

# RECOVERING TRANSGENDER SHAKESPEAREAN PERFORMANCE IN SALLY POTTER'S *ORLANDO* (1992)

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## Abstract

Upon the release of Sally Potter's *Orlando* in 1992, critics and audiences alike lauded Quentin Crisp's "cross-gender" performance as Elizabeth I, which mirrored Tilda Swinton's cross-cast role as Orlando during the Elizabethan age. Shakespeare significantly appears in relation to these casting choices since *Othello* and *As You Like It* both influence the plot and correspond to archeological theatrical practices represented in the film, such as when an Elizabethan male actor plays Desdemona on stage. Critics have responded to Potter's *Orlando* by describing it as a postfeminist erasure of gender, yet others note *Orlando*'s potential for representing transgender experiences on the page and screen. At the age of 90, Crisp came out as a transgender woman, a revelation made public in her posthumous memoir *The Last Word* (2017). Consequently, the memoir revises Crisp's performance as screening realness and transforms Crisp's relationships with Swinton's Orlando, Shakespearean theatrical practice, and Shakespearean intertexts. Crisp's memoir prompts important questions about how a transgender actor might experience a "cross-gender" role, how a transgender person who lately discovers the language and identity for a felt body image might remember a past, "cross-gender" role, and how that remembering might reshape intertextual relations between Shakespearean precedents and transgender narratives. I argue here that Crisp's memoir revises performance history and thereby renegotiates intertextual relations. Within *Orlando*, such renegotiation takes place between Crisp's performance as Elizabeth I and appropriations of *Othello* and *As You Like It* to produce new meanings about transgender embodiment, transition, and futurity.

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Actor Quentin Crisp posthumously came out as transgender in 2017 with her final memoir, *The Last Word*. Throughout the book, Crisp reflects on her life as a transgender woman, including her performance as Queen Elizabeth I in Sally Potter's film *Orlando* (Adventure Pictures, 1992). Based on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1927), Potter's *Orlando*<sup>1</sup> deconstructs gendered conventions that produce categories of cis-men and cis-women while drawing upon structures, themes, characters, and theatrical practices associated with William Shakespeare's *Othello* and *As You Like It*.<sup>2</sup> Crisp's memoir redefines her performance in the film and alters intertextual relations through a process of looking back that clarifies trans histories. Blake Gutt describes this looking back as anamorphosis, referencing a perspective technique in painting that produces a distorted image of the subject when seen from the usual viewpoint but appears as normal if viewed from a particular angle. Crisp's Elizabeth actualizes her felt body image,<sup>3</sup> which, in turn, revises other roles in the film, namely Tilda Swinton as Orlando and Oleg Pogudin as an Elizabethan actor who plays Desdemona onstage. These adaptations-within-the-film occur via the framework of an *Othello* plot and through early modern theatrical practices associated with that play. More broadly, anamorphosis occurs in relation to the green world cycle of *As You Like It* wherein figures depart the normal world for a transgressive space and return to the normal world via some kind of metamorphosis. The impact Crisp's memoir has on *Orlando* demonstrates how anamorphosis revises performance history and thereby renegotiates intertextual relations. Within *Orlando*, such renegotiation takes place between Crisp's performance as Elizabeth I and appropriations of *Othello* and *As You Like It* to produce new meanings about transgender embodiment, transition, and futurity.

Potter adapts Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, which depicts the defining moments of Orlando's centuries-long life, including a miraculous change in sex. Woolf wrote the novel as an imaginative biography of her lover, Vita Sackville-West, and as an experiment in using images within biographical writing. Orlando's change in sex, from male to female, literalizes Woolf's concept of androgyny and contrasts Orlando's male privilege early in life with the oppression she experiences after her transformation. Potter excises much of the novel's feminist critique, homoerotic context, and reflections on writing and literature, but she retains many of Woolf's appropriations of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare thoroughly haunts Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*. Even aside from explicit references to Shakespeare's poetry (Sonnets 29 and 48) and drama (*Othello*), Shakespearean plots merge with Sackville-West's biographical material, leading to a sense that both Sackville-West and Shakespeare shimmer between the lines. Briggs argues, "*Orlando* can be read as an act of homage" to both Sackville-West and to Shakespeare, "the dramatist whose comedies celebrate the possibilities of gender change and fluidity, yet,

1 The full title of Woolf's novel, *Orlando: A Biography*, is used throughout to differentiate it from Potter's film, *Orlando*.

2 Shakespeare's plays as theatrical intertexts. Quotations refer to the second edition of *The Norton Shakespeare*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt, et al in 2008.

3 Jay Prosser refers to Sigmund Freud and Didier Anzieu when describing the "body image" as the internal feeling of being one's gender. For transgender people, the body image constitutes the "felt" rather than "seen" body. I refer to the felt body image throughout this essay.

if so, both ‘begetters’ are notable for their absences though they are never very far off” (16). Briggs refers to the “unspoken (because at that time unspeakable)” lesbian relationship between Woolf and Sackville-West, which leads to the text’s Shakespearean “play with disguise and concealment, with masks and masquing” (16–17). Though Potter excises the lesbian subtext, she retains Woolf’s reliance on Shakespearean performance—onstage and off—to question the stability and meaning of gender. By doing so, Potter amplifies Woolf’s appropriations of Shakespeare, particularly via an Elizabethan staging of *Othello* and the nearly cyclical plot of *As You Like It*.

