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Invisible Lives, Silent Voices

(Un)veiling Gender

Fictionalised Biography as a New Voice for Women's Lives in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and *Flush*

La bibliographie fictive comme nouvelle voix des vies féminines : Flush et Orlando de Virginia Woolf

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Résumés

English Français

Virginia Woolf reflects on the vulnerability of women's voices in her essay *Three Guineas* (1938). More specifically, in *Three Guineas*, Woolf uses the term 'influence', which, according to her, women lack because they have neither financial power nor education, rendering them inaudible. She argues that women remain 'outsider[s]' with 'no right to speak' (Woolf 2015, 116). By the end of the essay, the reader realises that Woolf has transformed this condition into a form of resistance by refusing to occupy a position in the male-dominated public sphere. In the 1920s, Woolf's awareness of the inaudibility of women's lives made her want to write a woman's life herself, leading to *Orlando* and then to *Flush*. Both these fantasised biographies portray women: *Orlando* (1928) is a fantastical biography of her close friend Vita Sackville-West, and *Flush* (1933) tells the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's life through the biography of her dog. In contrast, *Roger Fry* is nonfictional. Why did Woolf choose to fictionalise her 'woman' biographies? This paper argues that, similarly to Woolf's unconventional choice in *Three Guineas* to remain an 'outsider' to better fight gender inequality and militarism, fiction can be considered a political tool in that it allows for an alternative mode of biographical representation. Not only does Woolf's use of fiction enable her to compensate for the lack of visibility of her feminine subjects, but she also develops a writing strategy capable of delivering an innovative, politicized representation of the women she depicted.



Dans son essai, *Trois guinées*, Woolf analyse la vulnérabilité de la voix des femmes. Selon elle, c'est « l'influence » qui manque aux femmes : le fait qu'elles n'aient ni pouvoir, ni éducation les

rend inaudibles. Les femmes demeurent exclues de la sphère publique, sans droit à la parole (Woolf 2015, 116). Cependant, le lecteur se rend compte que Woolf a transformé cette condition d'exclusion en une forme de résistance, en refusant elle-même d'investir cette sphère publique dominée par la voix patriarcale. Dans les années 20, consciente de l'invisibilité récurrente des femmes, Woolf veut écrire une biographie de femme ; ce sera *Orlando* (1928), la biographie fantastique de son amie Vita Sackville-West, suivie, quelques années plus tard, par *Flush*, qui décrit la vie de Elizabeth Barrett Browning à travers son chien. Au contraire, sa biographie de *Roger Fry* ne sera pas fictionnelle. Pourquoi Woolf choisit-elle de fictionnaliser ses biographies de femmes ? Cet article avance l'argument que, tout comme le choix assez peu conventionnel de rester à la marge pour mieux combattre l'inégalité des sexes et le militarisme, Woolf utilise la fiction en biographie comme outil politique, car cela lui permet de créer un mode de représentation alternatif. La fiction permet à Woolf de compenser le manque de visibilité de ses sujets féminins. En même temps, elle développe une stratégie capable de produire une représentation innovante et politique de ces femmes dont elle dresse le portrait.

Entrées d'index

Mots-clés : Virginia Woolf, La biographie moderniste, Trois guinées, Orlando, Flush, La nouvelle biographie, La biographie et la fiction, féminismes, le modernisme, récits de vie

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, Modernist Biography, Three Guineas, Orlando, Flush, The New Biography, Biography and Fiction, Feminisms, Modernism, Life-Writing

