for what a biographer is, is this biographer's own portrayal of it. Which is to say, the role of the biographer is not a thing that exists, that the biographer describes. The role is often a mirage.[14]

As a technique, the biographer's changing relationship to his role is partially explained in Woolf's essays, in which she illustrates a certain interest in operationalizing the different modes of biography, just like *Orlando*'s biographer, who switches between forms to suit individual purposes. In "The New Biography," for example, Woolf writes that "in order that the light of personality may shine through, facts must be manipulated; some must be brightened; others shaded; yet, in the process, they must never lose their integrity" (*Granite* 150). By finding the balance between these techniques, Woolf portrays the difference between fictional and nonfictional writing as a matter of degree. Rather than belonging to a singular school of thought

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[14] Underlying the biographer's ever-changing role is the performative aspect of the negative formation of character, as discussed in the context of Mary Beton. In short, performative actions seem precedented even when they are not.

(facts or personality), the writer should move between them to achieve the right effect. Similarly, *Orlando*'s biographer changes what the biographer is and does in order to suit his purposes. In Woolf's writing, this operationalizing is how to create the best portrayal of another person. In *Orlando*, however, the biographer's portrayal is entrenched in his own point of view.

When the biographer rejects the role of the biographer, he expands his reach. That is, the biographer's shaping of his own role occurs through his exiting it, and exiting the role allows him to take up space that was not initially his. The biographer's role, when defined, is defined by its limits, as shown here:

> Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it. Volumes might be written in interpretation of it; whole religious systems founded upon the signification of it. Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may. (Woolf, *Orlando* 65)

The biographer, in this passage, clings to his constructed precedent in the face of circumstances that are beyond his control. What was freedom in the last passage is now "duty." Yet again, the negation of what is not the biographer's role ("interpretation…signification"), clarifies the role. The interpretive work is given quite clearly to the reader, even though this biographer loves to interpret Orlando for the reader. The biographer moves into interpretation two pages later: "But

if sleep it was, of what nature, we can scarcely refrain from asking, are such sleeps as these?"

(Woolf, *Orlando* 67). From here, the biographer speculates on the answer to the question he

poses. The point here is not merely that the biographer has broken his own rules, although he

certainly has. The point is that the biographer has specifically established the territory of

interpretation as the reader's, seemingly only to trespass into it.[15] I will do some speculating of

my own: had the biographer not specified that interpretation is for the reader to do, there would

be no crossing of any boundary. He has created a space for the reader to occupy, only to crowd

them out of it. When thinking about the biographer's interpretive monopoly over Orlando, this

point is critical: he restricts and expands the confines of his role in order to act as he pleases. The

rejection of the ill-fitting role is useful to the biographer; like Mary, the biographer wants the

other version to reject. Rejection, as a process, affords a kind of freedom, which is the freedom

of self-definition without self-restriction. With his freedom, the biographer chooses to exert

control over the interpretation of Orlando.

The negative formation of character is one that affords a character freedom because its

characterization is discontinuous. Self-definition by negation and rejection, in *A Room of One's*

Own and *Orlando*, strikes the right balance between definition and open-endedness. The

doubling maneuver allows him and Mary to do as they please. What the biographer pleases is to

exert interpretive control over Orlando. The particular freedom that the biographer attains is due

to the changing relationship between him and his role. I have written that the biographer's role is

continually in transformation, therefore rejecting any notion of character that requires continuity.

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[15] As shown in "How Should One Read a Book?" and *The Common Reader*, Woolf believed

interpretation to be the job of the reader.

In its discontinuity, the characterization of the biographer is distinctly performative.[16] Woolf's characterization of the biographer is focusing on the biographer's relationship to his role, even as it changes. The only continuous element of the relationship between the biographer and his role is that there is a relationship at all. The focus on the relationship, in which the actual elements are changeable is sufficiently continuous for the biographer to be an identifiable person, but hardly restricts him further than that. Even though previous actions may inform future actions, they do not have to, so as not to restrict future actions. Or, a shape is not imposed because the shape may change at any moment. If the biographer's actions are discontinuous, then, it is difficult to write a statement of who the biographer is: there is only what he does. For Woolf, there is freedom to be found in understanding a person as individual instances, without needing to draw together an overall statement of identity.

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[16] This concept of performance as discontinuity draws specifically on Richard Schechner's book *Between Theater and Anthropology*, in which Schechner writes of performance as "restored behavior," which is "stored, transmitted, manipulated, transformed," or, in other words, continually changing (36).

