Virginia Woolf and the 'Objective' Camera: The Relationship Between Text and Image in Three Guineas and Orlando

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Virginia Woolf and the ‘Objective’ Camera: The Relationship Between Text and Image in *Three Guineas* and *Orlando*

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of Bachelor of Arts (International Honours) in English from The College of William and Mary

by

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**Introduction**

Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. … All photographs are *memento mori*. To take a photograph is to participate in another person’s (or thing’s) mortality, vulnerability, mutability. Precisely by slicing out this moment and freezing it, all photographs testify to time’s relentless melt.

–Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (11)

Virginia Woolf’s oeuvre is defined by its subversion of tradition. In novels, short stories, and essays, Woolf dismisses the narrative realism of her Victorian predecessors in favor of the seemingly mundane aspects of life, elevating ephemeral moments and glimpses into the human psyche above concerns such as linear structure. As Julia Briggs explains, this approach reflects Woolf’s desire to capture the multiplicity and inconsistency of life, or the texture of “the world lived inside the mind,” rather than present a straightforward narrative.¹ Similarly, Post-Impressionism, which seeks to freeze subjective visions of the world on canvas, emphasizes essence over mimesis and is closely linked to Woolf’s modernist literary aesthetic. Although Woolf’s writing veers toward Post-Impressionism, her embrace of another art form—photography—draws uncomfortably close to the objective truth she so vehemently denies. The inclusion of reproduced photographs in *Three Guineas*, Woolf’s pacifist yet polemical 1938 essay, and *Orlando: A Biography*, her parodic 1928 tribute to lover Vita-Sackville West, appears anathema to the author’s subversive efforts, but the interplay between text and image in both works underscores Woolf’s rejection of tradition by complicating her textual narratives, elevating visual art to the level of writing, and challenging the existence of a wholly ‘objective’ reflection of reality.

Woolf’s conception of photography anticipates the work of theorists including Susan Sontag, John Berger, Roland Barthes, and John Tagg. All four acknowledge the image’s popular status as ‘irrefutable’ evidence of existence, as well as the problematic aspects of this assertion, but emphasize different ways of thinking about the medium. Sontag’s early writing classifies photography as a concrete record of fleeting moments, while later works delve into more complex issues, such as the photographer’s point of view and the non-interventionist ethics of recording wartime atrocities. Berger is perhaps best known for *Ways of Seeing*, a collection of essays that examines topics ranging from the power imbalance between a surveyed subject and a voyeuristic viewer to the advertising role assumed by modern, mass produced images. Barthes’ central concerns are the unique perspective each viewer brings to a photograph and the camera’s eerie relationship with death, while Tagg’s focus is the portrait’s capacity to both describe and inscribe an individual’s social identity.

These theorists’ modes of thinking are evident in Woolf’s personal photo albums, which juxtapose snapshots of beloved friends and family members to create unconventional, seemingly modernist-inspired narratives. Pictures of deceased individuals tie in to Sontag’s and Barthes’ arguments, while posed portraits of subjects including young nieces and nephews speak to the surveyor-surveyed dynamic discussed by Berger. The seemingly random, scrapbook-like organization of these albums is further replicated in Woolf’s preparatory research for *Three Guineas*: she arranges newspaper clippings, journalistic photographs, and scribbled notes thematically, drawing connections between ephemera such as a military uniform and a fascist tyrant’s speech, and eventually transfers the same logic of assemblage to her final text.
In *Three Guineas*, Woolf relies on a mixture of reproduced and described images to support her analysis of wartime destruction. She highlights the causal relationship between patriarchal institutions, as represented by randomly placed photographs of excessively costumed male leaders, and military aggression, as represented by absent snapshots of innocent war victims. Whereas the first set of images fulfills little purpose beyond identifying and ridiculing those responsible for inciting war, the second set wields a transformative power. By declining to reproduce images of others’ suffering, Woolf encourages ongoing reflection and interpretation of the described scenes. These evolving acts of remembrance generate a sense of compassion for victims, whose plight resonates far more than the grotesque stasis of the printed images. Readers must examine both sets, however, if they hope to grasp Woolf’s underlying argument: as long as the masculinized public sphere remains barred to women, who are forced to exist in a feminized private sphere, the cyclical pattern of war violence will continue. Society must embrace collaborative, non-binary modes of thought, or aggressive patriarchal tendencies will encroach on the private sphere until all possibility of peace is lost.

*Orlando*, a whimsical parody of biography and gender identity, is far more subversive than Woolf suggests when describing it as her “writer’s holiday.” Like *Three Guineas*, *Orlando* deploys images in order to generate new forms of meaning, but unlike the politically focused essay, it introduces visual elements that complicate rather than reinforce textual narratives. Photographed and painted portraits of the novel’s eponymous hero, a seemingly ageless figure capable of changing gender at will, contradict the narrator’s attempts to fix her subject’s identity by presenting deliberately divergent versions of a singular individual. *Orlando* is concurrently a high-ranking male
ambassador, proper Victorian lady, swashbuckling Renaissance youth, and even Sackville-West herself; she defies dichotomous definitions such as man or woman and young or old by embodying multiple selves, and in doing so, reveals the constructed nature of identity. Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* provides a particularly elucidating analysis of Woolf’s novel, as her theory of performativity closely aligns with Orlando’s apparent gender vacillation. Orlando may be able to project a certain gender identity by adjusting her behavior and clothing accordingly, but the determination of one’s gender requires validation from an audience and is therefore an ongoing accomplishment, not a given fact. Similarly, photographs cannot be accepted as outright proof, but must be placed in a context that accounts for the possibility of authorial manipulation. Perception, Woolf argues in both *Orlando* and *Three Guineas*, is innately unstable, and any attempt to garner meaning must build on a pantheon of information. Ultimately, extracting absolute meaning remains, in true modernist fashion, impossible.

### The Nature of Photography

Over the course of its nearly 200-year history, photography has alternately been deemed the humble “handmaid of the arts and sciences,” an “irrefutable assertion of existence,” “nothing more than a technique of inscribing in an emulsion of silver salts,”

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a surveillance method capable of delineating and inscribing social identity,⁵ and a memento of the absent.⁶ Scholarly interpretations of photography vary depending on time period and categorizations of the practice as an art form versus an industrial process, but criticism has generally shifted from an understanding of the image as a direct reflection of reality to more nuanced explorations of its ideological uses, interactions with memory, and potential for evoking compassion.

Woolf, who was born almost 50 years after the birth of modern photography (as marked by Louis-Jacques Mandé Daguerre’s 1839 invention of the daguerreotype), was exposed to the medium from childhood. Over the course of her lifetime, she witnessed its increasing democratization: by the late 1880s, the unwieldy metal plates of the daguerreotype process had yielded to relatively portable, lightweight models such as the Kodak camera, allowing untrained individuals to practice domestic photography rather than rely on professional portraitists.⁷ A growing preference for cheap prints over staged portraiture reflected the divide between older and younger generations, as well as men and women. As Colin Dickey explains, the onslaught of modernity distanced Woolf’s male contemporaries from their colonial and classical past—a revered legacy alluded to by characters including Jacob Flanders of *Jacob’s Room* and Neville of *The Waves*—while simultaneously emboldening women to infringe upon the male-dominated art world.⁸ Although the best-known photographers of the era were men, women wielded

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cameras within the home, asserting some measure of artistic freedom through the creation of family photo albums and personal snapshots.

Much of photography’s appeal derives from the camera’s purported objectivity. Whereas media such as writing, painting, and drawing are innately interpretive, Susan Sontag argues, “Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire.”9 Roland Barthes further explains that photographs have a real-world referent without which they cannot exist; the camera “can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by nature tendentious, never as to its existence.”10 Unlike other art forms, which may be drawn from fact or fiction, photography must find its basis in reality. Although the photographer retains some level of control over the image’s framing and, necessarily, the definition of objects or events worth capturing, the camera only records that which exists or has once existed. In Three Guineas, Woolf writes, albeit in an ironic tone, “Photographs, of course, are not arguments addressed to the reason; they are simply statements of fact addressed to the eye.”11 These descriptions of photography suggest that the camera, acting as a direct reflection of reality, has unparalleled authority in the determination of truth. Photographic theory, however, presents the camera as a more complicated tool, one whose meaning depends largely on the relationship between photographer, subject, and viewer.

The work of Sontag, Barthes, John Berger, and John Tagg provides helpful context for an analysis of Woolf’s attitude toward photography. In On Photography and Regarding the Pain of Others, Sontag explores the camera’s relationship with death and

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10 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 87.
suffering, as well as the power differentials that exist between photographer and subject. *On Photography*, which was originally published in 1977, returns to the conception of photography as a record of reality and defines the medium as an “elegiac art” inevitably evocative of lost individuals, places, or experiences. One looks at a photograph, either directly after it is taken or later in time, and realizes the transience of depicted elements.

Once a moment passes, photography and film are the only ‘objective’ forms of documentation capable of transporting viewers back to it. Human memory is fallible, and written or drawn records cannot match the camera’s offer of concrete visual evidence. Overall, Sontag’s early work places her at the more conservative end of the spectrum. Although concerned by the passivity and non-intervention that may accompany photography, she classifies it as a largely unambiguous practice, concluding, “[Photographs] have the status of found objects—unpremeditated slices of the world. Thus, they trade simultaneously on the prestige of art and the magic of the real.”

