

# Challenging the "Deceived" Notions of Gender and History in Virginia Woolf's "Orlando" and Ali Smith's "How to Be Both"

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## DIPLOMSKI RAD

Challenging the “Deceived” Notions of Gender and History  
in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and Ali Smith’s *How to Be Both*

(Smjer: književno-kulturološki, engleska književnost i kultura)

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## 1. Introduction

*I was a she was a he was a we were a girl and a girl and a boy and a boy...*

– Ali Smith, *Girl Meets Boy*

*The fact is, history is actually all sorts of things nobody knows about.*

– Ali Smith, *There but for the*

This paper concerns itself with two distinct, but interrelated issues: gender and historical narrative representation. The discussion that follows is centered around Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014). Despite the nearly century-long gap that separates them, it can be argued that the novels' respective approaches to gender and history warrant a comparative reading. More precisely, both novels can be said to view gender and historical narratives as socially constructed by and within "centralized, totalized, hierarchized, closed systems" (Hutcheon 41). Asking the question, "What if received notions of history [and gender] were deceptive? Deceived notions" (A. Smith 172), the novels proceed to undermine normative, binary configurations of gender, sex, and sexuality, as well as the objectivity and truthfulness of narrative representations of the past. In order to discuss these issues, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction will be used as a theoretical backdrop. Bearing in mind the time of writing, Woolf's novel can be seen as anticipatory of, or at least tentatively compatible with, a number of aspects of Butler's poststructuralist feminist approach to gender and Hutcheon's postmodernist problematizing of history. On the other hand, Smith can be said to approach them with a dose of contemporary hindsight.

*Orlando* follows the life of its eponymous protagonist for over 300 years, from the Elizabethan era to 1928, and through changes in both character and body: "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" (Woolf 88). It is Orlando's self-declared biographer that provides the reader with an account of Orlando's life and character, but also with a running commentary on the construction of biographical, historical, and fictional narratives, as well as the nature of

gender<sup>1</sup> and identity. Woolf's heavy use of parody and self-reflexive narratorial commentary, together with the novel's focus on issues of history and the representation of truth in narratives, suggests that it is possible to read *Orlando* as a precursor to what Linda Hutcheon would later term historiographic metafiction. What is more, Woolf's challenging of binary gender and compulsory heterosexuality is in many ways anticipatory of social constructionist perspectives on gender and can, therefore, be discussed in the light of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity.

In what is difficult not to see as an intertextual nod to *Orlando*, Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* delivers a story about an ambiguously gendered Renaissance artist pushing the limits of time, reality, and narrative convention. The novel is divided into two parts, which are preceded by line drawings of a security camera and a pair of eyes. In "Camera," George – a 16-year-old girl living in current-day Cambridge – deals with the aftermath of her mother's sudden death and remembers the trip they took to Ferrara's Palazzo Schifanoia to see some frescoes painted by a little-known Italian artist. On the other hand, "Eyes" sees Francescho – a fictionalized version of the 15<sup>th</sup>-century Italian painter Francesco del Cossa responsible for the said frescoes – reappear in the 21<sup>st</sup> century as a ghost, follow George wherever she goes, and recall their<sup>2</sup> own life. The two parts can be read interchangeably – both are entitled "one" and the printed book can be found in two versions which differ only in the order of the sections.<sup>3</sup> In other words, readers can be faced with one of two possible formats of the novel: "Camera" followed by "Eyes" or "Eyes" followed by "Camera." The order of reading inevitably influences the perceived causality of the events taking place and, thus, the reader's interpretation of the text as a whole. Challenging the fixity and exclusivity of binary either/or structures – either man or woman, male or female, fictional or factual, past or present, beginning or end – Smith's novel functions as a kind of study on "bothness" and simultaneity.

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<sup>1</sup> In *Orlando*, Woolf does not distinguish between *sex* (the male/female distinction based on physiology) and *gender* (the man/woman distinction based on culture), but uses the term *sex* in a way that encompasses both of those meanings. In this paper, the terms *gender* and *sex* are used in accordance with Butler's definitions and applied to Woolf's novel as deemed appropriate with respect to the given context.

<sup>2</sup> This paper uses the pronouns *they/their* to refer to Francescho, Smith's character, as their gender identity remains unspoken and ambiguous throughout the narrative, while Francesco del Cossa, the artist and historical person, is referred to as *he/him*. Given that Orlando is referred to as *he/him* in the first half of Woolf's novel and *she/her* in the second, to avoid unnecessary confusion, Orlando is referred to as *s/he*.

<sup>3</sup> The page numbers provided in this paper in reference to *How to Be Both* have been taken from a copy of the novel which starts with "Camera."

The following discussion is divided into two parts. The first chapter elaborates on Butler's understanding of gender as performatively constructed and then proceeds to illustrate how a similar approach to and challenging of gender can be recognized in Woolf's and Smith's novels. Further, the opening section of the second chapter briefly introduces the theoretical premises that Hutcheon's historiographic metafiction is based on, while the rest of the chapter explores the strategies used in each of the two novels to question the objectivity and truth-value of narrative representations of the past.

## 2. Gender

Judith Butler's conceptualization of gender is grounded in social constructionism. As Judith Lorber explains, from a social constructionist perspective, "gendering is the process and the gendered social order the product of [the] social construction" of two "contrasting and complementary social categories, [...] 'men' and 'women'" that people are invariably divided into (82). Butler views the concept of identity as something that cannot be separated from the concept of gender because the existence of a subject whose personal identity is not gendered in accordance with existing social norms is an impossibility: "'persons' only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility" (*Gender Trouble* 22). However, she also subverts the idea of a unified, coherent personal identity – gender or otherwise – that functions as an intrinsic core of the subject. Gender attributes and acts of an individual, i.e. "the various ways in which a body shows or produces its cultural signification," are, Butler claims, not an outward expression of a stable and pre-existing internal (gender) identity; they are performative and thus "effectively constitute the identity they are said to express or reveal" (*Gender Trouble* 192). Gender is, then, a "performance which is performative" and it "cannot be understood as a *role* which either expresses or disguises an interior 'self,' whether that 'self' is conceived as sexed or not [...]" gender is an 'act,' broadly construed, which constructs the social fiction of its own psychological interiority" (Butler, "Performative Acts" 528).

A person, Butler claims, cannot *be* a certain gender, because gender in itself is not a "stable identity or locus of agency" (*Gender Trouble* 191), but comes into being as it is being done. It is the very doing or performing of acts which are culturally and historically predetermined as representative of one gender or the other that creates and sustains the illusion of an underlying gender identity, while simultaneously posing as an expression of that

(ultimately illusory) identity. In other words, gender acts function as “both that which constitutes meaning and that through which meaning is performed or enacted” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 521).

Moreover, Butler subsumes the category of sex under the superordinate term of gender. Linda Nicholson elaborates on this tendency to view sex as an inherently gendered, socially constructed category:

*[G]ender* has increasingly become used to refer to any social construction having to do with the male/female distinction, including those constructions that separate “female” bodies from “male” bodies. This latter usage [assumes] that society not only shapes personality and behavior, it also shapes the ways in which the body appears. But if the body is itself always seen through social interpretation, then sex is not something that is separate from gender but is, rather, that which is subsumable under it. (79)

Translating the above arguments into Butler’s terminology, the fabrication of an “inner truth of gender” is said to be “instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies” (*Gender Trouble* 186). Following on from this claim, Butler proposes that the “construct called ‘sex’ is as culturally constructed as gender; indeed, perhaps it was always already gender, with the consequence that the distinction between sex and gender turns out to be no distinction at all” (*Gender Trouble* 9-10). In other words, Butler argues that the binary category of sex is not natural, but naturalized through “a sedimentation of gender norms [...] that over time has produced a set of corporeal styles which [...] appear as the natural configuration of bodies into sexes existing in a binary relation to one another” (*Gender Trouble* 191).

To paraphrase Nicholson, this understanding of the category of sex does not deny the existence of physical differences between what we see as male and female bodies, but it does postulate that those differences only gain meaning once they are gendered (79). In terms of its social construction, the category of sex is, then, indistinguishable from the category of gender. That is, “gender is not to culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which ‘sexed nature’ or ‘a natural sex’ is produced and established as ‘prediscursive,’ prior to culture, a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 10).

What Butler terms the “heterosexual matrix” stands for the “grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, genders, and desires are naturalized” in a way that “assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally

and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality” (*Gender Trouble* 208). In other words, the binary categories of gender, sex, and sexuality are constructed within the dominant culture in such a way that they appear natural, so as to keep intact the existing power relations and hierarchies which depend on those binaries.