Orlando's Escape from Narration

Even though the biographer is characterized through discontinuous actions, his narration of Orlando insists upon continuity. The tension in *Orlando* is that of the biographer's interest in singularity, and Orlando's inherent multiplicity. It is precisely this tension that Woolf uses to parody the biography as a method of portraying a person.[17] As a concept, the biography requires a singular statement of who a person is, which is the kind of statement both Mary and the biographer evade. Upon Orlando, however, the biographer tries to impose a shape, a singularity, a continuous statement of identity. This is not to say that Orlando does not have continuous traits, or a sense of identity that spans their lifetime. It is the closed-off, singular continuous identity that Woolf identifies as problematic.[18] Woolf seemed to believe that such an imposition was ridiculous for any person, but stretches it to the extreme with Orlando, whose life spans 400 years, a myriad of literary historical periods, and a magical sex change, culminating in the vivid presentation of multiple selves. In order to embrace the character's multiplicity, however, Orlando must escape out from under the biographer's narration. In this section, I build on the previous discussions of Mary Beton and the biographer to describe what I read as Orlando's liberation, or, escape from narration. I discuss how the biographer's narration doubles Orlando.

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[17] Although my reading of *Orlando* does not draw on Woolf's personal experience, it is interesting to note that her father, Leslie Stephen, was a historian and biographer, and a tyrannical figure for Woolf. Katherine Hill writes that he was trained Woolf in biography, seeing her as his "intellectual heir" (351). It is likely a good guess that Woolf's subversion of the biographical form is related to her father.

[18] For a discussion of Orlando's enduring identity, see Narayan, "Sex and Literary History in *Orlando*." Describing Orlando's identity is not critical to my purposes here.

In rejecting this double, Orlando escapes from narration, leading to the same self-determinative gesture as Mary Beton. Specifically, I focus on Orlando's transformation, in which the biographer loses grip on the version of them that he is interested in narrating. I also discuss the concept of time, as the biographer's rigid conception of linear time allows him to make his voice necessary. As the historical gap between Orlando's time and present day closes, the biographer becomes obsolete, leaving Orlando free.

Orlando's characterization, like that of Mary and the biographer, begins with their doubling, which comes from the biographer's narration of Orlando's life. The biographer's narration is not so much description as it is creation:

> Thus, those who like symbols, and have a turn for the deciphering of them, might observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando's face, as he threw the window open, aws lit solely by the sun itself. A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after, till they reach what ever seat it may be that is the height of their desire. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career. (Woolf, *Orlando* 14-15)

In this passage, the biographer presents an opportunity to interpret Orlando, that is only for himself to take. As the biographer describes his process, he finds it akin to a mother. He nurtures and shapes Orlando, rather than merely observing. His interpretive control shapes Orlando, and he is possessive of that right. The biographer's portrayal of Orlando is a singular statement of who they are: Orlando is the kind of great man that biographies are written about. It does not

take exceptional insight to notice that this is not a good description of the highly emotional,

fanciful Orlando. However, as shown in the previous examples of the negative formation of

character, Orlando is here doubled, with an ill-fitting role assigned, through the biographer's

misperception of them. There is a disjunct between Orlando, and how the biographer presents

Orlando. The character that the reader is presented with is and must be filtered through the

biographer. This reading, in which the biographer is failing to (or deciding not to) portray

Orando truthfully, is supported by Woolf's depiction of writing character as seeking out the

essential core of a it in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown." The fact that the biographer creates a

different version of Orlando through narration highlights the power of language in the novel. The

biographer's description is a kind of creation, as Caughie writes: "The obtrusive narrator in

Orlando brings the textual language and style to the fore…the narrator shows us not the

inadequacy of language…but its primacy" (*Postmodernism* 77). Language, Caughie argues, is

key to the construction of reality: a reality that is variable, rather than stable. Orlando the

character, then, is the biographer's language. At least, the version of Orlando that the biographer

creates is just made out of the biographer's language. However, this brings up an interesting

point, as Boehm calls it, "metafictional performance," drawing to the forefront the constructed

nature of reality (197). The reality that the reader gets from the text is constructed by the

biographer.

