

is forced to look at themselves in reflective objects (177). At the pageant's conclusion, the border between performer and audience is thus completely blurred—there is no inside or outside. As Detloff notes, “The uncomfortable sense of dispersion that accompanies La Trobe’s ‘mirror-staging’ at the end of the pageant [. . .] acts as a philosophical counter to the identity-producing spectacle of the Lacanian ‘mirror stage,’ with its reliance on the illusion of a coherent identity” (51). What La Trobe stages in the final section represents “a significant alternative to the logic of repudiation that consolidates identity” (51).

As she is packing up to leave, La Trobe notes that the site on which the pageant had been held is “land merely, no land in particular” (210). In its natural form it is a borderless space, unmarked by normative regimes. While the pageant is underway, the land and townsfolk are shaped into narratives about England. In contrast to the certainty and security the villagers wish to attach to the site, La Trobe throughout the novel literally never seems to have a place to be. The Olivers live at Pointz Hall; the audience members take their seats and mingle between the scenes; the actors have their stage or their makeshift dressing room. Although La Trobe may hide in the bushes, she also hangs her props from the trees, tramples the grass, and alters the landscape. Her radical outsidership is emphasized to the end; post-play she sits separate at the local pub.

However, as the author of the pageant, La Trobe enacts Woolf’s injunction to the Workers’ Educational Association that “literature is no one’s private ground.” La Trobe, as Woolf implores literature to do, “trespass[es] freely and fearlessly” (“Leaning Tower” 154). By setting the pageant at the site of heterosexual domesticity, Woolf frames La Trobe’s trespass as a queer disruption of both domestic space and nationalist ideology. La Trobe’s trespass provides not only a critique of normative narratives, but in both a literal and epistemological sense, the very ground on which such narratives are written.

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#### The Queer Timing of *Orlando: A Biography*

Since Nigel Nicolson’s proclamation of *Orlando* as “the longest and most charming love letter in literature” (202-03), there has been a sustained critical desire to read *Orlando* as the encoded, otherwise untellable story of a private love between two very public women. These readings are both necessary and valuable, but they make it easy to forget that, at the time of *Orlando*’s publication, Vita Sackville-West’s status as the inspiration and model for Orlando would not have been known to anyone but those familiar with Bloomsbury gossip. The possibility that one might now understand *Orlando* as *only* a love story limits Sackville-West’s importance as biographical subject and reduces the formal difficulty of *Orlando* to scarcely more than a set of references to “the love that dare not speak its name,” which, once decoded, becomes unworthy of study *except* as biographical evidence. In this way, one queer reading actually diminishes the larger stakes—both feminist and queer—of the text.

While *Orlando* has long held the attention of scholars working at the intersection of modernist and queer studies, I want to suggest the expansion of these approaches to *Orlando* through renewed attention to genre: specifically, to the book’s often overlooked subtitle, “A Biography.” Woolf’s revision and expansion of biography’s generic codes in *Orlando* make it a uniquely important text to revisit in light of contemporary theorizations of queer temporality. In this brief essay, I foreground what I think of as *Orlando*’s queer time in relation to biographical form, and I demonstrate the resonances between Woolf’s critique of the generic conventions of biography and contemporary queer critiques of the institutions of what Lee Edelman has called “reproductive futurism.” Queer temporality studies critique understandings of time as a naturalized, internalized, bodily performance of the too easily accepted social scripts that govern our lives, asking us instead to recognize and resist—in our scholarly practices as in our lives—the standard, heteronormative, biologically-driven temporal organization of our world. This is why someone like Carolyn Dinshaw, whose *Getting Medieval* might be said to have inaugurated the field of queer temporality studies, holds out the possibility of what she calls “touching across time” (“Theorizing” 178)—collapsing it, even, through the vectors of desire that connect marginalized subjects in different historical periods. This is a non-linear vision of history in which time holds the potential to twist and pull in unexpected directions as, in Elizabeth Freeman’s words, “some minor feature of our own sexually impoverished present suddenly meets up with a richer past, or as the materials of a failed and forgotten project of the past find their uses now, in a future unimaginable in their time” (163). *Orlando* is hardly “failed and forgotten,” but I suggest that, in reading its modernist frustration with normative temporality as queer frustration with the mandates of heteronormative temporality, we open up productive new avenues for understanding *Orlando*’s cultural work.

