‘The Kingfisher Comes; the Kingfisher Comes Not’: The Maternal Impasse in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and *A Room of One’s Own*

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The aim of this paper is to explore the ambiguities and contradictions that surround Virginia Woolf’s use of the maternal in two of her seminal works written simultaneously at the peak of her career, *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). Both are directed at unearthing our literary mothers from obscurity, and reserving a space for the woman writer in the history as well as in the future of literary production. Woolf’s reaction to the nineteenth-century model of the woman as an eternal procreator resulted in characters like the ‘unmaternal’ Mrs Dalloway, [1] who ‘could not dispel a virginity preserved through childbirth’ (MD 40), [2] or Mrs Ramsay, the prolific mother, paradoxically reduced to ‘a wedge-shaped core of darkness’. [3] Even when biological mothering does not always lead to death (as in the case of Shakespeare’s fictitious sister, whose talent was caught in a woman’s body, and was therefore destined to be ruined), it always results in a textual stillbirth in Woolf’s feminist agenda. And, while *Orlando* is involved in a dialectic relationship with the dominant psychoanalytic discourse of the early twentieth century, employing even the techniques of jokes (as recorded by Freud) in order to cancel some of the dominant theses around maternity, the biographer/narrator fails to imagine Orlando as a biological mother. Pregnancy and labour are appropriated in these two texts for the purpose of assigning a viable identity to the female creator, whereas Woolf’s twentieth-century version of the maternal is, surprisingly, both reminiscent of the eighteenth-century notion of motherhood as an antagonistic relationship between mother and child structured upon power and dominion, but also resonant of the male-centred and ancient-old idea that children of the brain are far more significant than children of the body.

The literary mother of the woman writer is, of course, a pivotal figure in *A Room of One’s Own*, as it is only through her feminine past, through discovering her links with her predecessors, that any woman can write. In her vastly quoted, ‘we think back through our mothers if we are women’,[4] Woolf not only celebrates matrilineage, but establishes it as a presupposition for the existence of the woman writer. She comes, in a sense, to complement T. S. Eliot’s groundbreaking theory (published in 1919 in ‘Tradition and the

Individual Talent', a few years before Woolf's extensive essay) that 'no artist of any art has *his* complete meaning alone' and that 'the best […] parts of *his* work may be those in which the dead poets, *his* ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously'.[5] Though she more than agrees with him that 'masterpieces are not single and solitary births' (*ROO* 63), she finds it imperative to accommodate for the missing 'she' in Eliot: 'poetry ought to have a mother as well as a father' (*ROO* 98), she argues.[6]

Her figurative mothers are rescued from obscurity in *A Room of One's Own*; Lady Winchilsea, Margaret Cavendish, Dorothy Osborne, Aphra Behn, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and even 'Anon, who wrote so many poems without signing them' (*ROO* 48), are all granted their place in the history of literary production. It is they who have made possible the existence of modern women writers, as their foremothers have actually 'earned them the right to speak their minds' (*ROO* 63), Woolf argues. Furthermore, *A Room of One's Own* is preoccupied, albeit in a transitory manner, with literal mothers as well, in an attempt to acknowledge their importance in history: 'is the charwoman who has brought up eight children', Woolf wonders, 'of less value to the world than the barrister who has made a hundred thousand pounds?' (*ROO* 39). And, in a rather passing remark, Woolf feels the need to involve the biological mother in the creative process: '[w]hen', she remarks, 'one reads of a witch being ducked, of a woman possessed by devils, of a wise woman selling herbs, *or even of a very remarkable man who had a mother*, then I think we are on the track of a lost novelist, a suppressed poet' (*ROO* 48, emphasis added).[7]

Yet, talented mothers of biological children are bound to annihilation. The suppressed genius hidden in the body of the mother of 'a very remarkable man' turns into 'some mute and inglorious Jane Austen, some Emily Brontë who dashed her brains out on the moor or mopped and mowed about the highways crazed with the torture that her gift had put her to' (*ROO* 48), we read a few lines below. Creation and procreation remain incompatible, as Judith Shakespeare's example—Woolf's perception of the inspired and artistic sixteenth-century woman—also clearly manifests.[8] Shakespeare's imaginary and 'extraordinarily gifted sister' finds herself trapped within her impregnated body, a body incapable of carrying both spiritual and biological children at the same time. Nick Greene, the ruthless actor-manager, comes to confirm that any female body that wishes to exceed its limits beyond its reproductive capacity must be a dead body.[9] Unable to engage herself in the theatre, like her brother, or even to shelter herself in the nearby tavern, Judith

Shakespeare 'killed herself', her baby and her talent 'one winter's night and lies buried at some crossroads where the omnibuses now stop outside the Elephant and the Castle' (*ROO* 46-47).

Even so, *A Room of One's Own* ends with an optimistic slant. The dead poet can be resurrected, Woolf claims, walk among us again, live 'in you and in me', even in all those 'other women', who are not able to attend her lecture, or read her essay, because they are 'putting the children to bed' (*ROO* 107-8). Although Woolf offers no definite plans on how the average woman will 'escape a little from the common sitting-room', apart from the economists' advice to go on bearing children, but 'in twos and threes, not in tens and twelves' (*ROO* 107), or on how she will secure a room of her own and five hundred a year,, she does promise the dead poet 'will put on the body which she has so often laid down' (*ROO* 108).