As intelligible gender structures are determined by a set of culturally and historically established norms and are, thus, subject to change over time and across cultures, there is no fundamentally true or right way to perform gender; there is “neither an ‘essence’ that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 190). In this sense, there is also room for a degree of individual interpretation when it comes to gender performance. That is not to say that one can entirely escape or avoid the restrictions of the dominant culture and its proscribed categories of heterosexual desire and binary gender and sex. Despite the fact that “there are nuanced and individual ways of *doing* one’s gender [...] *that* one does it, and that one does it *in accord with* certain sanctions and proscriptions, is clearly not a fully individual matter” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 525). Yet, Butler suggests that “to operate within the matrix of power is not the same as to replicate uncritically relations of domination,” which means that individual agency can be located “within the possibility of a variation on that repetition” (*Gender Trouble* 42, 198).

In this sense, Butler proposes that a parodic kind of repetition or re-enactment of intelligible gender acts can serve “*to displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself” through a “radical proliferation of gender” (*Gender Trouble* 203). Drag and cross-dressing are proposed as possible ways of performing gender in a way that subversively blurs the lines between “anatomical sex, gender identity, and gender performance” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 187). Butler explains that this kind of “parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities” by revealing that “the original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin” (*Gender Trouble* 188). While this kind of subversive gender performance still remains a part of the hegemonic culture, it enables a kind of “performative fluidity” (Butler, “Performative Acts” 528) by allowing for the inclusion and representation of various, shifting, unstable gender identities.



## 2.1. Performing Gender

How the issue of gender is introduced into the narratives of *Orlando* and *How to Be Both* can be seen as indicative of the novels' overall treatment of that subject matter. The ambiguity of Orlando's gender and sex is established in the very first sentence of the novel, which, paradoxically, makes a point of emphasizing precisely the unambiguity of those categories: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (Woolf 3). The abrupt narratorial interjection which comes after only a single word, purportedly in order to reassure the reader of the certainty and stability of the as-of-yet-unnamed protagonist's maleness, immediately makes the reader question precisely that which it is trying to reaffirm. As Beth Boehm puts it, although the biographer's "parenthetical intrusion assures us of the correctness of the pronoun he has chosen to designate his subject's sex, that the issue has been raised at all unsettles us, making us question that which we normally process without notice" (200).

While *Orlando*'s opening sentence unmistakably draws the reader's attention to gender, Smith achieves a similar kind of defamiliarizing effect by using a different strategy. George's part of the narrative opens with the following sentence: "Consider this moral conundrum for a moment, George's mother says to George who's sitting in the front passenger seat" (A. Smith 3). When George is referred to as a *she* a few lines later – George being short for Georgia – the seeming discrepancy between the (masculine) name and (feminine) pronoun will likely provoke a response in the reader. In Francescho's part of the novel, this kind of ambiguity – or even misdirection – surrounding characters' gender identities is sustained considerably longer. The use of a 1<sup>st</sup>-person autodiegetic narrator enables Smith to completely avoid the use of either pronouns or names that would directly signal the narrator's gender.<sup>4</sup> That Francescho seems to be biologically female, but purposefully performs masculinity is revealed only about 30 pages into the narrative, at which point the reader will already have formed a particular image of the character and their identity – most likely that a 15<sup>th</sup>-century painter who wears breeches, makes maids blush, and negotiates their own business must be a heterosexual man.

In other words, as opposed to Woolf, who immediately and parodically overdetermines the motif of gender, Smith initially strategically underdetermines it, thus sustaining a state of

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<sup>4</sup> That is, if the reader starts with "Eyes." This strategy loses some of its impact if the reader has already read George's narrative and can infer the identity and assumed gender of the 1<sup>st</sup>-person narrator.

uncertainty about the identities of her characters. Yet, until it is resolved (and if it is resolved at all), this uncertainty will not always be recognized as such by the reader, who will most likely still tend to gender characters based on socially determined preconceptions which can be read from or into any given text. The twists surrounding gender can, then, be seen as a way of subtly making the reader aware of their own reading and gendering practices. Therefore, while Woolf's approach to issues of gender usually takes the more direct and overt form of parody, Smith's approach tends to be more implicit.

To begin with, Orlando spontaneously undergoes a physical transformation around the half-way point of Woolf's narrative. Following a seven-day sleep – one of the trances that s/he inexplicably falls into for weeks at a time – Orlando “stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and [...] we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman” (Woolf 87). Yet, Orlando's physical transformation does not seem to result in any kind of immediate change in gender, identity, or behaviour: “Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (Woolf 87). The idea that gender naturally follows from one's biological sex is, therefore, immediately undermined.

A shift in Orlando's gender performance and, consequently, identity does eventually happen, but only once s/he steps back into the world of Western social norms, returning from Constantinople where his/her transformation occurred, and starts wearing gendered clothes instead of gender-neutral “Turkish trousers” (Woolf 97). Dressed, for the first time since his/her physical transformation, in a “complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore,” Orlando comes to the realization that “she had scarcely given her sex a thought [...] until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs” (Woolf 97). The biographer soon notes that “what was said a short time ago about [there] being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true” and that the “change of clothes had [...] much to do with it” (Woolf 120). As Christy Burns notes, “the change in external, physical being has no impact on the self's internal identification [until] clothing—that external social trapping—pressures [Orlando] to conform with social expectations of gendered behavior” (350-351). What is more, applying Butler's understanding of sex as established through gender and not vice versa, it can be argued that the sex change in Woolf's novel does not happen simultaneously with Orlando's physical transformation, but occurs only when s/he changes her gender performance in

response to the requirements of the dominant culture. As Burns puts it, when Orlando's sex is "eventually transformed, this is not effected through a *genital* change. It occurs instead as a *gender* transformation that emerges after a change of clothing" (351).

Comparing two pictures of Orlando, the biographer points out that Orlando the man "has his hand free to seize his sword [and] looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking," while Orlando the woman "must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders [and] takes a sidelong glance at [the world], full of subtlety, even of suspicion" (Woolf 120-121). Commenting on the discrepancies between Orlando's differently gendered selves, the biographer makes a bold suggestion: "Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same" (Woolf 121). Positing an argument that can be seen as an early version of what would later become the social constructionist approach to gender, the biographer states that "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" (Woolf 120). If the clothes one wears are understood to metonymically stand for one's gender performance and if they "wear us" and not the other way around, then they are not, as Butler would put it, an expression of a core gender identity. On the contrary, they can be said to construct the illusion that such a core identity exists by posing as an expression of it, implying that "[gender] identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 34). In this vein, Adam Parkes points out, "If 'it is clothes that wear us,' [...] then roles may be [...] arbitrarily imposed from without. If clothes wear us, then we are constructed, and potentially censored, by some external agency—for instance, by the sexual hierarchy that assigns particular clothes to the male and female roles" (452). This external agency can, then, be said to take the shape of a set of social expectations which "work like an outside that seeps in, and clothing attracts and activates these expectations" (Burns 351).

In this sense, clothes can be said to both "change our view of the world and the world's view of us" (Woolf 120). Cross-dressing as a man – a habit of Orlando's which is further discussed later in the paper – the female Orlando meets a prostitute called Nell, who puts on a timid, hesitating persona in order to "gratify her [Orlando's] masculinity" (Woolf 139). Nell's treatment of Orlando as if s/he were a man, combined with Orlando's own play-acting of masculinity by means of clothing and behaviour, causes the following reaction: "To feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, roused in Orlando all the feelings which become

a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one” (Woolf 139). Elaborating on this interaction, Susan Watkins argues:

Clear puns on the words “roused” and “became” suggest not only sexual arousal and the appearance of *appropriate* masculine behavior *in response* to the “feminine wiles” of the woman, but also the literal creation, or bringing into being through performance, of Orlando’s masculinity. At this point the “feminine” and the “masculine” behaviors create each other, in what could be described as a truly chicken-and-egg situation. Which came first, or in other words, which is authentic? (47-48)

Performing masculinity through cross-dressing, Orlando is treated as a man would be, “experiences herself as different in response to gender expectations” (Burns 351), and in turn becomes, for all intents and purposes, the gender s/he is performing. A similar situation occurs when the Archduchess Harriet unexpectedly reveals herself to be a man – the Archduke Harry – to the female Orlando, who is immediately reminded to adopt a “properly calibrated performance of gender” (Stokes 352): “She was alone with a man. Recalled thus suddenly to a consciousness of her sex, which she had completely forgotten, and of his, which was now remote enough to be equally upsetting, Orlando felt seized with faintness” (Woolf 114). In this sense, Peter Stokes argues, “the securing of differences” is what “marks and underscores identifiable gender positions rather than *a priori* ‘truths’” (351). Both episodes, then, seem to suggest that gender is, to paraphrase Butler, a kind of performative performance (“Performative Acts” 528).