Biography, as a literary genre, is the gatekeeper *par excellence* of reproductive time, and it is difficult to extract oneself from the normativizing pull of biographical form. In what I take to be a representative critique of the genre, Terry Eagleton recently issued a complaint about the exasperating “paradox about biographies”:

We read them to savor the shape and texture of an individual life, yet few literary forms could be more predictable. Everyone has to be born, and almost everyone has to be educated, oppressed by parents, plagued by siblings, and launched into the world; they then enter



upon social and sexual relationships of their own, produce children, and finally expire. *The structure of biography is biology*. For all its tribute to the individual spirit, it is our animal life that underpins it. (89; my emphasis)

Eagleton implicitly names reproductive time as the temporal logic of standard biographies, and his contemporary impatience with the chronological predictability of biographical form seems to have been learned from Woolf and other modernists, for whom such impatience was axiomatic. For example, A. J. A. Symons, author of *The Quest for Corvo: An Experiment in Biography* (1934), delivered a nearly identical critique in a 1929 lecture given as part of the “Tradition and Experiment in Present-Day Literature” series. Symons, too, objected to the dependence upon chronology as the inviolable structuring principle of biography:

Constructed on the simple formula of chronological sequence, they begin, for the most part, with their subject’s birth, and describe his curly headed innocence, his sailor suit. Chapter 2 and 3, which show no diminution of the one or discarding of the other, are headed “Schooldays” and “Alma Mater,” and precede “Early Manhood” in which a passing reference to “wild oats” shows that the author has also experienced much; and then chapter 5, “Marriage,” sets us on the trail for home. “Life in London,” “Early Work,” and “Later Work” lead naturally to “Last Days”: a deathbed scene, several moral reflections, a list of the books or acts of the victim, and one more biography is on the shelf, probably to stay there. (2)

If biographies tell individual life stories, so the modernist critique goes, then there is no reason why all biographies must follow the same deadening, if factually accurate, formal structure. For both modernist and contemporary critics, the major problem with biography is its inviolable progression of the body through time: a biography details its subject’s birth, education, inheritance, marriage, children, and death. And, crucially, this complaint is reiterated again, almost word for word, in the work of Judith Halberstam, who has defined queer time as “the perverse turn away from the narrative coherence of adolescence-early adulthood-marriage-reproduction-child rearing-retirement-death” (Dinshaw et al. 181-82). The normative understanding of the human lifetime that is the object of this shared critique undergirds the generic structure of standard biography.<sup>1</sup>

Throughout *Orlando*, Woolf protests the tyranny of such temporal logic, arguing that

an hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. (98)

Instead of capitulating to Symons’s “simple formula of chronological sequence,” she imagines an entirely new life trajectory for her subject. Although the biography does begin when Orlando is a young boy, the details of his birth and education are not given; although Orlando begins (biographical) life as this young boy, he becomes a woman at the age of thirty; and, finally, although more than three hundred years have passed over the course of its more than three hundred pages, Orlando has not yet died when *Orlando* ends. Indeed, Orlando’s biographer insists that the “true length of a person’s life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute”:

[I]t cannot be denied that the most successful practitioners of the art of life, often unknown people by the way, somehow contrive to synchronise the sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past. Of them we

can justly say that they live precisely the sixty-eight or seventy-two years allotted them on the tombstone. Of the rest, some we know to be dead, though they walk among us; some are not yet born, though they go through the forms of life; others are hundreds of years old though they call themselves thirty-six. (305)

Although every “normal,” “successful,” often “unknown” individual contains “sixty or seventy different times which beat simultaneously,” those who are not “normal” do not successfully synchronize these different times into a single unified self. In these cases, standard “life and times” biographies that fix individual lives into set allotments of historical time, such as the short lives contained in the *DNB*, are insufficient. Even the best biographies are unable to narrate fully the complexities of individual life, “since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (309). Modernist biographies, like so many modernist novels, highlight the individual, subjective experience of time in order to dissociate the multiple “lives” of private individuals from the unified “times” of public, historical record. If one of the projects of modernist biography is to represent more than “six or seven selves” in any given individual, then this taxonomy of people-in-time in *Orlando* indicates Woolf’s refusal of Victorian biography’s insistence upon documented fact and its reliance upon the standard chronology of “every normal human system.” In *Orlando*, she demonstrates the power of fiction to stretch understandings of what constitutes the “normal” in biographical writing.