Potter’s use of history to engage modern poststructural theories of gender situates the film within the postheritage genre that Cameron McFarlane defines as using “the past primarily as a stage on which to rehearse issues of gender, class, race, and sexuality of specific interest to us today” (799). As opposed to heritage films that generally pay homage to historical cultures, figures, and texts through a nostalgic haze or its antithesis—arthouse cinema like Derek Jarman’s *Edward II* (1991) or Alex Cox’s *Revenger’s Tragedy* (2002) that talk back to big Hollywood costume dramas—postheritage films conscientiously engage in projects of revision. Vivian Kao claims that “post-heritage films rewrite, rather than preserve or disavow, their literary and cinematic inheritance, and that rewriting is how post-heritage defines the cultural work of adaptation” (276). Kao notes how Potter not only adapts Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*; she also rewrites “other heritage film sub-genres, such as the Shakespeare adaptation (Orlando watching a theatrical performance of *Othello* during the great frost sequence), the historical drama (the Queen Elizabeth sequence), and the colonial film” (282). Among these sub-genres, Shakespeare adaptation looms largest, not only because it stretches throughout the film on multiple levels, but because Potter includes Woolf’s own rewriting of Shakespeare.

Shakespeare figures so prominently in *Orlando: A Biography*, in part, because Woolf looks to him as a model for her theory of androgyny. Woolf claims in *A Room of One’s Own*, “One goes back to Shakespeare’s mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind, though it would be impossible to say what Shakespeare thought of women” (99). Importantly, Woolf theorizes androgyny as a creative practice, not a theory of gender. In *A Room of One’s Own*—often considered a companion text to *Orlando: A Biography*—Woolf refers to Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s claim that “a great mind is androgynous” (98). Woolf clarifies that Coleridge does not mean that “it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women” (98). Instead, Woolf describes the androgynous mind as “resonant and porous,” so it “transmits emotion without impediment;” only the androgynous mind “is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided” so that it “is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties” (98). Conversely, Woolf supposes that “a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine” (98). According to Woolf, a preoccupation with sex merely transmits resentments and stymies any true creativity or understanding.

Unsurprisingly, depictions of Orlando in the novel and film lead to confusion about Woolf’s concept of androgyny. Orlando appears androgynous in the beginning of the novel according to the Elizabethan age’s

“fashion,” even as the narrator assures, “there could be no doubt of his [Orlando’s] sex” (13). Later, androgyny seems to define attributes of both the mind and body. Orlando thinks, feels, and acts in such ways that the narrator concludes, “Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided” (190). Even here, however, Woolf does not theorize gender.

Orlando’s various expressions of androgyny are physical manifestations of what ultimately remains a creative practice. Orlando’s fashionable Elizabethan androgyny exaggerates the difference between himself and early modern playwrights like Shakespeare. Orlando yearns to become a poet, and he achieves an androgynous aesthetic associated with that calling, but his “fashion” appears as a mistranslation of Shakespeare’s creative androgyny. This confusion eventually results in Orlando’s great artistic failure. After he has “the temerity to press his play upon the *Death of Hercules* upon the poet [Nick Greene] and ask his opinion of it,” Greene lampoons Orlando in print so that “no one could doubt that the young Lord roasted was Orlando” (94–95). Greene turns Orlando into a joke because his art remains fixed to a “purely masculine” mind, despite whatever outward androgyny he may possess.<sup>4</sup> By the end of the book, however, Orlando’s physical transformation represents an increasing ability to tap into her “great variety of selves” (309). Orlando buries her beloved poem, “The Oak Tree,” forsaking “praise and fame,” because “was not writing poetry a secret transaction, a voice answering a voice?” (325). This gesture culminates in Orlando’s ability to see her many selves through many temporalities. Woolf ultimately turns Orlando’s embodiment into a metaphor about creative practice. Rather than challenging binary models of sex, therefore, Orlando’s androgyny represents a creative transition toward a mind capable of representing “truth” in literature.

Potter revises Orlando’s androgyny by reimagining Woolf’s theory of creativity as a theory of gender. By doing so, Potter moves away from Woolf’s commentary on art toward an erasure of sexual difference. Through costuming and Orlando’s frequently comical direct address, Potter winks at the quaint gender norms of various epochs of history, starting with the Elizabethan age — an era both Woolf and Potter note for its androgyny — and ending with an androgynous aesthetic common in the 1980s and early 1990s. By associating the late twentieth-century with a return to androgynous fashion, Potter brings Orlando’s story full circle. At the end of the film, Orlando rides her motorcycle to the now abandoned family estate with her daughter (Jessica Swinton) in the sidecar. Once there, Orlando and her daughter lounge under an old oak tree and satisfyingly gaze toward a utopian future represented by an angel overhead (Jimmy Somerville) who sings of sexless “unity,” “ecstasy,” and freedom.<sup>5</sup> *Orlando: A Biography* ends with patriarchal systems still intact. Orlando wanders the halls of her ancestral home only because her son lives to inherit

4 Judy Little argues that Woolf’s *Orlando* sustains a long-running joke that deconstructs gender in a way that anticipates poststructuralism. Though she usefully points out Woolf’s use of humor in the novel, Little ultimately reads Woolf through a presentist lens that disregards Woolf’s essays that inform *Orlando*. Little’s analysis reflects a frequent desire during the late 1980s and early 1990s among scholars to link poststructuralism to Woolf.

5 Alexis Lothian argues, in *Old Futures: Speculative Fiction and Queer Possibility* (2018), that queer minorities often “dream up alternative futures as a way to imagine transforming the present.”

it through progeniture. However, Potter reimagines Woolf's ending as a queer utopia where gender slips away to allow Orlando's daughter to inherit the earth.

Potter revises Woolf's concept of androgyny as an essential, genderless self. At the film's first screening during the 1992 Venice Film Festival, Potter gestures toward contemporary theories of gender construction when she states, "I think we are human beings and trapped within an illusion of difference . . . Men are trained to be the agents of oppression and women are trained to be dependent in a certain way" ("Orlando—Interview with Sally Potter in Venice"). Potter claims society teaches men and women to behave in a fundamentally antagonistic manner, yet the film does more than critique constructions of gender norms. Christina Lane explains, "While interested in tropes of transsexualism and cross-dressing, the film reveals a deep investment in a humanist perspective of gender" (97). For Potter, gender does little but produce conflict. Androgyny presents a pathway toward peace.