The biographer's narration of Orlando's life necessitates a particular distance from

Orlando. This is apparent when the biographer engages in a different concept of time and history

from the novel as a whole. Woolf problematizes the writing of time in *Orlando*, because the strict

linearity emphasized by the biographer is at odds with the much more idiosyncratic concept of

time that exists in the novel. The biographer's notion of time necessitates distance between the

reader and Orlando, although the novel seems to embrace non-linearity. The biographer's

insistence upon distance creates a gap in which he is necessary. His narration both insists upon

the clear-cut progression of time and positions himself as a translator. Woolf writes: "(For though

we must pause not a moment in the narrative we may here hastily note that all his images at this

time were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had

liked the taste of as a boy. But if his senses were simple they were at the same time extremely

strong. To pause therefore and seek the reasons of things is out of the question)" (Woolf,

Orlando 37). It is surely not lost on any reader that a work of literature can be paused for

digressions, because time does not move forward without the narrator. The parenthetical here

makes clear that the biographer is subservient to narrative time; he has no control, as if the

onward motion of time is inexorable, even within a literary object. Simultaneously in this

passage, he positions himself as an intermediary. He is unable to let the audience decide that the

"images were simple," believing instead that his role as translator and interpreter is necessary.

The biographer mediates the reader's contact with Orlando, which is justified by the fact that

there is a fundamental, temporal distance between them. In essence, the biographer is necessary

because of a fundamental distance between the reader and Orlando.

The biographer's emphasis on linear time, and his demand to translate across the distance

between Orlando and the reader, are each present in his portrayal of history. See the following

passage: "It was Orlando's fault perhaps; yet, after all, are we to blame him? The age was the

Elizabethan; their morals were not ours; nor their poets; nor their climate; nor their vegetables

even. Everything was different" (Woolf, *Orlando* 26-27).[19] The biographer, here, separates

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[19] This passage's emphasis on era likely parodies Leslie Stephen's belief in the "study literature

as the expression of a specific historical context" (Hill 357). See Hill's article, "Virginia Woolf

Orlando as fundamentally different, based on their era, from the biographer and the reader. He also assumes that he and the reader exist in the same historical moment, therefore successfully creating two separate groups. The biographer can be trusted because he understands the reader, based on a shared context, while his understanding of Orlando's historical moment makes him an authority. It is necessary, he implicitly argues, to have an interpreter across historical periods, which then makes his interpretation necessary, allowing him to have his interpretive monopoly over Orlando. De Gay writes that *Orlando* satirizes historical techniques like periodisation and the spirit of the age, in which rigid categorizations are utilized to understand history: "On the surface, *Orlando* is organised along the lines of clearly demarcated literary periods…but these categories become unstable for they are frequently treated ironically. Woolf's narrator attempts at several points to characterise the literature of a particular period, but the method is rendered ridiculous" ("Historiography" 63). De Gay makes an important point here, that the biographer's demand for historical categorization is ultimately unsuccessful. Because categorization is his method for creating distance between the reader and Orlando, this categorized conception of history is necessary for the biographer's aim of control. Furthermore, De Gay points out that *Orlando* creates a "sense of intimacy with the past," which is precisely the opposite objective from the biographer's ("Historiography" 70). "Intimacy with the past" may be rephrased as intimacy with the character Orlando, and, as Woolf argues in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," successful fiction allows the reader to gain some sense of intimacy with the character. Indeed, as De Gay writes in a different analysis of *Orlando*, "time does not move forward, destroying everything behind it, for the past remains intact and accessible" ("Rhythms of Revision" 64).

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and Leslie Stephen: History and Literary Revolution," as well as De Gay's article, "Virginia Woolf's Feminist Historiography in 'Orlando'" for more on the connection to Stephen.

Time, as presented in *Orlando*, differs drastically from the biographer's strict linearity, so the

novel itself does not allow for the distance between past and present that the biographer desires.

Or, as Caughie argues, the novel "renews the past in the present…within multiple pasts and

always in relation to a present moment" ("Temporality" 503). Clearly, *Orlando* as a whole does

not ascribe to the biographer's enforcement of distance between the past and the present. In her

presentation of time, Woolf forces the reader to read beyond the unreliable biographer. Once

again, the biographer is a kind of antagonist, as he is a hindrance to the kind of narrative

intimacy, and the conception of time, that Woolf seems to endorse.

I have positioned temporal distance from Orlando, and Orlando's role (great, masculine,

heroic), as being key to the biographer's interpretive control. As the narrative progresses,

however, both of these elements collapse, culminating in the biographer's loss of interpretive

control, Orlando's rejection of the double, and their escape from narration. Beginning with

Orlando's transformation, the biographer is reluctant to relinquish control over Orlando when he

announces that Orlando to be a woman: "He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in

complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth ! Truth ! Truth ! we have no

choice left but confess— he was a woman" (Woolf, *Orlando* 137). The final thought here, that

"he was a woman," is contradictory. The biographer is only willing to change pronouns for

Orlando after this passage. Recall earlier, how Orlando's masculine form of glory allows for the

biographer to have an easy job, which the biographer describes as maternal in its ability to shape

them (Woolf, *Orlando* 14-15). For the biographer to shape Orlando the way he wants, for