This may be, in part, simply the rejection of objectivity in favor of radical subjectivity that one expects from Woolf and other modernist writers, but this lesson, when delivered via the genre of biography, takes on new meaning. Formal choices about the representation of lives cannot be one-size-fits-all. If biography investigates, charts, records, and memorializes life, then the formal structure and generic conventions of biography are directly related to the types and ways of life that are understood as normal, or even possible, at any given time. One might adapt Gertrude Stein’s judgment of history to biography, and realize that biography, too, is deeply enmeshed in pedagogy: Let me recite what biography teaches. *Biography teaches*. (In other words, no matter their subjects, histories and biographies are both driven by a fundamentally pedagogical impulse.) The formal structure of biography teaches its readers about the possibilities—and impossibilities—of human life. In short, formal normativity protects and produces living normativity. Disrupting this form is not a merely literary decision; though playfully undertaken, this is not mere play: for Woolf, rupturing the generic conventions of biography is a means of unseating the keystone of normativity itself. I am suggesting that Woolf’s questions are still contemporary questions: how can one escape—or at least shift—the weight of standard time, standard expectations, standard lives?

Woolf may have begun *Orlando*, the first of her biographies, as a joke, but the stakes of her project were quite serious. Should conventional understandings of temporal progression govern the representation of individual lives? Or should the normative milestones of standard time be subordinate to other methods of representing the subject, as Ford Madox Ford argued about the novel: “To get [. . .] a man in function you could not begin at his beginning and work his life chronologically to the end. You must first get him with a strong impression, and then work backwards and forwards over his past” (194). Similarly, Woolf broke from the constraints of realism in biography-as-history and engaged in the unconventional temporal and formal freedoms of semi-fictionalized biography, of biography as something betwixt and between craft and art. In *Orlando*, Woolf isn’t simply writing a “joke biography” of Vita Sackville-West; she is modeling an alternative—feminist, modernist, queer—biographical structure that is not dependent upon the social scripts of standard time. The combination of reality and fantasy in *Orlando* offers an alternative model of a human lifetime that is bound by the limits of the imagination rather than somatic and social facts. If,

<sup>1</sup> See also Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*.



as Elizabeth Young-Bruehl suggests, “biography-writing can be a field for the playing out of fantasies, which is not a negative possibility—it is not *mere* subjectivity,” then fantasy and the work of the individual imagination should be understood as a social, even pedagogical, practice (8). In *Orlando*, Woolf frees her unconventional subject from the trappings of a conventional, biologically-bound lifetime (and its correspondingly conventional, chronologically-organized biography). *Orlando* is part of a long history of imaginative and theoretical attempts to set free the human experience from the shackles of standard time. It is part of a genealogy of frustration with normative temporalities. In rejecting and reshaping the formal conventions of standard biography, *Orlando* shifts the conditions of legibility for the queer life story.

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#### Queering Flowers, Queering Pleasures in “Slater’s Pins Have No Points”<sup>1</sup>

When Virginia Woolf sent “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” to *Forum* in July 1927, she wrote to Vita Sackville-West that “I’ve just written, or re-written, a nice little story about Sapphism, for the Americans” (L3 397). Later, in a letter to Vita on October 13, 1927, she wrote of “Sixty pounds just received from America for my little Sapphist story of which the Editor has not seen the point, though he’s been looking for it in the Adirondacks” (L3 431). Conceptually limited by heteronormative logic, the editor cannot see the “point” of Woolf’s popular and economically

