



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago  
Loyola eCommons

---

English: Faculty Publications and Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by  
Department

---

2010

## "Passing" and Identity: A Literary Perspective on Gender and Sexual Diversity

Pamela L. Caughie

Loyola University Chicago, [pcaughi@luc.edu](mailto:pcaughi@luc.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [https://ecommons.luc.edu/english\\_facpubs](https://ecommons.luc.edu/english_facpubs)



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Caughie, Pamela L. "Passing' and Identity: A Literary Perspective on Gender and Sexual Diversity." *God, Science, Sex, Gender: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Christian Ethics*. Ed. Patricia Jung & Aana Vigen. University of Illinois Press, 2010.

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in English: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact [ecommons@luc.edu](mailto:ecommons@luc.edu).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).  
Copyright © 2010 Pamela L. Caughie

## **“Passing” and Identity: A Literary Perspective on Gender and Sexual Diversity**

Pamela L. Caughie

From the idea that the self is not given to us, I think that there is only one practical consequence: we have to create ourselves as a work of art.  
(Michel Foucault, “On the Genealogy of Ethics” 351)

Sex, French historian Michel Foucault tells us, has a history. And gender, I would add, has a rhetoric. My goal in this chapter is to bring literature and gender theory into our discussions of sexual diversity and gender identity. The interdisciplinary nature of this anthology reminds us of the importance of defining our concepts; for we don’t all mean the same thing by even the most commonsense terms, such as *truth* or *identity*.

For the literary scholar as for the gender theorist, truth is what makes sense in terms of a particular narrative. What is true is not simply that which corresponds to the real; rather, what is true is *what is accepted as being true* within a given discourse, institution, or discipline. Unlike biologists, literary scholars don’t ask “Is it true?” but “How is it true?” This question requires interrogating the normative standards by which claims of truth, authenticity, and legitimacy are established. And that means learning to read people the way many of us have learned to read literature, taking into account the discursive structures, the narrative conventions, the character assignments, and the historical and social contexts within which narratives operate.

From a literary perspective, then, gender and sexual identity depend upon the narrative tropes we have available for representing our experiences. Tropes are figures of speech which, when repeated in cultural narratives and across disciplines, can easily become “naturalized” so that the figure becomes the “ground.” Or, as Foucault puts it, what we assume to be the origin or “real thing” is an *effect* produced by discourse (specialized knowledge). Building on the work of

Foucault, the contemporary gender theorists discussed below argue that gender is a rhetorical and linguistic construction, making this theory all the more compatible with literary studies.

Anne Fausto-Sterling, Professor of Biology and Gender Studies at Brown University, writes:

European and American culture is deeply devoted to the idea that there are only two sexes. Even our language refuses other possibilities [...]. But if the state and legal system has an interest in maintaining only two sexes, our collective biological bodies do not. While male and female stand on the extreme ends of a biological continuum, there are many other bodies [...] that evidently mix together anatomical components conventionally attributed to both males and females. [...] If nature really offers us more than two sexes, then it follows that our current notions of masculinity and femininity are cultural *conceits*. (“Two Sexes Are Not Enough”, my italics)

Fausto-Sterling’s assertion that gender is a conceit, an extended metaphor or cultural trope, echoes scholars in other fields. For example, in “The Egg and the Sperm,” Emily Martin, an anthropologist of science, argues that culture shapes our understanding of nature. Analyzing accounts of fertilization in biology textbooks for their metaphoric language, Martin exposes the normative assumptions about gender that structure descriptions of natural processes. Eggs behave “femininely” (they are passive and dependent), sperms “masculinely” (they are active, even aggressive). When we think we are learning about natural processes, Martin says, we are actually learning about cultural beliefs “as if they were part of nature” (485) and so cultural assumptions about masculinity and femininity appear natural (486). While the biologist (Fausto-Sterling) argues that cultural notions of gender are based upon an erroneous concept of sex, the anthropologist (Martin) argues that descriptions of sex are thoroughly imbued with cultural assumptions about gender. That is, the two notions of identity—as sex and as gender—can never be clearly distinguished, nor can we escape the implications of metaphoric language.