In the 2003 book *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Sontag expands on previous arguments by acknowledging photographers’ agency and, subsequently, photographs’ subjectivity. Using Woolf’s *Three Guineas* (discussed in depth later in this thesis) as a starting point, she examines the practice of war photography, which peaked during the Spanish Civil War. Although Woolf interspersed her 1938 essay with printed and described images related to the war, Sontag says she was more interested in the messages these photographs relayed than the individuals behind the camera. The general public, on the other hand, gained a growing appreciation of individual photographers as “the

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13 Sontag, 26.
profession of bearing ... witness to war and war’s atrocities with a camera was forged.”\textsuperscript{14} Photojournalists such as Robert Capa, Margaret Bourke-White, and Gerda Taro captured images of wartime suffering, cementing their own statuses as star ‘witnesses’ to war and forcing otherwise distanced viewers to confront gore directly. As Sontag argues, this strategy may have galvanized support for war and antiwar efforts, but it came at a cost: knowledge of wartime violence “accumulates” through the production of photographs and accompanying news reporting, then fades as public consciousness shifts to the next major conflict.\textsuperscript{15} Additionally, fleeting yet widespread awareness is shaped by expectations of photographic objectivity, but Sontag, in a shift from her previous conservative characterization of the practice, argues that images always present a point of view: “Sleight of hand allows photographs to be both objective record and personal testimony, both a faithful copy or transcription of an actual moment of reality and an interpretation of that reality.”\textsuperscript{16} A final concern Sontag cites is the underlying purpose of atrocity photography. When viewers look at images of suffering, do they become voyeurs participating in the objectification of victims, or do they fulfill an obligation to acknowledge the pain of others?\textsuperscript{17} The answers to these questions are complex and often situational, but in the context of Woolf’s work, they fall under the latter category. Viewed as Woolf intended, \textit{Three Guineas’} absent images of “dead bodies and ruined houses” evoke compassion and, more importantly, inspire action.

Like Sontag, Roland Barthes suggests that photography is intrinsically linked with death. The specter of mortality hovers in the background of every image, and the sitter

\textsuperscript{15} Sontag, \textit{Pain of Others}, 18.
\textsuperscript{16} Sontag, 23.
\textsuperscript{17} Sontag, 71.
posing for a photograph “feels he is becoming an object: I then experience a micro-
version of death (of parenthesis).”\textsuperscript{18} The sound of a camera shutter triggers its subject’s
recognition of her imminent end, as the captured photograph will outlast her physical
body, and serves as a key step in the erosion of personal identity. Simultaneously, the
‘objectifying’ nature of the photograph acts as a form of preservation. Although the
sitter’s individual characteristics and life experiences are eventually erased by time, her
image, or aura, remains forever immortalized—in many ways, akin to the historical
artifacts protected by a museum’s glass exhibition cases.

Another critical consideration in \textit{Camera Lucida} is the relationship between
image and viewer. Barthes focuses on several types of pictures and photographic
elements, including unary images, \textit{studium}, and \textit{punctum}. He describes photojournalism
as unary, or banal and reflective of reality without leading to vacillation or indirection,
and further explains, “The [news] photograph can shout, not wound. These journalistic
photographs are received (all at once), perceived. I glance through them, I don’t recall
them; no detail (in some corner) ever interrupts my reading: I am interested in them (as I
am interested in the world), I do not love them.”\textsuperscript{19} In terms of \textit{studium} and \textit{punctum}—
Barthes’ terms for the phenomenon that initially draws viewers to a photograph and the
detail that rises from the scene to attack the viewer, respectively—news photographs
possess the historical, political, or cultural context necessary for \textit{studium} but lack the
element of \textit{punctum} needed to truly resonate. Compared to \textit{studium}, which is clearly
encoded within a captured scene, \textit{punctum} evolves with every viewing. It is a single
element created by the photographer’s framing and the subject’s surroundings, often

\textsuperscript{18} Barthes, \textit{Camera Lucida}, 14.
\textsuperscript{19} Barthes, 40-41.
unintentionally, but jumps out at spectators for reasons specific to them. *Punctum* can include anything from the pattern on a subject’s dress to the length of one’s fingernails, and its attraction is ineffable; viewers may not even recognize *punctum* until they reflect back on the image at a later time. As Barthes writes, *punctum* has the power of expansion—“while remaining a detail, it fills the whole picture”\(^{20}\)—and, simultaneously, “is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there.”\(^{21}\)

In *Ways of Seeing* and various writings on photography, John Berger offers a less abstract interpretation of the relationship between subject, photographer or artist, and viewer. Using the tradition of the female nude, as represented by Titian’s *Venus of Urbino* and other paintings of reclining women, Berger examines power differentials between the surveyor and the surveyed. He describes the act of viewing or creating a painted nude as an instance of voyeurism that often manifests itself as men treating women like spectacles for their personal entertainment and writes, “This unequal relationship is so deeply embedded in our cultures that it still structures the consciousness of many women. They do to themselves what men do to them. They survey, like men, their own femininity.”\(^{22}\) Although Berger’s focus is painting rather than photography, his argument is closely related to Barthes’ discussion of the camera’s subject-turned-object. Both involve the reduction of a human subject to an object or possession that exists only to be looked at, but in Berger’s theory, gendered power relations, rather than the subject’s feelings of existential terror, are paramount. The majority of female nudes feature a woman, alternatively demure or coy, gazing out at the viewer. Her naked body is on full

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20 Barthes, 45.
21 Barthes, 55.
display, and the work’s underlying purpose is eminently clear: as Berger notes, “Women are there to feed an appetite, not to have any of their own.” The female body, painted mainly by male artists, is transformed—or, more aptly phrased, objectified—in order to satiate men’s lust. The artist’s model, as well as the image captured of her, has no identity or agency in relation to the male surveyor. She is merely a spectacle performing sexuality for the work’s audience.

In *The Burden of Representation*, John Tagg turns a historical lens on the issues raised by Sontag, Barthes, and Berger. He traces the role of photography in modern society, with a particular emphasis on surveillance, and examines the image’s status as proof or knowledge versus an authoritarian, coded tool. Reflecting on early uses of photography, Tagg notes that the camera has long been a means of regulation. Archives filled with portraits of those deemed aberrant, from criminals to the mentally ill, indicate that visual records of physiognomic ‘abnormalities’ played a key role in the stratification of society. Once the state identified physical characteristics associated with so-called degeneration, it gained the ability to label and separate its citizens accordingly. As Tagg summarizes, “The portrait is therefore a sign whose purpose is both the description of an individual and the inscription of social identity.”

The state’s reliance on photography, as opposed to writing or painting, draws on the presumed reliability of photographic representation. Tagg explains that the camera emerged as an authoritative method of procuring knowledge because it was free from the “imprecisions of verbal language”—whereas a written description produces multiple

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23 Berger, 55.
interpretations of a single event, the photograph reproduces an existing scene.⁵ This view seems to support the idea of an ‘objective’ camera, but as Tagg points out, replications of reality are not necessarily neutral. He writes, “The photographer turns his or her camera on a world of objects already constructed as a world of uses, values and meanings, though in the perceptual process these may not appear as such but only as qualities discerned in a ‘natural’ recognition of ‘what is there.’”⁶ Although photography presents a scene exactly as it appeared in life, the photographer’s point of view—represented by what she deems worthy of capturing—and the audience’s existing perception of the world shape the image’s overall message. Viewers may believe their interpretation of a photograph relies solely on “what is there,” but one’s understanding of any event, photographed or not, draws on the base of knowledge created within a cultural framework. Ultimately, Tagg argues, photography involves an interplay of visual and verbal factors, rendering the idea of a “purely visual image … nothing but an Edenic fiction.”⁷

Sontag, Barthes, Berger, and Tagg offer varying interpretations of the camera’s objective—or objectifying—gaze, but all share an appreciation of the tool’s immense complexity. On a superficial level, photography presents a straightforward account of the past, free from the imprecision of written or drawn records. As a direct reflection of reality, the image concretizes identity, allowing society to identify criminals via mugshots or mourn a family member whose essence is forever encased within the picture frame. In addition to establishing individual identity, journalistic or unary photographs

⁵ Tagg, 85.
⁶ Tagg, 187.
⁷ Tagg, 188.
relay information to the public. Propaganda shots such as the ones featured in *Three Guineas* foster awareness of and support for a cause, and their authority builds on the presumed credibility offered by the camera, as opposed to a reporter’s article or romanticized artistic rendering. Photography, however, is more susceptible to manipulation than it initially appears. The act of recording an event enables the photographer to assign it comparative importance over another potential subject, and the angle at which a photograph is taken represents just one of innumerable points of view. Examined within the ingrained cultural framework of individual photographers, subjects, and viewers, the image becomes a highly subjective form of representation.

**Woolf, the Arts, and Photography**

At the end of Woolf’s 1921 short story “An Unwritten Novel,” the narrator simultaneously laments and rejoices in the impossibility of absolute knowledge:

“Mysterious figures! Mother and son. Who are you? Why do you walk down the street? Where to-night will you sleep, and then, to-morrow? Oh, how it whirls and surges—floats me afresh! I start after them. People drive this way and that.”