Texte intégral

- 1 Virginia Woolf reflects on the vulnerability of women's voices in her essay *Three Guineas*. She uses the term 'influence', which she thinks women lack because they have neither financial power nor education, rendering them inaudible. She argues that women remain 'outsider[s]' with 'no right to speak' (Woolf 2015, 116). By the end of the essay, the reader realises that Woolf has transformed this condition into a form of resistance by refusing to occupy a position in the male-dominated public sphere.
- 2 *Three Guineas*, published at the end of Woolf's career, provides formulation for her matured reflexion on issues of gender and power in society. A decade earlier, in the 1920s, Woolf's awareness of the inaudibility of women's lives made her want to write a woman's life herself, leading to her first biography, *Orlando* (1928), followed a few years later by her second biography, *Flush* (1933). Both these biographies portray, in their special way, real women: *Orlando* is a fantasised biography of Woolf's intimate friend Vita Sackville-West, and *Flush* tells the life of the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning through the biography of her dog. Both these biographies are fictionalised, in contrast to her third biography of Roger Fry. In *Roger Fry*, Woolf did not fantasise, and she did not fictionalise either. But then, *Roger Fry* was the biography of a man. Why did Woolf choose to fictionalise her 'woman' biographies? This paper argues that, similarly to Woolf's unconventional choice in *Three Guineas* to remain a female outsider in order to better fight gender inequality and militarism, the alternative mode of representation provided by fiction writing, instead of engaging with conventional historiography, has made Woolf's biographies into a political tool. Not only does Woolf's use of fiction enable her to compensate for the lack of visibility of her feminine subjects and shed new light on them, but she also develops a writing strategy capable of delivering an innovative, politicized representation of the women she depicts in her biographies.
- 3 Laura Marcus, in her essay "The Newness of the 'New Biography'", writes that "[t]he dominance of modernist and avant-garde literature in the first decades of the twentieth century has directed attention away from certain texts and genres. Biography is a prime example of this process" (Marcus 2004, 193). Claire Battershill's study *Modernist Biography* also clearly shows that biography and autobiography are not to be considered to be at the margins of the modernist canon. She also makes the crucial point that the Hogarth Press contributed to defining the genre of biography as a literary genre. This paper seeks to show that Woolf's biographies participate actively in the



politics of her literary practice. To understand the value of fictionalisation in Woolf's biographies and the empowerment it provides in terms of voice, the case of Woolf's essay *Three Guineas* has much insight to offer and provides additional understanding of Woolf's biographical texts *Orlando* and *Flush*. When these texts are read from the perspective of voice, the subaltern narratives that are woven into the main one gain strength and meaning. This paper also contributes to assessing voice and revived visibility as a major element of the problematics developed by Woolf in her biographical writing.

4 The perspective Guillaume Le Blanc develops in *L'invisibilité sociale* (which can be translated as 'Social Invisibility') can provide insight and new paths of understanding for Woolf's *Three Guineas*. Le Blanc analyses the relation between voice and power in society as well as the mechanisms leading to the silencing of certain social groups, and even to their exclusion altogether from the public sphere. Regarding minor voices and their alternative narratives, Le Blanc writes: 'Forms of visibility and of narration are not equally attributed . . . some voices overshadow others'¹ (Le Blanc 41).

5 Where did Virginia Woolf's voice stand in the public sphere in her time? By 1938, when *Three Guineas* was published, Woolf had gained fame and authority in the literary scene. She was also part of Bloomsbury, a group of famous intellectuals who formed an influential Avant-garde, known for their modernist art, their progressivist philosophy, and their commitment to gender equality. Woolf was keen on women improving their status in society and through the 1920s and 1930s, Woolf was asked to lend her name and her voice to various women's causes and fund-raising campaigns. In 1928, she gave talks at Newnham and Girton, two women's colleges in Cambridge². Out of these talks came her feminist ground-breaking and now milestone essay *A Room of One's Own*, in which Woolf explains that the overall absence of women in the literary canon is linked to women being ignored by historians. For too long, women had belonged to the category Woolf calls the lives of the obscure (Woolf 2009, 28), which Snaith explicates as being "undocumented lives" (Snaith 2000a, 99). Woolf points out that women had also been excluded from education and were financially subjected to their male counterparts, whether it was their fathers, brothers or husbands.

6 However, Woolf has no intention of embracing "feminism" totally blindfolded. After *A Room of One's Own*, the reader may be startled by Woolf's strong statement in *Three Guineas* that: 'The old names as we have seen are futile and false. "Feminism", we have had to destroy. "The emancipation of women" is equally inexpressive and corrupt.' (Woolf 2015, 210). Woolf's language seems dissonant: feminism an old name, a false one? Emancipation equally 'corrupt'? Woolf believes that there is something inherently wrong with the regular words we associate with women's fight for their rights and refuses to take up language imposed on her as to all to speak of the issue of the status of women in society. She does not, however, suggest a palliative term. Nicolas Boileau points out that the lack of direction in Woolf's text is intentional and subversive, stimulating her readers' critical thinking (Boileau 6).