It should, at this point, be noted that the biographer also offers a number of other explanations of Orlando’s transformations (both physical and of character):

The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex. And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather more openly than usual [...] something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. 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. (Woolf 121)

Two sets of opposing claims are made here: 1) that there are distinct differences between women and men, but also that gender is inherently fluid; a mix of categories,<sup>5</sup> and 2) that clothes are indicative of an inner gender identity and/or sex, but also, contrary to that claim, that clothes are not at all indicative of one's sex or gender identity because what is on the surface can (both literally and figuratively) be the opposite from what is on the inside. Pamela Caughie elaborates on the biographer's self-contradictory tendencies, noting that the section cited above "not only contradicts the earlier assertion that Orlando's sex change has not affected his/her identity, as well as the other philosophy that says we put on our identity with our clothing, but it also contradicts itself [by asserting] both that clothes are natural and fitting and that they are arbitrary and deceiving" (80). The biographer's theorizing should, therefore, not be taken at face value. As a general rule of thumb, J. J. Wilson notes that it is "wise to remain alert to the subversive motives of *Orlando*, for the unwary fall victim to the stuffy comments of our friendly biographer" (176).

Much like *Orlando*, *How to Be Both* includes a kind of transformation – not a physical one, in this instance, but one which is, once again, centered around the motif of clothes. Throughout "Eyes," Francescho recalls their 15<sup>th</sup>-century childhood. One such analeptic episode finds the child that is to become Francescho insistently wearing their recently deceased mother's clothes. Francescho's father, knowing that Francescho is talented at drawing, makes the following proposal:

If you agree to put these clothes away. [...] And if you were to put, say, breeches on, or these leggings I've here, instead [...] Then we might find someone to train you up in the making and using of colours on wood and on walls [...] But you'll have to wear your brothers' clothes [...] nobody will take you for such a training wearing the clothes of a woman. (A. Smith 215-218)

What initially might appear to be at issue here is that a boy grieving his mother's death insists on wearing her dresses instead of clothes fitting of his own sex, which makes a good education and the profession of a painter inaccessible to him. However, the episode gradually, yet never explicitly, reveals that the opposite is true: that Francescho, in fact, seems to be biologically female and that what their father is suggesting is a change of gender performance enacted by a

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<sup>5</sup> The latter calls to mind a kind of inherent androgyny – an idea often associated with Woolf's understanding of the "differences between the sexes" (121) which will, however, not be discussed in this paper. For interpretations of Woolf's use of androgyny see e.g. Moi 1-18; Rado 147-169; Kaivola 235-261.

change of clothes, “a bit of imagining,” and “a bit of discretion,” all of which should enable Francescho to “be, or become, one of them. Your brothers” (A. Smith 216-217). Moreover, for the transformation to be complete, Francescho would need to “be seen to be working” with their father and brothers in order to become established as a man: “when it is clearly established in others’ eyes as to who you have *become* – He raised an eyebrow. – we will get you into a painters’ workshop” (A. Smith 218). In other words, it is only once the change in gender performance results in others accepting Francescho as a man and treating them accordingly, that Francescho can be said to have “become” a man. Later in the narrative, this constitutive power of gender performance is exemplified by the fact that people seem to unquestioningly accept Francescho as a man, regardless of being aware of their physiology, due to their performed masculinity (A. Smith 278-279).

The symbolic act of transformation is depicted as a shedding of one set of clothes for another, which results in a metaphorical rebirth:

I pulled on the ties and I loosened the gown front : I stood up and the whole gown slipped off the clothes trunk then slipped down away from me like the peeled back petals of a lily and me at its centre standing straight like the stamen : I stepped out naked over its folds : I held out my hand for the leggings. [...] You’ll need a name, [my father] said as I pulled the shirt on over my head. [...] Francescho, I said. [...] My father held his frown : then he smiled in his beard a grave smile down at me and he nodded. On that day with that blessing and that new name I died and was reborn. (A. Smith 219-222)

Performed through a kind of costume change and finalized with an act of naming and approval from Francescho’s father, the transformation seems to doubly emphasize the role of the (patriarchal) social system in the construction of gender. What is more, the episode is reminiscent of the depiction of Orlando’s physical change. In a kind of literalized metaphor, the figures of Purity, Chastity, and Modesty endeavour to hide Orlando’s newly transformed body, while the figures of Truth, Candour, and Honesty call for the biographer to record “the Truth and nothing but the Truth” (Woolf 86). Both episodes are marked by motifs of “unveiling and nakedness” which, especially in *Orlando*, call to mind a symbolic “search for bare, naked, essential truths” (Burns 350). Yet, what is ultimately “‘revealed’ or ‘unveiled’” in both novels alike “points only to the essential instability of essence, the reversibility inscribed within the ‘truth.’ What is essential here is to be without an essence. What is revealed is the reversibility of sex [and gender]” (Burns 350). Orlando’s and Francescho’s transformations, then, serve to illustrate that “gender reality is created through sustained social performances” and to

undermine the idea of “an essential sex and a true or abiding masculinity or femininity” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 192).

## 2.2. Subverting Gender

False assumptions, mistakes in identification, and instances in which a character’s gender cannot be determined or does not fit the binary mould abound in both novels. The Russian princess Sasha is initially assumed to be “a boy” because “no woman could skate with such speed and vigour,” the Archduchess Harriet turns out to have been the Archduke Harry all along, and Orlando’s husband, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, is said to be “a man as strange and subtle as a woman” (Woolf 19, 168). In a similar vein, Francescho believes George to be a boy for a considerable amount of time before observing that she “looks very girl” and concluding that the boy is, indeed, a girl (A. Smith 235). Moreover, traditionally feminine and masculine gender attributes and behavioural patterns intermix in the character of Orlando both before and after his/her physical transformation and “official” change of gender and sex. For instance, the male Orlando is characterized as a “nobleman, full of grace and manly courtesy” who “never thought twice about heading a charge or fighting a duel,” but also as shy and girlishly handsome with red cheeks “covered with peach down” and eyes “like drenched violets” (Woolf 21, 62, 4).

As mentioned earlier, the second half of the novel also sees Orlando regularly engaging in cross-dressing. The biographer notes that Orlando “found it convenient [...] to change frequently from one set of clothes to another” and, more importantly, that s/he had “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” (Woolf 141). Such “theatrical self-transformation[s]” can be said to offer Orlando “potential freedom from the historically assigned social roles which often censor present and future possibilities” (Parkes 451-452), while further undermining the idea that gender represents a unified identity which follows from one’s biological sex. In other words, Orlando’s cross-dressing can be seen as a potential source of agency – it challenges the system of binary sex and gender from within the confines of that system.

In *How to Be Both*, Francescho also confounds the normative relations between biological sex, inner gender identity, and exterior gender performance. On the surface, the biologically female Francescho performs masculinity (once again, through cross-dressing) in

order to bypass the restrictive social norms of the time. Yet, Francescho can also be said to undermine intelligible configurations of gender by doing their “own particular both” (A. Smith 236):

The great Cennini, though, in his handbook on colours and picturemaking, finds no worth and no beauty of proportion in girls, or in women of any age – except in the matter of hands in themselves, since the delicate hands of girls and women [...] are more patient, he says, than those of a man, from spending so much more time indoors which makes them more suited to making the best blue. Myself I went out of my way, then, to be expert at the painting of hands and be good at the grinding of blue *and* the using of blue, both (A. Smith 235-236)

In other words, Francescho actively combines the traditionally feminine with the traditionally masculine, as well as aims to better represent the historically oppressed end of the binary – a tendency which will be discussed in more detail in the following section of the paper. It is, then, not surprising that the figure in one of Francescho’s frescoes which George’s mother describes as “the effeminate boy, the boyish girl [...] hold[ing] both an arrow and a hoop, male and female symbols one in each hand” (A. Smith 111) turns out to be a self-portrait. In fact, many of the figures in Francescho’s paintings are characterized by similar “sexual and gender ambiguities,” as George’s mother remarks during their trip to Palazzo Schifanoia (A. Smith 111). The ambiguity is intentional – Francescho notes that “even the great Alberti was wrong when he wrote in disapproving terms that *it would not be suitable to dress Venus or Minerva in the rough wool cloak of a soldier, it would be the same as dressing Mars or Jove in the clothes of a woman*. Cause I met many female Marses and Joves [...] and many Venuses and Minervas in and out of all sorts of clothes” (A. Smith 276).