Orlando to be the biographical subject he wants, they must be masculine. So, the biographer

continues to portray Orlando as such, while reporting the facts, creating the clause above: "he

was a woman." Contrast this, too, with the first sentence of the novel, in which the biographer

simultaneously asserts his own presence and Orlando's masculinity: "for there could be no doubt of his sex" (Woolf, *Orlando* 13). The biographer's assertion of his own presence is inextricably connected to Orlando's masculinity. Even though he wants Orlando to conform to his simplified and singular notion of masculinity, as González writes, *Orlando* portrays "the impossibility to attain masculinity and…parody of femininity" (84). Gender, then, is a simplified version of a person that must be rejected. In this moment in the text, the vital disjunct shows a difference between the biographer's portrayal and what may be called the truth, or essence, of the character. The biographer describes Orlando using "he," even though it's inaccurate. Here, the biographer's reading of Orlando is the only one presented in the text, but it is by no means objective. That disjunct (between the biographer's portrayal and reality) is shown here in miniature. Orlando's gender becomes confusing, but the biographer does not want to move on from the simple, singular narrative he has been writing. This passage brings up questions: if the biographer is portraying Orlando through a narrow lens, then what is being missed? Or, if the biographer's portrayal of Orlando creates one version of Orlando, what is the other one like? Most importantly, the difference between the biographer's interpretation of Orlando, and Orlando as a person, is made obvious to the reader, so the biographer loses some of his control.

When the biographer loses control over his interpretation of Orlando, his narration becomes more akin to recording than to creating. Passages in which the biographer seems to lose control proliferate after Orlando's transformation. Shown here, Orlando's internal thoughts, perceptions, and experiences override the biographer's interpretation: "(We are jotting down a few reflections that came to Orlando higgledy-piggledy)" (Woolf, *Orlando* 208). The biographer's description of his own work is physical, not intellectual. "Jotting" calls to mind the work of transcription rather than interpretation. He is merely trying to keep up, not imposing a

way of understanding Orlando. In fact, there are no notes about how the reader is supposed to interpret this Orlando, except for "higgledy-piggledy," which is itself unclear. Are the biographer's jottings "higgledy-piggledy," or does this describe the Orlando's thoughts? I have written earlier on variable language, with unclear and multiple meanings, as being important to the negative formation of character. Passages that encourage varying readings also help characters to resist singularity. Here, "higgledy-piggledy" is difficult to pin down, because either Orlando's thoughts are in a state of disorder, or the biographer's are, or both. The uncertainty here, however, can't impose a specific way to understand Orlando, because one does not exist. Furthermore, either way of reading "higgledy-piggledy" would give the impression that Orlando's thoughts are flowing freely, and the biographer is picking them up and relaying them, without influencing their portrayal. To briefly digress and address a possible flaw in my argument, it is true that I argue that the biographer is an unreliable narrator. I still rely on his description of his own writing process, which is a tenuous source. Ultimately, *Orlando* is a work of fiction, and it is Woolf's aim to comment on the process of writing through this work of fiction. I believe that it is reasonable to accept the portrayal of the biographer's process, differentiating between the biographer's narration, and the "totality of textual signals" (Olson 93). So, to return to the point: the biographer has here lost grip of Orlando. Furthermore, the context is important in this passage: "she [Orlando] now began to live much in the company of men of genius, yet after all they were not much different from other people" (Woolf, *Orlando* 208). In this passage, on the level of the narrative, and the level of narration, the supremacy of masculine glory, and the point of view that comes with it, is debunked. It is debunked in the narrative (as Orlando's perspective changes) and in the narration (as the biographer loses power). As Orlando becomes disenfranchised with men of genius— specifically writers— and,

importantly, stops taking their perspectives as objective, the importance and supremacy of the biographer's perspective is simultaneously in decline.