Critics such as Brenda R. Silver criticize Potter's representation of androgyny as a universalizing concept of gender. Silver claims that Potter's "refashioning of *Orlando*, which dresses androgyny in the concepts of cross-dressing, gender-bending, masquerade, camp, and/or genderfuck, appears to undo not only the differences between the genders/sexes but the stability of gender itself" (225). By destabilizing gender, Potter resists feminist discourses that critique, desire, and celebrate differently gendered people. Silver describes *Orlando* as "subsum[ing] the body into an androgynous mind/self that is beyond politics: a manifestation of the postfeminist refrain that we don't need feminism anymore, that we have transcended it just as we have transcended gender difference because women have achieved their goals" (223). Potter's *Orlando* offers a utopian vision in which androgyny liberates and unifies at the cost of those for whom gender deeply matters.<sup>6</sup>

*Orlando*'s utopian vision threatens to realize Jay Prosser's concerns about poststructural theories of gender, such as Judith Butler's theory of performativity. Butler describes performativity as "the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being" (45). Rather than a "stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts follow," Butler argues that gender is a copy of a copy that generates "the illusion of an abiding gendered self" (191). Butler relies on the story of Herculine Barbin, a nineteenth-century intersex person legally forced to live as male, as an example of constructing gender and sexuality. Butler additionally refers to drag as a means for parodying the very idea of an original. Butler has come under fire from trans theorists for her use of Barbin's biography and drag to delineate the limits of gender. According to Prosser, Butler's theorizing results in a new binary where transgender people are either turned into a "key queer trope: the means through which not only to challenge sex, gender, and sexual binaries but to institutionalize homosexuality as queer" (5) or they are "condemned for reinscribing as referential

6 Potter's representation of androgyny reflects certain attitudes that emerged from second wave feminism. Refer to Lisa S. Starks's article "Transmisogyny in Popular Culture, Feminisms, and Shakespeare Studies," which appears in this issue, for a more in-depth discussion.

the primary categories of ontology that poststructuralism seeks to deconstruct” (14). Potter’s investment in androgyny realizes Prosser’s criticism by situating transgender people as exceptionally genderqueer. Gladly, Crisp’s memoir revises her performance in *Orlando* to reformulate the relationship between androgyny and the transgender subject, shifting focus toward a trans narrative wherein gender once again matters.

### Anamorphic Performance: Recovering Crisp’s Transgender Embodiment

Critiques of transgender performance often conflate anti-trans rhetoric that describes transgender identity as fake, fabricated, or forged with theories or practices of gender embodiment. Consequently, there has been a tendency to disavow performance amongst trans theorists. However, performance can play a vital role in transgender identity, community, and history. The Transgender Shakespeare Company, for example, founded by Robin Craig and Jack Doyle in 2015 aimed at “combining the historical presence of Shakespeare with a space for transgender actors to form community links” (Craig 6). Participants formed intergenerational relationships with other transgender people and discovered experiences and emotions in Shakespeare’s plays that reflected their own lives. Among other valuable results, Craig notes that the “use of Shakespearean scenes, monologues, and language in the workshops also highlighted the ways in which marginalized identities can interact with the mainstream canon and access dominant cultural narratives” (7). For transgender people like Crisp, performance can become a felt matter. That is, individuals use performance to discern identity and briefly materialize a felt body image on stage as a life-affirming practice. To disavow performance may inadvertently disavow a vital process of embodiment, transition, and affirmation.

Crisp’s memoir revises her performance in *Orlando* to create a hopeful transgender narrative. This revision occurs through a process of anamorphosis that clarifies identity and its history, replicating queer and transgender processes of self-discovery. Blake Gutt synthesizes Jacques Lacan’s description of anamorphosis and Kathryn Bond Stockton’s theorization of the queer child to demonstrate how transgender people construct identity through a process of looking back. Gutt refers to Lacan’s experience of viewing Hans Holbein the Younger’s painting titled *The Ambassadors* (1533). Lacan describes an anamorphic skull that “emerges when, having passed in front of [the painting], you leave the room by a door located so that you see it in its sinister truth, at the very moment when you turn around to look at it for the last time” (173). In such cases, one must look back and even askew in order to decipher a complete picture and its meaning. Though the anamorphic image “can never be brought close, or fully assimilated into a linear concept of time,” Gutt maintains that anamorphosis remains a highly productive strategy for realizing new meanings, understandings, and connections (176).

Anamorphosis describes a powerful interpretive strategy for viewing art, but it also represents an epistemological approach to recognizing transgender histories. Gutt associates anamorphosis and its ability to develop meaning with Stockton’s notion of the queer child’s “backward birth.” Stockton refers to the

constitution of a queer self when people repeatedly ask queer adults the same repetitive questions: “When did you know?” “Did you know as a kid?” (2). Gutt extends Stockton’s observation about queer children to the transgender child, arguing, “Both have experienced similar moments of anamorphosis, of making the connections afforded by a new vantage point and seeing one’s personal history refocused and transformed —yet have also experienced the realization that this narrative will remain forever fractured” (176). Gutt argues that “reading through anamorphosis” is not only “unavoidable for the trans subject, but constitutes an essential part of inhabiting trans identity” (176). For Gutt, anamorphosis extends beyond the individual to reading history more generally, allowing transgender people to participate “*with and in history*” (176).<sup>7</sup> Anamorphosis revises Crisp’s performance and its connections to Shakespeare to reveal new understandings about transgender embodiment in personal and communal histories.