Another form of subversion can be identified in *Orlando*’s approach to sexuality. As mentioned, Butler argues that the heterosexual matrix maps out, as well as enforces, intelligible or socially sanctioned configurations of the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality. More precisely, the norm is that one’s gender should follow from one’s sex and both categories should be defined through their distinction from the opposite end of the binary – “one is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender, a formulation that presupposes and enforces the restriction of gender within that binary pair” (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 30). Genders need to be constructed and naturalized as fixed binary oppositions so that they can “necessitate” heterosexual desire, which functions on the basis of that opposition, as well as regulates and



ensures its implementation. In other words, Butler argues that “The internal coherence or unity of either gender [...] requires both a stable and oppositional heterosexuality [while] institutional heterosexuality both requires and produces the univocity of each of the gendered terms that constitute the limit of gendered possibilities within an oppositional, binary gender system” (*Gender Trouble* 30-31). This kind of arrangement, wherein intelligible structures of binary gender, sex, and sexuality are presented as natural, necessary, and mutually causal as opposed to constructed and naturalized, ultimately serves the purpose of maintaining the existing heteronormative system.

In *Orlando*, the (seeming) necessity of heterosexuality is undermined, paradoxically, through a parodic insistence on heteronormativity. Ambiguously gendered characters with a tendency for cross-dressing make it easy for Woolf to play with the possibilities of non-heterosexual desire, while also making certain to end this exploration on a heterosexual note – through any and all ridiculous means necessary – thus parodically overdetermining the inevitability of oppositional heterosexuality. As Jean Kennard points out, the “insistence on the necessity for desire to be heterosexual is repeated to the point of mockery in *Orlando*” (162). For instance, when s/he first sees Sasha, Orlando’s attention is immediately captured by the “extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person” (Woolf 18). However, mistakenly taking Sasha for a man, Orlando is “ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question” (Woolf 18-19). His/her desire is soon made legitimate by the discovery that Sasha is, as chance would have it, a woman. Moreover, Orlando’s relationship with Shelmerdine seems to be premised on an ongoing suspicion on both sides that the other is in fact of the opposite sex than what they purport to be (with the norm of heterosexuality duly maintained in either case):

“I’m passionately in love with you,” she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously,

“You’re a woman, Shel!” she cried.

“You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried. (Woolf 164)

According to Kennard, “the absurdity of these turnabouts undercuts the very insistence on the heterosexuality of desire which they attempt to enforce” (162).

However, the parody is perhaps most obvious in the near-absurd plot-twist wherein the Archduchess Harriet – the male Orlando’s suitor – suddenly reappears after Orlando’s transformation into a woman only to “confess that he is really the Archduke Harry, now

conveniently male, his female disguise abandoned” (Kennard 162). In other words, the Archduke strategically adapts his gender performance in such a way that it meets the requirements of compulsory heterosexuality and, thus, allows Harry’s desire for Orlando to remain (at least seemingly) “legitimate.” As Stokes points out: “rather than submit to the regulatory discourse of convention, [Harry] has chosen to perform the gender that would allow him to maintain, his attraction for Orlando” (352). As mentioned earlier, Orlando also makes ample use of such means of bypassing the constraints of compulsory heterosexuality. With regard to this, the biographer notes that Orlando “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” (Woolf 141-142).

In *How to Be Both*, sexuality is consistently represented as fluid. George’s mother has both a husband and a female lover, George herself explores her feelings for her friend Helena, while the sexual encounters Francescho recounts feature both women and men. Yet, the restrictions of normative heterosexuality are present in Smith’s novel as well. How Francescho’s childhood friend Barto reacts to being explicitly told that Francescho is biologically female is telling:

...there’d been many times when Barto’d seen me naked or near-naked [...] but there are certain things that, said out loud, will change the hues of a picture [...] he looked at me then with eyes like little wounds in his head and I understood : that he loved me, and that our friendship had been tenable on condition that he could never have me, that I was never to be had, and that someone else, anyone else, saying out loud to him what I was, other than painter, broke this condition, since those words in themselves mean the inevitability, the being had. (A. Smith 278-279)

Francescho’s body not fitting with their performed masculinity can easily be overlooked and Francescho accepted as their “painter self” (A. Smith 278) until the moment when their femaleness is verbalized. Once Francescho has become a sexed being in his eyes, Barto is forced to acknowledge the difference between his own sex and Francescho’s and is no longer able to deny his (now “legitimate”) attraction for his friend. It is important to note here that it is language in particular that is shown to hold the power to restrict individuals in the existing system of binary sex and gender. As Tory Young notes: “the strictures of binary linguistic constructions impose cruelly on those who wish to live outside of them” (998).

A relationship between language and gender is also established in George's part of the narrative. While George sees language as a "finite set of rules" to be followed, her mother, Carol, "subscribe[s] to the belief [...] that language is a living growing changing organism [...] which follows its own rules and alters them as it likes" (A. Smith 9). Young points out that George's "grammatical pedantry" and Carol's objections to it signify "an interest in [the tension between] fixity and fluidity that goes to the heart of the novel's interest in gender" (998). That is, the two opposing attitudes on language are indicative of the way George and her mother approach the categories of sex and gender, as well as time: "Past or present? George says. Male or female? It can't be both. It must be one or the other. / Who says? Why must it? her mother says" (A. Smith 8). Despite her initial insistence on either/or binaries, George's views develop as the narrative progresses, gravitating more and more towards the kind of simultaneity and multiplicity that her mother favoured. Carol, much like Francescho, seems to want to live outside of "the rigid codes of hierarchical binarisms" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 198), which is exemplified in the plurality of her lived selves – "the glamorous secrets of having a lover and being an activist [...] are independent of Carol's known public identities of mother and wife" (Young 998-999). In this sense, Carol, Francescho, and Orlando all seem to insist on a similar kind of "refusal to be fixed into a single identity" (Young 999).

There is an overarching sense of purposeful ambiguity and resistance to definitive truths surrounding the issue of characters' gender identities in both *Orlando* and *How to Be Both*. At one point, even Orlando's truth-seeking biographer seems to admit defeat: "Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided" (Woolf 122). In this vein, Parkes notes that "one cannot, and indeed need not, decide to what sex Orlando most belongs; while there do appear to be two sexes, two poles of gender, there is no law that fixes them in one place, or that assigns one identity to either pole" (452). While Orlando's performance of gender might not, as Stokes puts it, "deconstruct [or] radically alter the culturally hegemonic institutions which put compulsory heterosexuality into place" (350-351), agency can be located in his/her tactical implementation of "a kind of reversibility, [...] of being at once both inside and outside" of conventions and norms (Burns 347). A similar thing could be said of Francescho's tactical performance of masculinity. Yet, while Orlando tends to alternate between two clearly demarcated categories, performing either femininity or masculinity, Francescho can be said to simultaneously perform a kind of combination of both, which is, arguably, a step further towards a denaturalization of binary gender.

Ultimately, in both novels, agency seems to be located precisely in the ability to sustain either a position of vacillation, as Orlando does, or one of bothness, as is the case with Francescho. Each approach allows for a pluralizing of identity and desire and, consequently, undermines the necessity of the oppressive, hierarchizing either/or binaries that form the basis for dominant configurations of gender, sex, and sexuality. How these subversive pluralizing tendencies translate to a more general level of narrative structure, as well as the novels' attitudes towards historical representation and truth will be explored in the following chapter.

### 3. Historiographic Metafiction

Linda Hutcheon defines historiographic metafiction as a type of fiction which is “both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also [lays] claim to historical events and personages” (5). These kinds of novels adopt the view that historical works attempt to represent the past in a meaningful way, yet do so in a narrative format which is not dissimilar to that of works of fiction. That is, according to Hayden White, a historical work can be defined as “a verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse that purports to be a model, or icon, of past structures and processes in the interest of *explaining what they were by representing them*” (2). Moreover, Patricia Waugh defines metafiction as “fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (2). Overtly aware of its own fictionality and critical of the conventions and modes of its own construction, metafiction (re-)examines “the fundamental structures of narrative fiction [...] through the *practice* of writing fiction” (Waugh 2). Accordingly, in works of historiographic metafiction, the process of narrativization through which the past is represented and, thus, comes to be known is problematized through a self-reflexive consideration of the shared conventions used to construct fictional and non-fictional narratives.

In its self-reflexive problematizing of the process of narrative construction, historiographic metafiction foregrounds “the implications of narrative explanation and historical reconstruction” (Currie 14). To begin with, both historical and fictional narratives are shown to be composed in accordance with sets of conventionalized narrative codes and, thus, tend to share a number of formal characteristics. For instance, history and traditional realist novels both act as “retrospective account[s] of events ordered sequentially and causally, often with an omniscient potential to examine the relations between individuals and social

conditions” (Currie 14). Yet, historical texts are usually understood to refer to the real world, to events that happened in the past, as opposed to fictional texts, which purportedly have imaginary, fictive referents. This implies that the two narrative types differ, if not in the narrative conventions used to construct them, then in the fact that they refer to different ontological spheres.