“It may seem only natural to those who equate gender with biology,” writes Susan Bordo in *The Male Body*, “that the presence of a penis would confirm that the body who has it is male”

(23). Bordo uses a scene from Neil Jordan's film *The Crying Game* to make us rethink the tendency to equate gender with biology. Dil, a male-to-female transsexual who has not had sexual reassignment surgery (SRS), goes home with Fergus, an unsuspecting IRA agent who has fallen for her. When Dil disrobes, Fergus vomits at the sight of the penis on the woman he desires. Dil's body creates what Marjorie Garber terms "category crisis"<sup>1</sup>; for despite the penis, Dil is still a girl, Bordo writes, "according to the cultural grammar of gender" (23)—that is, her dress, her body type, her walk, her speech, in short, her performance of femininity. Bordo's point is that "the body [is] not only a physical entity" but also "a cultural form that carries *meaning* with it" (26). "The way we experience our bodies is powerfully affected by the cultural metaphors that are available to us. [. . .] Whatever the input of biology, culture is always present, providing language and categories to help interpret that input" (38-39).

Bordo suggests that cultural conceits interpret a prior sexed reality. Judith Butler argues instead that gender precedes sex. Butler's *Gender Trouble* challenges the notion of sex as primary or prior, the idea that sexual identity exists before culture. "*Gender is a kind of imitation for which there is no original,*" Butler asserts, using "catechresis," a figure of speech for which there is no literal referent ("Imitation" 127). Following Foucault, Butler argues that to be sexed is to be subject to the law, that is, to discourses that categorize sex. There is no doer behind the deed, but rather, the deed creates the doer (142). This is known as the theory of performativity.<sup>2</sup>

The power, if not priority, of cultural conceits is exposed by other feminist philosophers. Marilyn Frye, for example, has argued that the demand for two distinct sexes requires that we insistently and continually announce our sex: "One must be female or male, actively," she says, asserting our sex again and again, through costume and performance (26). In doing so, we collude with the medical, legal, psychiatric, and philosophical discourses that create a world of

sex dimorphism, “a world in which it seems to us that we *could* never mistake a woman for a man or a man for a woman” (26), the kind of mistake that makes Fergus retch.

Sandra Lee Bartky makes a similar point in discussing “feminine bodily discipline.” “Discipline,” as Foucault defines it, is an imposed system of authority that produces a subject who is subjected to institutionalized forms of knowledge (Bartky 37). Dieting is one such disciplinary practice that “produce[s] a modality of embodiment that is peculiarly feminine” (27). It is not that dieting is always and only a “form of subjection,” Bartky says, but that “it is not always easy in the case of women to distinguish what is done for the sake of physical fitness from what is done in obedience to the requirements of femininity” (29). The fact that we do not formally punish women who do not comply, writes Bartky, “does not mean that a woman who is unable or unwilling to submit herself to the appropriate body discipline will face no sanctions at all” (38). (One sanction, she notes, is “the refusal of male patronage,” which can have severe consequences, such as the loss of intimacy and income potential.) Disciplinary practices become internalized, incorporated into the “structure of the self,” thereby producing a form of psychic oppression or self-policing, but also—and importantly—providing the individual with a sense of identity, a “sense of oneself as a distinct and valuable individual” (38).

So what feminism is really calling for in resisting forms of oppression is women’s relinquishment of a certain sense of identity. Not just our beliefs or our politics, but our very identity as women, and men, is at stake in feminist resistance to disciplinary regimes that produce femininity and masculinity. Insofar as one must have a sexed identity, that one must *be* male or female actively, as Frye says, any political project that seeks to dismantle the sex/gender system will be a threat to identity. No wonder feminism is so menacing to so many people.

The transgender movement, as Fausto-Sterling and others argue, can potentially provide a means of resisting disciplinary practices that insist on a dimorphic system of gender. To effect a sexual revolution, transgender theory, Bartky says, must re-conceptualize sexual difference itself. “Femininity as a certain ‘style of the flesh,’” she says, “will have to be surpassed in the direction of something quite different—not masculinity, which is in many ways only its mirror opposite, but a radical and as yet unimagined transformation of the [gendered] body” (40). That transformation is transgender.<sup>3</sup>

Yet some gender theorists, such as Bernice Hausman, argue that the transgendered person may reinforce normative assumptions about gender and sex that feminist and gender scholars want to challenge. The demand that we recognize more diversity in human sexuality and gender identity can serve to buttress the notion that gender is essential to society and to personal identity. Similarly, the argument that transsexuals should have access to medical procedures as a way of aligning one’s body with one’s felt identity has sparked debate. Some argue that a truly inclusive society would make such surgeries unnecessary, others that using an illness model for transsexuals (where they are seen to have an ailment that requires treatment) risks pathologizing the condition.<sup>4</sup> Where Jay Prosser says that treatments such as SRS produce new narratives of the body that “allow the transsexual individual to emerge as a subject,” Hausman responds that the illness model of transsexualism ends up changing the body to comply with the narratives, reinforcing rather than dismantling the sex/gender system (471).