These exclamations, which could easily be attributed to Woolf herself, encapsulate the author’s lifelong fascination with the untenable nature of human perception. In her writing, she examines this subjective phenomenon through the lens of ephemerality, ineffability, and identity by relying on techniques including fragmented characterization and non-linear narration. As Diane Filby Gillespie notes, Woolf’s indirect manner of representation mirrors the abstract nature of modern painting, allowing her to “render the self elusive through

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multiple and partial points of view.” Although this Post-Impressionist aesthetic is most apparent in works of fiction including *The Waves*, *Jacob’s Room*, and *To the Lighthouse*, it permeates all aspects of Woolf’s life, from her central position in the Bloomsbury Group to her relationship with sister Vanessa Bell and the creation of her personal family photo albums. Photography initially appears at odds with an artistic philosophy grounded in less exacting representation, but as Woolf argues in *Three Guineas* and *Orlando*, verisimilitude does not necessarily equate to objectivity.

Woolf’s lifelong passion for the arts stems from her childhood. The Stephen family was relatively affluent, and many of its members engaged in creative pursuits. Julia, the family matriarch, was a Pre-Raphaelite model who frequently posed for her aunt, the esteemed Victorian photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, while Woolf’s father, Sir Leslie Stephen, was an avid writer, editor, and historian. Alongside Bell, the young Virginia regularly visited London’s National Gallery and captured photographs of family trips to St. Ives or events such as half-sister Stella Duckworth’s wedding. She showed an affinity for writing, while Bell preferred painting. This binary of form persisted throughout the sisters’ lives, with both using their respective media to meditate on the experience of loss. Woolf, born in 1882, was relatively young when her parents died (Julia in 1895 and Leslie in 1904). Their loss, coupled with the subsequent deaths of Stella and brother Thoby Stephen, had a traumatic impact that resonates throughout both sisters’ work.

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For Woolf, the 1927 publication of *To the Lighthouse*, featuring the characters of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay as fictionalized versions of Julia and Leslie, served as an exorcism of her parents’ ghosts. In the novel, Mrs. Ramsay passes away unexpectedly, and her death receives only parenthetical mention: “[Mr Ramsay stumbling along a passage stretched his arms out one dark morning, but Mrs Ramsay having died rather suddenly the night before he stretched his arms out. They remained empty.]”\(^{31}\) Woolf’s abrupt treatment of death may be jarring for readers, but as Hermione Lee explains, it reflects her rejection of the “melodramatic, morbid lamentations which filled her darkened rooms … after her mother’s death.”\(^{32}\) By describing death in the simplest of terms, she acknowledges its ubiquitous nature and draws attention to the individual experience of mourning. Rather than partaking in a sensationalized show of grief, Woolf grants her characters the privacy she never received and benefits from vicarious catharsis. In a November 28, 1928, diary entry, she concluded, “(I believe this to be true—that I was obsessed by them both, unhealthily; & writing of them was a necessary act.).”\(^{33}\)

Bell’s portraits are similarly imbued with a sense of absence. Abstract, occasionally faceless figures convey their sitters’ essence rather than direct likeness, and in their “inhuman and chilling” silence, evoke the void left by death (fig. 1).\(^{34}\) At the same time, the distancing effect of such seemingly fixed scenes lends a promise of permanence which further supports the sisters’ belief that artistic representations can

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\(^{34}\) Gillespie, *Sisters’ Arts*, 103.
resist death.\textsuperscript{35} As Lily Briscoe, the creative force at the center \textit{To the Lighthouse}, notes, “Nothing stays; all changes; but not words, not paint. … One might say, even of this scrawl, not of that actual picture, perhaps, but of what it attempted, that it ‘remained for ever.’”\textsuperscript{36} Briscoe’s characterization as a maligned female artist who must fight for others’ respect, as well as her attempts to defy the erasure of time through an act of creation, mirrors the professional struggles faced by both Woolf and Bell.

![Figure 1. Vanessa Bell, \textit{Virginia Woolf}, 1912, oil on board, National Portrait Gallery, London.](image)


\textsuperscript{36} Woolf, \textit{Lighthouse}, 147.
Ultimately, both sisters’ art aims to confront the ephemerality of human existence. Gillespie equates Bell’s enigmatic painted figures with the indistinguishable masses that populate Woolf’s fiction, writing, “Individuals are transient, both sisters imply in their art; the patterns they make in the contexts which they move are not.”37 This assertion, rather than serving as a dark reminder of human vulnerability, instead reiterates the underlying message of “An Unwritten Novel.” The obliterating power of time and the intrinsic impenetrability of others guarantees that an outsider’s perception will always be partial, but art, as an act of creation, allows individuals to assume agency and circumvent, however momentarily, the effacement of death.

In addition to writing and painting, Woolf and Bell explored loss through the shared medium of photography. The sisters’ family photo albums, which were continually crafted throughout their lives, are significant for both their reflection of an untenable past and embrace of a marginal art form. Compared to the staged portraiture of the previous century, informal snapshots captured everyday life in the domestic sphere, as represented by images of Angelica and Julian Bell playing outside, Duncan Grant lounging in his studio, Leonard Woolf lost in thought. Furthermore, photographs of the deceased served as relics of loved ones, frozen images of a past where the subject was alive and well. According to Susan Sontag, “Photography is an elegiac art, a twilight art. Most subjects photographed are, just by virtue of being photographed, touched with pathos.”38 This assessment relates to photography’s claim of objectivity, which writing and painting cannot ostensibly equal. Whereas other art forms are actively shaped by their creators, photographs appear to directly reflect reality and allow viewers to retain an

37 Gillespie, *Sisters’ Arts*, 162.
accurate image of those they have lost. Gillespie writes, “Photographs kept absent people present for Virginia Woolf and dead ones alive.”

Images of Stella Duckworth, for example, allude to Julia Stephen’s absence and Stella’s role as the Stephens’ surrogate mother (fig. 2). In lieu of Stella’s early death, Woolf attempted to preserve a portrait of her by mounting it on heavy protective card, a technique she also tested on an 1892 photo of Julia.

Figure 2. Stella Duckworth, Rome, date unknown, Monk’s House Album 1, p. 50, Harvard Theatre Collection, Houghton Library, Harvard University, Cambridge, Mass.

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40 Humm, Snapshots, 7.
Leslie Stephen displayed a similar emotional affinity for snapshots of the deceased. Shortly after his wife’s death, Stephen composed a personal history of the couple’s relationship (published in 1977 as *The Mausoleum Book*) and filled it with images including a portrait of Julia taken by her aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron (fig. 3). According to Erika Flesher, Stephen felt that Julia’s beauty could not be encapsulated by drawing or painting, but required the careful framing of Cameron’s camera.\(^{41}\) Stephen admired the superlative likenesses found in photographs, though he admitted “it is [possible] that I may be able to read into them something which would not be equally visible to others who have not my associations.”\(^{42}\) Woolf’s *Orlando* portraits, which gain new layers of meaning based on one’s prior knowledge of their subjects, further explore the tension between what an individual brings to the photograph and what is already there. In terms of photographic theory, the snapshots in *Orlando* and *The Mausoleum Book* closely relate to Barthes’ *punctum*, a uniquely resonant detail that overtakes an entire image, and Tagg’s dismissal of the purely visual image, an “Edenic fiction” that cannot exist when photographs are necessarily understood within an existing cultural or personal framework. Overall, Stephen’s and Woolf’s attempts to protect photos of lost relatives cement their images’ status as not only mementoes, but revered icons on par with early Christian depictions of the Madonna and Child. Only photography, by referring directly to reality, can fix identity to such an extent.


During the early twentieth century, cheap, portable cameras became readily accessible, allowing women to challenge the dominant Victorian tradition of studio portraiture. Domestic photography emerged as the low culture complement to professional photography, while the rising popularity of family photo albums cemented women’s status as amateur photographers responsible for recording events in the private
sphere. Emily Dalgarno, who describes this demarcation as a gendered division of labor, further notes that the widespread presence of photo albums generated societal ideals regarding family life.\(^4^3\) In her albums, for example, Bell consciously crafts an idyllic image of her domestic world, combining portraits of family members and frequent visitors to present what Val Williams describes as a “propagandised” version of her life.\(^4^4\) Comparatively, Woolf’s Monk’s House albums are less concerned with maintaining a facade of enviable domesticity. Although both sisters necessarily shaped their albums in the very act of creating them, Woolf readily acknowledges this manipulation, while Bell hides it behind her constructed mythic lifestyle. Gillespie writes:

Woolf observes, then, the way photographs tyrannize over the living. They do so because of the stiff artificiality of the formal photograph; because of the common perception that cameras present the facts; because of the documentary nature of the camera which, in family use, was limited to records of only certain kinds of occasions; and because of the human tendency to distort the past, whether for self-indulgent, sentimental reasons or for prescriptive ones.\(^4^5\)

The definition of photography Gillespie offers echoes Woolf’s decision to incorporate images in *Three Guineas* and *Orlando*: both reflect an awareness of the camera’s presumed role as objective observer and, in typically Post-Impressionist fashion, subvert these expectations to reveal a new understanding of perception.