However, an opposing view suggests that history can, in fact, never “re-cover the past as it was because the past was not an account but events, situations” (Jenkins 14) which can no longer be reached by any means other than through already textualized accounts, such as historical documents or “the institutions of the past, its social structures and practices, [which function] as social texts” (Hutcheon 16). According to White, the process of emplotment or narrativization involves the historian choosing which events the historical narrative will focus on – i.e. “including some events and excluding others, [...] stressing some and subordinating others” – as well as deciding how the chosen events will be presented, since “the same event can serve as a different kind of element of many different historical stories, depending on the role it is assigned” (6-7). In this context, it is important to distinguish between 1) extra-textual, real-world past events, 2) historical documents and other (textual) sources through which the past is available to us, and 3) history, which, on the basis of those available sources, attempts to explain the past by representing it in the form of an emplotted narrative.

In other words, in its attempt to represent past events in a coherent, meaningful way, the act of narrativization seems unable to avoid a certain amount of subjective interpretation and explanation. As Keith Jenkins notes, “although there may be methods of finding out ‘what happened’ there is no method whatsoever whereby one can definitely [establish] incorrigible meanings; all facts to be meaningful need embedding in interpretive readings that obviously contain them but which do not simply somehow arise from them” (40-41). Consequently, any and every historical narrative comes to represent only one of the many possible understandings and emplotments of the same set of events, as there is no “fundamentally correct ‘text’ of which other interpretations are just variations; variations are all there are” (Jenkins 14). This view of history, then, questions the traditionally presumed representational reliability, objectivity, and neutrality of historical works, as well as the idea of a single, ultimate Truth about the past reachable through that kind of representation by suggesting that “we can only know ‘reality’ as it is produced and sustained by cultural representations of it” (Hutcheon 121). This kind of understanding of history, according to Hutcheon, does not “deny that the *past* existed, but only that its accessibility to us now is entirely conditioned by textuality” (16).

While the norms and conventions of narrative construction typically remain “a set of *implicit* cultural and literary codes which are activated by the reader in the reading process,” in historiographic metafiction, they are “made *explicit* as a literary structure” (Waugh 66) and thus problematized. Waugh argues that metafiction generally tends to be “constructed on the principle of a fundamental and sustained opposition,” in the sense that it utilizes conventionalized narrative codes or “frames” to create “a fictional illusion,” but also makes those conventions the object of its criticism by “laying bare [...] that illusion” and undermining the necessity and neutrality of the frames within which the illusion is constructed (6). This kind of alternation between “frame and frame-break [...] provides the essential deconstructive method of metafiction” (Waugh 31). In a similar vein, historiographic metafiction “inscribes and only then subverts its mimetic engagement with the world,” thus challenging “any simple notions of realism or reference by directly confronting the discourse of art with the discourse of history” (Hutcheon 20). Historiographic metafiction, thus, foregrounds the fact that “both history and fiction are discourses, that both constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past” and, in this sense, “acknowledges the human urge to make order, while pointing out that the orders we create are just that: human constructs, not natural or given entities” (Hutcheon 89, 41-42).

### 3.1. Challenging Historical Narratives

*Orlando* can be described as a “narrative that constantly draws attention to itself as a construct in subversively confessional asides” (Spiropoulou 78). The conventions of both fictional and factual (e.g. history, biography) narrative writing are foregrounded through the intrusive narratorial voice of Orlando’s biographer and his ongoing (meta)commentary on precisely what he is doing, whether or not he is doing it well, and how it is usually done. The biographer’s intrusions tend to interrupt the narrative flow and keep reminding the reader of the constructed nature of the (fictional, factual – both) narrative they are reading. As Hutcheon notes, while the discourses of history, biography, and even traditional realism try to “narrate past events in such a way that the events seem to narrate themselves,” in overtly self-reflexive texts like *Orlando* “there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation” (91-92).

In this vein, Woolf's narrator self-consciously states that the "first duty of the biographer" is to "plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth" with the aim of recording "the facts as far as they are known" and leaving it to the reader to "make of them what he may" (Woolf 38). In other words, the biographer presents himself "as an unbiased collector of facts" (Boehm 201) who aims to represent the truth about his subject's life; to record without interpreting a kind of personal history. However, this is not what Orlando's "kindly, inadequate biographer" (Wilson 176) does – his alleged (or desired) objectivity is consistently undermined through a parodic subversion of the strategies he uses in narrativizing Orlando's life. In *Orlando*, even the paratextual elements are crafted in such a way to create and maintain a kind of "quasi-academic format" (Spiropoulou 75). Subtitled "A Biography," *Orlando* opens with a preface, closes with an index, and includes explanatory footnotes, as well as pictures of its subjects. Yet, none of these elements should be taken at face value. The list of acknowledgements includes a number of "strange bedfellows" and is marked by an "arbitrariness and acerbity of sentiment and tone" (Wilson 176-177), while the index is "ludicrous and inaccurate," thus undermining "the scholarly research apparatus which creates and supports the illusion of [...] truth and factuality" (Boehm 201). In other words, each of the ironically used paratextual elements serves to undermine "the popular notion of biography as an accumulation of objective evidence" (Spiropoulou 76).

In this sense *Orlando*, as Angeliki Spiropoulou puts it, can "be read as a parody and pastiche of tropes of historical representation" (76). In an attempt to "subvert all claims to a comprehensive inquiry into and objective rendering of a life or epoch fostered by positivist historicism" (Spiropoulou 77), the conventions of bio/historiographic narrative construction – the "scholarly apparati for viewing the past" (De Gay 63) – are overdetermined to the point of mockery, as well as combined with the conventions of fiction writing. To use Hutcheon's wording, Woolf's novel can be said to have a "specifically parodic [...] intertextual relation to the traditions and conventions of the genres involved" (11).

In *Orlando*, the referents, subjects, and methods of biography and history are, on the surface, overtly contrasted to those of fiction. The biographer claims that poets and novelists, as opposed to bio/historiographers, "have little need of the truth, and no respect for it," as they tend to deal with subject matters where "truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma—a mirage" – in other words, fiction, as the biographer colourfully puts it, deals largely with "something-nothings" (Woolf 124). Yet, these claims are thoroughly subverted in Woolf's novel. To begin with, contrary to his own stated duty, the biographer not only

interprets and comments on various aspects of Orlando's life (especially those that lack clear "historical" evidence), but also over-indulges in explanations, uses overly-stylized language, relies on physical description as a way of characterization, etc. As Boehm puts it, "the biographer's reliance upon the least sophisticated of fictional conventions [...] even as he claims not to need the tricks of the novelist [...] parodies the mechanisms of factual biographical narration" and serves as an example of *Orlando's* breaking down of the distinction between fictional and factual narratives: "if the biographer employs the techniques of fiction to record his hero's glories, Woolf implicitly asks, how distinct from fiction are such factual recordings?" (194).

Moreover, representing and "(unproblematically) *know[ing]*" (Hutcheon 119) reality or truth through language in any kind of narrative is problematized. For instance, Orlando, attempting to describe nature in one of his/her poems, shows "more audacity than most" and looks out of the window in search of a real-world referent to base his/her writing on, after which "of course, he could write no more. Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces" (Woolf 5). What is more, Orlando struggles to see the difference between "simply [saying] in so many words [...] what one means and leav[ing] it" and using stylized language overflowing with metaphors to describe or represent truths of various kinds: "Upon my word, [...] I don't see that one's more true than another. Both are utterly false" (Woolf 61-62). Language continually proves unable to adequately represent what Orlando wants it to.

The novel's parodic tendencies can also be noted in the obvious contradictions between what the biographer claims to be doing and what he can actually be seen doing. For instance, he often apologetically expresses awareness of the lack of reliable historical records to support his claims about Orlando's life:

It is, indeed, highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted that at this stage of Orlando's career [...] we have least information to go upon. [...] But the revolution which broke out during his period of office, and the fire which followed, have so damaged or destroyed all those papers from which any trustworthy record could be drawn, that what we can give is lamentably incomplete. Often the paper was scorched a deep brown in the middle of the most important sentence. Just when we thought to elucidate a secret that has puzzled historians for a hundred years, there was a hole in the manuscript big enough to put your finger through. (Woolf 74)

On the one hand, the biographer's exposé on the lack of trustworthy historical sources foregrounds the limits of our knowledge of the past – the "epistemological fragility" (Jenkins



13) of history – and reiterates the fact that the past is accessible to us only through “lamentably incomplete” (Woolf 74) textual fragments. However, in a parodic turn, the biographer’s “[comical] fussing over the scarcity of vital ‘facts’ and ‘information’” (Parkes 454) is immediately followed by highly detailed and specific descriptions of the minutiae of Orlando’s everyday life in Constantinople. As Judy Little points out, the biographer cannot seem to “resist filling in the gaps, even when, as [he himself] often says, almost nothing is known about the matter” (183).