Feminists and gender theorists like Bordo, Hausman and Bartky seek to challenge the gendered meanings attached to bodies and “embodied practices”; these theorists conceive gender as an analytic concept, not as some truth about the body. Gender, writes Hausman; “is always only a mode of perceiving and experiencing the world that is attributed and *narrativized*” (476;

my italics). While transgender theorists who argue for SRS strive to make bodies more coherent within the current social organization, feminist gender theorists work to transform that organization in such a way as “to loosen its grip on our bodies” (Hausman 485).

It is Michel Foucault who is, perhaps, the best-known theorist of sex and sexuality and whose work informs many of the theories presented above. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault argues that “sex” is a complex idea that is produced by a range of social and discursive practices. “The notion of ‘sex’,” writes Foucault, “made it possible to group together, in an artificial unity, anatomical elements, biological functions, conducts, sensations, pleasures; and it enabled one to make use of this fictitious unity as a causal principle, an omnipresent meaning, a secret to be discovered everywhere” (154). Foucault doesn’t deny biological sex and sexual organs; rather, he is saying that in the nineteenth century a range of very different things were grouped together under the category of “sex”: biological distinctions, body parts, psychological reactions, social meanings. In other words, Foucault acknowledges that certain biological sexual identities and sex organs predominately appear in some specific forms more than others. For example, biological male and female human beings, each with their respective and specific sex organs, are found more often in nature than transgendered males or females or individuals with ambiguous genitalia. Many natural scientists refer to these predominant types existing in nature as “wild types.”

However, and more importantly, Foucault shows how sex came to be treated as fundamental to the *identity* of the individual (“homosexual” and “heterosexual” came to name identities rather than simply to distinguish practices). Then, after this artificial unity is in place, it becomes the *cause* for the very things that had been grouped together to create the concept in the first place. Something posited becomes the secret to uncover, the key to identity or behavior.

Thus, far from being something natural that the Victorians repressed, Foucault says, “sex” was produced, talked about everywhere in various nineteenth-century discourses. (Surprisingly, perhaps, Joan Roughgarden offered a similar insight in a seminar gathering that preceded the writing of these chapters when she remarked, “The wild type may be a myth that we’re burdened with.”)

In 1980 Foucault published *Herculine Barbin*, the memoirs of a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite whose life story became the subject of medical discourses dating from 1865. *Herculine Barbin* also contains several medical reports published in that decade, along with a scandalous fictional account published in Germany in 1893 by Oscar Panizza. It thus serves as an excellent text for illustrating the different ways sexual identity is “narrativized.” Foucault opens this work with a provocative question: “Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?” (vii). The reiteration of *true* already raises doubts.

As a historian, Foucault responds by tracing changes in how hermaphrodites (intersexuals in today’s language) have been treated by law and in medicine. In the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, he says, the one who named the child (typically the godfather) chose the sex at the time of baptism, but upon reaching adulthood and before entering upon marriage, the individual could decide which sex he/she preferred, the only stipulation being that the sex couldn’t be changed again later. Yet in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, “biological theories of sexuality, juridical conceptions of the individual, forms of administrative control” (such as birth certificates), and moral theories aligned not just to determine but to *necessitate* a “true” sex (xiii). Individual choice gave way to medical, legal, or moral expertise.

Challenges—legal, political, social—to sexual dimorphism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had a profound effect on concepts of sexual identity. “Homosexuals,”



only recently named (c. 1870), were showing up in ever increasing numbers, notes Alice Dreger, and the rise of gynecology and more medical attention meant more hermaphrodites were being discovered as well. Around the same time, Freud was challenging the sacrosanct nineteenth-century belief in a natural, biologically rooted sexual dimorphism by posing a universal bisexuality in children. In the 1910s, anthropologists were writing about the Native American “Berdache,” men living and dressing as women.<sup>5</sup> By the 1920s, transsexual surgery was being performed in Germany (Meyerowitz). On the social scene, women were advocating for equal rights and access to the professions and universities, and the “new woman,” a cultural icon of this era, was cutting her hair, wearing pants, smoking in public, playing sports, and traveling alone, challenging notions of femininity. No wonder Virginia Woolf wrote in 1929, “No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own” (*A Room of One’s Own* 99). In response, doctors, anxious over the increasing instability of sexual identities and worried that “physical sexual confusion” could “amplify social sexual confusion,” offered various definitions of sex meant to maintain clearly demarcated lines between two sexes and thereby stem confusion (Dreger 6, 10).