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\(^4^3\) Emily Dalgarno, *Virginia Woolf and the Visible World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 150.
\(^4^5\) Gillespie, “Kodak,” 146.
The organization of Woolf’s and Bell’s photo albums similarly reflects their aesthetic priorities. As Humm explains, all albums derive meaning from their sequencing of otherwise singular events.46 While Bell tends to use a traditionally chronological

layout, Woolf prefers to arrange images thematically or randomly. Like her fiction, which emphasizes interiority and ephemerality over a linear narrative, Woolf’s albums offer a disjointed yet subtly intricate viewing experience. A page from the fourth Monk’s House album, for example, features four undated photographs of Bloomsbury member Lytton Strachey (fig. 4). The images are uncaptioned aside from a scribbled, nearly illegible word at the bottom right and appear to be linked only by Strachey’s presence and the recurring motif of architectural openings, or windows and doorways. There is no indication of when and where the photographs were taken, but at the same time, such information feels almost ancillary. Rather than commemorating a specific event, Woolf’s repeated portraits of Strachey paint a concrete “visual discourse of friendship,” anchoring Virginia and Leonard’s relationship with the writer amidst a period of cultural change and widespread volatility.\(^\text{47}\) Repeated motifs, including windows, armchairs, and bookcases, have a comparable structuring effect and, in Humm’s opinion, contribute to the domestic, “maternal” language of Woolf’s albums.\(^\text{48}\) Whereas public images like the ones featured in Three Guineas are typically associated with professional male photographers, the Monk’s House albums represent Woolf’s assertion over the private sphere. Rather than allowing the camera’s masculine gaze to fall upon her, she turns its lens onto the surrounding world, acting primarily as photographer, not subject. The few images of Woolf included in the albums mirror snapshots of Leonard, suggesting that the couple took turns photographing each other, and ultimately act as repetitive, anchoring portraits similar to the shots of Strachey (fig. 5).\(^\text{49}\)

\(^{47}\) Humm, Snapshots, 27.
\(^{48}\) Humm, “Albums,” 47.
\(^{49}\) Humm, Snapshots, 8.
with mental illness, these photographs enabled her to “survive those identity destroying moments of her own life” by providing a stable reference point from the past.50

The assemblage-like logic seen in the Monk’s House albums is further demonstrated by Woolf’s preparatory work for Three Guineas. Her notes juxtapose 139 documents ranging from newspaper cuttings to pamphlets and journalistic snapshots, all of which are arranged thematically rather than chronologically.51 Julia Briggs describes the endeavor as a “scrapbook [of] history in the raw,” noting that between 1931 and ‘37,

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Woolf recorded instances of patriarchal and fascist injustices at home and abroad, then organized her ‘evidence’ in such a way that notes commented on one another to multiply their respective meanings.\textsuperscript{52} Figure 6, for example, includes three related clippings: two articles describing the political climate in 1935 Germany (Adolf Hitler offers an ominous warning to all who oppose him, and a local official’s wife is arrested for criticizing the “thorn of hatred” overtaking her country) and a photograph of Count Gian Ciano, Benito Mussolini’s son-in-law, dressed in flying kit.\textsuperscript{53} Together, the extracted clippings foreshadow \textit{Three Guineas}’ main arguments. Hitler’s speech hints at the rising power of European fascism, and Ciano’s military attire alludes to the patriarchal uniforms donned during wartime. The other element of the page, an article headlined “Outspoken Essen Woman Arrested,” highlights society’s dismissal of female voices, an issue Woolf greatly expands upon in her essay. Overall, Merry Pawlowski writes, the preparatory scrapbooks fulfill their intended goal of creating a “gendered map of … contemporary society.”\textsuperscript{54} Using this ‘map’ as a blueprint, Woolf was able to write her landmark critique of patriarchal systems and even incorporate a scrapbook-like structure. Just as she did in her personal photo albums, Woolf ultimately relied on \textit{Three Guineas}’ visual elements to present an alternative narrative that, in line with the essay’s larger argument, questioned traditional institutions ranging from photography to historical authority.

\textsuperscript{52} Briggs, 	extit{Inner Life}, 318-19.
\textsuperscript{54} Pawlowski, “Scrapbooking,” 300.
Three Guineas and the Absent Versus Reproduced Image

Three Guineas, Woolf’s pacifist yet polemical 1938 essay, is framed as an epistolary meditation on three related topics—the prevention of war, a fund for the rebuilding of a women’s college, and a working women’s society. The essayist, who serves as a semi-fictionalized version of Woolf, writes that she has received correspondence requesting her advice on these issues but failed to respond in a timely manner. As she notes, “I had hoped that [the letter] would answer itself, or that other people would answer it for me” (117). Woolf expands on the reasoning behind her prolonged silence by citing concerns such as the intractable distance between male and female experience, the limited nature of women’s professional opportunities, and the comparative levels of influence wielded by educated versus uneducated women. These excuses focus largely on women’s subordination within and separation from male-dominated society, but they are conveyed in a sardonic tone that seems to dismiss the very essentialist notions upon which they are predicated. For example, Woolf writes, “Complete understanding [between genders] could only be achieved by blood transfusion and memory transfusion—a miracle still beyond the reach of science” (121). Within the context of Three Guineas’ overarching argument, and against the historical background of the Spanish Civil War and rising threat of fascism, such statements retain a hint of lightheartedness; however, their main function is to reinforce the societally-imposed, rather than biologically inherent, divisions between men and women (to be discussed in relation to Woolf’s 1928 novel Orlando later in the thesis). Ultimately, Woolf addresses the question of how to prevent war with a highly ambiguous statement:

55 All Three Guineas quotations in this section are taken from A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas, ed. Michele Barrett (1938; repr., London: Penguin, 2000).
The answer to your question must be that we can best help you to prevent war not by repeating your words and following your methods but by finding new words and creating new methods. We can best help you to prevent war not by joining your society but by remaining outside your society but in co-operation with its aim. That aim is the same for us both. It is to assert “the rights of all.” (272)

This refusal to align directly with existing institutions highlights Woolf’s belief that war is the inherent product of a patriarchal culture that encourages aggression as a form of masculinity. Women, who exist on the margins of society, are unable to prevent such conflicts without access to education, professional careers, and other aspects of the public sphere. Once access is granted, women will be better equipped to meditate on the issue of war—still, Woolf suggests, immersion within the dominantly male world will not equate to an adoption of patriarchal modes of thinking, but the development of diverse methods that build on resources currently unavailable to women.

The amorphous nature of *Three Guineas*’ conclusion aligns with the dialogic nature of the overall essay. By adopting an epistolary framework, Woolf appears to engage in a conversation with her readers. As Lisa Low notes, “Unlike the fascist, the university-educated literary critic, or the nineteenth-century novelist, Woolf refuses to tell people what they must think and do.” Instead, Woolf outlines her personal beliefs regarding the intrinsically masculine issue of wartime aggression and encourages readers to challenge others’ assertions—including her own. She writes, “You have to strip each statement of its money motive, of its power motive, of its advertisement motive, of its publicity motive … before you make up your mind which fact about politics to believe” (221). The multilayered elements of Woolf’s critique are further emphasized by five

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photographs that interrupt the text and force readers to consider their relevance, as well as a set of described images. Together, they build a sense of audience culpability, alluding to readers’ participation in a patriarchal society that perpetuates military violence but distances itself from the effects of this aggression. From a visual standpoint, the reproduced and described images serve contrasting purposes. The former depict but decry a male world of pomp and circumstance; as Maggie Humm writes, they are “snatched images of public life immune to deeper readings” and thus convey, in Barthesian terms, a kind of pure *studium*. Conversely, the latter exist in a private, domestic, and feminine sphere. In the absence of printed images, readers can project their personal interpretations onto “pictures of dead bodies and ruined houses” and move beyond the stasis found in the reproduced images.

The five printed images—entitled *A General, Heralds, A University Procession, A Judge,* and *An Archbishop*—are sporadically situated throughout the text. Although they depict varying scenes of public life, all share the common subject of male officials engaging in the ritualistic ceremonies of patriarchal society. *A General,* for example, features a half-length portrait of a grinning man draped in military decoration (fig. 7). To Woolf’s contemporary audience, he would be instantly recognizable as Robert Baden Powell, founder of the Boy Scouts, but to modern-day viewers, Powell simply registers as a symbolic figurehead of Britain’s military might. Often, there is no direct link between a specific photograph and the words surrounding it. The resulting sense of disjuncture forces readers to confront the image directly, perhaps by reflecting on Woolf’s reasons for placing *The Archbishop* near the end of the text but reproducing *A General, Heralds,*

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and *A University Procession* in quick succession. Significantly, Rebecca Wisor notes that *Three Guineas’* photographs were omitted from American and British editions beginning in the 1960s and only restored with the 1993 publication of Michele Barrett’s joint edition of *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas.*

![Figure 7. A General, Three Guineas (1938), 135.](image)

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Such widespread exclusion highlights the lack of scholarly attention afforded to the images, which are largely understood as “anonymous, symbolic illustrations of Woolf’s written arguments connecting fascism, patriarchy, and war.”\textsuperscript{59} Although this interpretation is supported by close readings of the text, it fails to account for the nuanced implications raised by image placement and content, as well as the tension that emerges between the printed and described snapshots.

\textit{A Judge}, which is placed roughly halfway through the essay, exemplifies the benefits of considering visual and textual information in tandem (fig. 8). In the image, a judge exits a building alongside a variety of well-dressed officials. Although these figures clutter the photograph’s composition, the judge is clearly the dominant subject. He is

\textsuperscript{59} Wisor, “About Face,” 1.
placed to the right of the central axis but commands attention through his positioning in the foreground and singular attire, as opposed to the slim figure in the middle of the photograph. Rather than detracting from the image’s visual impact, its limited black and white tones further accentuate the contrast between the individuals present. Whereas the man to the judge’s left fades into the dark void of the image’s background, the judge stands out due to his combination of black robes, white wig, and white fur-trimmed cape.