7 *Three Guineas* is a matured formulation of Woolf's feminism. Leonard Woolf called it 'Virginia's "impeccable feminism"' (Glendinning 295). As Snaith explains, 'Woolf conducted extensive research during the 1930s, which produced, among other notes, three notebooks of cuttings and quotations, on the subject of women's experience and society's treatment of women' (Snaith 2000a, 102). Laura Marcus points out that the text extends the issues developed in *A Room of One's Own*, but is much shaped by the context of the rise of fascism and the growing threat of war (Marcus 2010, 150). The text is constructed as a response to three letters asking Woolf to lend her name to three causes: the promotion of pacifism, commitment to building a new Women's college and commitment to promoting working women. Woolf is staged as reluctantly conceding a guinea to each of these causes. She warns her correspondents that the real obstacle to peace and to gender equality is the patriarchal nature of society and that no change can occur for women before destroying that first: peace will not win over militarism, no real change can be expected in the status of women, there will be no gain of equality or dignity without first putting an end to the male politics of domination.



8 More to it, by merely paying lip service to these causes, Woolf succeeds in playing on her own terms. Le Blanc describes dominant groups as detaining a monopoly over voice in the public sphere (Le Blanc 41). In Woolf's response to the lawyer who wants her to join his society to promote pacifism, Woolf chooses to take the voice of this male barrister out of his hands and to transform that voice into her own. In *La force du féminin : sur trois essais de Virginia Woolf*, Regard sees the transition from the private letter to the public essay as a process in which Woolf attains a state of impersonality. The claimant acquires no grip over Woolf the individual, the artist's impersonality is made available instead. Regard explains, regarding *Three Guineas*, 'So [Woolf] uses "I" to speak for all. This is what she whispers: "I" am writing to you, but not from where you expect me to be, not from the place you assigned me to'³ (Regard 2002, 92). This supports the idea that, by providing an impersonalised authorial voice instead of the expected private reply, Woolf shows that not only does she have power over her voice, but she also has the power to define and design her voice. Her choice to fictionalise her response can be understood in this way. Woolf may also be implying that the fiction initially resides in this make-believe situation in which a woman is asked for help by a male member of the establishment. Woolf considers that in inviting women from time to time to enter the male-dominated public sphere is only faking equality. In refusing the requests and designing a fictional essay, by means of voicing her opinion, Woolf creates a new voice for women freed from the rules and constraints set by the dominant voice. Woolf aims at evading the risk of being caught in the nets of domination, to use Leblanc's formulation (Le Blanc 42).

9 Ironically, her stance is that she will not lend her voice to the mentioned causes, and chooses instead to remain silent by refusing to join the barrister's pacifist organisation. Her refusal is made all the more tangible by the delay in responding—three years, and the insignificant contribution of one guinea. Hermione Lee comments that *Three guineas* is about not joining up and making a revolution by staying on the outside (Lee 390).

10 Woolf was relatively alone in her stance pacifism; several of her male friends from Bloomsbury were committed to the war effort (Snaith 2000b, 134). Her disapproval of the general effort to prepare for war against fascist Germany brought on her a shower of criticism from men and women alike, from friends, and even her own husband. For many, including Leonard, *Three Guineas* disqualified Woolf as a political thinker (Lee 920). This disqualification illustrates Le Blanc's analysis of the way subaltern voices are often considered by the dominating voice: '[the subaltern voice] is auditioned as a narrative power, but at the cost of being disqualified because it always faces the accusing structures of those in power'⁴ (Le Blanc 42). Woolf's voice had indeed gained status as a legitimate narrator, but, public opinion being absorbed by the threat posed by Hitler, most people reacted by preparing for war whilst Woolf reminds her readers that fascism is the culmination of war policies induced by patriarchal societies, driven by the policy of domination. Woolf turns to biography—Wilfred Owen's—to point out another subaltern voice that had been disqualified because he had spoken out against the horror of war instead of praising patriotism; 'however many dissidents there are, the great majority of your sex are today in favour of war', the narrator tells the barrister (Woolf 2015, 93). Therefore, Woolf's staged non-commitment is also a refusal to collaborate with the dominating class.