The biographer's loss of power is emphasized when Orlando rejects the role initially ascribed to them. When Orlando rejects this role, the biographer feels that this as a blow to his aspirations of being a great man, even though he is consistently portrayed as foolish and bad at his job. Orlando renders the biographer's desires impossible:

> If only subjects, we might complain (for our patience is wearing thin), had more consideration for their biographers! What is more irritating than to see one's subject, on whom one has lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one's grasp altogether and indulging—witness her sighs and gasps, her flushing, her palings, her eyes now bright as lamps, now haggard as dawns—what is more humiliating than to see all this dumb show of emotion and excitement gone through before our eyes when we know that what causes it—thought and imagination—are of no importance whatsoever? (Woolf, *Orlando* 267-68)

In this passage, the biographer seeks glory through the production of his work. Orlando, however, no longer matches the picture of masculine glory that the biographer relies on. In reality, Orlando's rejection of the biographer's expectation is not quite so gendered as he makes it seem. While the biographer portrays Orlando's emotions as feminine, Orlando is highly emotional through the entirety of the novel. So, it's clear that the biographer's feminization of emotions is inaccurate.[20] Thus, I return to the disjunct between the biographer's interpretation and portrayal of Orlando, and Orlando. The biographer should not be accepted as an authority. In

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[20] Another way of putting this would be that the totality of textual signals becomes clearer, relative to the biographer's narration; his unreliability is easier to spot.

this passage, he uses language that seems meant to be opened up, housing multiple readings: "we might complain." The biographer moves to complain, voices the complaint, but technically does not complain. The biographer himself may be complaining, or he may be voicing a possible common complaint for those in his profession. He may actually feel the desire to complain, or he may just be saying that he could. Yet again, this indeterminate language allows him a certain freedom. Further, regardless of the inconsistency, what the biographer perceives to be (and portrays as) feminine does not work for him. What works for him is what he first portrays Orlando to be, a great man worthy of biography. Very straightforwardly, above, the biographer writes, "one's subject, on whom one has lavished so much time and trouble, slipping out of one's grasp altogether." Although the biographer has done his best to shape Orlando, he cannot keep hold of them, because they have been feminized, having now more dimensions than is convenient. Orlando rejects the role ascribed by the biographer, and the singular notion of the great man, which Orlando was supposed to be. It is through rejecting this misperceived version, that Orlando is able to reach self-determination.

The negative formation of Orlando is what allows Woolf to write the character without reducing them. Once again, the rejection of the double (the biographer's narrative) is enough to assert the existence of the character, without restriction. Victoria Smith points out that *Orlando* "thematizes… language's inability to adequately represent the 'thing itself'—mirrors the undecidability of the text—is it a biography, autobiography, fantasy, etc" (58). In being unable to represent the "thing itself," then, *Orlando* represents how the biographer sees Orlando, and decides that Orlando is not what the biographer sees them as. It does not move toward a decided, singular image of Orlando's identity, though this is not to say that Orlando does not have consistent characteristics throughout the novel. Similarly, Christy Burns writes that "the notion

of an essential self [is] comically reduced to a belief that Woolf's less than competent narrator struggles to defend, while the parody of that narrator's attempt results in the realization of the modern, constructive figuration of subjectivity" (346). This is absolutely correct in that Orlando's multiple, complex identity is formed out of the biographer's failure to distill Orlando's identity. It is, in other words, the rejection of a role. Like Mary, the performative element of Orlando's characterization is the illusion of precedent. As discussed in the context of Mary's performative characterization, performance seems precedented, even when it is not. Orlando, as a character, is precedented only by the inaccurate ideas held about them by the biographer. However, a misperception is enough of a starting-place toward self-determination. The rejection of the singular role allows for possibility, as discussed by Judith Allen: "Woolf's rejection of categories, definitions and certainties leads to the openness that is privileged in *Orlando*. The possibilities are endless, and perhaps that is the point" (206). The biographer's understanding of Orlando, based on category, is overtaken by openness. In short, rejection is a generative process for Orlando. Self-determination, for Mary and for Orlando, look similar, expressed through writerly achievement. While there may be a variety of metrics with which to measure Orlando's self-actualization and autonomy as a character, a particularly clear one is that they come into their own as a writer. Orlando works on their poem, "The Oak Tree" for centuries. It begins as a highly emotional and somewhat childish work, and develops into a prize-winning literary accomplishment (Woolf, *Orlando* 77, 213). This trajectory requires Orlando's maturation and self-actualization.

Woolf writes *Orlando*'s struggle between the biographer's imposition of shape against Orlando's shapelessness, such that shapelessness and multiplicity triumph. The best example of the model of character multiplicity developed in *Orlando* is, naturally, Orlando's many selves