A highly publicized trial in Britain in 1929 captures the anxiety at this time over changing understandings of sexual and gender identity as well as an emerging sense of identity as something one *acquires* rather than something one *is*. Colonel Victor Barker, alias Valerie Arkell-Smith, was tried for perjury in 1929 for passing as a man. In this case, the identity of her “true” sex was not in dispute, nor was her sexuality the legal issue, even though she was married to a woman. The perjury trial centered instead on what we now call gender identity, raising questions about how to classify this anomalous woman. Was she a sexual invert? A pervert? A “new woman”? The spectacle of Arkell-Smith, with closely cropped hair and forced to wear a

dress throughout the trial, testifying that she had always felt herself to be a man before a male judge wearing a gown and a wig of curls must have struck witnesses even then as perverse. Add to this that the trial took place at a time when the androgynous fashions of the day (pants for women, the Sheik look for men) and the "new woman" were arousing anxiety over what were thought to be clear-cut sex differences and we can see that whatever the outcome of Arkell-Smith's trial for fraud, the trial itself exposed the fraudulence of the sex/gender system.<sup>6</sup>

In "Passing as Modernism," I argue that "passing" (the strategic adoption of a culturally empowered identity, as in passing as white or passing as a man) is the peculiar identification at the heart of turn-of-the-century modernism. The fluidity of identity boundaries that we have come to identify with our contemporary era has as much to do with the historical conditions of the early twentieth century as with recent (trans)gender theory. Insofar as all passing is marked by a discrepancy between what one professes to be and how one is actually positioned in a society, institution, or discourse, it mimes the *experience* of identity in a world in which, as evidenced above, boundaries of all kinds were being crossed. Passing, in my use, signifies the *dynamics* of identity and identification—the social, cultural, and psychological processes by which a subject comes to understand his or her identity in relation to others. Although passing is often understood as fraudulence or betrayal, as a sin against authenticity, authenticity is itself a historically-specific concept, one whose meaning and value were being challenged in the modernist era. If authenticity and identity are cultural conceits, not truths, then we can rethink "passing." Whereas some might argue that a "passer" like Arkell-Smith lived a lie, I would say instead that she *refused* to live a conventional fiction.

While we might agree, says Foucault, that one could "adopt a sex that is not biologically his [or her] own" (x), as transsexuals do, such a possibility does not dispel the belief in a true

sex, nor does it undo the “essential relationships between sex and truth” (x). It is precisely this relationship between identity (sexual or racial) and truth that makes “passing” seem morally and politically reprehensible, and that leads people to condemn passing as deceit or fraud. We may no longer believe that a feminine man or a masculine woman or same-sex relations are crimes, Foucault says, but we retain “the suspicion that they are fictions, which, whether involuntary or self-indulgent, [...] it would be better to dispel” (x). A reading of *Herculine Barbin*, along with Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel, *Orlando*, supports the view that sexual identities are, indeed, fictions, or in Roughgarden’s words, “myths that we are burdened with.”

In brief, here is the story of Alexina, a nineteenth-century French hermaphrodite, whose life was the subject of much medical and legal discussion and of whom Foucault writes in *Herculine Barbin*. After her father dies when she is very young and her mother can’t afford to support her, Alexina spends her childhood and youth in various convents and Catholic schools. Initially Alexina feels her difference from the other girls because of her social class. It is not until her adolescence that she begins to be aware of her physical difference from the other girls: e.g., a certain “hardness” of features, excessive body hair, a “ridiculously thin” build. Later she describes the terrible physical pain she suffers from time to time that eventually leads to the discovery of her anatomical difference. She is “instinctively ashamed of the enormous distance that separated me from them, physically speaking” (26), and when she is sent off to a Catholic normal school to become a teacher, she shudders upon entering the room filled with other young women in training, overcome by “sensations” that she says she blamed herself for “like a crime” (26, 33). Such shame and guilt are the moral consequences of disciplinary practices that “produce a modality of embodiment” (Bartky 27) that must be either feminine or masculine.

At her first teaching position, Alexina meets Sara, another young teacher. The two women share an intense emotional and physical bond, what in the nineteenth-century was referred to as “romantic friendship” and later would be stigmatized as “lesbianism.”<sup>7</sup> Their physical intimacy leads to Alexina’s identity crisis, as we might call it today. She feels guilty about their intimacy, but then defends herself by saying that the fault wasn’t hers but was due to those physical sensations she couldn’t resist. That is, the intimacy was “pure” because involuntary, not a matter of conscious choice. When we read the medical reports published at the end of the text, we learn that Alexina’s physical features meant that penetration had likely occurred.<sup>8</sup> “What, in the natural order of things, ought to have separated us in the world had united us,” Alexina writes (51). Here the nature of their relationship confounds the binary system of sexual and gender identity. Alexina admits to being Sara’s “lover” (52), but was the “crime” that Alexina defends herself against that of same-sex sexual relations, or illegitimate heterosexual relations? Alexina feels guilty because she was, as she puts it, “usurping a place [...] that human and divine laws forbade” (52), making the crime less about sexual relations than about gender identity. As with the shifting adjectives and pronouns she uses to refer to herself in the original French version, the language of sexual relations eludes her as well, not just because the subject was taboo but because its nature was “impossible.”<sup>9</sup>