Through anamorphosis, vestiges of offstage transgender experience emerge in Crisp’s onscreen persona as Elizabeth I. Crisp first gained widespread recognition through her memoir *The Naked Civil Servant* (1972), followed by its small screen adaptation in 1975, directed by Jack Gold and starring John Hurt.<sup>8</sup> Long before Crisp identified as transgender, she described a dissonance between her felt and seen bodies. Crisp reflects in *The Naked Civil Servant*,

To most children I suppose there is a difference in degree between their imaginary and their real lives — the one being more fluid, freer, and more beautiful than the other. To me fantasy and reality were not merely different; they were opposed. In the one I was a woman, exotic, disdainful; in the other I was a boy. (10–11)

What Crisp frequently refers to as “fantasy” and “reality” are best described as felt and seen body images, respectively. Crisp’s description of her felt body as a part of her “imaginary,” as opposed to her “real,” life unknowingly reiterates anti-trans language that describes transgender embodiment as pretend or false. Despite her word choice, Crisp does not mean to delineate between real and fake but rather between the seen and felt body. Her point, in fact, is to express just how vital and how real her felt body is, but without access to certain language and information concerning transgender embodiment, Crisp struggles to communicate her experience clearly.

Crisp eventually developed a reputation as a raconteur who provided commentary about growing up as a seemingly gay, effeminate man in early twentieth-century London. Crisp describes herself in *The Naked Civil Servant* as an outcast, experiencing hostility not only from straight people, but from gay men who, in prewar England, were deeply invested in expressing masculinity. Even amongst early twentieth-century drag queens, Crisp reports feeling like an outsider. Despite this hostility and alienation, Crisp remained

<sup>7</sup> Alexa Alice Joubin argues elsewhere in this issue that the “anamorphic image of transness” helps us to understand that “it is the viewers perspective that is inappropriate, not the subject’s existence” (68).

<sup>8</sup> John Hurt would also portray an older Crisp in *An Englishman in New York* (2009), directed by Richard Laxton.

dedicated to outwardly expressing her felt body image by wearing makeup, growing her nails, and dying her long hair with henna. Frequent interviews on late night talk shows fueled her fame where Crisp's self-hatred manifested as deeply homophobic proclamations. Despite coming under attack by gay activists, she remained in the public eye until her death through film performances, interviews, and one-person shows where Crisp monologued about her life before audiences probed Crisp about her experiences and opinions.

Crisp came out privately as a transgender woman in 1999 at the age of 90—mere months before her death—and publicly through her memoir *The Last Word*, published in 2017. In *The Last Word*, Crisp traces her felt embodiment as a woman throughout her life. She recalls how her “daydream as a child was of growing up to be a very worldly, very beautiful woman” (4) and she reflects on moments when she attempted to actualize her felt body with the help of her mother. Shakespeare appears among those instances, such as when Crisp remembers her mother “permitting me to appear in a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* dressed as a fairy. To my mind, she knew my desire was to triumph as a woman” (60).<sup>9</sup> *The Last Word* reframes Crisp's famous femininity as a lifelong means of externalizing her felt body image. Crisp goes so far as to reveal, “The life I've led has not been one lived in the real world. It has been one long daydream. I wish I had been born a woman and one attracted to men, as I myself once was. That is my definition of real. It's the reality I wished for myself” (11). Again, Crisp slips into the language of fantasy, not to differentiate between the true and false but between seen and felt body images.

Crisp's memoir demonstrates the need to think more broadly about how transitions occur without access to certain information, technologies, or discursive practices. Despite major advancements in gender reassignment technology, it remains out of reach for certain transgender people due to socioeconomic barriers and medical practices, but Crisp makes us aware of a generational divide, as well. Crisp reflects,

If the operation had been available and cheap when I was young, say when I was twenty-five or twenty-six, I would have jumped at the chance. My life would have been much simpler as a result. I would have told nobody. Instead, I would have gone to live in a distant town and run a knitting wool shop and no one would ever have known my secret. I would have joined the real world and it would have been wonderful. (8)

Instead, Crisp turns toward commonplace material, gesture, and speech to externalize her felt body. Crisp declares, “I am obsessed with appearing in public as more like myself than nature has made me” (44). Crisp's insistence upon being herself in public extends to the screen. When asked about her preparation for the role as Elizabeth, Crisp instructs, “All you have to do is be yourself and say the lines as though you mean them, as though they were your own. It worked for me and the only thing I can do well, the only

<sup>9</sup> Crisp previously referred to this event in *The Naked Civil Servant* where she reports, “I was allowed to appear in public wearing a wreath of roses and a green tulle dress in a show that was in no other way transvestite” (5).



thing I know how to do, is be *me*” (131). Crisp’s merging between self and character prompts us to ask what it means for Crisp to be herself while playing Elizabeth.

Crisp’s performance as Elizabeth actualizes Crisp’s felt body image and illuminates the many ways transgender embodiment moves beyond the typical narrative driven by pathologizing discourse and medical practice. Jeanne Vaccaro theorizes transgender embodiment when one does not have access to certain discursive practices or technologies. Vaccaro relies on felt as a metaphor that associates both feeling and fabric with transgender identity and processes of transition. As a fabric, its associations with craft means it is, according to Vaccaro, “too often dismissed as low art, amateurism, or merely ‘women’s work’” (92). Felt gestures toward Prosser’s description of transgender identity as feeling trapped in the wrong skin and of transition as a means toward (re)constructing the body image through medical transition. However, Vaccaro contests Prosser’s preoccupation with internal body image and its constitution through the body. Instead, Vaccaro focuses on “the relation between matter and feeling within experience, specifically the sensation (bodily, cognitive and otherwise) of gender in transition;” furthermore, Vaccaro argues that “the many valances of felt account for the dimensionality of such an experience, and importantly, do not privilege a single mode of transition (hormonal, surgical or legal) or reinforce narratives of gender ‘realness’” (91). Vaccaro proposes “a non-predictive theory of gender in which predetermination of gender identity or expression is neither possible nor desirable” (92). Such a theory makes room for transgender narratives that entail alternative paths of transition—what Vaccaro calls “utilitarian transition” (93)—that might otherwise be discounted. Felt in both its meanings—as feeling and fabric—points to the way anamorphosis adapts *Orlando* as a complicated transgender narrative about aging, identity, and transition that differs from usual narratives about transgender embodiment.