Seen in that light, it would be interesting to examine the extent to which that promise is kept in *Orlando*, which was published a year before the essay, but was composed concurrently, and is Woolf's fictional version of the history of the female author. Although it is published as a novel, *Orlando* is subtitled *A Biography*, and linked to a real-life person and Woolf's intimate friend, Vita Sackville-West, both through the pictures of Sackville-West and her ancestors included in the book, but mainly through the constant allusions to Sackville-West's noble past and present life. But, my intention here is not to read *Orlando* as a text that illuminates Woolf and Sackville-West's Sapphic relationship, or vice versa; the topic has, I believe, been extensively dealt with.[10] My interest lies rather in exploring *Orlando* as a joke that attempts crucial subversions of well-established notions of the maternal. The book was written, after all, as a joke,[11] and became for Woolf both a source of pleasure and release of energy, and at the same time an indirect, well-covered attack on monolithic versions of history and sexuality, gender polarities, and dominant institutions. In that sense *Orlando* verifies one of Freud's theses concerning the purpose of jokes, according to which a joke may represent a rebellion against an authority and 'a liberation from its pressure'.[12] This is something Woolf must have been aware of, as, despite the fact that she was reluctant to read Freud before meeting him in person in December 1939, she was exposed to everyday conversations with members of the Bloomsbury Group directly associated with psychoanalysis and Freud.[13]

The novel could be summarized perhaps as a nonsensical joke, as its principal character is repeatedly involved in a series of contradictions: Orlando is both a man and a woman, for example, both Victorian and Modern, both married and free. The technique of nonsensical jokes, Freud writes in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905; the first English translation was published in 1916), consists 'in presenting something that is stupid and nonsensical, the sense of which lies in the revelation and demonstration of something else that is stupid and nonsensical' (*Jokes* 96). So, Orlando's paradoxical nature can be read as nothing but a joke that exposes the absurdity of a society that denies women their rights, prescribes fixed modes of behaviour for them, and penalizes anyone who deviates from these patterns. If the English Law presses the following charges against Orlando: 1) that she was dead, 2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing, 3) that she was an English Duke (*O* 161)—which, if taken separately could be valid, but taken together, they exclude one another and therefore render these accusations absurd—Woolf empowers Orlando by attributing all these characteristics to him/her. S/he is allowed more freedom than any other character in fiction perhaps, roaming throughout five centuries (he is born in the sixteenth century and is still in her forties in the twentieth century, when the book ends), as a man or a woman interchangeably, as an English nobleman and heir making the most of life, or an English Lady whose husband is very conveniently 'always sailing round Cape Horn' (*O* 252).

Yet, although Orlando is authorized by Woolf to achieve the impossible, there is one aspect of her character which brings her creator at a complete loss. And this is Orlando, the mother, or *father* initially, of three sons by Rosina Pepita (the gypsy dancer he marries in Constantinople a few days before his inexplicable change into a woman),[14] as well as Orlando the mother of a legitimate male heir by Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine (her nineteenth-century husband).

Orlando's identity as a birth parent occupies such a liminal space in the book and in Orlando's life, that she even seems unacquainted with the fact that she fathers three sons by Pepita: '*They said* I had three sons by […] a Spanish dancer', she explains to her English husband (*O* 243, emphasis added). The maternal aspect of Orlando's character was undoubtedly an agonizing issue for Woolf, given the fact that childbearing was forbidden to her (both Leonard Woolf and her sister, Vanessa Bell, conformed to the doctors' views that children would be a source of extra stress to her). Throughout her life,

Woolf felt dispossessed for not having children and envious of both her sister and Sackville-West as mothers. In her diary entry of 21 December 1925, Woolf writes of Sackville-West: 'There is her maturity and full breastedness', 'her motherhood (but she's a little cold & offhand with her boys) her being in short (what I have never been) a real woman' (*D3* 52). Sackville-West's criticism of that aspect of Orlando in a letter to her husband is, as Victoria Smith argues, ironical: 'Marriage and motherhood would either modify or destroy Orlando, as a character: they do neither'.[15] The child, Sackville-West writes, referring evidently to her English son with Shel and completely disregarding Orlando's gypsy progeny, 'contributes less than nothing [to the story], but even strikes rather a false note'.[16]

Whether Orlando was informed of the existence of his/her gypsy sons, or whether she wishes to renounce them, remains unresolved in the text; one thing is for certain, though: she is more than relieved to read the annulment of her Turkish marriage in the settlement of her lawsuits:

> 'Children pronounced illegitimate [...]. So they don't inherit, which is all to the good. … Sex? Ah! What about my sex? My sex', she read out with some solemnity, 'is pronounced indisputably, and beyond the shadow of doubt [...] female. The estates which are now desequestrated in perpetuity descend and are tailed and entailed upon the heirs male of my body, or in default of marriage'—but here she grew impatient with this legal verbiage, and said, 'but there won't be any default of marriage, nor of heir either, so the rest can be taken as read.'[17] (*O* 243)

It is interesting to notice how Orlando, as a nineteenth-century woman, is so much attuned to the spirit of the age (longing for a husband), whereas, as a mother, she is a strange echo of the eighteenth-century picaresque Moll Flanders or Roxana. Indeed, in her initial plans for the novel, Woolf conceived of *Orlando* as a Defoe narrative ('I might write a Defoe narrative for fun' [*D3* 131]). A few years before, in 1919, she had published an article on 'The Novels of Defoe',[18] where she characterizes *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* as two of 'the few English novels which we can call indisputably great' (*CR* 87), despite the fact that they never gained the popularity of *Robinson Crusoe*. Woolf admires in Defoe his courage to defend his female heroines and expose the injustice done to them, and marvels at his characters, because, above all, she writes, 'they were free to talk openly of the passions and desires which have moved men and women since the beginning of time' (*CR* 93).