Alexina ends up “confessing” her “false situation” three times, presenting different moral scenarios for responding to such sexual indeterminacy. She first confesses to the curé of the parish where her school is located, a man she detests for his power over the schoolteachers. He is horrified by her confession and responds with insults and scorn, grudgingly pardoning her (55). Her second confession is to an unknown priest in the town where she attends a retreat. He too is astonished by her confession but responds more indulgently. He recognizes that she is now

“entitled” to call herself a man, but to make this claim publicly would create a “scandal,” while continuing to pass as female in her current position is also impossible. Thus, he advises her to “withdraw from the world and become a nun” (62). While the first priest’s “unspeakable moral code” (55) allows no compassion for what is outside the bounds of legitimate discourse, the second priest is no less culpable in Alexina’s eyes for his “don’t ask, don’t tell” solution.

Eventually Alexina’s physical sufferings grow so intense that she agrees to have Sara’s mother, in whose home she lives, send for a doctor. The doctor, shocked to discover what we learn later was the presence of testes, advises the mother to send Alexina away, thereby freeing himself of any responsibility. Alexina is as disgusted by his failure of duty as she was by the curé’s scorn. “His duty traced out another line of conduct for him,” she writes. “In such a circumstance, indecision was not permitted; it was a grave fault, not only morally but in the eyes of the law” (70). The two-sex system has moral as well as legal consequences, or rather, as Fausto-Sterling puts it, moral and legal discourses demand two sexes so that clear lines of appropriate behavior may be drawn. One must choose “a true sex.” When it comes to sexual identity, indecision is not permitted.

The doctor’s moral failing leads Alexina to confess a third time. This time the priest consults with his doctor, “a man of science in the full sense of the word” (77), and together these “experts” plan a course of action to “rectify” Alexina’s civil status (78). Alexina’s legal, if not bodily, identity is changed from female to male. But whether in legal language (to rectify an error) or medical language (to correct a disability), changing the sexual identity complies with the sex/gender system rather than interrogating it.

On the one hand, Alexina feels it was her “duty” to reveal her physical condition to the authorities; on the other hand, she feels even this solution is wrong because her change in status

“offend[s] all the laws of conventional behavior” (79): “Was it likely that society, which is so severe, so blind in its judgments, would give me credit for an impulse that might ‘pass’ for honesty? Wouldn’t people try to falsify it instead and treat it as if it were a crime on my part?” (79). The ambiguity of “it” exposes the impossibility of this choice. Is the impulse that might pass for honesty the impulse to confess her difference, or the impulse that led her to act sexually on that difference? Where’s the crime: engaging in sexual relations of an ambiguous moral as well as physical nature, or defying conventional behavior by failing to have a “true” sex? Alexina’s confessions expose the limitations of “imaginary conceptions,” the lack of cultural conceits, that might allow for the possibility of a different truth. She refers to herself as “I, who am called a man” (107), unable or unwilling to embrace that identity but no longer able to deny it. “Dissembling,” she says, was no longer possible. But dissembling what? Is she now “passing” as a man, or was she “passing” as a woman before?

As a man, Alexina (now called Abel) has trouble finding work.<sup>10</sup> As she quips at one point, in discussing her past work experience, “Abel” could hardly say he had been a schoolmistress and a lady’s maid. Her experiences are that of a woman, her legal identity that of a man. As a result, Alexina suffers terrible poverty and isolation. The narrative ends with Alexina’s decision to accept a job as a waiter’s assistant on a ship bound for the U.S., although it’s unclear if she ever sailed. Alexina killed herself in Paris in February 1868.

Although in the fictional story based on Alexina’s life, “A Scandal at the Convent,” the “scandal” is the discovery of a male body in the convent, Alexina says that her very life is a scandal (99). What’s scandalous is having no “true sex” in a culture that insists on such a distinction, and in a culture structured by binary gender. Her isolation is signified by new pronouns in the closing pages, where she refers to herself as “you” and “it.” The pronoun “it” in

particular brings out into strong relief the very insight of contemporary gender theory: namely, that one cannot be a “person” outside the discourses of gender. Alexina literally cannot name herself or convey her “true” experiences not because they are *outside* the laws of conventional behavior, as she puts it, but precisely because they are structured *by* those laws, by a “cultural grammar of gender.”