11 Moreover, by fictionalising, Woolf makes her narrative deliberately into a subaltern one by stripping it of some of its truth value. By doing so, she also retains control over her narrative. The hybrid nature of this fiction-essay makes it an 'outsider's' text, not to be considered serious enough in the eyes of political critics. Marie Laniel, in her article "'Thoughts of an Outsider': Virginia Woolf et la pensée du dehors" ('"La pensée du dehors": Virginia Woolf's Thoughts of an Outsider'), uses Foucault's concept to give meaning to Woolf's exploration of alternative narrative forms and highlights Woolf's determination to keep her narrative voice outside the perimeter of dominant narrative forms, resisting the comfort of fitting in and thus maintaining the power to contest (Laniel 3). Laniel explains that this 'parole du dehors' is, according to Foucault, what



constitutes the essence of modern fiction (Laniel 3). This in turn could give insight into Woolf's choice to fictionalise her women's biographies, thus empowering her narrative voice, by keeping it clear of the traditional narrative forms used in biography.

- 12 Therefore, *Three Guineas* can be read as Woolf's wrestling with the male dominant narrative that rules the public sphere. In this essay, Woolf's resistance to use the word 'feminist' is due to the word having been appropriated by dominant narrative discourses. Woolf writes:

What more fitting than to destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day and is now obsolete? The word 'feminist' is the word indicated. That word, according to the dictionary, means 'one who champions the rights of women'. Since the only right, the right to earn a living, has been won, the word no longer has a meaning. And a word without a meaning is a dead word, a corrupt word. (Woolf 2015, 210)

- 13 By this, Woolf signifies that even the defining of the term 'feminism' is taken out of women's hands and is used as yet another label to characterise them, to put them in boxes. Her refusal to comply with the term and with the definition of the word feminism is a form of resistance to the male dominated public discourse and its appropriation of words and concepts, imposed through the inscription of definitions in dictionaries. In her article 'A Room of One's Own's (Resistance to) Feminist Interpretations and Feminism', Valérie Favre explains that Woolf resists ['directing'] her readers towards a particular feminist direction, but also, in the different pathways it outlines, towards feminism itself (Favre 18). Quite tellingly, Woolf's dismissal and critique of the word 'feminism' is often commented upon while referring to *Three Guineas*, in which her persona considers destroying this 'vicious' and 'corrupt' word and calls for a reappropriation of the form and content of discourse to speak of women in order to reinvent the representation of women in narrative discourses.

- 14 The fictional aspect of *Three Guineas* follows up from Woolf's 1929 essay *A Room of One's Own*, and inscribes *Three Guineas* into a broader endeavour. *Three Guineas* is the final result of the 'novel-essay' that Woolf had initially planned to write. Her wanting to develop an innovative genre, the 'novel-essay' brings insight into the power of the voice Woolf wanted to create from her fictionalising the narrative. In *Women and Fiction*, Woolf discusses the advantages of fiction for women:

it is still true that before a woman can write exactly as she wishes to write, she has many difficulties to face. To begin with, there is the technical difficulty—so simple, apparently; in reality, so baffling—that the very form of the sentence does not fit her. It is a sentence made by men . . . a woman must make for herself, altering and adapting the current sentence until she writes one that takes the natural shape of her thought without crushing or distorting it. (Woolf 2009, 32)

- 15 Therefore, fictionalisation becomes a form of empowerment: the subject takes the narrative in her own hands, reconfiguring the frame, and making her texts follow her own rules, thus establishing a new form of veracity. In doing so, she creates a new voice for women, without having to comply with the conventions of the narrative imposed by the voices of the male-dominated public sphere. These considerations apply to Woolf's biographies *Orlando* and *Flush*.

- 16 *Orlando* is the story of an Elizabethan courtier whose life spans four centuries. The narrative enables Orlando to travel through time and witness the changes in British society. Orlando is also a traveller, posted in the East, then crossing Europe back to England, only to find the country totally transformed by time. Having become a woman in the eighteenth century, Orlando makes endless encounters from different strata of society. Satire of society is a principal component of the narrative, but at the same time, this endows Orlando with the status of an outsider, a witness of the contradictions of history and civilisation. Orlando undergoes passively, taking in the change in clothes, in literature with a keen eye, amusing the reader. She is aware, but not affected by her diminished status as a woman. The eighteenth century stands as a turning point for women, marking their first literary breakthroughs in historical texts. Lee sees both



Orlando and *A Room of One's Own* to be bids of freedom, and share a utopian ending. Both texts set their women free from “histories” of repression and limitation (Lee 715).