In other words, the episode not only stresses that we can know “real past events” solely “through their traces, their texts” (Hutcheon 225), but it also foregrounds the nature of the process through which these textual traces are given meaning (i.e. formed into what we see as historical facts). As the biographer himself notes: “We have done our best to piece out a meagre summary from the charred fragments that remain; but often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (Woolf 74). The reader is, thus, made to wonder whether a subject’s life is “quite so exciting, quite so flattering, quite so glorious as it sounds when the memoir writer has done his work upon it” (Woolf 136). What all of the above implies is that biographical (as well as historical) representation is not objective or neutral in its narrativizing processes; it tends to not only subjectively interpret, but also to performatively construct the subjects or events it is allegedly representing. As Stokes explains, writing can, in this sense, be said to construct “subjects without recourse to ‘truth.’ Discourse is performative: it produces subjects rather than describes them” (351).

In this vein, the basic relationship between Orlando and the biographer can, according to Kennard, be described as one of pursuit (162). The biographer’s efforts and failures to capture his subject lead the narrative. At the beginning of the novel, Orlando’s character seems fitting of a subject of biography: “Happy the mother who bears, happier still the biographer who records the life of such a one! Never need she vex herself, nor he invoke the help of novelist or poet. From deed to deed, from glory to glory, from office to office he must go, his scribe following after [...]. Orlando, to look at, was cut out precisely for some such career” (Woolf 4). There seems to be an implication of a predetermined, idealized kind of subject that biographers and historians alike prefer dealing with (or constructing) – one whose character is coherent, straightforward, and never contradictory or inconsistent and whose life can easily be represented in the form of a “forward-moving linear narrative” (Thompson 310).

However, despite the biographer's initial confidence about recording Orlando's life and character, his enthusiasm dwindles as the task at hand turns out to be more complex than anticipated and the "factual, cataloguing and linear mode of biography" (Thompson 310) proves to be an inadequate means of capturing a subject like Orlando. There are two reasons for this: the above-mentioned lack of reliable sources of information and the multiplicity and instability of Orlando's identity. In line with the biographer's own claim that each person is built up of as many as "two thousand and fifty-two" selves, piled "one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter's hand" (Woolf 201), Orlando can be seen transitioning "from several different kinds of men to several different kinds of women" (Little 186-187) during the course of the narrative. As the biographer struggles to get a firm hold on the "welter of opposites" that is Orlando's mind, giving "an exact and particular account of Orlando's life [...] becomes more and more out of the question. [...] we seem now to catch sight of her and then again to lose it" (Woolf 9, 141). In fact, encompassing the entirety of Orlando's life and self seems to be beyond the capabilities of any biographer, "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" (Woolf 202).

On the other hand, in a sentiment anticipatory of "the tensions between notions of *essential* personal identity and *contextually re-defined* subjectivity" (Burns 344), there is also mention of a "Key self, which amalgamates and controls" all of "the selves we have it in us to be" (Woolf 202). Yet, as Burns argues, "the notion of an essential self [is] comically reduced to a belief that Woolf's less than competent narrator struggles to defend, while the parody of that narrator's attempt results in the realization of the modern, constructive figuration of subjectivity" (346). The plurality of Orlando's selves, together with the biographer's inability to capture them, undermines both the notion of a unified identity and the representational capabilities of factual narratives such as biography and history: "'truth' and 'facts' prove elusive after all, and Orlando escapes the understanding of the biographer" (Kennard 162). As Spiropoulou puts it, Orlando's "multiple, multi-temporal, multi-gendered subjectivity brings the narrator/biographer to a predicament and reveals the limits of biography and of historiography; it draws attention to the inevitable incompleteness and arbitrariness of writing a life, depicting an era, and demarcating the course of time" (77).

While not quite as overtly self-referential as *Orlando*, and certainly not as parodically charged, Smith's novel also combines fact with fiction and uses metafictional strategies to challenge conventional historical discourse. For instance, the possibility of constructing a narrative for Francesco del Cossa – something that Smith herself does in the “Eyes” section of the novel – is discussed on two occasions in “Camera.” When George asks her mother whether she thinks “any women artists” painted any of the Palazzo Schifanoia frescoes, her mother replies that it is unlikely, but claims that she “could make a reasonably witty argument for [the frescoes'] originator being female” (A. Smith 110-111).

What is more, after her mother's death, George considers writing about del Cossa's life for a school assignment. In a markedly self-reflexive episode, George and her friend H discuss how they would go about creating a story about the life of “a painter they don't know anything about” (A. Smith 143). Their conversation both suggests that George and H might be the authors or imaginers of “Eyes,” and foregrounds the issue of truthfully, or at least realistically, representing an obscure historical figure in a narrative format. Performing the role of fiction-writing biographers, George and H attempt to put themselves in del Cossa's place: “He'd speak like from another time, H says. He'd say things like ho, or gadzooks, or egad” (A. Smith 137). However, George also notes that “[y]ou can't just make stuff up about real people,” imagining the painter's reaction to their narrativization of his life: “He'd be all *alas I am being made up really badly by a sixteen-year-old girl who knows fuck all about art and nothing at all about me except that I did some paintings and seem to have died of the plague*” (A. Smith 138-139). In terms of what could be called their narrativizing technique, Holly Ranger notes that George and H “do not want to write a conservative ‘reimagine someone from the past parachuted into the present’ piece,” but they also do not “want to be inaccurate, despite acknowledging that they cannot know what the past was like” (413).

George articulates two different ways of understanding history during the course of her narrative. While her mother is still alive, George thinks of history as something terrible that happened in the past and is now over: “History is horrible. It is a mound of bodies pressing down into the ground below cities and towns in the unending wars and the famines and the diseases [...] George is appalled by history, its only redeeming feature being that it tends to be well and truly over” (A. Smith 103-104). However, by the end of “Camera,” George formulates a significantly different idea of history. Inspired by the story of Rosalind Franklin, who “nearly didn't get credited for the double helix discovery” because she was a woman, George becomes more focused on similar kinds of “*historic fact[s] that [oppose] the making of true history*” (A.

Smith 173, 174). For George, the alternative to this excluding, othering kind of history, fittingly, resembles the double helix structure of DNA:

It resembled a joyful bedspring or a bespoke ladder. It was like a kind of shout, if a shout to the sky could be said to look like something. It looked like the opposite of history [...] What if history, instead, was that shout, that upward spring, that staircase-ladder thing, and everybody was just used to calling something quite different the word history? What if received notions of history were deceptive? Deceived notions. Ha. Maybe anything that forced or pushed such a spring back down or blocked the upward shout of it was opposed to the making of what history really was. (A. Smith 172-173)

In other words, as Cara Lewis points out, “rather than simply offering an ideological critique of the patriarchal bias that underwrites official history, George goes further, to reimagine history itself” (138). George’s vision of history can be said to revise the “deceived” notions of the official historical discourse based on “binary opposites which always privileged one half: white/black, male/female, self/other, intellect/body, west/east, objectivity/subjectivity” (Hutcheon 62). In this sense, George’s version of history could be seen, in Hutcheon’s terms, as a multiply-voiced or “decentered” kind; one that is inclusive of “the ‘marginal’ and [...] the ‘ex-centric’ (be it in class, race, gender, sexual orientation, or ethnicity) [...] in the light of the implied recognition that our culture is not really the homogeneous monolith (that is middleclass, male, heterosexual, white, western) we might have assumed” (12).

It is telling that the “Eyes” section of the novel opens with a kind of shout at the sky – “Ho this is a mighty twisting thing” – as Francescho’s ghost is “pulled” out of the ground, “upwards past maggots and worms and / the bones and the rockwork,” and back into life – “wait though / look is that / sun / blue sky [...] same old sky? earth? again? / home again home again / jiggety down through the up” (A. Smith 189-190). Creating a mirroring effect, a number of elements in Smith’s novel seem to resemble a spring or double helix: George’s revised vision of history, the novel’s two narratives which correspond to each other “like a twist of yarn, 2 strands twisted together for strength,” the trajectory of Francescho’s “falling upward,” and the string of verse-like text depicting it (A. Smith 202, 190). Each of those parallels indicates that “Eyes” can be said to represent precisely the kind of history that George envisions.