who exist all at once, side-by-side. It is a wild, untameable self that I read as the result of the negative formation of character. Importantly, in this scene, the biographer is a recorder, not an interpreter, and certainly not an authority: "Orlando was certainly seeking this self as the reader can judge from overhearing her talk as she drove (and if it is a rambling talk, disconnected, trivial, dull, and sometimes unintelligible, it is the reader's fault for listening to a lady talk to herself; we only copy her words as she spoke them, adding in brackets which self in our opinion is speaking, but in this we may well be wrong)" (Woolf, *Orlando* 310). The existence of Orlando's multiple selves, in this passage, does not mean that they are multiple people; rather, it simply means that they are multi-faceted, and that there does not need to be a single truth about who Orlando is. Sandberg argues that this representation of multiplicity demonstrates the limits of biography itself, in portraying a life, which is an excellent point (169). In this passage, the biographer actually lets the reader interpret Orlando, noting that, "the reader can judge." The language used here is to "overhear," so the biographer is unobtrusive and incidental. He can only "copy her words," and his own voice is sectioned off, qualified, and placed in brackets. There is plenty of space for the reader to understand Orlando, unimpeded by the biographer, as he has become more reliable. The biographer embraces immediacy between the reader and Orlando, in contrast to the distance he has imposed throughout the the novel. The result is the multiplicity and discontinuity articulated in the passage above as a legitimate expression of selfhood.

Because the biographer's insistence on linear history allows him to exert his interpretive control, Orlando's extreme longevity topples the biographer's effort. The novel ends with the temproal gap closing and the biographer becoming obsolete: "And the twelfth stroke of midnight sounded; the twelfth stroke of midnight, Thursday, the eleventh of October, Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight" (Woolf, *Orlando* 329). When Orlando arrives at the present moment, the slow

encroachment is over, so there is no space over which the biographer must translate. Immediacy renders him obsolete. This new immediacy is the achievement of the intimacy that Woolf discusses in "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," so, by Woolf's metric, the decline of the biographer's voice causes the success of the literary character. Spiropoulou points out that Orlando's longevity makes it impossible for a singular narrative to be written about them, as they are "forever at odds with his/her times and hence with a fame premised on death and a unitary concept of the subject" (112). So, when Orlando catches up with the present day, rather than dying, as biographical subjects ought to, a singular representation of Orlando becomes absolutely impossible. Continuing to live means continual possibility. It is reasonable, then, that the final line of the text is not some summation of Orlando's life or character, which would impose a kind of ultimate truth. The biographer has finished interpreting Orlando and cannot say anything more. He simply recedes, becomes a recorder of the date, little more than a calendar. Ultimately, then, does Orlando escape the kind of tyranny of representation, specifically historical representation? Possibly. The biographer can no longer simplify Orlando. As De Gay puts it, "Past and present are united…in Orlando, as they meet in the body of the androgynous protagonist who has lived for over 350 years" ("Rhythms of Revision" 65). The biographer imposes distance between the past and present that Orlando, by way of existing, deconstructs. Further, as Bryony Randall writes, "history is no longer a discourse imposed on individuals and constructed from a distance but instead a dynamic expression of corporeal life" (129). The biographer's strictly categorized notion of history is no longer applicable by the end of the novel, He tries to write a history by imposing categorization, and his own interpretation, on Orlando, but in the end, he has run out of time. His interpretive monopoly is over.

While Woolf begins *A Room of One's Own* with Mary rejecting her double, and the biographer's act of rejection underlies his narration, Orlando takes most of the novel to be able to reject their double. The role that the biographer assigns is large and overwhelms Orlando, so they struggle beneath it, though they ultimately escape. Both Mary and the biographer create their own doubles. They pretend, trying to shift the production of the double onto an outside source, like the audience, conventions of lectureship, or conventions of biography. It is, however, clear that the roles imposed on them are self-imposed. Orlando's role is truly an external force, keeping them down. The key thing drawing together Mary and the biographer is that they are writers, writing about themselves, highly concerned with the process of writing about themselves. While Orlando is a writer, they do not write their own narrative. A comparative reading of these three instances of the negative formation of character reveals that Woolf saw great value in writing the self. The narrative tyranny that Orlando experiences may be contrasted from the narrative freedom that Mary and the biographer each enjoy. In other words, writing the self is a self-determinative act.

Coda: The Transmissibility of Character

This thesis has endeavored to outline a theory of the negative formation of character, as shown across *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*. Underlying this project is Woolf's concerns about writing people. Woolf had ethical concerns, and she worried over how the act of narration could simplify another person. The issue wasn't merely ethical, but formal. As a craftsperson, and great literary experimenter, Woolf tried to get around writing a simplified subject. The negative formation of character is how I read *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* as Woolf trying out a solution to the problem of writing people.