17 Our interest lies in the subaltern life narratives that Woolf weaves into the text, in compliance with Le Blanc’s concept of the term subaltern, noted beforehand. These subaltern narratives give voice to a set of obscure lives. One of Woolf’s subaltern narratives is dedicated to the gypsies. The day *Orlando* metamorphoses into a woman, an old gypsy on a donkey comes to take *Orlando* away from conventional society to the gypsy camp where *Orlando* can live free and liberated. In this micro-society, men and women are shown to be equal: Woolf makes this explicit by repeatedly using the term ‘the men and the women’, such as in ‘All the young men and women burst out laughing uproariously’ (Woolf 2004, 96) or, further on, ‘the older men and women thought . . .’ (96), their voices expressing unison. In this gypsy community, freed from the conventions of so-called civilisation, symbiosis brings men and women together, certainly linked to Woolf’s concept of ideal androgyny. Vassiliki Kolocotroni highlights this feature by designating the gypsy camp and its orientalist setting as a ‘third space’ in which gender indeterminacy becomes ‘viable’ (Kolocotroni l. 2347). Elements in the description of the gypsies allude to Vita’s own experience of the Bloomsbury group, who were living in a closed circle, on the margins of conventional society. Vita Sackville-West developed an intense and intimate relationship with Woolf. The Bloomsbury group took Sackville-West in, though they remained cautious about her and her aristocratic ways. The representation of the old gypsy in *Orlando* is very likely to be a self-portrait of Woolf herself, old and wrinkled, with ‘a nose like a scimitar’ (Woolf 2004, 97).

18 A second subaltern narrative concerns the prostitutes, *Orlando*’s ‘ladies of fashion’ (Woolf 2004, 150), which is another marginalised group, this time made exclusively of women. Woolf gives them visibility and voice through the discussions engaged with *Orlando*:

These poor creatures, she ascertained, for Nell brought Prue, and Prue Kitty, and Kitty Rose, had a society of their own of which they now elected her a member. Each would tell the story of the adventures which had landed her in her present way of life. (Woolf 2004, 152)

19 In giving these women a voice, Woolf offers a platform to these obscure lives from which they can narrate their own neglected life narratives, from their own perspectives. Laura Marcus comments that “their inclusion in this episode in *Orlando* would point to the existence of an alternative literary history, comprising the autobiographies of women” (Marcus 1994, 120). These lives may be obscure, but the lives of the ‘ladies of fashion’, similarly to the lives of the gypsies, voice strength, joy, warmth, and above all freedom, which very likely comes from their evolving on the margins of a society dominated by invalidating patriarchal norms.

20 *Orlando*’s own voice as a woman writer follows the trends of British history. *Orlando*’s incapacity to achieve writing her poem *The Land* parallels women’s incapacity through the centuries to achieve a breakthrough on the literary scene. It is only in the nineteenth century that *Orlando* is finally able to write and publish her poem *The Land*, and in the twentieth century that she is awarded a prize for it: the prestigious Hawthornden prize.⁵ Only in the nineteenth century do women become widely published. In Woolf’s essay ‘Women and Fiction’, Woolf writes:

in England in the sixteenth century, when the dramatists and poets were most active, the women were dumb. Elizabethan literature is exclusively masculine. Then, at the end of the eighteenth century and in the beginning of the nineteenth, we find women again writing—this time in England—with extraordinary frequency and success. (Woolf 2009, 29)

21 Through the centuries, women were considered dumb because they were thought of as being intellectually impaired, but ‘dumb’ is also to be understood as having no voice. Accordingly, *Orlando*’s voice runs parallel to the historiography of women as writers. In



the twentieth century, the narrator relates: ‘And it was at this moment, when she had ceased to call “Orlando” and was deep in thoughts of something else, that the Orlando whom she had called came of its own accord; as was proved by the change that now came over her’ (Woolf 2004, 222). Finally, Orlando has had to wait until the twentieth century to be able to see herself as she really is, to identify herself as an independent subject, with her own voice.

22 *Flush* is similar to *Orlando* in that it is a fantasised biography, again enabling Woolf to use fiction as a means of empowering her narrative voice. As Christine Reynier has brought forward the following in ‘The Impure Art of Biography’:

The slight distortion of facts concerning Elizabeth Barrett’s invalidity is eventually turned into a metaphor of the invalidating effect of Victorian society. There is . . . a criticism of Victorian patriarchy in such a representation, the same thread running through the essays in *A Room of One’s Own* and *Three Guineas*.
(Reynier 191)

23 According to Reynier, it was mainly Barrett’s ‘ability to challenge Victorian values’ that motivated Woolf’s biography, more than her interest in the Victorian poet’s works (Reynier 191). It is for this reason that Reynier calls for *Flush* to be read as theory and practice of biography whose relation to fiction needs to be re-appraised (Reynier 189).