<sup>1</sup> The story was first published in the January 1928 issue of *Forum*, as “Slater’s Pins Have No Points.” I have chosen to retain Virginia Woolf’s original title rather than using the more cumbersome later title (“Moments of Being: ‘Slater’s Pins Have No Points’”), which Leonard Woolf gave the story in republishing it in *A Haunted House and Other Stories* in 1944.

fruitful short story. Woolf surely meant for the editor to miss the “point” of her short story, as Mark Hussey notes:

The “point” of that little story, which begins with a flower that falls to the floor, having become unpinned from a dress, might well have been something Woolf felt she ought to obscure. Just before setting off to France, she had written to Vita about their shared outrage over the suppression by the Home Secretary of Radclyffe Hall’s clumsy lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*. (23)

Here Hussey alludes to the fear of censorship representative of the time period when “Slater’s Pins Have No Points” was published. Thus, the “point” of the short story had to be obscured to ensure its publication. However, I want to argue that the editor of the *Forum* may have missed the point because there is a sense in which there *is* no point to Woolf’s story. In this story, Woolf’s title purposefully misdirects heteronormative readers, for it is the fantastic flower, not the pointless pin, that is the focus of the story. In much of her fiction—“Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” *Orlando*, and *Mrs. Dalloway*, to name only a few—Woolf uses flowers to represent not lesbian sexual relationships *per se*, but queer desires, pleasures, and bodies.<sup>2</sup> In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Woolf’s use of a fantastic flower (a rose that turns into a carnation) to represent queer desires and imagined pleasures suggests that there is really “no point” in naming sexuality definitively.

In complex ways, many of Virginia Woolf’s texts resist normative and essentialist definitions of sexuality and gender in the early to mid-twentieth century, including those of sexology.<sup>3</sup> In so doing, Woolf’s writings challenge ideas that gender or sexuality determine how people can and/or should experience pleasure. Similarly, Woolf’s use of pleasure and fantasy in her texts expands our understanding of erotic pleasures, which are not limited to sexual pleasures. Queer studies can help Woolf’s readers to understand her use of fantasy, as Woolf often fantasizes nonheteronormative ways to think about pleasures and desires. Judith Butler explains that, “Fantasy is what allows us to imagine ourselves and others otherwise; it establishes the possible in excess of the real; it points elsewhere, and when it is embodied, it brings the elsewhere home” (29). Rather than confining pleasure to definitions of sexualities or locating pleasure only within bodies, Woolf’s fantastic flowers enable us to expand our minds to the possibilities of pleasures sexual and “otherwise.” In “Slater’s Pins Have No Points,” Woolf’s focus is not so much on the physical relationship between Fanny and Julia, but rather on how the queer flower, which represents queer desire, changes the erotic possibilities the two women are able to imagine.

“Slater’s Pins Have No Points” tells the story of Fanny as she struggles to understand her experience of her own pleasure while desirously watching Julia Craye, her piano instructor.<sup>4</sup> Woolf uses floral imagery to insinuate queer desires as Fanny watches and wonders about Miss Craye. The story begins, “‘Slater’s pins have no points—don’t you always find that?’ said Miss Craye, turning round as the rose fell out of Fanny Wilmot’s dress, and Fanny stooped with her ears full of music, to look for the pin on the floor” (215). The rose, seemingly stimulated by Julia’s music, falls “out of” rather than “off of” Fanny’s dress. The pin without points cannot hold Fanny’s flower either in or on her dress; instead, the flower falls out onto the floor for Julia to pick up and play with, similarly to the way she beautifully plays Bach for Fanny: “as a reward to a favourite pupil (Fanny Wilmot knew that she was Miss Craye’s favourite pupil)” (216). Rather instinctively, Fanny knows that she is Miss Craye’s favorite pupil. There exists a level of communication, erotic bond, and preference between the two characters which is understood by both,

<sup>2</sup> For previous scholarship on Woolf’s queering of flowers and desire, see Douglas, Roof, and Simpson.

<sup>3</sup> On Woolf’s rejection of sexology, see Helt.

<sup>4</sup> For scholarship on eroticism and mentoring relationships, see Winston.