Defoe's characters are so free, that they even 'take shape and substance of their own accord' (*CR* 90), Woolf claims, and cites as an example a scene from *Roxana*:

> [The moment] when the Prince sits by his son's cradle and Roxana observes how 'he loved to look at it when it was asleep', seems to mean much more to us than to him [Defoe]. After the curiously modern dissertation upon the need of communicating matters of importance to a second person lest, like the thief in Newgate, we should talk of it in our sleep, he apologises for his digression. (*CR* 91)

Although Woolf's joke here is on psychoanalysis, its emphasis on dreams as well as the importance of recording and interpreting them in one's effort to understand the self,[19] this part of Roxana's narration does indeed 'mean much more to us', when read in relation to the character's inability to feel for her son in the way his father does. This passage may simply record the father's love for the child, and pre-echo Roxana's sincere and shocking confession, later in the novel, that the Dutch merchant, her last husband, had more real affection for their son than she had ever felt for him: 'I did not love the Child, nor love to see it', she states bluntly.[20] Throughout Defoe's novel, Roxana disregards, abandons, or forsakes her progeny in an effort to survive the hardships of her time, and it is exactly because both Moll Flanders and Roxana (at least before the appearance of her daughter Susan and her insistence that she be acknowledged by her mother) are such monstrous mothers, that they are successful. The fact that Woolf selects to quote this particular excerpt from Defoe, moreover, may 'mean much more to us' about the awe Woolf feels towards these eighteenth-century 'unmaternal' heroines. Woolf's acknowledgement to Defoe (among others) in the Preface to the novel, which Nigel Nicolson has called 'all spoof',[21] may be an honest moment in her book-long joke, after all, as the reader can clearly detect traces of these eighteenth-century heartless mothers in Orlando's eagerness to reject her progeny.

Woolf is evidently more at ease with this 'insensitive, uncaring mother' pattern than with the nineteenth-century invention of the loving, self-sacrificing mother.[22] And, although Orlando is in every other respect able to adapt to the spirit of each age, she is just incapable of performing the part of the modern Madonna. So, she remains untouched even by her English heir, for whom, apart from the birth scene (to which I will return later in my essay), there is only one passing and indirect reference, when we are told near the end of the novel that 'boy's boots' are articles included in her shopping list (*O* 286). Her

maternal love is targeted solely towards 'The Oak Tree', this perennial poem, which accompanies her throughout the centuries, and which she always carries next to her breast. Like a baby, it nests in her bosom; it grows, learns and changes with her; it even demands a life of its own, when, 'as if it were a living thing', it asks to be published (*O* 259). Her desire to be a writer eclipses any other desire in her life, and is as enduring as the actual oak tree, which she had known since 1588, and whose bones feel like ribs from a spine when she's riding them (*O* 309). Although the oak tree is a symbol of fertility and procreation, associated with materiality and the natural world, Woolf transforms it into a symbol of literary creativity. The fact that the tree lends its name to Orlando's most important literary work reflects her desire to metaphorize motherhood, as I argue in the last part of this essay.

But, if Orlando has good reasons to dismiss his/her three sons with Pepita (as they claim her estate), how can one account for the silence in the text that surrounds Orlando's mothering towards her English son? Her 'offhandedness', apart from being an echo of her origin's (Vita Sackville West) aloofness as a mother, verifies once again Woolf's view that procreation and creation are incompatible. The less Orlando has to do with the child, the more chances she has to become a successful writer. There are, however, additional and related reasons why biological mothering remains a source of permanent discomfort for Woolf. One being, that her English son is born in the nineteenth century, the spirit of which 'was antipathetic to her in the extreme' (*O* 233), as this is the time when 'the sexes drew further and further apart', when 'the life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths', and when 'the British Empire came into existence' (*O* 219). If the Victorian woman was defined through her ability to populate and strengthen the nation, in ways that reverberate in Woolf's contemporary fascist ideology which glorified biological maternity,[23] motherhood then, like marriage, becomes just a stage through which Orlando has to pass and in which she must be involved in the minimum degree, if she is to escape it.

A second reason is Woolf's uneasiness with the dominant psychoanalytic discourse of the time, Freud's theories, specifically the literally and metaphorically castrated mother published in English by Virginia and Leonard Woolf's Hogarth Press and discussed extensively in the Bloomsbury circle, as mentioned before. Her sharp criticism of Freud resonates throughout the text to the extent that Nigel Nicolson's characterization