Through “Eyes,” Smith’s novel gives a voice to a relatively unknown historical personage. The lack of historical documentation on Francesco del Cossa’s life is a recurring motif in “Camera.” As George’s friend H points out: “The thing it always says about him, in the hardly-anything-there-is when you do look him up, is that very little is known about him”

(A. Smith 135). By representing the mostly fruitless search for information on Francesco del Cossa in “Camera,” but also giving him a voice through the character of Francescho in “Eyes” – what is more, one which stands in sharp contrast to the few miscellaneous “facts” official history has to offer on the painter – the novel foregrounds the scarcity of what the present knows about the past and the importance of how it represents what little it does (seem to) know. As Huber and Funk point out, “Historical authority is contrasted with the highly individualised and subjective vision of fiction [wherein] Francescho [...] is imagined as a cross-dressed woman, thereby implying a reason for the painter’s obscurity while at the same time counteracting the historical silence” (152). George’s mother provides an explanation for del Cossa’s absence from history: “For four hundred years he didn’t exist. No one even knew the room had frescoes in it till only about a hundred or so years ago [when a letter he wrote to the Duke of Ferrara was found]. They’d been whitewashed over for hundreds of years. Then some whitewash fell off the walls and they found these pictures underneath. The room’d been lost till then” (A. Smith 56-57). The image of whitewash as a means of erasing something from existence calls to mind the glossing over of the marginal or “ex-centric” – i.e. anyone or anything that “does not fit in the humanly constructed notion of center” – from history in order to preserve the illusion of “sameness (or single otherness) and homogeneity, unity and certainty” (Hutcheon 42) and, in turn, maintain the existing cultural hierarchies and power relations.

Francescho, much like Smith, tends to provide the people who are typically left out of the dominant discourse of history with a (figurative) voice. By insistently inserting historically marginalized groups of people – slaves and field workers, prostitutes, people of colour, Semitic people, and even members of their own family, who were “historic, as anonymous wallmakers go” (A. Smith 206) – into their frescoes, Francescho both “personaliz[es] the images and visually reinsert[s] into the narratives of myth, art, and history those who are usually absent” (Ranger 409). How Francescho’s more acclaimed, yet less talented fellow painter Cosmo reacts to Francescho’s paintings is telling. Seeing Francescho’s unconventional interpretation of the myth of Apollo and Marsyas, Cosmo seems to personify the discourse of dominant culture:

He is looking at my painting : he is shaking his head.

It’s wrong, he says. [...] Marsyas is a satyr and therefore male, he says.

Says who? I say.

Says the story, he says. Say the scholars. Say the centuries. Says everyone. You can’t do this. It’s a travesty. Says me.

Who're you? I say (though I know quite well who he is).

Who am I? Wrong question, he says. Who are you? Nobody. No one will ever pay you, not money, for this. It's worthless. Meaningless. If you're going to paint a Marsyas, Apollo has to win. Marsyas has to display ruin and be defeated. Apollo is purity. Marsyas has to pay.

He is staring at the picture with, is it a kind of anger? (A. Smith 361)

In Francescho's retelling (or repainting) of the mythological story, Marsyas is depicted not as being flayed alive as a punishment for committing hubris against Apollo – “the god stands to one side, the unused knife slack in his hand : he has an air near disappointment” – but as being reborn in the form of a virginal woman: “the inner body of the musician is twisting up out of the skin in a kind of ecstasy [...] : the body appears through the skin's unpeeling like the bride undressing after the wedding : but bright red, crystal red : best of all the musician catches the skin over the very arm it's coming off and folding itself, neat” (A. Smith 360). Cosmo finds himself unable to accept such a depiction; its subversion of the absolute authority of official mythology and history upsets him to the point of anger. Cosmo's understanding of truth and history, thus, stands in sharp opposition to Francescho's, which allows for variations in interpretation; for truths in place of Truth, to paraphrase Hutcheon (109).

Significantly, on yet another level, the painting is reminiscent of Francescho's own symbolic transformation. As Ranger notes, Francescho's “new ‘way’ to tell the tale of Marsyas is revealed as a queering of gender, enacting and doubling within the novel Smith's own rewriting of Francesco in the novel's frame” (411). The imagery used to describe Francescho's transformative change of clothes is strikingly similar to the ekphrastic description of their painting of Marsyas. The peeling away of clothes/skin and re-emerging from them reborn is, in both cases, “described in a simile that is as explicitly metamorphic as it is sexually suggestive” (Ranger 412). In other words, since “the gender-queer Francesc[h]o herself is an insertion by Smith, on the macro-level, of a woman into Renaissance art history, albeit [...] one who resists definitive categories of gender,” their paintings can, according to Ranger, be said to function as a “*mis-en-abyme* [*sic*] for Smith's novel, both thematically (illustrating visually the themes of mothers, gender-fluidity, [...]) and methodologically (inserting women, queering the text)” (409).

Woolf's and Smith's novels, then, both construct fictionalized versions of real, historical people and, in turn, self-reflexively explore the processes and means of that construction. Discussing *How to Be Both*, Huber and Funk point out: “On what one could call

its surface realism, the novel is meticulous in its numerous historical and particularly ekphrastic references. Several of the surviving paintings by Francesco del Cossa are described in detail, and the few facts known about the painter's life are faithfully adhered to" (158-159). Yet, the "Eyes" section of the novel "goes beyond what is known [about del Cossa] and is thus both: a translation of a life during the Renaissance and an original which enriches history, opening it up for alternative ways to imagine the world. Engaging with a character in a novel who really existed in the actual world creates the storyworld as a counter reality that puts to test the certainties of history" (Liebermann 144).

What is more, an untranslated excerpt from Francesco del Cossa's letter to the Duke of Ferrara – wherein he, interestingly, refers to himself as "francescho" – serves as one of the epigraphs to Smith's novel. The epigraph foregrounds the novel's multi-referentiality and problematizes the relationship between Francesco del Cossa, the historical person, and Francescho, a fictionalized version of that historical person. As Liebermann notes, "Positioning a quote from a historical document in an epigraph of a book which then features this historical figure as a fictional character, while also contesting some basic assumptions about said historical figure – as, for example, its sex – lays bare the slippery boundary between reality and fiction" (144). Moreover, the numerous ekphrastic descriptions of del Cossa's existing artwork are supplemented with just as detailed and vivid a description of Francescho's painting of Marsyas, the only difference between them being the fact that *Marsyas* is a figment of Smith's imagination. As Ranger points out, "Comparing the real and the fictional [art] is not simply a literary game here, but a contrast that asks the reader to reflect on the construction of fiction, and the fictionality of reality itself" (410).

In a similar vein, *Orlando* self-consciously declares itself to be a biography. Yet, while parts of it are, indeed, factual, as it includes details about the life and family history of Vita Sackville-West, the novel diminishes biography's and, by extension, history's, claim to factuality by insistently combining real-world reference with fictional and fantastical elements, thus turning into a parody of what it claims to be. As Spiropoulou points out, "Orlando's single name and life-expectancy, the *non-sequitur* logic of events, and the genre of magic realism in which the novel's style is inscribed, undermine any belief in the truth of the story" despite the fact that Woolf's "fiction [is modelled] on a 'real' person" (76). In other words, Woolf "confound[s] the codes of distinction between story and history. She attempts to confer a credibility on the existence of these fictional characters [e.g. by including their pictures in the novel] while simultaneously she 'derealizes' historically existing persons" (Spiropoulou 76-

77). In a similar vein, excerpts from existing literary and non-literary texts such as *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Rape of the Lock*, and *The Spectator* are included in the narrative as direct citations, yet, on the other hand, so are excerpts from partially destroyed “historical” resources on Orlando’s life (Woolf 135, 80).

In this sense, both novels can be said to combine and alternate between a number of different kinds of reference: from metafictional autoreferentiality and intertextual referencing of both historical texts and works of fiction, to (a problematized version of) extra-textual reference, and even a kind of feigned intertextuality (e.g. *Marsyas*, the biographer’s “historical” sources). When a novel’s fictional characters are, at the same time, historical figures and the text references both real fictional texts and made-up factual texts, the result is a kind of “ontological confusion” (Hutcheon 153), wherein it is increasingly difficult for the reader to discern which realm of existence – fictive or real; (inter)textual or extra-textual – the text is referring to at any given point. It is in this sense that the novels can be said to both highlight and subvert their “mimetic engagement with the world” and thus challenge “any simple notions of realism or reference” (Hutcheon 20). In a sentiment applicable to both discussed novels, George notes of one of del Cossa’s paintings: “After this painting [the other ones] look flat and old-fashioned, as if they’re stale dramas and pretending to be real. This one at least admits the whole thing’s a performance” (A. Smith 156).

### 3.2. Being Both

The title of Smith’s novel alludes to its focus on layering and multiplicity – of gender, narrative structure, time, truth, point of view, etc. The plot of the novel functions as an exploration of the relationship between the past and the present, which intertwine through (indirect) interactions between George and Francescho, but also through both characters’ interactions with their own pasts. The end of “Camera” is marked by an unexpected intrusion by the thus far covert 3<sup>rd</sup>-person narrator: “This is the point in this story at which, according to its structure so far, a friend enters or a door opens or some kind of plot surfaces [...] this is the place in this book where a spirit of twist in the tale has tended, in the past, to provide a friendly nudge forward to whatever’s coming next” (A. Smith 182). The narrator proceeds to describe a number of events that will happen in George’s future, only to abruptly end the proleptic episode with another interjection: “But none of the above has happened. Not yet, anyway. For



now, in the present tense, George sits in the gallery and looks at one of the old paintings on the wall” (A. Smith 185-186).