Potter’s use of “cross-gender” casting both clarifies and complicates the distinction between cross-dressing, drag performance, and realness, especially in relation to Shakespearean conventions. *Orlando* begins by exaggerating the dissonance between Swinton’s sex and that of Orlando. Potter means for audiences to recognize Swinton’s role as cross-gender casting. Swinton’s gender performance is therefore self-referential. Potter deconstructs gender as performance, so she calls the audience’s attention to Swinton’s performance of gender. This self-referentiality operates as nonparodic drag, yet slippages frequently occur due to characters’ relations to Shakespeare, such as when Swinton-as-Orlando watches a Shakespearean production of *Othello*. In this scene, Potter stages the Elizabethan convention of using male actors for female parts. As such, the historical representation relies upon a recognition of sexual difference. When cross-gender casting relates to Shakespearean performance, Drouin notes the impossibility of presenting it as a subversive directorial choice. Drouin argues, “No matter what the intentions of the actors and directors may be, cross-gender casting and onstage cross-dressing is forcibly an archaeological practice because the early modern theatrical norms to which it writes back are historically fixed and therefore inescapable—unless the performance is not really a production of Shakespeare at all” (26). The film’s portrayal of Elizabethan staging of *Othello* possibly draws other “cross-gender” roles into its archaeological practice. When Swin-

ton-as-Orlando watches Desdemona on the Elizabethan stage, the juxtaposition of cross-gender roles not only amplifies Swinton's cross-dressing, it also threatens to pull Crisp's performance as Elizabeth into its orbit as a similar theatrical practice.

Crisp's memoir defends against such gravitation toward cross-dressing or drag by clarifying Crisp's performance as realness. As opposed to Crisp's differentiation between imagined and real worlds, realness clarifies Crisp's formulation to express how one's felt body image is true and vital. In short, Crisp's description of her "fantasy" world is in fact real, and realness outwardly conveys the truth of her felt body image. Drag and cross-dressing differ from "passing" or realness because, as Drouin points out, realness, "an often dangerous and deadly serious matter, is neither parody nor an intentional exposure of normativity" (23); instead, "the concern when passing is to signify not the fluidity of gender, but rather one's firm entrenchment within its fixed sex-derived categories" (30). At times, performances intended as cross-dressing or drag appear as expressions of felt body experience. Within the constraints of film, felt body experience appears via visual, oral, and haptic effects so that realness becomes a measure of one's felt embodiment. These limits emphasize the importance of realness; however, they also fail to account for the frequent inability or even undesirability of some transgender people to "pass" as their true gender. How, then, can film or theater stage transgender embodiment beyond realness? The anamorphosis made possible through Crisp's memoir provides one way of reading beyond the visual, aural, or haptic. Through *The Last Word*, Crisp revises Potter's cross-gender casting as felt body experience. By extension, Crisp's revision calls into question the cross-gender casting on the Shakespearean stage, suggesting that perhaps the Elizabethan actor's performance as Desdemona constitutes the actualization of a felt body image.

### Shakespearean Performance and the Transgender Subject

Crisp's Elizabeth pulls Shakespearean plays and Shakespearean performances into the constellation of transgender history. Crossdressing appears amongst theatrical practices that most scream Shakespeare, and Potter makes that association clear by portraying an Elizabethan performance of *Othello* that features cross-cast actors. The film's staging of *Othello* emphasizes how representations of Othello and Desdemona racialize gender. Upon his elopement with the muscovite princess, Sasha (Charlotte Valandrey), Orlando approaches the small stage production of *Othello*. Two white, male actors perform Othello's death scene on an open-air stage upon the frozen Thames. The actor playing Desdemona wears a blond wig—slipping to reveal the actor's dark hair underneath—along with white face paint and rouge, all of which exaggerate the difference between the actor and character as well as the difference between Orlando and Desdemona. In this instance, both race and gender appear as mutually constructed on stage, gesturing toward the way Dympna Callaghan describes race and gender intricately intertwining in early modern theatrical practices. Callaghan argues that through Desdemona's cosmetics on the Shakespearean stage, "whiteness becomes visible in an exaggerated white and, crucially, feminine identity" (78), yet the very use of cosmetics means

“the alabaster Desdemona is a plausible impersonation of transgressive femininity, certain formations of which are both punished and valorized in tragedy” (88). Through the actor’s representation of femininity, Desdemona constitutes the epitome of womanhood but also its performance within a specific value system.

The Shakespearean actor becomes the “pearl” Othello laments throwing away in his final speech. The pearl’s image gestures toward Othello’s earlier description of Desdemona as he contemplates her murder so as to avoid blemishing her skin: “Yet I’ll not shed her blood, / Nor scar that whiter skin of hers than snow, / And smooth as monumental alabaster” (5.1.3–5). The proof of Desdemona’s innocence appears before Othello as her physiognomy makes Desdemona’s moral purity evident through her alabaster skin. On the one hand, Desdemona’s whiteness amplifies the desirability of her moral and physical character within a specifically racialized Elizabethan framework. On the other hand, connecting Crisp’s performance as Elizabeth to the Elizabethan actor’s performance as Desdemona shifts desire from Othello and the spectator to the actor playing Desdemona. Fissures between actor and character through cross-gender casting suggest that perhaps the performance of Desdemona represents a felt embodiment that the Elizabethan actor as a trans subject desires to make manifest.