of the book as the longest 'love-letter in literature' (written by Woolf to Sackville-West),[24] is obscured by the thought that *Orlando* is the most original letter of rage (written by Woolf to Freud). Read hand in hand with his essay on 'Femininity',[25] the novel can be seen as a daunting attempt to make a farce out of Freud. To Freud's conviction, for example, that when girls enter their phallic phase, we are 'obliged to recognize that the little girl is a little man' ('Femininity' 151), she answers with a character that defies biology, changes from man to woman, and uses clothes to determine gender. If the love of the child is 'directed to her *phallic* mother', whom she later discovers to be castrated ('Femininity' 160), she answers with a character who is: 1) the father of three sons by Rosina Pepita, 2) the mother of a son by Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, and 3) both the father and the mother of her poem, 'The Oak Tree' (Orlando began composing it when he was a man and completed it as a woman). If normative female sexuality involves growing out of the clitoral into the vaginal, i.e., marriage, her character gets married without really being married, for her Bonthrop (bon=good, throp=anthropos=person), apart from always being absent, never overshadows Orlando's desire to write.[26] Finally, if normative femininity involves wishing for a baby more than anything else ('Femininity' 162), and if 'a mother is only brought unlimited satisfaction by her relation to a son', 'the most perfect, the most free from ambivalence of all human relationships' ('Femininity' 168), the only satisfaction her son can give her is the guarantee that she will not be dispossessed of her estate. Husband and son are only desired by Orlando as her means of securing a place in society that will enable her to write in peace.

Freud's model of femininity, motored by the design to integrate women into the reproductive pattern of the heterosexual family, was antagonistic to Woolf's perception of a fluid, creative femininity. Throughout her work she insists on the return to the Mother figure and celebrates the Minoan-Mycenaean[27] phase in girls and their reluctance to give up the pre-Oedipal mother.[28] The unearthing of Mother Goddess figurines in Crete in the early twentieth century, which testified for a pre-Olympian matriarchy, inspired feminists such as Jane Harrison (Woolf's Greek teacher) and fuelled the development of modernism. As Ruth Hoberman convincingly argues, 'that there could be power, even domination, associated with specifically female body parts working in alliance with nature was an appealing notion to many women, who then found in their identity as woman a source of strength, symbolized by their relation to a Magna Mater'.[29] But, how does Woolf, the

'spokesperson for the Mother as against Freud the apostle of the Father',[30] the creator of the archaic matriarchy that prevails in the first part of *To the Lighthouse*, envisage this return to the prehistoric empowerment of female body parts in her modern maternal embodiment in *Orlando*?

Since there is no trace of concern for her three gypsy sons, or even for her imperial progeny, as already stated, let us focus on the ingeniously disguised birth scene in the novel, and examine Woolf's perception of the labouring body, as well as how psychoanalysis here fires her imagination and opens up immense possibilities for the female writer. Orlando's labour (there is no mentioning of her pregnancy before that in the novel) begins in a passage in which her biographer seems to be so absorbed in bulbs, birds, and boats, and only the very alert reader will take notice of Orlando's 'gasps and groans' (*O* 279) and begin to suspect she is in labour. Well aware she is touching upon a taboo issue (since this is still the nineteenth century), the biographer willingly goes through a process of self-censorship in an effort 'to veil, to cover, to conceal, to shroud this undeniable event whatever it may be', 'until the moment comes when it is impossible to deny its coming' (*O* 279).[31] By employing the common techniques used in dreams and jokes, which Freud terms 'condensation', i.e., the combining of several themes into one symbol, and 'displacement', the transferring of significant issues onto unimportant material, the biographer 'evade[s] restrictions and open[s] sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible' (*Jokes* 147).

So, nothing is there to allude to the pains of birth, as the reader is urged to flee the birth chamber, surrender to the external intervention of a barrel-organ and be carried by thought to Kew Gardens. If Orlando's nineteenth-century body in labour belongs *a priori* to this general plan of populating of the glorious nation, Kew then, which, like the empire, is the hothouse for cultivating the alien and outlandish species, and providing the right context within which they could prosper, would be the most appropriate place to transport her. Kew's horticultural colonialism, this transferring of exotic and tropical trees, shrubs and palms from their natural habitat, this bringing together of multifarious life which was made to flourish in a civilized environment, provides the answer to the question asked by the biographer a couple of pages before: 'The wealth and power of England, these leviathans – how do they propagate themselves?' (*O* 275).

Orlando was 'of her age', we are reminded throughout Chapter VI, and as a woman of the nineteenth century, it is her duty to be a propagator. Orlando 'need neither fight her age, nor submit to it', we are told; 'she was of it, yet remained herself' (*O* 254). For even if her childbirth takes place within the context of imperial Britain, Woolf finds the means to demedicalize and celebrate birth as a female space and transform the torture of contractions into moments of ecstasy.[32]

It seems, first of all, that Orlando follows Queen Victoria's precedent to defy the Christian dogma, according to which women should suffer during labour, and opted for a pain-free delivery at the birth of her last two children with the aid of anaesthesia. As Orlando is carried away by music, tossing on the waves in his little boat of thoughts, and hailing pleasure of all sorts and 'the splendid fulfilment of natural desires' (*O* 280), it is hard not to notice the soothing and often satisfying effects the administration of chloroform had on women in labour, a much debated issue in the mid-1850s. To the extent that chloroform relieved women of severe muscular pain and agony, it made both women and accoucheurs happy, as the former were no more prey to their biology, while the latter were facilitated in their task. There was, however, a good reason why a large number of physicians were against anaesthesia: chloroform did not simply silence the screams of the labouring woman, it was also responsible for hysterical 'instances of delirium, and spasms, and convulsions' and very specific 'female displays of *sexual excitation*', as reported in the English journals of the time.[33] Orlando's exclamation: 'Hail! […] pleasure of all sorts', 'hail! In whatever forms it comes, and may there be more forms, and stranger' directly associates birth with a dark, queer, unnameable form of ecstasy that interrupts the whole project of 'binding the empire together' (*O* 280-81).