Mary's maneuver of doubling and rejection comes from her preoccupation with acting without precedent. She creates the illusion of an expectation held by the students, in order to reject it, because the process of rejection generates freedom and possibility for her. Defining what she is not defines her, without closing her in or declaring too precisely who she is. In moving from Mary to the biographer, the doubling maneuver moves from an exercise in self-control, to excess control. That is, the freedom afforded to Mary is afforded to the biographer, as he similarly creates a role to reject. He uses it to control Orlando. Through the biographer, I further elaborate my theory of the negative formation of character. The biographer is paradigmatic of Woolf's concern about narration as tyranny. For this reason, this thesis ends with Orlando, and their escape out from under the biographer's narration. Orlando's narrative arc, then, is one of liberation, from ways of writing people that simplify them. Orlando exemplifies what I read as Woolf's aim in writing all three of these characters: to escape from problematic forms of literary characterization.

The three case studies that make up this study each are confined to the world of the text, and for good reason. They are fictional characters, and the negative formation of character is a

theory of writing fiction. However, I situate the negative formation of character in Woolf's own beliefs about writing character, and it is worth returning to a particular point from her critical writing. Woolf saw fictional characters as functional, and as ways of understanding real people. Writing about fictional characters is, for Woolf, almost the same process as knowing real people. I will use this final section to explore the use-value of the negative formation of character, as it pertains to real people, and how my theory of character may become a theory of personhood. On that note, I have a fourth case study: the audience in *A Room of One's Own*.

Woolf signals the beginning of the final section of *A Room of One's Own* with "here, then, Mary Beton ceases to speak" (105). At this moment, there is a kind of collapse. The fictional world that Woolf has built out, with Mary at its helm, is once again rendered merely a thought experiment, not that Woolf tries to convince anyone that Mary is a real person. However, the narrative ends with a reminder that it was all merely a rhetorical device. Everyone is then required to think about the fact that Mary is a character created for certain illustrative purposes, and then, to think about what those purposes were. In essence, this transition forces the reader to consider what the role of a fictional character is when thinking through real life.

Returning once again to "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown," Woolf thought that understanding character was similar to understanding people, and that one aided in the other: "I have said that people have to acquire a good deal of skill in character-reading if they are to live a single year of life without disaster" (5). Woolf sees fictional characters— and knowledge about fictional characters— as being transmissible to real people. Of course they are not the same thing, but the boundary is porous. I read the audience present in *A Room of One's Own* as the vehicle through which this negative formation of character— which has existed, thus far, exclusively inside the literary text— may be read as functional in the real world.

The audience is not quite fictional, though not quite real, and their liminal status makes them an ideal way to carry a theory of fictional character into the real world. They exist inside the text. Although they have no lines or actions, their presence is necessary, and they constitute a "storyworld participant," to use Margolin's definition of character (66). They also have a real counterpart: the actual students of Newnham and Girton who saw the actual lecture that was to become *A Room of One's Own*.[21] This is to say, the audience creates a kind of bridge between fictional characters and real people. It is easiest to apply an understanding of the audience's characterization to the real people who would have been there at the lecture. By publishing *A Room of One's Own* as she did, Woolf converts the role of these real audience-members into a role of a fictional character. She models this transition, and the ways in which fictional character knowledge might be taken away as real-person knowledge.

As characters, the audience-members in *A Room of One's Own* are quite limited. They lack any real, defined traits, except for those that Mary assumes they have. Everything that is known about the audience comes from Mary's perceptions, or misperceptions, which is the same predicament that Orlando is put in by the biographer. Mary's description of the audience echoes the biographer's tyrannical narration, which is worthy of inquiry, as Mary is concerned with and distressed by the harm that writing can do to another person. She seeks to liberate women from the myths perpetuated by misogynistic scholarship. Despite this, Mary misperceives the

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[21] Although not my focus here, it is surely interesting to consider how Orlando occupies a similarly liminal space, being Woolf's fictional construction as well as a representation of the very real Vita Sackville-West. Smith's article "'Ransacking the Language': Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf's 'Orlando,'" is helpful for thinking this through, in its engagement with the simultaneous public and private dimensions of *Orlando*.

audience, treating them as a blank canvas that she can describe as she pleases. So, I argue, *A Room of One's Own* functions to create a double, or role, for the audience that they can reject. This method, which works for Mary Beton as a form of self-determination, is gifted to the audience.