The proleptic episode is the only part of the story which is recounted both in “Eyes” and in “Camera”; it is the point where the two narratives overlap. Huber and Funk note that “the painter’s narrative [...] precedes George’s part historically [but] Francescho’s narration chronologically follows that of George (irrespective of what its actual position in the novel might be)” (160). While Francescho’s narrative does function as a continuation of George’s, because of the frequent jumps between different pasts and presents in both narratives, there is also an inevitable kind of flux of temporalities. Since the proleptic episode “anticipates everything that happens in Francescho’s deictic present [...] Francescho’s present becomes belated, reiterating a future that has already been forecast” (Huber 99). According to Huber, “The point of all these temporal entanglements is surely to present a complex picture in which events and narratives can be past and present and even future all at the same time [and] in which each present is charged with multiple layers of past and future” (99). The proleptic episode, then, foregrounds the interconnectedness of past, present, and future, as well as the two narratives, which can be said to “operate in a relation of simultaneity that is not simply simultaneous [but] is rather a simultaneity that is both before and after, both cause and effect, co-temporal and co-causal” (Lewis 137).

The frescoes in Palazzo Schifanoia mirror the novel’s tendency towards simultaneity (or is it the other way around?). They are layered physically, consisting of underdrawings and the surface of the fresco, but also in terms of their composition, as “[t]hings happen right at the front of the pictures and at the same time they continue happening, both separately and connectedly, behind” (A. Smith 53), as well as their plural meanings, which can be “objectively present, or only subjectively present, or both” (Ranger 409). Emphasizing that it is possible to “be both,” the frescoes, much like Smith’s novel, “tell a story, but tell it more than one way at once, and tell another underneath it up-rising through the skin of it” (A. Smith 237).

Moreover, there is great emphasis on visuality and double or multiple vision in Smith’s novel. Motifs of eyes and seeing or watching are a constant in both sections, as are ekphrastic descriptions of visual art, which are often repeated from different points of view, providing different interpretations or readings of the art. Relatedly, Smith’s novel does not provide its reader with a clear-cut, unambiguous answer to questions about the relationship between its two narratives, but leaves the matter open to interpretation, as if saying “no one’s sure exactly

[...] it could be one or the other” (A. Smith 135) – after all, it would be against the ethos of the story not to actively resist being put into a single box. Each of the novel’s two reversible narratives can be seen as both the story and the other side of the story, leaving it to the reader to decide which, if either, of the narratives functions as the underdrawing and which of them as the surface of the fresco. By treating both parts of the novel as equal, entitling both “one” and thus not giving either of them primacy, Smith can be said to redistribute narrative authority in such a way that, in the end, neither narrative can justifiably be taken as more important than the other. As Emma Smith points out, this kind of approach can be said to subvert the “systems of power [that] operate behind a textual structure in which one narrative ‘oversees’ another, in which certain stories are brought to the center or pushed to the margins” (84). Once again, the structure of Ali Smith’s novel mirrors its content and vice versa.

It is also telling, relating to multiple points of view, that Francescho’s depiction of Saint Lucy, who is usually portrayed “blind or eyeless and many painters give her eyes but not in her face, instead they put them on a platter or set them in the palm of her hand,” has both her own eyes and is holding another pair “on a sprig in her hand, eyes opening at the end of the sprig like flowers will” (A. Smith 346). Francescho notes of the painting: “I let her keep all her eyes, I did not want to deprive her of any” (A. Smith 346). On the one hand, Lucy’s two pairs of eyes imply a kind of double vision – the ability to see things from different perspectives; to see multiply, simultaneously. Yet, what is more, as Fatma Bilge has pointed out, a play on the homonymic relationship between the words *eye* and *I* suggests another level of meaning (117-118). Francescho letting Saint Lucy keep all her eyes/I’s thus becomes a sentiment which is not only representative of the recurring motif of multiple vision, but which also serves as a comment on the multiplicity of identity – gender or otherwise. As Ranger points out, in Smith’s novel “words, images and artefacts are all at least doubly encoded, effecting a dissolution of Enlightenment-derived binaries of being and knowing (boy/girl, art/life, history/fiction) that reclaims and celebrates the space between strictly defined identities and categories” (414).

To sum up, Woolf and Smith alike challenge ideas of essential, fixed gender identities and single truths about the past reachable through (historical) narrative representation. The novels’ “fascination with liminal boundaries between reality and fiction, truth and lies” and combining of “realist and non-realist narrative conventions” points to their shared tendency to question “overarching meta-narratives” (Germanà and Horton 4) – the “deceived” notions of

gender and history. Both Orlando and Francescho are liminal characters, existing in states of vacillation or bothness, not only in terms of their gender identities, but also as fictional characters based on real people. Yet, there is a notable difference in how their narrativization is approached. In *Orlando*, the more parodically charged text, the emphasis is on the biographer persistently trying (and humorously failing) to get to or even to construct the singular Truth about Orlando's life and character, despite the lack of reliable sources, the shortcomings of narrative representation, and Orlando's many selves. *Orlando*, then, focuses primarily on self-consciously undermining the truthfulness and objectivity of dominant historical and biographical discourses by means of parody.

On the other hand, while acknowledging "the problematic nature of using narrative to convey accurate representations of history," *How to Be Both* also demonstrates "that narrative is a valuable system for conveying personal, subjective history" (Frangipane 569). A possible version of Francesco del Cossa's life is imagined as a kind of exercise in empathy, in seeing plurally, and as a means of providing a voice, albeit an imagined one, for someone largely missing from official history. In what Hutcheon might call its "pluralizing multivalency of points of view" (161), Smith's novel emphasizes the value of multiplicity, layering, overlapping, intertwining; of the simultaneous co-existence and validity of different identities, temporalities, voices, and ways of seeing and, consequently, different truths and stories.

At one point in the novel, Francescho states that they are painting "an unofficial portrait" of a friend "since official versions are never true" (A. Smith 367). Expanding on that, the narrativization of Orlando's life in Woolf's novel can be seen as a parodic, subversive comment on the nature of official portraits, while Francescho's narrative in *How to Be Both* functions as an unofficial one.

#### 4. Conclusion

As this paper has attempted to illustrate, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* view gender and narrative representations of the past as social constructs. A performative understanding of gender and, in turn, a rejection of the idea of an essential, unchanging gender identity, can be recognized in both novels. Normative heterosexuality and binary configurations of gender and sex are undermined in each of the narratives through an exploration of alternative ways of performing gender. Moreover, in line with the tendencies of historiographic metafiction, the process of narrativization through which the past is represented

and, thus, comes to be known by the present is, in both novels, problematized through a self-reflexive consideration of the construction of fictional and non-fictional narratives. Consequently, the existence of a single truth about the past that history can objectively represent is challenged.

Viewed together, the novels also illustrate a certain development of ideas relating to gender and history. Despite the multiplicity of his/her differently gendered selves, Orlando still tends to vacillate between two clearly demarcated categories of gender, performing either femininity or masculinity. On the other hand, Francescho can be said to simultaneously perform a kind of combination of both, in a step further towards a denaturalization of distinct, binary genders. Finally, while Woolf's novel focuses mainly on subverting the received notion of history through parody, Smith's novel acknowledges the shortcomings of historical narrative representation, but also consistently emphasizes the value of individual, subjective truths and (hi)stories through its exploration of various kinds of simultaneity or bothness.

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## Abstract

The discussion provided in this paper focuses on two distinct, but interrelated issues: gender and historical narrative representation. Arguing that both Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) and Ali Smith's *How to Be Both* (2014) view gender and narrative representations of the past as social constructs, the paper analyses their similar approaches to each of those issues through the lens of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity and Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction. The paper first illustrates how a performative understanding of gender can be recognized in both novels and then proceeds to explore their respective ways of challenging normative heterosexuality and fixed, binary configurations of gender and sex. The recurring motif of clothes, as well as themes of physical transformations, malleable gender identities, and alternative ways of performing gender are central to this part of the discussion. Further, a connection is established between the two novels and historiographic metafiction. In this regard, the paper discusses the novels' use of various metafictional strategies, illustrates how they serve to problematize the process of narrativization through which the past is represented and comes to be known by the present, and comes to the conclusion that both novels undermine the existence of a single truth about the past that history can objectively represent. Following on from this, the exploration of various kinds of simultaneity or "bothness" in Smith's novel is examined. Finally, the discussion is concluded by highlighting how the novels' respective approaches to gender and history serve to illustrate a development of ideas relating to each of those issues.

**Key words:** gender performativity, historiographic metafiction, narrative representation, simultaneity, Virginia Woolf, Ali Smith