It is not accidental then that Orlando is assisted by a female midwife, a historical inaccuracy, as only doctors had the authority to acquire an analgesic for the woman and the means of administering it. (In Queen Victoria's case, it was John Snow, a leading English practitioner in the use of anesthetics.) Woolf has Mrs Banting, the midwife, whose art had become by the nineteenth century the most masculine of arts,[34] return to the scene of birth, a fact that asserts reproduction as a private matter that involves women, and alludes to female bonding, as female midwives were occasionally accused of titillating their patients and arousing them sexually.[35] Mrs Banting announces sex and gender confusion and exposes the absurdity of any rigid sex and gender classifications.[36]

Borrowing her name from an eminent male physiologist Frederick Banting, who shared a 1923 Nobel Prize for the discovery of insulin, she embodies both the man midwife (administering chloroform) and the female midwife lulling Orlando to her secretive, euphoric sleep.

It is also Mrs Banting who voices the culmination of any woman's desire, according to Freud, i.e., the birth of a son, possessor of the phallus, which she can never hope to embody. But the son in *Orlando* is reduced to a silent, almost abstract concept of no importance at all. Chief protagonist in the birth scene is the kingfisher, whose coming, like the coming of the baby, demands patience and composure. The desire for a son is displaced in the text into the expectation of the kingfisher, symbol of serenity and calmness after the storm. The bird is also, however, a disguise for Halcyon (Alcyone), a woman who defied patriarchal authority in Greek mythology, and was metamorphosed into a bird as a punishment by Zeus, the reason being that she and her husband, Ceyx, often sacrilegiously thought of themselves as gods and called each other 'Zeus' and 'Hera'. Alcyone is allowed to lay her eggs in safety in the heart of winter every year, as her father, god of the winds, restrains the storms and calms the waves for seven days. 'The kingfisher comes; the kingfisher comes not' (*O* 280); the text attuned to the rhythm of the labouring body, contracts; the bird finally 'flys, burns, bursts [Orlando's] seal of sleep', 'so that now floods back refluent like a tide, the red, thick stream of life' (*O* 282).

A joke, Freud writes, is not a joke unless told to someone else (*Jokes* 195); as a social process, it is meant to be shared. It is not every woman, though, that can participate in the joke *Orlando* is telling its readers. If its leading character has found the way to overcome gender, sex, and age constraints, or even experience labour as a moment of delight, she has managed to do so only because she is a white, upper-middle class Englishwoman, because she—he—once was a nobleman in the court of Queen Elizabeth I, or, because in the eighteenth century she used to pour tea for Pope, Addison, and Swift. But what about the average mother who had to stay at home and put her children to bed in *A Room of One's Own*? Has she been listening all the while? And laughing with us? One can perhaps detect a vague intention to accommodate a larger spectrum of races and classes in Woolf's novel. Orlando's marriage to Rosina Pepita as well as the time she spends with the gypsies is proof of this. Also, her socializing with Nell, the prostitute, and her friends, and their forming a sorority at the expense of the gentlemen, does promise that

class barriers can be overcome, when women are united by the same cause. Yet, we never learn what happened to Rosina, who had to raise three sons all on her own, or whether Nell ever became the incarnation of Judith Shakespeare.

Despite the fact that the novel is an inspired subversion of the concept of the maternal as defined within the context of nineteenth-century Britain or early twentieth-century Freudian psychoanalysis, throughout the book Orlando's maternal identity remains an impasse. She is either a return to the self-centered and voracious eighteenth-century mothers, as she scandalously disowns her gypsy sons in order to secure her estate, or she is simply not there as a mother at all. In her effort to revive our literary mothers, Woolf finds it impossible to accommodate literal mothers. The maternal is kept locked at the level of metaphor, while the body of the mother is surprisingly appropriated in ways that mirror the colonization of the maternal by the male philosopher in Plato's *Symposium*.

In the summer of 1908, Woolf read the *Symposium* in Greek, produced a nine-page commentary on it, and concluded that 'He [Alcibiades] feels all Socrates' grandeur—yet wishes the man dead sometimes—such is the conflict he raises in the bodies of his followers'.[37] Reading the classics in the original, in the early twentieth century, was, for a woman especially, an ultimate intellectual achievement.[38] But Woolf was not just an admirer of Plato, she goes as far as experiencing an 'almost physical empathy' with him, and writes in one of her early diaries: 'I see for a moment how our minds are all threaded together—how any live mind today is of the very same stuff as Plato's and Euripides''.[39] Why did Plato fascinate Woolf, though—or, in what sense can the *Symposium* have been a source of inspiration for her?[40] In the central part of this dialogue, which is Socrates' definition of *eros*, Diotima (the priestess from Mantinea) argues through Socrates' voice that physical sex is not what counts more in *eros*. The philosopher is actually the living embodiment of this doctrine, as in his relationships with young men 'he exploited the homoerotic nature of the Athenian circle within which he moved', aiming at convincing them to 'consummate a lifelong affair with philosophy'.[41] While love's desire, initially, is for immortality achieved through procreation, this idea is gradually replaced by the thesis that only the beauty and goodness of the soul has the potential of immortality (212a). Once one realizes that, it's all he needs 'to give birth to and enquire after the kinds of reasoning which help young man's moral progress' (210c). 'When men are *physically* pregnant', Diotima has taught Socrates,