Four members of the clergy also wear a mixture of white and black clothing, but their voluminous white robes and thin black sashes have a whitewashing, unifying effect. Rather than highlighting individuality, the clergy’s costumes identify them as faceless representatives limited to the margins of both the photograph and its referent proceedings.

On the page preceding *A Judge*, Woolf addresses her female audience and hints at the spectacle soon to follow: “Think — one of these days, you may wear a judge’s wig on your head, an ermine cape on your shoulders; sit under the lion and the unicorn; draw a salary of five thousand a year with a pension on retiring” (184). She identifies a judge’s wig and ermine cape as ritualistic symbols of patriarchal society that women can only don in fantasies of the future and suggests that such costuming is valuable solely to men, who rely on the display of elaborate attire in a ceremonial setting to exhibit and solidify their social standing. In comparison with those who must ‘perform’ their purported power in the public arena, Woolf emphasizes female spectators, who are free to “laugh—indeed the shadow of the private house still makes those dresses look a little queer” (184).

Viewed from the relative simplicity of the private arena, these exorbitantly preening male figures attract women’s derision; however, they simultaneously become objects of envy,
as even in their ridiculed state, men remain the bearers of superior societal status.

Although women are free to mock the rituals of patriarchal society in the privacy of their homes, they remain limited to the domestic sphere, always observing rather than participating. Woolf, keenly aware of the limits of such observation, notes that in her imagined vision of equality, women “who have looked so long at the pageant in books, or from a curtained window watched educated men leaving the house at about nine-thirty to go to an office … need look passively no longer” (184). Ironically, the juxtaposition of this argument against *A Judge*, printed on the facing page, finds Woolf decrying passive spectatorship while simultaneously presenting an image encouraging that very act.

While these sentiments appear contradictory, the casting of women as observers and men as actors both reinforces the former’s exclusion from society and allows females a certain level of agency by transforming them into surveyors and men into the surveyed. As John Berger explains, the tradition of female nudes has long dictated that “men act and women appear. … The surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus she turns herself into an object— and most particularly an object of vision: a sight.” According to Berger’s interpretation, the act of painting or viewing a female nude serves as an instance of voyeurism in which men treat women as their titillating personal property. Interestingly, *Three Guineas* reverses this dynamic, explicitly displaying men while placing women in the observer role. Male figures provide females’ entertainment, and though this still constitutes passive watching, it affords women the sense of possession over others that the male gaze often perpetuates. Nancy Knowles, further elaborating on the reversal of gender roles, writes, “Through the communal,

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60 Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, 47.
feminine gaze Woolf constructs, the men appear ridiculous rather than attractive.”⁶¹ As men become surveyed objects, the women’s gaze grows derisive, spurred on by the subjects’ self-serving display of pomp and ceremony. In the context of Three Guineas’ central criticism of patriarchal institutions, which provoke war while expecting women in the private sphere to promote peace, the individuals depicted appear frozen in time as costumed objects of mockery, the structural systems they represent caught in a scenario that calls into question the very purpose of their existence. As Diane Gillespie concludes, “Woolf imprints upon our minds visual images of the overriding source of the problem, the patriarchy on parade.”⁶²

Looking to the printed images’ photographic, rather than connotative, properties, Roland Barthes’ theory of studium and punctum proves useful. A Judge, for example, falls under his definition of a journalistic, or unary, photograph. In terms of studium, viewers can analyze the men’s attire and the image’s background to determine the context of a public ceremony. Rebecca Wisor adds that Three Guineas’ contemporary audience likely would have recognized the photographs’ subjects, including Boy Scouts founder Robert Baden-Powell and former Archbishop of Canterbury Cosmo Gordon Lang, and therefore experienced an even stronger sense of studium.⁶³ Regardless, the aimlessness of the overall image bars viewers from finding a shocking detail worthy of the label punctum. Although the eponymous judge is clearly the central figure, he and the other men depicted remain static caricatures of their professions. In relation to John

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⁶³ Wisor, “About Face,” 5.
Tagg’s work on representation, the printed photographs fall somewhere between portrait and mugshot, inscribing their subjects’ “social identity” as ‘types’ rather than unique individuals. The images contain no action, nor the introspection typically seen in portraits, and fulfill only the most basic function of a photograph: recording the existence of a moment in time, mundane as it may be.

Comparatively, *Three Guineas’* described “pictures of dead bodies and ruined houses” convey enhanced meaning without the benefit of visualization (154). Toward the start of the text, Woolf invites readers to gaze upon a set of war images laid out on the kitchen table. She details the snapshots’ origins, noting that the Spanish government sends similar photographs about twice a week, and establishes *studium*, or the historical context of the Spanish Civil War. Woolf refers to the images a total of nine times throughout the text, but the majority of these mentions are limited to the oft-cited description of “dead bodies and ruined houses.” Rather than continually recreating the photographs, Woolf uses this repeated phrase to trigger memories of her initial description:

They are not pleasant photographs to look upon. They are photographs of dead bodies for the most part. This morning’s collection contains the photograph of what might be a man’s body, or a woman’s; it is so mutilated that it might, on the other hand, be the body of a pig. But those certainly are dead children, and that undoubtedly is the section of a house. A bomb has torn open the side; there is still a bird-cage hanging in what was presumably the sitting-room, but the rest of the house looks like nothing so much as a bunch of spillikins suspended in mid air. (125)

Although Woolf paints the scene in visceral terms, she is purposefully vague, refusing to identify corpses as human or animal. This fluidity affords the images a level of

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64 Tagg, *Burden*, 37.
versatility, as readers are left to continually conjure their own poignant versions of the scene.

Like the printed photographs, which Woolf uses to reverse the surveyor and surveyed relationship, the described images subvert expectations by elevating memory above the reliably ‘objective’ camera. The act of remembering becomes a highly gendered practice, as individuals are invited to examine the photographs in a domestic, and therefore feminine, space: the narrator’s kitchen. Compared to public snapshots of patriarchal ceremonies, which women can only view in newspapers or secondhand reports, the described images exist in the private domain of the home. As Colin Dickey explains, these settings carry contrasting implications: “Woolf punctuates her book with photographs of the professional life that women have as of yet very little direct access to. Thus the actual reproduced images are meant to be read as simulacra, at the same time that the nonrepresented photo is the truth, the real.”

Here, Dickey reverses assumptions regarding photography’s superior claim to authenticity by suggesting that *Three Guineas’* printed images offer no meaningful insights aside from those Woolf outlines in the text. Their function is largely illustrative, especially in comparison with the absent images’ provocative potential. While much of the latter group’s power derives from its alignment with the private sphere, the lack of representation Dickey refers to proves equally essential. Maggie Humm argues that Woolf’s “memory traces” of the photographs offer a more dimensional experience of the traumatic civil war, as they “represent ongoing states or processes, not static, frozen images.”

With each mention of the “dead bodies and ruined houses,” *Three Guineas’* readers remember and reinterpret the original images,

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generating an effect similar to Barthes’ *punctum*, which emerges with ongoing reflection and is simultaneously what one adds to the scene and what is already there. Unlike the printed photographs, which remain fixed in their caricature-like depictions and immune to deeper readings, the described images gain new meaning with every instance of remembrance.

The emotional impact of the ‘absent’ photographs is further accentuated by their dark subject matter. In Woolf’s view, war is solely the product of patriarchal structures, but individuals in the domestic sphere are forced to share the burden of violence’s devastating effects. The intrusion of war, a masculine enterprise, therefore renders the home a liminal, impure site of negotiation between public and private. As Susan Sontag explains, war not only robs women of the limited agency they hold in domestic spaces but effaces identity entirely. Referring to the initial description of the war victims’ dehumanizing mutilation, she adds, “[Woolf’s] point is that the scale of war’s murderousness destroys what identifies people as individuals. … This, of course, is how war looks when it is seen from afar, as an image.”67 The described photographs’ distancing effect simultaneously reinforces the assignment of blame to male institutions, as the brutality depicted is anathema to the private realm, and renders their violent imagery anonymous. In Humm’s view, this anonymity actually enables readers to connect their private histories with public events—for example, envisioning loved ones instead of faceless victims—and thereby heightens a tragedy’s resonance.68 The entire process, from viewing images laid out on a kitchen table to remembering scenes of devastation and working to truly empathize with unknown casualties, draws on the

68 Humm, “Memory,” 651.
emotional capacity of the snapshots’ female audience. As Krista Ratcliffe argues, Woolf’s elevation of “the emotional as a valid means of proof” on par with the traditionally male realm of logic reinforces *Three Guineas*’ central assertion: men must allow women to enter and reshape the public sphere if they ever hope to prevent war. Woolf further echoes Ratcliffe’s suggestion of collaborative efforts by writing, “How essential it is that we should realize that unity the dead bodies, the ruined houses prove. For such will be our ruin if you, in the immensity of your public abstractions forget the private figure, or if we in the intensity of our private emotions forget the public world” (130). Ultimately, the described images are designed to elicit compassion for the plight of Spanish Civil War victims, or in a more general sense, all victims of patriarchal violence.