In this narrative the language of deception and fraudulence (the traditional notion of “passing”) is tied to what is beyond belief, what hasn’t been narrated. That is, the moral failing is not the fault of the individual but a failure of language, and thus of the cultural imagination. The notion of a “true” sex is the real scandal, as Foucault suggests when he asks, “Do we *truly* need a *true* sex?” Alexina’s identity is not fraudulent, based on a misrepresentation or suppression of the truth; rather, in her case, the truth “goes beyond all imaginary conceptions” (87), and thus is “unreal,” unbelievable. It’s not, I would argue, that we need more identity categories so we might get the labels right; what we need are more imaginary conceptions, more life-sustaining fictions. Alexina has no “true” sex at the end; instead, as a man, she is living a conventional fiction, a role that kills her.

We may not be able to get rid of the category of sex altogether, as some feminist theorists argue, but we can investigate how the category of sex came to be discursively defined and how (not what) it *means*—socially, legally, rhetorically. This is where the concepts of *transgender* and *passing*, can prove helpful. For *trans*, like *passing*, is a dynamic, a movement; and while these terms are often read as connoting movement from one identity category to another, whether legitimately or fraudulently, I suggest that they be read as defying the notion of fixed categories or bounded identities, as Woolf’s novel can illustrate.

I first published on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) twenty years ago in an essay that I realize now was about the rhetoric of transgender. Written for Woolf's bisexual friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West, *Orlando* is a mock biography of a character who lives for nearly four centuries, changing from a man to a woman at the turn of the eighteenth century. The novel isn't just a story about a transsexual (the eponymous protagonist); the novel also disrupts, rhetorically, sex dimorphism. For the rhetoric of *Orlando* is as unstable as the sex of Orlando.<sup>11</sup>

The novel opens in the sixteenth century with Orlando as a young boy practicing his swordsmanship and ends in 1928 with Orlando as a young woman shopping at Selfridges. The opening words of the novel upset our certainty about anything in this text. We read, "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex," and immediately our doubt is aroused. The emphasis on what should be obvious makes it seem unnatural; the emphasis on an innocent pronoun makes it suspect. Long before any sex change is ever anticipated in the plot of the novel, that declarative sentence arouses uncertainty about what even fiction takes to be real: namely, sexual identity.

The sexual and textual indeterminacy of this narrative links language and identity. Orlando is associated with writing throughout. She writes the same poem for nearly four centuries; she is read like a book by the narrator, her fictional biographer (25); and she refers to herself as in the "process of fabrication" (175). That is, the novel is a text about writing, about constructing lives, histories, identities, and fictions. Thus, it encourages us to read Orlando's transsexualism not in terms of some notion of a "true" sex, but in terms of the relation between language and identity. One must assume a sexual identity in order to take one's place in language, yet we have no pronouns available for any indeterminate sex. Thus does grammar reinforce the two-sex system.<sup>12</sup> Woolf brings out the arbitrariness of that identity, and of language itself, not just through Orlando's sex change but through her own shifting rhetoric in



this novel. Transsexualism in *Orlando* calls into question both conventional assumptions about sexual identity and conventional assumptions about language. The point of the vacillating rhetoric and the epicene protagonist of Woolf's novel is that language and identity are learned together. One famous passage from the novel, the famous clothes philosophy passage, most clearly makes this point.

Now a woman and living in the eighteenth century, Orlando in this chapter is becoming acutely aware of her new sex as she faces a legal challenge to her property rights, as she parries the sexual advances of the Archduke, and as she contends with "the coil of skirts about her legs" (153). Initially unchanged by the sex change, or so the narrator says, in the eighteenth century Orlando is assuming a more feminine identity. The narrator writes: "The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem [...] they change our view of the world and the world's view of us" (187). According to this philosophy, our identity is as changeable as our apparel. Clothes make the man, or in this case, the woman.

The difference between the sexes would seem, then, to be conventional. However, the narrator continues: "That is the view of some philosophers [...] but on the whole, we incline to another. The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but the symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and a woman's sex" (188). This is the view many contemporary memoirs by transsexuals take, that sexual difference is ontological, something "deep beneath" dictates the outward change.

But then, two sentences later, the narrator offers the statement often taken as Woolf's theory of androgyny: "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 is above” (189).<sup>13</sup> This statement contradicts the earlier assertion that Orlando was unaffected by the sex change as well as the philosophy that says we put on our identity with our clothing, but it also contradicts itself. For the narrator begins by saying that clothes are a symbol of something deep beneath, one’s “true sex,” and ends by saying that often what is deep beneath is the opposite of the outward appearance. That is, clothes are at once natural and fitting, and arbitrary and possibly deceiving. Similarly, rhetoric is seen as both a mere ornamentation of thought and as what makes a thought possible. Such contradictions are not surprising in this fantastic novel. What *is* surprising is that readers pass over the contradictions to focus on one statement as the author’s position, accepting the narrator at his word, which is to take the rhetoric of the novel for granted. Reading through the rhetoric to the author’s “true” point beneath is to privilege one understanding of rhetoric (as ornamentation) over the other offered in the novel.