Because Crisp introduces the possibility that stage performance externalizes a felt body image, Desdemona may appear as a historical analog for Crisp’s Elizabeth, the performance of Desdemona actualizing the actor’s inner life. Like Crisp, such a performance would constitute a kind of historical drag but also a self-actualizing practice of embodiment. I do not suggest a historical practice, but a representation of modern transgender performance set within the Elizabethan era. More recently, onstage and onscreen drag performance has served as a similar vehicle for working out transgender identity, such as in the case of Laganja Estranja, the RuPaul’s Drag Race star whose stage performance made her gender identity “more explainable to the masses” while also offering the opportunity to fully embody her felt self (Nolfi). For Estranja, drag was a testing ground and a step toward offstage female embodiment.<sup>10</sup> Such cases reflect the blending of drag, realness, and felt embodiment on stage and screen that gets subsumed under the cross-dressing category.

Orlando elaborates upon this slip from desirable object to vital embodiment through the mutual construction of race and gender on the Shakespearean stage through Othello’s racialized masculinity. When Orlando stumbles upon the Shakespearean production, Desdemona already lies dead, and Othello speaks his final speech before committing suicide. Therefore, Othello appears most prominent onstage. The actor playing Othello (Toby Stephens)<sup>11</sup> wears a long, black beard while dressed in a white turban and robe. The white actor playing Othello does not appear in blackface, though lighting emphasizes the actor’s darker

10 Estranja famously appeared in season 6 of *RuPaul’s Drag Race* and came out publicly as a transgender woman in June 2021. Other transgender women have also appeared on the show. These women include Kylie Sonique Love (season 2), Carmen Carrera (season 3), Stacy Layne Matthews (season 3), Jiggly Caliente (season 4), Kenya Michaels (season 4), Monica Beverly Hillz (season 5), Gia Gunn (season 6), Peppermint (season 9), and several others.

11 Stephens performed in two Royal Shakespeare Company plays: *Coriolanus* and *Measure for Measure* around the time of *Orlando*’s release.

complexion in relation to Desdemona's whitened face. Consequently, clothes take on a heightened role in staging what Callaghan describes as a mimesis that "entails an imitation of otherness" (77). According to Callaghan, this otherness resists exact ethnic, racial, or national characterization and instead demonstrates the capacity to "intensify, subsume, and absorb all aspects of otherness" (78). Callaghan describes this effect as a "specifically Renaissance configuration of othering" (78); however, modern iterations that associate blackness with sexual and gendered otherness in *Orlando* filter it as an assemblage that moves beyond skin color to include Othello's turban and robe, two racialized objects that Orlando himself wears while serving as imperial ambassador to Turkey.

Potter continually links Orlando to Othello throughout the film, first through rewriting the *Othello* plot and then through Orlando's replication of Othello's appearance while serving as Queen Anne's ambassador. Referring to Woolf's novel, Celia R. Caputi muses, "It is almost as if Woolf sat down to write the story of an Othello whose Desdemona betrays him *before* their marriage, and then eludes (ingeniously and to feminine applause) his jealous rage" (57). Connections to Othello admittedly appear stronger in the novel, which begins with the famous scene in which *Orlando* "was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor" (13). The staging of *Othello*, Orlando's rage at Sasha, and accounts of Orlando's "adventure with a Moor in Venice" (110) all support underlying connections to Othello. Potter omits Woolf's opening scene and adds Orlando's transition from wearing elaborate English costume—including powdered wig, waistcoat, breeches, justacorps, and tricorne hat—to the turban and robe that refer back to Othello's appearance on stage and that mutually construct race and gender.

Orlando's adoption of turban and robe does not register a wholesale becoming of Othello. Rather, this visual citation calls our attention to Caputi's argument that *Orlando* is nearly *Othello* in reverse. Like Othello, Orlando rages against his female lover's presumed infidelity, but, unlike Desdemona, Sasha escapes Orlando's wrath. In effect, Orlando fails to perform Othello's male violence. Orlando's failures in romance and violence produce a sense of alienation, leading him to recite lines from Shakespeare's Sonnet 29. Orlando reads, "I all alone bewep my outcast state, / And trouble deaf heaven with my bootless cries / And look upon myself and curse my fate" (2–4), expressing a deeply felt frustration linked to his performance of gender. After Nick Greene (Heathcote Williams) mocks Orlando's poetry, Orlando flees to Turkey where he eventually imitates Othello's otherness as a method for compensating for his failed expressions of masculinity and as a means for disavowing his previous identity as androgynous, English, and white.

Though Orlando previously failed to perform Othello's violence, he appropriates objects that define Othello's mutual constructions of race and gender on stage. By appropriating Turkish attire, Orlando attempts to disavow his English past while also using racist associations between violence, masculinity, and blackness to compensate for his failure to act upon Sasha as Othello acts upon Desdemona. Through objects Orlando associates with Othello's staging of blackness, Orlando doubles down on masculinity. Orlando's impersonation fails, however, when he comes face-to-face with death while defending the citadel from

Turkish invaders. This failure reiterates a symbolic castration that eventually leads to Orlando's change in sex. As Caputi claims, Orlando serves as an analog for Othello from the beginning, but Potter uses costume to cite Othello's constructions of race and gender as a disavowal of his past.

Potter's cross-gender casting and Crisp's performance of felt embodiment characterize Orlando's transformation as a confirmation of an existing felt body image, replicating and extending Crisp's performance. Karen Hollinger and Teresa Winterhalter refer to Swinton's Orlando as "transparently female" and point to the way the narrator's assurance of Orlando's indisputable maleness "insinuates the very doubt it purports to dispel" (240). Swinton's prior performances additionally haunt the film to disrupt her portrayal as the male Orlando. Catherine Fowler notes that across Potter's films, performers, actors, and performances exist "alongside characters . . . to appear dialectically in her films, as themselves and as figures with narrative roles" (8). Swinton's off-screen personas and prior performances emphasize her embodiment of Orlando as drag, not because they exaggerate her femininity but because they self-referentially emphasize gender as performance. By 1992, Swinton was well-known for her female roles in art house cinema, including seven Jarman films. Most significantly for UK audiences, Swinton performed as a woman who cross-dresses as her deceased husband in *Screenplay's* "Man to Man" episode (1992) wherein Swinton's female body remains legible as the underlying image. For audiences familiar with Swinton's performance in "Man to Man," Swinton's role as Orlando leads to a ghosting effect that Marvin Carlson defines as an instance when "the identical thing they [the audience] have encountered before" appears "now in a somewhat different form" (7). To different degrees, Swinton's previous performances exaggerate the dissonance between the actor's and character's sex to produce an alignment effect when Orlando finally transforms physically.