*Three Guineas* is a text grounded in dichotomies. Woolf’s verbal arguments emphasize the artificially imposed divisions between public and private domains, and visual elements are similarly separated into imagined landscapes of violence versus the frozen, black-and-white smiles of generals and heralds. The latter, representative of patriarchal, warmongering institutions, inhabit the public arena, whereas the former, representative of the female domestic sphere, occupies an ostensibly private space. War, a masculine phenomenon that nevertheless affects all members of society, unites the two realms by inspiring preventative action. Although the printed images alone offer little information of value, in conjunction with the described images they highlight the causal relationship between patriarchal ceremony and domestic destruction. The only path to avoiding future war violence, Woolf suggests, is the subversion of such dichotomies and the melding of public and private. Just as *Three Guineas* relies on the relationship

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between image and text, society must balance both feminine and masculine modes of thinking in order to function effectively—and peacefully.

**Orlando, Portraiture, and the Performance of Identity**

*Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf’s 1928 tribute to lover Vita Sackville-West, initially reads as a lighthearted, fantastical tale, particularly compared with *Three Guineas*’ political overtones. Its hero, an androgynous, seemingly ageless figure who minglest with historical figures ranging from Elizabeth I to Alexander Pope, serves as a fictionalized version of Sackville-West, and her escapades are recounted in the immersive fashion common to biographies. Like *Three Guineas*, however, *Orlando*’s aim is to not only entertain, but to challenge existing norms. The novel’s time- and gender-defying journey raises two central concerns: the nature of identity and the limitations of biography. Although the novel’s narrator purports to address both issues by providing “indelible footprints of truth,” her declarations reveal an underlying tension between absolute objectivity and multiplicitous manipulation (47).

Woolf’s disdain for biography stems from her aforementioned rejection of absolute knowledge, as well as a personal connection to the genre. Between 1885 and 1891, her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, served as editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*. As its title suggests, the dictionary provides brief profiles of notable figures from British history; even Stephen, who authored many of the volume’s character sketches, personally believed “that a biographer rarely penetrates far below the

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This sentiment is particularly fitting in relation to Victorian biography, which maintains ‘authoritative’ status while dismissing unsavory anecdotes and presenting a sanitized version of a subject’s life. *Orlando* is one of the best-known examples of Bloomsbury responses to traditional biography, but Lytton Strachey’s *Eminent Victorians* is a noteworthy predecessor. In this 1918 work, Strachey adopts an irreverent approach to his subjects, revealing intimate details of their lives without hesitation. As *The Bookman* periodical warned in its review of *Eminent Victorians*, readers might be surprised to learn that General Charles Gordon enjoyed brandy on the sly, while Florence Nightingale was disagreeable and domineering in her private life. Still, the reviewer concludes, “This method of dealing frankly with the foibles of a character certainly produces a feeling of reality which the conventional biographies often fail to create.”

Although Woolf and Strachey both reject traditional biography, the former emphasizes the genre’s shortcomings, while the latter offers an alternative vision of shockingly immersive personal histories.

In *Orlando*, statements such as “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” (47) and the inclusion of minute details, including unnecessarily specific dates—a reference to “the seventh day of his trance (Monday, May the 10th)” (94) parallels the opening of Woolf’s 1924 essay, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown,” which alludes to the origins of modernism by stating that “on or about December, 1910, human character changed”—appear to build narratorial authority yet add little to the reader’s understanding of the biography’s subject. Orlando,

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who is defined by her abrupt gender transition and seeming immortality, remains an enigma because the narrator does not know the reason these supernatural happenings occur. She acknowledges her lack of information, citing the need for speculation and even imagination to complete Orlando’s story, but concludes that “it is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since” (98). The inherent contradiction of claiming to provide facts yet admitting to partial understanding speaks to Orlando’s overarching argument: biography, which aims to depict and therefore concretize identity, must always remain incomplete, for identity, particularly sexual or gender identity, is a multifaceted, constantly evolving undertaking. An individual may retain an explicit or ineffable ‘essential’ trait—for example, Orlando’s famed calves—but capturing the entirety of one’s identity remains an elusive endeavor.

Following her unexplained transition from male to female, Orlando experiences life in an entirely new way. She muses, “I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw my sword and run him through the body. … All I can do, once I set foot on English soil, is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it” (113). Whereas the male Orlando took the opportunities afforded by his sex for granted, the female Orlando must confront the limitations imposed on women in relation to the freedom she once enjoyed. After living as both a man and a woman, however, Orlando gains perspective on the culturally-prescribed gender roles dominating society and manipulates them to her advantage with the aid of a simple tool—clothing:

When Captain Bartolus saw Orlando’s skirt, he had an awning stretched for her immediately, pressed her to take another slice of beef, and invited her to go ashore with him in the longboat. These compliments would certainly not have been paid her had her skirts, instead of flowing, been cut tight to her legs in the fashion of
breeches. And when we are paid compliments, it behoves us to make some return. Orlando curtseyed; she complied; she flattered the good man’s humours as she would not have done had his neat breeches been a woman’s skirts, and his braided coat a woman’s satin bodice. Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking. (132)

At the time of Orlando’s encounter with Captain Bartolus, she is indisputably (or so the narrator claims) a woman and therefore dressed accordingly in flowing skirts. Similarly, the captain is attired in “neat breeches” and a “braided coat.” Both Orlando and Bartolus feel a need to signal their gender to the outside world, as societal gender roles often dictate interactions. Each individual ‘performs’ for the other by donning the clothing associated with their respective gender, as well as engaging in typically male or female behaviors such as curtseying. Whereas Bartolus’ show of masculinity is likely an unconscious, learned practice, Orlando’s actions represent a conscious effort to reinforce the femininity suggested by her clothing. Although the narrator proclaims “there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them,” Orlando manages to simultaneously subvert and support this proposal. As an individual who has been both male and female, she is aware of the rigid structures that govern the sexes and uses this knowledge to control the events surrounding her. Orlando’s clothing necessarily guides her behavior, but she realizes the performance of femininity is an illusion that can be broken at any moment. Bartolus may believe he has engineered the encounter with Orlando, but in actuality, he is merely a man upon whom Orlando can test her newfound womanhood.

In the second half of the aforementioned passage, the narrator examines portraits of both the male and female Orlando and determines that her subject’s appearance has undergone noticeable changes:
So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found if the reader will look at page 111, even in her face. If we compare the picture of Orlando as a man with that of Orlando as a woman we shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the same person, there are certain changes. The man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders. The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same. (132)

Whereas one figure wields a sword and gazes directly out of the painting, the other clutches her satin robes and looks to the side in a show of modesty. Despite these differences, however, an essential aspect of Orlando’s identity is discernible in both images. The narrator declines to identify this intangible element—an unsurprising choice given previous comments on humans’ inability to judge character—but remains convinced that at her core, Orlando is the same individual she has always been. In further support of this belief, the narrator mentions that those who knew Orlando as a man accept her gender transition without question:

No one showed an instant’s suspicion that Orlando was not the Orlando they had known. If any doubt there was in the human mind the action of the deer and the dogs would have been enough to dispel it, for the dumb creatures, as is well known, are far better judges both of identity and character than we are. (120-21)

Ultimately, the narrator argues that discrepancies between the male and female figures derive from their gendered clothing; “had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same.” In conjunction with the first half of the passage, which describes how the pair’s attire shapes their interaction, the narrator’s analysis reinforces Woolf’s suggestion that defining identity is a tenuous, ongoing process influenced by cultural constructions of gender and the social mores of a given time period.
Much of *Orlando*’s subversive power derives from its inclusion of eight painted or photographed portraits. According to Helen Wussow, these images enable the text to mimic the format of traditional biographies, which use artistic representation to strengthen their claim of representing an individual through unassailable documentary evidence. Woolf, however, rejects such conventional meanings, preferring to manipulate media in service of her modernist agenda. Talia Schaffer writes, “[The images] form a strange narrative themselves, constituting a countertext that contradicts, refines, supports, and satirizes the written text’s assertions. If a narrative is intended to show the consistent development of a character through time, then the photographs are antinarratives: inconsistent, contradictory, stuck in a particular moment of time.”

Notably, *Orlando*’s four painted images depict male figures, or individuals who identify as male at some point in the novel, while the four photographs depict females. Orlando, the subject of two paintings and three photographs, is featured most prominently. Sasha, the Archduchess Harriet/Archduke Harry, and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine are each featured once. In comparison with *Three Guineas*’ candid snapshots, *Orlando*’s portraits are posed, formal images. Their seemingly constructed nature, however, has the same destabilizing effect as *Three Guineas*’ photographs. Whereas the latter’s depiction of ritualistic male ceremony undermines the patriarchy’s purported power, the former’s artistic likenesses question the veracity of portraiture and, subsequently, the performativity of identity.

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A photograph of Orlando’s lover Sasha exemplifies the novel’s text/image disconnect (fig. 9). In her initial description of Sasha, the narrator writes, “Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea” (20). Comparatively, the portrait appears more feminine than androgynous, and many of the qualities emphasized in the text are absent or masked. These disparities can be attributed largely to the age and character of Woolf’s chosen model, Angelica Bell. The
nine-year-old daughter of Vanessa Bell and lover Duncan Grant, Angelica is a prominent figure in both her mother’s and aunt’s family photo albums. Here, she performs the role of Sasha by donning a costume and consciously exuding an aura of mystery. Still, the obvious dissonance between Angelica’s childlike visual appearance and Sasha’s sexually alluring textual description has a jarring effect. The narrator attempts to mete audience discomfort by labeling the portrait as a snapshot from the princess’ childhood, but the problematically sexualized image of a young girl persists.