> they're more likely to be attracted to women; their love manifests in trying to get immortality, renown, and what they take to be happiness by producing children. Those who are *mentally* pregnant, however … I mean, there are people whose minds are far more pregnant than their bodies; they're filled with the offspring you might expect a mind to bear and produce. What offspring? Virtue, and especially wisdom' (208e-209a, emphasis and ellipses in the original)

Paradoxically, Woolf employs Plato's technique of metaphorizing birth in her effort to reposition women in history, despite the fact that his model excludes women from brain production, as it is associated exclusively with male homoerotic desire. The articulation of same-sex desire in the *Symposium*, and also the evanescence and multivocality of Socrates' truth, seem to open up new possibilities for Orlando's fluid subjectivity and sexuality, as well as her craving to elevate literary productivity and dissociate it from reproduction. If 'truth comes to us in different disguises' in the *Symposium*, as Woolf writes in her essay 'On Not Knowing Greek',[42] what else is *Orlando*, but a text about dressing, cross-dressing, and redressing? If 'Truth is various', and 'is to be pursued with all our faculties', not with the intellect alone,[43] Woolf's acute *hearing* concentrates on Diotima's voice covered up in Socrates' disguise. For, even if women are exiled as physical presences from Agathon's gathering of important men, it is a woman's ventriloquized voice that utters the ultimate Truth in Plato's work.

If, according to Socrates, it is children of the mind of important men that lead to beauty and virtue, it is the children of their heart ('The Oak Tree' poem, for example, kept next to Orlando's heart throughout the centuries) that will make women immortal, Woolf argues. In asking, 'who shall measure the heat and violence of the poet's heart when caught and tangled in a woman's body?' (*ROO* 47), Woolf makes it evident that genius for her is born irrespectively of bodily experience. The poet seems to exist *a priori*, and when she happens sometimes to dwell in a female body, then it is either her creative or her procreative nature that will survive.

Notes

I wish to thank Sigal Spigel as well as the anonymous reviewers of *Studies in the Maternal* for their constructive comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

[1] Virginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway,* ed. by Claire Tomalin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 250 [*MD*].

[2] As I have argued elsewhere, Mrs Dalloway's virginity does not render her a modernist Madonna, but is a sign of power and autonomy, in the sense that she consciously opts for abstinence from heterosexual activities. (See my article, 'Clarissa Dalloway's Body: Transformations of Christian Concepts of Femininity and Maternity in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway', Gramma: Theory of Literature and Culture,* 1 [1993], 86-104.)

[3] Virginia Woolf, *To the Lighthouse,* ed. by Margaret Drabble (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 85 [*TL*]. Mrs Ramsay is interestingly both empowered and disempowered in the novel. Even if she is the motivating force in the novel as the epitome of maternity—she is the mother of eight, always happy when carrying a child around her arms—Lily's, as well as the narrator's, modern depiction of her focuses also on the empty centre inside her.

[4] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Grafton, 1987), pp. 72-73 [*ROO*].

[5] T. S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Norton Anthology of English Literature, Volume 2*, ed. by Stephen Greenblatt and M. H. Abrams, 8th edn (New York: W.W. Norton, 2006), pp. 2319-25 (p. 2320, emphasis added).

[6] A number of critics have carried on this metaphor of literary maternity. For Jane Marcus, Virginia Woolf is the mother of us all, both as 'a redeemer of lost lives', a 'deliverer' of 'stranded ghosts' ('Thinking Back Through our Mothers', in *New Feminist Essays on Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Jane Marcus [Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981], pp.1-30 [p.3]), but also as a woman writer who inspired the idea of 'the fertile and promiscuous mother tongue', as well as the importance of 'collective history and the collective unconscious' in the minds of her female successors (ibid. p.17). Elaine Showalter, on the other hand, calls Woolf a phantom mother, who haunted her literary daughters, the mid-twentieth-century novelists, and points out how important it was for them to 'kill' the legend of Woolf, who betrayed her feminism by her flight into androgyny (*A Literature of their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1977], p. 265).

[7] As the daughter of Julia Stephen, a Victorian woman who had no sympathy for women's emancipation, or for intellectual women who aspired to pursue a political or artistic career, Woolf always thought of herself as 'motherless daughter'. She was devastated to know that her mother would never have supported her, had she been alive when her daughter became a writer. For more on this, see Jane Marcus' 'Thinking Back Through our Mothers', pp. 11-21.

[8] Procreation for Woolf is not only an insurmountable barrier to women's creativity; it is also the reason why women are not free. In her 1940 essay 'Thoughts on Peace in an Air Raid', she associates the aggressive instinct of a young airman to fight against and shoot enemies with the maternal instinct, and argues: 'if it were necessary for the sake of humanity, for the peace of the world, that childbearing should be restricted, the maternal instinct subdued, women would attempt it. Men would help them. They would honour them for their refusal to bear children. They would give them other openings for their creative power. That too must

make part of our fight for freedom' (in *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* [London: Hogarth Press, 1981], pp.154-57 [p.156]).