24 *Flush* also contains subaltern narratives and Woolf even voices a plea by calling for more investigation of one particular life that needs more attention, that of Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s maid, Lily Wilson. In assessing Woolf’s dealing with Wilson in *Flush*, it is important to place ourselves from Woolf’s perspective in the beginning of the 1930s. Woolf obviously had little biographical material on Elizabeth Wilson. Woolf relayed what she knew at the time. Decades later, more became known about Wilson. For instance, Margaret Forster followed up her biography of *Elizabeth Barrett Browning* (1988) with a partly imaginary biography of Wilson, called *Lady’s Maid* (1990), based largely on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s correspondence with her close friend Mary Russell Mitford.

25 Wilson’s life is yet another life of the obscure. Woolf succeeds in creating this effect through two principal techniques. Wilson’s life is conveyed in the text through a mere asterisk, taking the reader to the endnotes, where we discover a biography within the biography. In this marginalised part of the book, several pages are given to Wilson’s life, in particular her love life and marriage in Italy. In this way, Woolf elicits Wilson’s status in society, her life also relegated to the dark corridors of society, to take up Woolf’s imagery in ‘Women and Fiction’ (Woolf 2009, 28), and remains, in Woolf’s narrative, an outsider, despite her uninterrupted presence and service to her mistress.

26 This is also made clear in the main narrative as well, more particularly in Wilson’s relation to the dog. They are depicted as a couple. Given Barrett Browning’s infirmity, Wilson is the only person to take *Flush* out for walks. They are portrayed as sharing the same experiences, “groping” their way through the fog (Woolf 2000, 24) for instance, highlighting the complicity between Wilson and the dog. It would be expected that *Flush* became attached to the person who takes him out. However, in *Flush*’s wording, Wilson remains ‘the maid’. For *Flush*, the only couple that exists is him and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The narrator relates, ‘*Flush* felt that he and Miss Barrett lived alone together’, thus making Wilson become invisible again. However, despite Woolf’s strong feelings against the exclusion of the underprivileged from the public sphere, Alison Light, author of *Mrs Woolf and the Servants*, has shown that Woolf’s own servants remained quite invisible in Woolf’s writings, revealing her struggle with issues relating to class. Light finds that, despite a certain degree of mutual distrust, Virginia Woolf and Vanessa Bell were both close to their servants. Light has gathered a collection of photographs taken of cooks and housemaids. However, as she points out, ‘though mistresses and maids were constantly in each other’s company, they seem never to have been photographed together. They never could appear side by side’ (Light 159). Light also relates the case of Brereton, Julian Bell’s governess, known to the Stephen sisters as ‘la “B”’ and whom Vanessa thought quite stupid. However, the governess left behind



a half-written novel, written during her stay at Charleston (Light 142). The fact the text has not survived—along with most of the servants' letters to Vanessa or to Virginia—seems to have been a missed opportunity for giving voice to those who lacked it so much.

- 27 More than just being the biography of a dog, *Flush* is, above all, the biography of the Victorian poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, whose life can be mainly characterised by years of self-inflicted seclusion in her bedroom at Wimpole Street, London. Why did Woolf choose to tell the story through the dog? One reason could be that it enabled Woolf to create a new perspective for her subject. As noted in the introduction, fiction in *Orlando* and in *Flush* is to be considered a politicising tool. Reynier highlights the political edge of Woolf's text by arguing the following:

by giving a political turn to her biography, Woolf indirectly takes up the task allotted to the female narrator in Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, "A Curse for a Nation" (1860); there the female voice is bidden by her Muse to undertake what is usually regarded as a male task, *i.e.*, to write a politically committed poem. Thus, the defence of women's rights and political convictions are linked in Woolf's biography and the homage to Elizabeth Barrett's personal non-conformism extends to the commitment of Elizabeth Barrett the poet. (Reynier 193)

- 28 The character of Flush works as the principal focaliser in Woolf's text, creating incongruity and satire but also producing an intimate voice; after all, Flush was the main witness of Barrett Browning's life at Wimpole Street. It is however ironic that Woolf chooses the dog as witness and mediator. Woolf chooses a focaliser that cannot understand human language let alone Barrett Browning's art of literature: 'There she would lie hour after hour passing her hand over a white page with a black stick' (Woolf 2000, 26), recounts the narrator. Woolf's interest in Barrett Browning resides elsewhere: in her status as a woman writer in the Victorian era. Christine Reynier has pointed this out in 'The Impure Art of Biography', in relation to Barrett Browning, but also to her friend, the writer Mary Russell Mitford, who was the one to offer the dog to Barrett Browning in the first place. Reynier explains that both 'seem to have been selected [by Woolf] not so much because they were writers but because of their initially similar . . . attitudes towards Victorian society . . . they both live secluded, restricted lives' (Reynier 189).