In a May 1928 letter to Bell, Woolf describes the snapshots of Angelica as “most lovely” but “a trifle young”: “I’m showing them to Vita, who doesn’t want to be accused of raping the under age. My God – I shall rape Angelica one of these days.” According to Schaffer, Angelica sparked Woolf and Sackville-West’s desire because she personified the fictional character of Sasha, as well as two of Sackville-West’s actual lovers, Violet Trefusis (Sasha’s real-world inspiration) and Valerie Taylor (who Woolf initially wanted to pose for the portrait). Schaffer concludes, “This image is remarkably complex: a ‘disguised’ Valerie Taylor is replaced by Angelica Bell, who masquerades as Sasha, who is really a disguise for Violet Trefusis.” Woolf and Sackville-West’s reactions to the image also reinforce the sensuality of portraiture—just as Berger argues that artists and viewers of Renaissance paintings turn nude female subjects into a surveyed spectacle, the pair observes Angelica, in the form of Sasha/Violet, with voyeuristic longing. The fact that Sasha is photographed rather than painted only furthers the sense of possessiveness surrounding her image; Sontag writes that “the [very] act of taking pictures is a

77 Schaffer, “Posing Orlando,” 32-33.
semblance of appropriation, a semblance of rape.” Barthes, too, emphasizes the complex power negotiations that take place between a photographer, subject, and viewer, likening the camera’s subjects to “anesthetized, fastened down … butterflies.”

In the end, perceptions of Sasha’s portrait necessarily vary based on readers’ familiarity with Woolf’s personal life. To Bell and close relatives, Angelica’s presence suggests a private joke, perhaps referencing her well-known affinity for dressing up in elaborate costumes or echoing her mother’s great-aunt, photographer Julia Margaret Cameron, who often asked family and friends to don costumes and pose as characters from the Bible, English poetry, and Greek mythology. To Woolf and Sackville-West, the image acquires an added dimension of longing aimed not so much at the young Angelica as the numerous figures she represents. Finally, to the average reader, the portrait presents a provocative question: should one attribute the discrepancies between Sasha’s written description and visual appearance simply to her implied change in age, or should these disjunctures be interrogated as intentional references to such issues as performativity, identity, and costuming?

Portraits of Orlando’s eponymous hero yield similarly disconcerting divergences, as the printed images directly contradict both written descriptions and fellow visualizations. In paintings and photographs, Orlando is alternatively depicted as a mustachioed male ambassador, a demure middle-class woman, and a nobly-dressed Renaissance man. She assumes these same roles within the text, but once again, attributes described in writing are absent from comparable images. The portrait of Orlando as an

79 Barthes, Camera Lucida, 58.
80 Natasha Aleksiuk, “‘A Thousand Angles’: Photographic Irony in the Work of Julia Margaret Cameron and Virginia Woolf,” Mosaic 33, no. 2 (June 2000): 130.
ambassador, for example, shows an average upper-class male of considerable means but leaves defining qualities such as his striking calves unseen (fig. 10). Much of the justification for this omission stems from the actual painting’s history. Both portraits of the male Orlando were drawn from the collection of Sackville-West’s family estate, Knole, and depict figures from previous Sackville generations. Consequently, *Orlando as Ambassador* may offer an exact likeness of its historical subject, Earl Richard Sackville, but has little in common with the character described in Woolf’s text. Compared to *Orlando*’s other portraits, the ambassador painting, like the printed snapshots in *Three Guineas*, is representative of a general ‘type’ rather than specific likeness. As Shearer West explains, painted portraits aim to capture a subject’s physical appearance, “inner life,” and social position but often emphasize one aspect over the others.81 Here, the priority is clearly a show of the sitter’s status, as evinced by his sumptuous red drapery and various fineries. John Berger notes that similarly lavish portraits are common amongst Renaissance oil paintings, which have a “special ability to render the tangibility, the texture, the lustre, the solidity of what [they] depict.”82 Rather than directly reproducing a sitter’s likeness (a choice that could have serious consequences if said subject disagrees with the artist’s characterization of him), such paintings serve as ‘advertisements’ of one’s wealth. The *Orlando* portrait may directly replicate Sackville’s appearance, but in the context of the novel, such concerns are secondary to the image’s referential characterization—reminiscent of Barthes’ *studium*, which grounds a photograph in a specific cultural context—of Orlando as a ‘typically’ wealthy, aristocratic ambassador.

Conversely, photographs of Orlando post-gender transition are more concerned with capturing likeness and essential character. Sackville-West poses for all three portraits, providing a sense of continuity unseen in the painted renditions, but similarly fails to adhere to written descriptions. Toward the beginning of chapter five, Orlando notes, “To-morrow she would have to buy twenty yards or more of black bombazine, she supposed, to make a skirt. And then (here she blushed), she would have to buy a crinoline, and then (here she blushed) a bassinette” (162). According to Kate Faber Oestreich, Orlando’s embrace of the crinoline, a petticoat used mainly to hide one's
pregnancy, represents her acquiescence to Victorian repression. A portrait entitled *Orlando about the Year 1840*, however, provides a contrasting narrative (fig. 11). Although its title suggests the photograph dates from a time when crinolines were in fashion, Sackville-West dons modernist era clothing, including a loose, free-flowing plaid skirt and floppy hat, and dismisses the restrictive guidelines of Victorian dress. The effect of this anachronistic costuming, Oestreich concludes, is to “make visual Woolf’s modernist parody of biography, revealing how photographs and text are all plays on fact-making.”

Oestreich’s argument readily applies to the entirety of *Orlando*. The text is scattered with hints of the narrator’s unreliability, and the images multiply reader mistrust of this so-called biography. Although the three photographs of Orlando feature the same model, their vague captioning—featuring language such as “about the year 1840” and “at the present time”—and inclusion of anachronistic or contradictory details undermine their status as biographical evidence. Additionally, the fact that Woolf’s chosen model is Sackville-West, the real-world inspiration for Orlando, complicates the photographs’ meaning beyond text-image discrepancy. Wussow writes that readers are asked to accept the photographs of Sackville-West as incontrovertible evidence of Orlando’s existence, even if they recognize her true identity; the difficulty in reading an image so defined by one’s external knowledge, as represented by individualized *punctum* elements, “is similar to the problems presented by Orlando’s androgyny and agelessness.” Few of *Orlando’s*

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84 Oestreich, “1840,” 2.
contemporary critics, however, realized the significance of Woolf’s choice of model, or the overarching purpose of the novel’s images. *The Bystander*’s Ralph Straus wrote that *Orlando* featured a mixture of “excellent” prints and “some very dull photographs which are about as ‘wrong’ as they can be,”\(^8\) while *The Evening Standard*’s Arnold Bennett noted Sackville-West’s presence but merely stated, “The portraits of Miss Sackville-West are labelled ‘Orlando.’ This is the oddest of all the book’s oddities.”\(^7\)

![Vanessa Bell](image_url)

Figure 11. Vanessa Bell, *Orlando about the Year 1840, Orlando* (1928), 171.

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In discounting *Orlando*’s images, reviewers failed to grasp Woolf’s overarching argument. By encoding multiple sets of meaning in the portraits of Sasha/Angelica and Orlando/Sackville-West, she presents a layered conception of identity built on the accretion of knowledge via the juxtaposition of related information. Readers may recognize that photographs of the female Orlando feature a single individual who remains physically unchanged across the centuries, but they must counter this apparently fixed identity with contrasting depictions offered by the painted portraits and textual descriptions. In Barthesian terms, *Orlando* asks its audience to interrogate the notion of the image as a direct reflection of reality. The novel’s portraits are presented as proof of a thing “that-has-been” but no longer is, and the reader is tasked with recognizing Orlando in fragments, differentially rather than essentially.⁸⁸ Although this fragmentation seems to suggest that Orlando is a formless, constantly changing entity, Woolf reiterates that an intangible aspect of Orlando remains constant across changes in time and gender. Identity, much like photography, is susceptible to manipulation, but this malleability does not preclude the existence of an individual’s core interiority.

By affording identity a certain level of fluidity, Woolf dispels the need to fully account for Orlando’s change in sex. Although the narrator writes that “Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since,” her account of Orlando’s life in London portrays gender in a less definitive fashion (98):

But to give an exact and particular account of Orlando’s life at this time becomes more and more out of the question. As we peer and grope in the ill-lit, ill-paved, ill-ventilated courtyards that lay about Gerrard Street and Drury Lane at that time, we seem now to catch sight of her and then again to lose it. The task is made still more difficult by the fact that she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another. Thus she often occurs in contemporary memoirs as ‘Lord’ So-and-so, who was in fact her cousin; her

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bounty is ascribed to him, and it is he who is said to have written the poems that were really hers. She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (152-53; emphasis added)

The seeming impossibility of an individual who is definitively female yet capable of regularly changing sex appears to further undermine the narrator’s authority, but in actuality, the contradiction reinforces Woolf’s argument regarding objective truth. As shown during Orlando’s encounter with Bartolus, Woolf views gender as a performative, consciously constructed phenomenon. Once Orlando experiences the world as both a man and a woman, she is capable of performing either gender and does so frequently in an effort to enjoy the pleasures “of both sexes equally.” By donning traditionally male or female attire and adjusting her behavior accordingly, Orlando is able to project the gender identity she deems appropriate for a given situation; thus, when the narrator claims that Orlando changes sex frequently yet retains her status as a woman, she does not make a wholly contradictory statement.