I read the language of *A Room of One's Own* simultaneously as language of independence and language of containment. Once again, these indeterminate sentence-level readings prove essential to negative formations of character. For one thing, there is the consistent use of "one." See the following passage as an example:

> The inevitable sequel to lunching and dining at Oxbridge seemed, unfortunately, to be a visit to the British museum. One must train off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach for the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth…But one needed answers, not questions…If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth? (Woolf, *A Room* 25-6)

Mary's experiences, here, are "inevitable," after which she changes pronouns from the personal to the impersonal. The visit to the British museum is not brought on by Mary as a person, then, but by her meals at Oxbridge. Any different person in her situation would take the same path, it seems. The word "one" opens Mary's experience into something resembling more of a role: a place that any person, like any audience-member, could take. Woolf thus prepares the audience to partake in the generative form of rejection that Mary partakes in at the beginning of the *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf's "one" becomes a role to fill, to reject, or to reshape. Boehm writes that Woolf uses "one" to push readers to consider the false "neutrality and inclusivity" adopted by male writers who write with the confidence inherent to recognized authority (199). The

association of the artificially neutral "one" with an imposing form of authority acts to render a flexible word inflexible. Although my reading differs, Boehm's point, that "one" houses more rules and rigidity than it should, rings true. Woolf plays with these rules, and exploits them, in order to create the generative type of overly-imposing role.

I re-read the title as language that evokes the role that the audience is supposed to reject. The imagery in *A Room of One's Own* may bring to mind independence, or it may bring to mind something more akin to solitary confinement. Indeed, in her reflections on the lecture, Woolf does not celebrate her primary claim, but denigrates it: "I blandly told them to drink wine & have a room of their own" (*Diary* 200).[22] Even though Woolf does not find her call to action from the original lecture to be inspiring or engaging, she chooses to publish it. Therefore, it is not necessary for Woolf to wholly believe her call-to-action worthwhile in order to share it. The address of the students does not have to fit them well, in order for Woolf to use it. The imagery of the room is imagery of containment. Yes, the room is an independent space, but it may be read restrictively as well, marking the limits of where the audience is able to go. Hite also questions the symbol of the room, writing that the "hermetic room" is at odds with the collective dream of a women's literary tradition (87). Both "one" and the room become containers, inviting the audience in, only to restrict them.

Woolf goes even further to create a restrictive role for the audience, as Mary, writing: "What one wants, I thought— and why does some brilliant student at Newnham or Girton supply it?— is a mass of information" (*A Room* 45). This is a confusing sentence, which shifts within it, from "one" to "I." In this sentence, "one" is differentiated from "I." "One" is the person who wants, but "I" is Mary, who brings "one" into being. Mary creates a void: a "one," a role that needs to be filled by a person who wants a "mass of information." So, this "one" which may

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[22] This entry is dated 27 October 1928.

seem like Mary, is also separate from Mary. It is close enough to Mary to seem like a role that

Mary can or does fill, but remains vacant enough to invite the audience in. It is vague enough to

be anybody, but specific enough to restrict the "anybody" who fills the role of the "one."[23]

When Woolf takes over the narrative, she misperceives and provides ill-fitting roles for

the audience of students. Woolf's call-to-action, separate from Mary's, is this: "Therefore I

would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or vast" (*A

Room* 109). This specific assignment is far more broad than the one that Mary is given ("women

and fiction"), though it is still an assignment. Recall that Mary feels suffocated by her

assignment. Merely by saying this, Woolf positions herself as a higher authority, someone with

the power to control the lives of others. At the end of an essay that takes pains to establish its

outsider-status, rejecting enough authority to even make statements of truth, Woolf's directive is

jarring. This role, like the title of *A Room of One's Own* may be supposed to be restrictive, for it

is in restriction that Mary models self-determination. Saloman argues that *A Room of One's

Own*'s purpose is to model how to create a new future for the students, by using speculation,

counterfactuals, and hypotheticals (54). I, too, believe that Woolf tries to let the students chart a

new course for themselves by providing a starting place to reject. In *A Room of One's Own* (and

Orlando) it is easier to start with something, some version of a self, even if it is not good or right,

to begin a process of self-determination. Woolf creates the doubled version— the writer— for

these students to work against, with, or modify.

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[23] Christina Stevenson goes further than this, calling Woolf's "I" in *A Room of One's Own*

"vacant." Because Mary Beton distinguishes herself in definitive ways, I would not call the "I"

vacant, but the sense of vacancy in the essay is a valid point.

In this conclusion, I do not seek to argue that Woolf presents a theory of how to be a person in the world, which is to reject a pre-existing (or seemingly pre-existing) role. Rather, in this thesis, I have sought to argue that Woolf presents a theory of character across *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* that is built off rejection, which allows for multiplicity and open-endedness. I believe *A Room of One's Own,* in its address to its audience, gestures toward the possibility of character as being transmissible to people. Characters may help us think through how to be people, and how to know people. This is what Woolf offers at the end of *A Room of One's Own*: a possibility of how to possibly act on this self-determinative and liberatory act of rejection.

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