By revising Elizabeth, Desdemona, and Orlando as transgender characters, Crisp's memoir effectively combines their three deaths to bind them within a fictionalized trans history. As Elizabeth, Crisp appropriates her persona as Gloriana. Crisp/Elizabeth first appears gliding across the water in darkness as rows of torches cast their flickering light upon the queen. A tenor (Jimmy Somerville) heralds Elizabeth's coming by singing an adaptation of Edward Johnson's "Eliza is the Fairest Queen" (1591) that blazons Elizabeth, whose "eyes are blessed stars" and "breast is that fair hill." Rather than questioning Crisp's female embodiment, the blazons emphasize Crisp's realness. When Elizabeth dies at the end of the first sequence, however, it marks the end to the actualization of Crisp's felt embodiment. While Elizabeth's perfection appears through the blazon, Desdemona's beauty escapes its limits. The Shakespearean actor becomes the "pearl" Othello laments discarding in his final speech, gesturing to Cassio's earlier description of Desdemona as a maid

That paragons description and wild fame,  
One that excels the quirks of blazoning pens,  
And in th'essential vesture of creation  
Does tire the engineer. (2.1.62–66)

If performing Desdemona actualizes a felt body image, that too halts abruptly with her death. In these instances, death attends the actualization of felt embodiment and gestures toward the rhetoric of death, such as deadnaming, attributed to erasing transgender identity. While historical drag characterizes felt embodiment as desirable in relation to the “blazoning pen,” each death also gestures toward the temporal limits of theatrical and cinematic performance. Eventually, the actor must return to an offstage or offscreen persona.

Yet Elizabeth’s and Desdemona’s deaths do not signify an end to the transgender narrative since both performances trigger Orlando’s own progression toward sexual metamorphosis. As Elizabeth’s favorite and “limb of her infirmity,” Orlando actualizes Crisp’s fantasy after Elizabeth’s death. Similarly, Orlando’s viewing of Desdemona on the Elizabethan stage doubly marks the *Othello* plot and foreshadows Orlando’s transition. Orlando suffers a symbolic death by slipping into a brief coma. When Orlando awakens as a woman, her transformation visually appears via Swinton’s naked body, which she then cleanses in a baptismal washing away of the old skin and an anointing of the new in a literal and symbolic rebirth. Anamorphosis ultimately links Elizabeth, Desdemona, and Orlando as a transindividual and transhistorical narrative of sexual transition.

These connections between Elizabeth, Desdemona, and Orlando occur within the green world cycle of *As You Like It*. Northrop Frye describes the green world cycle as action that “begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world” (182). Shakespeare’s comedies, such as *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *The Winter’s Tale* all entail green spaces that disrupt the order of normal worlds, but the transgressive space may also entail places other than forests, such as the seacoast in *Twelfth Night*. Frye additionally refers to *The Merchant of Venice* where “the second world takes the form of Portia’s mysterious house in Belmont, with its magic caskets and the wonderful cosmological harmonies that proceed from it in the fifth act” (182–83). *As You Like It* stands out as Potter’s precedent because she relies upon Rosalind’s apparent pleasure in cross-dressing, differentiating her from the melancholic experience of Viola’s cross-dressing, for example. *As You Like It* presents cross-dressing as pleasurable, empowering, and productive, all of which align with Potter’s vision of Orlando’s transformation as a pathway toward androgyny or, in relation to Crisp’s revision, a pathway toward normalizing transgender embodiment via the green world cycle. In either case, pleasurable transformations in appearance usher a return to the normal world.

The structure of *As You Like It* repeats the green world progression from a normal world to a transgressive world and back again. From the beginning, court life constitutes the normal world, but Duke Frederick disrupts its order when he exiles Rosalind. Rosalind then enters the Forest of Ardenne’s transgressive green space where misrule presents both threat and possibility. Rosalind voices her anxiety about sexual violence when she exclaims, “Alas, what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far!” (1.3.102–104). In response, Rosalind cross-dresses as Ganymede. Rosalind’s transformation, which allows

her to safely traverse the forest, enables Rosalind to recover her father and facilitate the romance with Orlando. The resolution ultimately restores normal order with Duke Senior's return to court and the re-institution of normative gender roles via Rosalind's marriage to Orlando.

Woolf appropriates Orlando's name rather than Rosalind's because its androgyny fits the protagonist when either male or female. The name indicates a connection between *Orlando* and *As You Like It*, but it also refers audiences to Rosalind due to correlations between the characters' gender transformations. Recognizing this analog clarifies *Orlando's* green world cycle wherein androgyny defines the normal world. Potter frames the eras that unfold after Elizabeth's death as increasingly gendered, punctuated by Orlando's proximity to war in Turkey during the seventeenth century. Potter retains Woolf's Orientalism to clearly define Turkish space as transgressive. Only when Orlando encounters the Byronic Shelmerdine (Billy Zane) does she begin the return to androgyny. Shelmerdine mirrors Orlando's own androgynous essence, leading to a temporary love affair that produces Orlando's daughter. With the advent of the late twentieth century and its return to an androgynous aesthetic, Orlando's path comes full circle to imagine a gender utopia. Through Shakespeare's green world cycle, Potter normalizes androgyny by beginning and ending in androgynous eras, characterizing them as normal worlds.