- 29 By leading an isolated life, Barrett Browning was able to elude the common tasks that usually fell upon young ladies of upper-class society. Among these would be sitting and listening to gentlemen guests and pouring out tea, as was the case for Orlando who, in the company of Pope and Addison, heard herself say 'how women in ages to come will envy me!' (Woolf 2004, 136). However, instead, Barrett Browning was able to busy herself with other, more gratifying occupations in 'the back bedroom':

She was lying, thinking; she had forgotten Flush altogether, and her thoughts were so sad that the tears fell upon the pillow. Then suddenly a hairy head was pressed against her; large bright eyes shone in hers; and she started. Was it Flush, or was it Pan? Was she no longer an invalid in Wimpole Street, but a Greek nymph in some dim grove in Arcady? And did the bearded god himself press his lips to hers? For a moment she was transformed; she was a nymph and Flush was Pan. The sun burnt and love blazed. (Woolf 2000, 27)

- 30 Woolf describes Barrett Browning's bedroom as a place of artistic creation, only made possible because of Barrett Browning's sick health and infirmity. The young lady was able to dodge the social duties bestowed on women of her class, giving her the freedom to devote time to her art. So, ironically, in Barrett Browning's case, her exclusion from social interaction is what enabled her to shape her voice and become an accomplished writer. Similarly to Woolf's refusal to expose herself in the public sphere in *Three Guineas*, Barrett Browning's success came likewise from her refusal to mingle with society. In this way, she succeeded in securing an unspoilt space, *a room of her own*, where she could develop her art, free from the constraints of patriarchal society, represented in *Flush* by the looming shadow of Barrett Browning's father.



31 Barrett Browning's father is depicted as negative and threatening: 'solemnly a knock sounded that was no tap of enquiry but a demand for admittance; the door opened and in came the blackest, the most formidable of elderly men—Mr Barrett himself' (Woolf 2000, 31). Here, Flush enables Woolf to voice an outsider's perception of the father, through a witness who is unable to rationalise, but is able to sense the weight and emotionally react to the nature of such a presence. Woolf has Flush indirectly comment 'A force had entered the bedroom which he dreaded; a force that he was powerless to withstand' (31), the force being simultaneously the father and patriarchal society. However, Barrett Browning had dompted that force. Her handling of the kidnapping of her dog provides evidence for this. Woolf makes this episode one of the most important in the biography, revealing the true nature of the young lady who is all but a weak invalid, locked away in her room; she turns out to be in good control of her life and destiny. When her family, and her lover, Browning, refuse to assist her in paying the ransom and fetching her dog, she does it herself:

All Wimpole Street was against her . . . Her father and her brother were in league against her and were capable of any treachery in the interests of their class. But worst of all—far worse—Mr Browning himself threw all his weight, all his eloquence, all his learning, all his logic, on the side of Wimpole Street and against Flush. (Woolf 2000, 60)

32 Woolf suggests a gendered battle: 'Wimpole Street' represents society, and the male voices of the family represent patriarchy, 'their class' alludes to the domineering males. Woolf makes gender equality clearly the issue at stake in this episode. So as to highlight Barrett's feminist edge, Woolf has Barrett dwell on her sofa 'How easy it would have been to yield—how easy it would have been to say, "Your good opinion is worth more to me than a hundred cocker Spaniels". How easy it would have been to sink back on her pillow and sigh, "I am a weak woman; I know nothing of law and justice; decide for me" But Miss Barrett was not to be intimidated' (61). Woolf quotes from Browning's letter to Barrett Browning, reassuring her of his support with explicit criticism of patriarchy 'one word more—in all this, I labour against the execrable policy of the world's husbands, fathers, brothers, and domineers in general' (62). But nothing can stop Barrett Browning: 'She puts on her shoes, her cloak, her hat. She glanced at Mr Browning's letter once more. "I am about to marry you", she read. Still the dog howled [in her head]. She left her room and went downstairs' (62). The image of the invalid rising and walking conveys the parables of paralysed men, though, in her case, it is not a miracle, but unmistakably the young lady's determination and strength that enables Barrett Browning to get up and walk, to catch a cab to the infamous district of Whitechapel, and bravely confront her dog's abductors. Barrett Browning's final elopement to Italy to marry Robert Browning confirms her infallibly strong will and confirms that, ironically, Barrett Browning is a woman of action. Therefore, Woolf has turned the conventional narrative of Barrett Browning's quiet, docile life into quite a different story: Barrett's seclusion is voluntary, offering the poet the freedom of creating in a secure and private space. Her voice strikes us as determined and strong enough to turn the tide.