Critics who accept the androgyny passage as a straightforward statement of Woolf’s philosophy of identity focus on what the novel *says*, not what it *does*. Yet in this novel, language is not *expressive* but *performative*. Every time the narrator tries to clarify the ways Orlando has changed with the sex change, he ends up making stereotypical remarks; for he can make such sexual distinctions only by relying on conventional assumptions about sexual difference. Woolf knows that any language she can use to describe Orlando is already embroiled in certain conventional assumptions about gender and identity. There is no getting outside language in discussing sexual identity, and *this* is the insight we gain from this novel, not any one theory of sexual identity. One must attend to historical context and rhetorical language in any discussion of sexual identity. There is no way that the eighteenth-century philosopher and the twentieth-

century gender theorist are talking about the “same” phenomenon when they write about human sexuality and sexual identity. For embodiment has a history as well as a style.

For me, the significance of the androgyny passage, then, is that it threatens meaning by breaking down those conventional oppositions that allow us to make meaningful distinctions. Far from doing away with sexual difference, as some readers conclude, *Orlando* enacts it, exploits it, makes a spectacle of it, thereby calling attention to its conventional and contextual “nature.” Divesting Orlando of her property and patronym in this chapter, putting both her paternity and her propriety into question, Woolf does not liberate her identity but calls attention to the categories by which identity is determined and legalized. That is, it is not that the appropriate identity is androgynous, but that the metaphor of androgyny defies the notion of an appropriate identity or “true sex.” Androgyny in *Orlando* is less a psychosexual category than a rhetorical strategy. Alexina asks, “Doesn’t the truth sometimes go beyond all imaginary conceptions?” (87) Woolf might respond, imaginary conceptions are necessary to comprehend truth.

Sex as a fiction, a cultural conceit, a grammar, a metaphor—such conceptualizations enable us to *read* sexual identity as an historically-specific narrative, making textual analysis an ethical imperative. A commonly-held view of narrative ethics assumes that stories give us versions of real-life events so that we can exercise our moral judgment, hone our skills in making ethical decisions. This view holds that we learn to make ethical judgments by learning to sympathize with others' experiences as reflected in literature. We put ourselves in "their" place and thereby come to expand our notion of what it means to be human. Ethics lies in being able to bridge the gap between our position and theirs. In this sense, literary studies serves as a “handmaiden,” so to speak, to philosophical, historical, or scientific studies.

In my writings on “passing,” however, I have suggested we rethink this common notion of narrative in order to rethink where ethics takes place in the study of literature. Woolf’s *Orlando* and Alexina’s memoir provide a different model for narrative ethics, *an ethics without identification*. What they teach us is not how to read characters as if they were people, but how to read people as if they were texts. To read through the rhetoric to the meaningful content beneath is like reading through the surface appearance to the “true sex” beneath. To read instead with attentiveness to the performative dimensions of language is to open up new imaginative possibilities that may lead to new forms of being. Literary scholar Bidy Martin writes that “our literary training ... may hold out the greatest promise for new interdisciplinary discussions since it is at [the] level of language, of metaphor, and of rhetoric that new connections across fields can begin to be imagined” (371). No longer the handmaiden, serving other disciplines, literary studies, insofar as it produces knowledge, is now one of the boys!

#### Works Cited

- Bartky, Sandra Lee. “Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power.” In *The Politics of Women’s Bodies*. Ed. Rose Weitz (Oxford 2003): 25-45.
- Bordo, Susan. *The Male Body*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1999.
- Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- . “Imitation and Gender Insubordination.” In *The Judith Butler Reader*. Ed. Sara Salih with Judith Butler. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004: 119-137
- Caughie, Pamela L. “Passing as Modernism.” *Modernism/modernity* (September 2005): 385-406.
- Dreger, Alice. “A History of Intersex: From the Age of Gonads to the Age of Consent.” In *Intersex in the Age of Ethics*, ed. Alice Dreger. (1999)
- Faderman, Lillian. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth-Century America*. New York: Columbia U P, 1991.