[9] Nick Greene embodies both the violent impregnator of the talented, but vulnerable, Renaissance woman and the nightmare of the living poet in his impersonation of the male critic in *Orlando*. He kills both fleshy and textual children, as according to Greene's severe criticism, a good poet is always a dead poet. It is only near the end of the book that Orlando can free herself from his ghost that has been haunting her for almost three centuries, when she wires to her husband 'life literature Greene today—' and her two cypher words 'Rattigan Glumphoboo' (Virginia Woolf, *Orlando,* ed. & intro by Rachel Bowlby [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998], p. 269 [*O*]), suggestive of Geene's 'ratty' mouth ('gan') and shouts of disapproval ('boo'), which put Orlando in a gloomy ('glum') disposition.

[10] Their affair became most vehement between 1925 and 1928, the year of *Orlando*'s publication. For comprehensive discussions of this topic, see, for example, Victoria L Smith's article '"Ransacking the Language": Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf's Orlando', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29. 4 (2006), 57-75; Kirstie Blair's 'Gypsies and Lesbian Desire: Vita Sackville-West, Violet Trefusis, and Virginia Woolf', *Twentieth Century Literature*, 50. 2 (2004), 141-166; Suzanne Raitt's 'Gallivanting with Campbell: *Orlando* and Biography' in *Vita and Virginia: The Work and Friendship of V. Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 17-40; Lawrence, Karen R. 'Orlando's Voyage Out', *Modern Fiction Studies*, 38 (1992), 253–77; Sherron E. Knopp's '"If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?": Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf's Orlando', *PMLA*, 103. 1 (1988), 24-34; Louise A. DeSalvo's 'Lighting the Cave: The Relationship between Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf', *Signs*, 8. 2 (1982), 195-214.

[11] A 'mere childs [*sic*] play' Woolf calls it in her diary entry of 2 November 1929 (Virginia Woolf, *The Diary of Virginia Woolf,* ed. by Ann Olivier Bell, 5 vols. [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982], III, 1925-1930, 264 [*D3*]). Her intentions about *Orlando* were evident since March 1927, when again she wrote in her diary that this novel was meant to be 'an escapade after these serious experimental books' (*Mrs Dalloway* and *To the Lighthouse*), and 'great fun to write' before her 'mystical poetical work' (*The Waves*); 'Satire is to be the main note—satire & wildness. […] My own lyric vein is to be satirized. Everything mocked' (*D3* 131).

[12] Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,* ed. and trans. by James Strachey (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986), p.149 [*Jokes*].

[13] Woolf's understanding of psychoanalysis is, as most critics tend to agree, rather hazy and coloured by her own ambivalent and idiosyncratic perspective, and, of course, filtered through Leonard Woolf's readings, Adrian and Karin Stephen, her brother and his wife, who had been trained as psychoanalysts, and also James Strachey, translator and editor of the Standard Edition of Freud in English. On the whole, Woolf detested psychoanalysis as a science' as Ward Jouve contends, because she thought of it as 'a double threat to her own life and art' ('Virginia Woolf and Psychoanalysis', in *The Cambridge Companion to Virginia Woolf*, ed. by Sue Roe and Susan Sellers [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000], pp. 245-72 [p. 256]). For a detailed discussion of this topic, see also Jan Ellen Golstein's 'The Woolf's Response to Freud: Water,

Spiders, Singing Canaries and the Second Apple', in *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ed. by Edith Kurzweil and William Phillips (New York: Columbia, 1983), pp. 232-251; Douglass Orr's 'Virginia Woolf and Psychoanalysis', *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 16 (1989), 151-61; as well as Elizabeth Abel's extensive study *Virginia Woolf and the Fictions of Psychoanalysis* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1989).

[14] Vita's maternal grandmother was a Spanish dancer called Pepita. *Orlando*'s plot here borrows from the Sackville family history and the issue of inheritance raised by Pepita's relation with Lionel Sackville-West and the legitimacy of their marriage. For Constantinople as a symbol of sexual freedom and a locus allowing endless possibilities of experiencing desire, see Davis Roessel's 'The Significance of Constantinople in *Orlando*', *Papers on Language and Literature* 28 (1992), 398-416.

[15] Quoted in Victoria L. Smith, '"Ransacking the Language": Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*', *Journal of Modern Literature*, 29. 4 (2006), 57-75 (footnote 13).

[16] Quoted in Madeline Moore, '*Orlando*: An Imaginative Answer', in *The Short Season Between Two Silences: The Mystical and the Political in the Novels of Virginia Woolf* (Boston : G. Allen & Unwin, 1984), pp. 93-115 (p.107).

[17] In the prospect of securing her estate, rather than seeing it passed on to the hands of her gypsy inheritors, Orlando is allowed in this part of the narrative a rather clumsy foreshadowing of the birth of her legitimate heir, a fact which actually takes place in the next chapter of the book.

[18] It first appeared in *TLS*, and was published in 1925 under the title 'Defoe', in *The Common Reader 1*, ed. by Andrew McNeillie (London: Hogarth Press, 1984), pp.86-94 [*CR*].

[19] Leonard Woolf had read the first English translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* in 1914, he discussed parts of it with his wife, and they occasionally attempted mock interpretations of their own dreams, as Douglass Orr informs us ('Virginia Woolf and Psychoanalysis', *International Review of Psychoanalysis*, 16 [1989], 151-61).

[20] Daniel Defoe, *Roxana* (London: Penguin, 1987), p.272.

[21] Quoted in *MD*, p. 318 (note on page 5).