33 Woolf's experiments in biography writing contributed to building Woolf's feminist formulations, more specifically regarding the voice of women as well as their status in society as expressed in *A Room of One's Own* and in *Three Guineas*. Woolf's exploring of the lives of two women writers enabled her to develop awareness of the reasons why women writers were absent from the histories of literature; they were made inaudible and invisible by the general lack of interest in their works. One major characteristic that Woolf's biographies of women and both these essays share is that they are all fictionalised. The biographies are fantasised representations of their subjects—Vita Sackville-West in *Orlando* and Elizabeth Barrett Browning in *Flush*—and both essays are part of Woolf's experimentation with the hybrid form of the 'essay-novel'.

In 'Women and Fiction', a draft for *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf explains the reasons why women writers have had a natural preference for fiction writing. It has less to do



with feminine writing—as Frédéric Regard has shown in *La Force du Féminin*—than it has with simply being the most convenient genre for women to write in, given the constraints related to women’s social and domestic duties, and the unfortunate hindering of their artistic creativity. Precisely, in ‘Women and Fiction’, Woolf points out:


Fiction was, and fiction still is, the easiest thing for a woman to write. Nor is it difficult to find the reason. A novel is the least concentrated form of art. A novel can be taken up or put down more easily than a play or a poem. George Eliot left her work to nurse her father. Charlotte Brontë put down her pen to pick the eyes out of the potatoes. And living as she did in the common sitting room, surrounded by people, a woman was trained to use her mind in observation and upon the analysis of character. She was trained to be a novelist and not to be a poet. (Woolf 2009, 30)

- 35 Given the elements studied in *Three Guineas* and the women biographies addressed in this paper, it can be said that Woolf endorsed fiction as a mode of expression serving several purposes. Fictionalised biography in these texts becomes a mode that is the most representative of women writers. Moreover, fictionalised biography enables Woolf to give a new voice to women who lack visibility. Whether these women were marginalised, such as Orlando’s ‘ladies of fashion’ or her gypsies, or whether they were Victorian icons that had been misunderstood, such as Barrett Browning, these fictionalised biographies enable the reader to gain new insight of these subjects. Lastly, fictionalised biography and novel-essays become a political tool for the woman writer in that they offer an alternative narrative voice, which does not need to comply with the conventions of male-dominated historiography, the same historiography that had left women out of its narrative for so long.
- 36 Equating non-fictional and fantasised biography raises the question of the truth-value in these texts. For further understanding of the truth value of Woolf’s fictionalisation in her biography writing, these women biographies are also to be placed in the context of the New Biography.⁶ It can be said that Woolf thought her fantasised biographies could offer a more efficient mode of representation than the dull hagiographic biographies of Victorian times did.

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Notes

1 'Les formes de la visibilité et de la narration ne sont pas distribuées équitablement [. . .] certaines voix s'imposent plus que d'autres' (LE BLANC 41).

2 Woolf's essay 'Women and Fiction' comes from these talks, and fuelled in turn her fiction-essay *A Room of One's Own*.

3 The translation is mine : '[Woolf] dit donc je pour les autres [. . .]. Elle souffle ceci : [. . .] "je" vous écris, mais pas de là où vous me croyez, pas de là où vous m'avez assignée' (REGARD 2002, 92).

4 '[La voix] est auditionnée comme pouvoir narratif mais au prix [. . .] d'une disqualification de la voix subalterne car elle comparait toujours devant la structure accusatrice des oreilles du pouvoir' (LE BLANC 42).

5 Parenthetically, *The Land* is an explicit reference to Vita Sackville-West's poem of the same title which was awarded the Hawthornden prize in 1926.

6 See THIRRIARD.

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