- Fausto-Sterling, Anne. "Two Sexes Are Not Enough." Excerpt from *Sexing the Body*  
<http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/nova/gender/fs.html>
- Foucault, Michel. *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century Hermaphrodite*. Trans. Ricahrd McDougall. New York: Pantheon, 1980.
- . *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, vol. 1. Trans. Robert Hurley. New York: Random House, 1978.
- Frye, Marilyn. *The Politics of Reality: Essays in Feminist Theory*. Freedom, CA: The Crossing Press, 1983.
- Garber, Marjorie. *Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Hausman, Bernice. "Recent Transgender Theory." *Feminist Studies* 27.2 (Summer 2001): 465-490.
- Kessler, Suzanne. "The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants," *Signs* 16 (1990): 3-26
- Martin, Biddy. "Success and Its Failures." In *Feminist Consequences: Theory for the New Century*. Ed. Elisabeth Bronfen and Misha Kavka. NY: Columbia U P, 2001: 353-380.
- Martin, Emily. "The Egg and the Sperm." *Signs* 16.3 (1991): 485-501.
- Meyerowitz, Joanne. *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard U P, 2002.
- Roughgarden, Joan. *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender, and Sexuality in Nature and People*. Berkeley: U of California P, 2004.
- Weil, Kari. *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 1992.
- Woolf, Virginia. *A Room of One's Own*. 1929. New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1981.
- . *Orlando: A Biography*. 1928. San Diego: Harcourt, Inc., 1956.

---

<sup>1</sup> "Category crisis" designates "a failure of definitional distinction, a borderline that becomes permeable, that permits of border crossings from one (apparently distinct) category to another" (16).

<sup>2</sup> An accessible example of this theory is the use of "we" in the Declaration of Independence. "We the people" does not refer to citizens of the United States but brings that category of

---

subjects into being. That is, the “we” isn’t *referential*, pointing to a prior identity, but *performative*, producing that identity.

<sup>3</sup> “Transgender” refers to the social phenomenon of people who live as a sex different from that to which they were assigned at birth, whether or not they have surgical or hormonal sex change to facilitate their lives as the “other sex.”

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of the medical management model, see Suzanne Kessler, “The Medical Construction of Gender: Case Management of Intersexed Infants,” *Signs* 16 (1990): 3-26.

<sup>5</sup> *La'mana*—called the Berdache by colonialists who saw them as homosexual transvestites or male prostitutes—undergo a ceremony that marks their passage into a new identity and a third gender. Elsie Clews Parsons, who published on the Zuni *la'mana* in 1916, writes: “This native theory of the institution of the man-woman is a curious commentary, is it not, on that thorough-going belief in the intrinsic difference between the sexes which is so tightly held to in our own culture” (qtd. in Babcock, 9). For a fuller discussion of two-spirit people, see Roughgarden’s *Evolution’s Rainbow*, chapter 18. See also my “Passing as Modernism.”

<sup>6</sup> In October 2008 a transgender politician in Georgia, Michelle Bruce, won a lawsuit brought by her opponents, who had accused her of fraud for running as a woman and claimed she had used a “fictitious” name.

<sup>7</sup> On the history of lesbianism, see Lillian Faderman’s *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers*. Romantic friendship referred to emotional and physical bonds between women that were culturally sanctioned, not “immoral.”

<sup>8</sup> The medical reports refer to this organ variously as “a penial body,” “a monstrously developed clitoris” and “this little member as far removed from the clitoris as it is from the penis in its normal state” (126-7).

<sup>9</sup> French, of course, is a gendered language, dividing all subjects along the binary. Foucault notes that in the English translation, “it is difficult to render the play of the masculine and feminine adjectives which Alexina applies to herself,” noting such difficulty “is an ironic reminder of *grammatical*, medical, and juridical categories that language must utilize but that the content of the narrative contradicts” (xiii-xiv; my italics).

<sup>10</sup> I retain Alexina and the feminine pronoun, for that is the point of view from which the narrative is written.

<sup>11</sup> Woolf uses the more philosophical concept, androgyny, rather than “transsexual,” even though that word could have been available to her in 1928.

<sup>12</sup> Fausto-Sterling refers to “the linguistic convenience” that gives us only two pronouns for the sexes. “Nor is the linguistic convenience an idle fancy. Whether one falls into the category of man or woman matters in concrete ways.”

<sup>13</sup> Androgyny is a “cultural conceit,” to use Fausto-Sterling’s phrase; intersex the physical condition. Kari Weil distinguishes between the androgyne as an “aesthetic ideal” and the hermaphrodite as a “monstrous reality” in 19<sup>th</sup>-century literature. Whereas the androgyne designates an ideal of complementary wholeness, the hermaphrodite is a figure of warring bodies, an incompleteness “haunting the ideal of androgyny” (11).