*The Last Word* revises Orlando's green world cycle by establishing Elizabeth's embodiment of transgender realness as normal and therefore familiar and desirable. Despite the Elizabethan era's associations with androgyny, Crisp's Elizabeth defines the age, especially since Potter stages the "Cult of Elizabeth" through image, song, and ritual. In a defining moment, Orlando insults the queen when he recites, "See the virgin rose. How sweetly she doth peep forth with bashful modesty . . . Lo see soon after how she fades" from Book II of Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene*. Despite the insult to the aging queen, Elizabeth dotes on Orlando as a symbol of her bygone youth. Upon her death, Elizabeth initiates Orlando's journey by bestowing the family estate unto Orlando and requiring his eternal youth. With *The Last Word* in mind, the scene projects intersecting desires for youth and female embodiment onto Orlando's character.

When Orlando moves through transgressive space, most represented by Orientalist depictions of Turkey, the memoir renegotiates Orlando's relation to Crisp's/Elizabeth's desires. While Orlando's eternal youth explicitly realizes Elizabeth's desire, Orlando's change in sex realizes Crisp's. These two desires merge upon Orlando's transformation to interrogate constructions of womanhood as necessarily youthful and prompts questions about felt body images not only in relation to gender but to age. The desire for youth and womanhood overlap, but they differ in the film since the former demands stasis while the latter requires transition. As a result of this difference, Orlando never suffers the disorientation of eternal youthfulness, but she does struggle to inhabit her new body. As such, anamorphosis amplifies Chris Coffman's characterization of Woolf's *Orlando* as considering "both the implications of and the persistence of memories of one's past sex after transition and some of the psychological changes involved in coming to inhabit a body or a gender identity that is subject to different social expectations than those of the sex of one's birth" (15).

Potter screens this unease amidst Orlando's conversation with famous "wits," including Jonathan Swift, Joseph Addison, and Alexander Pope, who ridicule Orlando on account of her sex with such insults as, "Women have no desires, only affectations" and "Women are but children of larger growth." The effect disorients Orlando, who only recently enjoyed the deference generally given to aristocratic men. Potter's adaptation replicates what Coffman refers to as the inverted narrative of "being at odds with one's embodiment" (16). This disorientation ultimately defines Orlando's experience surrounding his transformation in transgressive space.

While Orlando's recitation of Sonnet 29 in the sixteenth century screens a discomfort similar to Crisp's feeling of otherness within men's cultures, Orlando's feeling of otherness after her transformation into a woman registers an experience with trans residue unavailable to Crisp. Orlando struggles to adapt to limitations the world places on her female-bodied identity. This discomfort disrupts connections between *Orlando* and *As You Like It* and instead brings *Twelfth Night* into the film's orbit. Whereas Shakespeare's Rosalind finds her cross-dressing pleasurable and empowering, Viola shares Crisp's and Orlando's experiences of discomfort in the film. *As You Like It* emphasizes the way Rosalind playfully uses cross-dressing in games of love. The epilogue highlights this playfulness when Rosalind hopes "the play may please" (14), referring to both the theatrical production and flirtations between men and women in the audience. The actor playing Rosalind speaks out of character, supposing "If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me" (14–16). The epilogue's blurring of gender, performance, and desire reflects Rosalind's similar cross-gender play with Orlando as both theatrical and fun. In contrast, *Twelfth Night* concludes with a more somber tone because Viola's identity remains contested. Orsino demands Viola's female attire as proof of her sex. Until she can produce the clothes, Orsino declares that Viola must remain Cesario, "For so you shall be while you are a man" (5.1.373), forcing her to continue, however temporarily, embodying an identity she disavows. The play ends, therefore, by extending Viola's discomfort as a mis-gendered woman. Orlando's discomfort with gender in the film temporarily gestures toward Viola; even so, *Orlando* eventually pivots away from these negative feelings to emphasize Potter's utopian resolution. Despite a brief nod to *Twelfth Night*, Potter's investment in androgyny and Crisp's revision of that androgyny as transgender embodiment ultimately rely on *As You Like It's* playfully triumphant tone as well as its cyclical structure.

The revisions produced by Crisp's memoir help to incorporate transgender embodiment into Potter's vision of Orlando's return to the normal world. Orlando's final scene in which the protagonist travels to the abandoned family estate provides a powerful symbol of reconciliation with the past. Despite her androgynous aesthetic, Orlando remains tightly bound to Crisp's realness at the beginning of the film since her daughter refers to that realness by verifying Orlando's newfound sex before the angel's song of universal acceptance. Crisp's memoir does little to interfere with Potter's resolution, yet the memoir's revision of the normal world as an actualization of one's felt embodiment vitally transforms Orlando's daughter into a symbolic child of futurity that incorporates transgender people into Potter's vision of gender utopia.



## Conclusion

Crisp's Elizabeth replicates the theatrical experience Crisp returns to in both *The Naked Civil Servant* and *The Last Word*: her triumph as a dress-wearing fairy in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Shakespeare clearly mattered to Crisp, based upon her identification in *The Naked Civil Servant* with Juliet (12), Desdemona (26), and Imogen (163). For Crisp, Elizabeth appears as yet another opportunity where she could live out her "daydream." Though one must not generalize Crisp's experience, she is not alone amongst aging transgender people for whom the discursive practices and technologies pertaining to transgender identity have been and may continue to be elusive. Tarynn M. Witten and A. Evan Eyster report that older transgender adults are "less likely to be out" (188) and that many remain "unaware of their true gender (not out even to oneself) until later in life, sometimes followed by transition in the older adult years or at least by some private true-gender expression" (201). Crisp's coming out at 90 represents an extreme example, but it highlights the discursive, technological, and cultural differences not only between generations but between various socioeconomic and cultural demographics. For those like Crisp without access to the language or technology to externalize their felt body image, embodiment in performance may constitute a vital, if temporary, way of actualizing one's true self. Affirming such felt realities through Shakespeare importantly produces the pleasure and validation of enfolding transgender performance within an imaginative history, replicating Woolf's productive effects of merging biography and imagination within a transhistorical framework.

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