[22] As a number of critics have argued, the notion of the caring mother is born in the nineteenth century. See, for example, Susan Greenfield, "Introduction", in *Inventing Maternity: Politics, Science and Literature 1650-1865,* ed. by Susan C. Greenfield, and Carol Barash, (Kentucky: Univ. Press of Kentucky, 1999), pp. 1-33; and Ludmilla Jordanova, *Nature Displayed: Gender, Science and Medicine 1760-1820* (London and New York: Longman, 1999), p. 219.

[23] 'As a Nazi propaganda pamphlet designed by and for women succinctly declares', Abel informs us, '"In a woman's womb rests the future of the people"' (pp. 90-91.)

[24] Quoted in *MD*, p. xviii.

[25] According to Strachey, although this lecture was first published in 1933 in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, it is based on two earlier papers: 'Some Physical Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction between the Sexes' (1925) and 'Female Sexuality' (1931) (Sigmund Freud, 'Femininity', in *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis,* ed. and trans. by James Strachey [Harmondsworth: Penguin,

1986], pp. 145-169 [p.145]). As Freud's views on the maternal are made clear basically through his Oedipus complex theory, 'Femininity' is perhaps the work that best expresses his understanding of the role of the mother.

[26] 'She was married, true; but if one's husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the world, to write poetry, was it marriage? (*O* 252)

[27] 'Our insight into this early, pre-Oedipus, phase in girls comes to us as a surprise, like the discovery, in another field, of the Minoan-Mycenaean civilization behind the civilization of Greece', Freud writes ('Female Sexuality', in *On* Sexuality, ed. by Angela Richards and trans. by James Strachey [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986], pp. 371-92 [p. 372]).

[28] Mary Jacobus and Gillian Beer, among others, have shown how this is reflected in Woolf's writing practices, such as the fusion of voices, the dissolution of boundaries, the absence of a stable subject, the poetry in her language, the pre-eminence of the watery element, etc. For an extensive discussion and bibliography on this issue, see Ward Jouve.

[29] Ruth Hoberman, *Gendering Classicism: The Ancient World in Twentieth-Century Women's Historical Fiction* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p. 19.

[30] Ward Jouve, p. 265.

[31] That the narrator/biographer eludes an overt description of a birth scene here is both a reflection of Woolf's attention to the cultural invisibility of women's birthing in the nineteenth century, evident in the scoptic beginning of this scene ('Is nothing then, going to happen … to veil, to cover, to conceal, to shroud this undeniable event whatever it may be', *O* 278-79), and also Woolf's own inability to touch upon on a body issue in an explicit way, something that characterizes her writing on the whole.

[32] Jane Maree Maher's article: 'Prone to Pregnancy: Orlando, Virginia Woolf and Sally Potter Represent the Gestating Body' (*Journal of Medical Humanities*, 28 [2007], 19–30), which offers an interesting interpretation of Orlando's pregnancy both in Woolf's novel and Sally Potter's 1992 cinematic version of it, covers an area that has not been given due attention by critics. According to Maher, although Orlando's pregnancy interrupts her 'open and unbounded engagement with sex, gender and history' (24), the stillness of her pregnant state is active and productive, in that it does not cause her to 'retreat from the world and the pre-existing regulatory systems' (25). It is the birth of her legitimate son that allows Orlando 'recognition from those systems' of her flexible identity (25). I would not agree with Maher, however, that pregnancy 'redefines productivity in the intricate enmeshed activities of the body rather than in the distinction of the oak tree' (27); I intend to show how the labour scene provides us with an alternative experience of birthing, while at the same time, it disempowers the maternal by silencing and masquerading the body of the mother.

[33] Mary Poovey, '"Scenes of an Indelicate Character": The Medical "Treatment" of Victorian Women', in *The Making of the Modern Body: Sexuality and Society in the Nineteenth Century,* ed. by Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1987), pp. 137-68. (p. 142).

[34] Lisa Forman Cody, 'The Politics of Reproduction: From Midwives' Alternative Public Sphere to the Public of Man-Midwifery', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 32. 4, *Sites and Margins of the Public Sphere* (1999), 477-495 (490).

[35] Ibid. p. 487.

[36] The term 'man midwife', which was invented when male doctors displaced women midwives, is also a contradictory term that both confuses and cancels sex boundaries.

[37] This is quoted from the Unpublished Manuscripts of Monks House Papers in Rowena Fowler's 'Moments and Metamorphoses: Virginia Woolf's Greece', *Comparative Literature*, 51.3 (Summer 1999), pp. 217-242 (p. 227).

[38] Brenda Lyons, 'Virginia Woolf and Plato: The Platonic Background of *Jacob's Room*', in *Platonism and the English Imagination*, ed. by Anna Baldwin and Sarah Hutton (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 290-97 (p. 294). In this article Lyons focuses on *Jacob's Room* as a watershed in Woolf's reception of Plato and makes general observations about his impact on Woolf's work.

[39] Quoted in Fowler, p. 219.

[40] Kiran Toor in '"Offspring of his Genius": Coleridge's Pregnant Metaphors and Metamorphic Pregnancies' *Romanticism*, 13.3 (2007), 257-270, explores this timeless analogy between the male brain and the womb. Along with Ovid, Horace, Sir Philip Sidney, Ben Jonson, Coleridge, Woolf contributes to this long, male tradition of confusing literary creativity with childbirth.

[41] Plato, *Symposium*, ed. and trans. by Robin Waterfield (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p. xvii.

[42] 'On Not Knowing Greek', in *CR*, pp. 23-38 (p. 32).

[43] Ibid. p. 33.