The key to interpreting Woolf’s intentions lies in the difference between sex and gender, which contemporary culture views as separate but connected elements. Whereas sex is a biologically determined label based on the presence of certain bodily markers, gender is a projection of identity constructed by adhering to (or rejecting) societal expectations of men versus women. Although Woolf uses the terms interchangeably, the nuances of her narrative suggest an adherence to modern understandings of sex and gender. When the narrator notes that Orlando became a woman and has remained thus ever since, she is referring to Orlando’s sex, which is determined by physical
characteristics; when she writes that Orlando’s “sex changed far more frequently” than most individuals, she is actually referring to Orlando’s gender. Ultimately, Orlando undergoes only one sex change—the momentous event that occurs about halfway through the novel—but engineers numerous changes in gender.

Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble* was published more than 60 years after *Orlando*, but its arguments regarding performativity and social disorder parallel the evolution of Woolf’s enigmatic protagonist. Butler posits that gender, defined as the cultural status assumed by the sexed body, is too often placed in a mimetic relationship with sex. The expectation that one’s sex determines gender leads to the naturalization of a binary system, when in actuality, gender should be “theorized as radically independent of sex, … a free-floating artifice.”

Like personal identity, which seeks to identify an internal feature that establishes continuity, gender identity is governed by social mores and norms of intelligibility that work to prevent the emergence of “incoherent” or “discontinuous” beings, such as masculine-sexed individuals who project a feminine gender. Societies maintain control through their enforcement of ideas, including a binary conception of gender, and thus create boundaries that cannot be crossed without risking marginalization—for example, the line between one’s inner and outer self, which exists to uphold the coherence of individual identity. In Butler’s view, a binary system that acknowledges the existence of an “internal fixity of self” necessitates a corollary exterior display, or an inscription of interiority on the physical body. Returning to the question of gender, she further notes:

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91 Butler, 183.
It is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of a corporeal signification. … Acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are performative in the sense that the essence or identity they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means.\(^92\)

Butler’s explanation of gender performativity, or the idea that gender is continuously constructed through a series of repeated actions and behaviors, is often misconstrued as an outright dismissal of interiority. If gender is manufactured, some argue, the mere “expectation [of it] … ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates,” or in other words, there is no internal psyche dictating gender, only an external impression or effect constituted through performances born out of an ingrained belief in gender’s primacy.\(^93\) In the preface to her 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, however, Butler refutes the notion that gender is a wholly voluntary self-invention, writing, “I would deny that all of the internal world of the psyche is but an effect of a stylized set of acts. … Certain features of the world, including people we know and lose, do become ‘internal’ features of the self, but they are transformed through that interiorization.”\(^94\) While Butler wholeheartedly believes in the constructed, performatively nature of gender, she does not equate such machinations with “illusoriness or artificiality, where those terms are understood to reside within a binary that counterposes ‘real’ and the ‘authentic’ as oppositional.”\(^95\) Instead, Butler offers an argument reminiscent of

\(^92\) Butler, 185.
\(^94\) Butler, preface, xvi.
\(^95\) Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 45.
*Orlando*’s underlying message: both gender and personal identity are susceptible to manipulation, but this does not mean they are entirely fictive.

“In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above” (132-33). This statement from *Orlando*’s narrator anticipates Butler’s theory of gender performativity. As discussed previously, Orlando undergoes one explicit change in sex but numerous changes in gender. To accomplish this, she dons gendered clothing, adopts masculine or feminine behaviors, and, significantly, receives recognition from others. Rather than simply dressing in drag, a practice Butler describes as a parodic imitation of gender (albeit one that reveals “the imitative structure of gender itself”), Orlando creates and projects multiple gender identities, “for she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (213). These identities, while constructed, are not the random product of cultural expectations. Instead, they serve as evidence of the multifaceted nature of identity, as well as the inherent instability of gender. In the context of transgender studies, a field that addresses many of the issues raised by Woolf, Orlando’s “body as that which can be seen, … as visual surface,” becomes a site of contention. Orlando performs varying genders by inscribing their markers on her body, but she does not do so simply on a whim. The multiplicitous selves that *Orlando*’s narrator describes must balance external manifestations with an inner awareness of gender, and, much like transgender individuals, demand “some

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recognition of the category of corporeal interiority (internal bodily sensations) and of its distinctiveness from that which can be seen (external surface).” As Christy Burns notes, the overarching question raised by these machinations relates to the issue of identity: does Orlando retain an essential inner character as her exterior changes, or does she become a wholly different individual based on the confines of a given time period? The answer, Burns concludes, is necessarily ambiguous: “the one truly persistent aspect that remains with Orlando throughout her life may seem more arbitrary than essential; only her name, ‘Orlando,’ truly remains the same.” Just as Butler rejects the notion of a gender binary, however, Woolf refuses to situate identity in a binary construction. Orlando’s name may be evidence of a stable core identity, but at the same time, her embrace of the crinoline and similarly repressive Victorian attire suggests adherence to given cultural norms. Such contradictions are emblematic of Orlando’s (and all individuals’) innate complexity, which Woolf exploits to extreme levels in an effort to obviate the reductive effects of dualistic models ranging from masculinity versus femininity to objectivity versus subjectivity and essentialism versus constructionism.

Conclusion

In Orlando, Woolf uses portraiture and biography to frame characters as unknowable, purposefully manufactured amalgamations of written description and visual representation. Both mediums claim to offer definitive representations but are highly

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98 Prosser, Second Skins, 43.
susceptible to authorial manipulation: painted portraits often emphasize the essence or idea of an individual over mimesis, while photographed portraits may provide false evidence, such as the anachronistic clothing featured in *Orlando about the Year 1840*. Written biographies, however exhaustively researched, are inherently partial, and many authors or narrators prove unreliable. Although portraiture and biography traditionally aim to fix identity, in Woolf’s subversive tome they merely highlight the fictive nature of all-encompassing representations. Utilizing both images and text, Orlando controls others’ perceptions of her by crafting performances that simultaneously parody the constructedness of gender and enable the expression of numerous contrasting selves. Woolf, in turn, further co-opts the notion of a singular personal identity by conflating fictional characters with real-world counterparts. Photographs of Orlando/Sackville-West and Sasha/Angelica Bell suggest that any understanding of another human being must account for a myriad of evolving selves, as readers must balance their external knowledge of these individuals with the purported facts laid out by an ‘objective’ camera. Ultimately, Woolf argues that identity is not absolute, but by layering and juxtaposing seemingly contradictory information—for example, a snapshot of a woman masquerading as an ageless, androgynous fictional character inspired by her own life—one can begin to draw multivalent meaning out of seemingly unending flux.

*Three Guineas* similarly requires viewers to reconcile tensions between given and absent information. Reproduced photographs of patriarchal figureheads highlight the superficial and ritualistic aspects of male institutions, which assert their dominance through grotesquely elaborate ceremonies, yet prove significant largely for what they omit: women, or representatives of the private sphere. Unlike *Orlando*’s portraits, which
generate composite meaning through their assemblage of contradictory details, *Three Guineas*’ five snapshots largely reiterate the same critique of patriarchal excess. Isolated from the text, such images uphold a hierarchy of meaning that prioritizes masculinity over femininity. Within the framework provided by *Three Guineas*’ narrator, however, they become typological spectacles observed and derided by the very group they exclude, while a set of ‘absent’ images offers the more authentic narrative. These described photographs of wartime devastation derive significance from external factors, or what a mainly female audience personally brings to the scene. By imagining rather than explicitly seeing others’ suffering, viewers conjure a dynamic conception of wartime devastation that evolves with each instance of remembrance. Compared to the frozen images of patriarchal pomp and circumstance, *Three Guineas*’ absent photographs exist in a state of flux. Once again, Woolf dismisses the banal notion of photography as exact representation in favor of a more disruptive interpretation. Just as *Orlando* is best understood by layering information provided in images and text, *Three Guineas* asks readers to continually reflect on two related yet antithetical sets of photographs.

Virginia Woolf’s engagement with photography initially appears to contradict her dedication to life’s innate unknowability. Conventionally, the camera operates on an objective surface level, verifying events that occur in the plainly visible world. Photography offers unparalleled authority, particularly in relation to writing, painting, and other perception-based mediums, and thus seems out of place in modernist works consumed by the variance of experience. As Roland Barthes points out, however, “Photography never lies: or rather, it can lie as to the meaning of the thing, being by
nature tendentious, never as to its existence.”

In its traditional role as a record of that which has been, photography enabled Woolf to concretize absent figures such as Julia Stephen and Lytton Strachey, anchoring their impact on her life in an undeniable fashion. The act of assembling snapshots in personal photo albums also allowed her to map out meaning in a multitude of ways, as evidenced by the preparatory *Three Guineas* scrapbooks.

Woolf’s writing adopted a more radical attitude toward photography, preferring to undermine its claim of objectivity by hinting that the camera, like the writer’s pen or painter’s brush, is vulnerable to external shaping. In *Orlando*, Woolf presents a visual counter-narrative that disrupts an already unstable text while simultaneously calling attention to the masquerade that is evident in posed photographs. In *Three Guineas*, printed images reinforce the text’s argument but provide limited insights of their own accord, while absent yet described images offer dynamic depth. Although each work juxtaposes image and text in contrasting ways, both share an overarching interest in exposing the fictive nature of mechanical reproduction. The photograph, Woolf concludes, may not be able to lie regarding what has once existed, but by exploiting the presumed coherence of ‘real’ existence, one can manipulate an image with ease.

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100 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 87.
Bibliography


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