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Did Human Character Change? Representing Women and Fiction from Shakespeare to Virginia Woolf

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A century on from Virginia Woolf's much-debated claim that "on or about December 1910, human character changed," this essay takes the opportunity to reassess its import not as the provocation to her contemporaries that seems to have been intended, or as a statement of originality, but in a historical envelope that encompasses Woolf's own fictional oeuvre within a tradition of representing women in fiction.¹ This tradition is rhetorical and literary rather than essentialist; it engages with representations and associations rather than directly with psychological or philosophical questions about personality or identity. As such, "character" should be understood as involving a series of recognizable codes or tropes played through new contexts. A pioneer of "stream of consciousness" prose and Modernist fiction, Woolf is normally read for her innovations in representing selfhood; this experimentalism, I shall suggest, is built on a bedrock of familiar imagery that reveals her involvement in a continuing literary tradition of character representation. Her interest in late nineteenth-century and contemporary developments in depth psychology notwithstanding, Woolf's revolutionary prose style shows evidence of her careful reading of previous literary evocations of character, particularly the characters of women. What is at issue, then, is not primarily existential questions about whether character "is" innate, self-fashioned, or merely linguistic, but rather critical or representational issues of how literary character has been evoked so as to create certain responses in readers. In the process, however, the larger existential questions are implicitly invoked, and shown to be not novel concerns of

¹Earlier versions of this paper were given as talk at the University of Glasgow (December 2010) and the Hebrew University of Jerusalem (March 2011). I am grateful to members of the audience on both occasions for comments and questions which have helped to clarify the argument. Woolf's phrase comes from the essay "Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown" (1928), based on a paper read to the Heretics, Cambridge, on May 18, 1924; see "Character in Fiction," in Woolf 1988: 421.

modernist psychology but continuing issues in literary understandings of the concept of “character” itself, at least as far back as the seventeenth century.

I begin with a passage from Woolf’s last published novel, *Between the Acts* (1941), at the moment when an elderly woman, a little disorientated but swept up in the thespian wave of a village pageant of English history, attempts to express her gratitude to its frustrated and irascible but idealistic stage manager, Miss La Trobe:

Mrs Swithin, laying hold desperately of a fraction of her meaning, said: “What a small part I’ve had to play! But you’ve made me feel I could have played . . . Cleopatra!”

She nodded between the trembling bushes and ambled off.

The villagers winked. “Batty” was the word for old Flimsy, breaking through the bushes.

“I might have been — Cleopatra,” Miss La Trobe repeated. “You’ve stirred in me my unacted part,” she meant. (2011: 110)

Shakespeare is a constant touchstone for Miss La Trobe’s aspirations, as for Mrs Swithin’s understanding of the pageant’s import. The impresario instinctively grasps the comfort offered in “old Flimsy’s” muddled attempt to convey, amidst the other villagers’ carping incomprehension, her appreciation of the liberating possibilities of La Trobe’s vision. Mrs Swithin’s moment of rapture both expresses her personal sense of self-transcendence and (recalling the setting of *Between the Acts* on the eve of the outbreak of war in 1939) voices a sense of tragic foreboding and grief for the loss of all our unacted (and perhaps unrecoverable) parts. We might want to understand Woolf’s reference to Shakespeare’s tragedy at this point in the novel both as a wry comedy of disproportion (dotty old widow fantasizes Egyptian empress), and as a parable of empire at its moment of dissolution. These are not alternatives, of course; it would be a mistake to circumscribe the implicative reach of this richly layered book. This “moment of being” in the flow of time when character crystallizes into self-expression suggests its multi-faceted nature, as implying the “unacted” as well as acted “parts”: those aspects of personality which remain implicit, repressed, or simply unrepresented in any manifestation. The passage also, rather movingly, catches a glimpse of real understanding between two women who, like the other characters in the novel, float for the most part past one another in insulated bubbles on streams of incommunicable consciousness (Woolf 1990: 165–66). The image of character they share in this moment is charged with significance: Cleopa-

tra, the greatest female “part” of all time, a woman of “infinite variety.”²

“The novel,” Woolf famously wrote, “is a very remarkable machine for the creation of human character.”³ Alluding again to Shakespeare’s heroine in “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Woolf’s “English,” “French” and “Russian” versions of the fictional Mrs Brown in a railway carriage suggest that “character” is always a literary construction in which the writer’s choices are determined as much by her own circumstances as by the demands of the subject: “Mrs Brown can be treated in an infinite variety of ways according to the age, country, and temperament of the writer” (1988: 75). A few years later, in “Women and Fiction,” Woolf notes the problem of how to represent in language the texture of a woman’s experience when the substantive events that constitute it to an external view are private and ephemeral:

not only do women submit less readily to observation than men, but their lives are far less tested and examined by the ordinary processes of life. Often nothing tangible remains of a woman’s day. The food that has been cooked is eaten; the children that have been nursed have gone out into the world. Where does the accent fall? What is the salient point for the novelist to seize upon? It is difficult to say. Her life has an anonymous character which is baffling and puzzling in the extreme. For the first time, this dark country is beginning to be explored in fiction. (1966, II: 146)

We might read this as Woolf taking issue with the failure of existing representational conventions to register adequately for a reader — and what would constitute “adequacy” is of course arguable — the *sense* of what a woman’s life, as lived, felt like. Her fiction writing was preoccupied by the question of how far inner realities may ever be rendered in communicable language.

Woolf’s provocation about the change in human character in the essay on Arnold Bennett quoted above was, then, a statement about writing, an aesthetic manifesto. It pointed primarily not to a real alteration in human nature (however one might describe that), but to the possibilities for representing character in prose — more particularly, this “anonymous” character of hidden experience, the “unacted parts” implied in represented selfhood. In an era of mass mechanization, it was a question of how an artistic representation of “the human” might emerge from the

² William Shakespeare, *Antony and Cleopatra*, II.2: 236.

³ “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Woolf 1988: 384.

highly effective technology of the popular realist novel. We might say, in other words, that it concerned the nature of representation rather than of essence or identity: the existential questions about what a woman's life "is" were addressed not as philosophical or psychological issues but as issues of style, and of frustration as well as accomplishment. Exploring the "dark country" of consciousness would involve Woolf, too, I shall suggest, in the abandoned potentialities of the selves and characters that might have been.⁴

Woolf was dissatisfied, as people tend to be, more with her immediate literary antecedents "the Victorians" (Arnold Bennett being "their" special representative), than with their forebears, with whom she made some common cause. Her essays suggest that she found more to her purposes in eighteenth-century writing: Daniel Defoe, or Laurence Sterne, or James Boswell, for example. Her discussion of Defoe was an occasional piece written to commemorate the bicentenary of *Robinson Crusoe*, a book which had, she noted, "given [its author] a kind of anonymous glory" that has obscured his representations of women. "On any monument . . . the names of *Moll Flanders* and *Roxana* . . . should be carved as deeply as the name of Defoe" (1984: 87). I want to link the "anonymous glory" she ascribes to a great creator of female subjects with the "anonymous character" of women's lives for which Woolf's own writing struggled to find an adequate idiom. Her sympathy with marginally self-reflective heroines like Defoe's makes it clear that the representational issue was how to portray interiority ("the Victorians," after all, were the great masters of psychologism who played out the fates of their latter-day Molls and Roxanas — George Eliot's Hetty Sorel or Hardy's Tess of the D'Urbervilles, for example) not in terms of verbalized experience or conceptual articulacy on the part of the character but through carefully choreographed interactions within the plot that revealed their own limited comprehension of the train of events into which their actions and responses swept them. The issue to which Woolf addressed herself more particularly was how to represent the additional layer of that "baffling and puzzling" "anonymous character" that eludes analysis or explana-

⁴Erving Goffman's *The Presentation of the Self in Everyday Life* (1959) and the tradition of sociological and sociolinguistic concern with "character" associated with it, used images of theatricality to address questions of selves "acting" parts in ordinary human intercourse. I would argue that Woolf's writing (and that of the literary antecedents with whom this essay is concerned) anticipated and offered verbal models for this influential interpretation of social interaction.

tion: something that we might call the texture of experiencing, the livingness of being.

The philosophical underpinning of this sense of the mind and its extension into the world in the forms of personal identity and character was essentially that of another eighteenth-century literary pioneer, the philosopher David Hume: Woolf's, like his, was a skeptical epistemology that found in the medium of theater an appropriate metaphor for the performative nature of character. Invoking a different periodicity, and casting backwards two centuries from *Between the Acts*, we may identify both conceptual and verbal continuities between the eighteenth-century writing that Woolf admired, and that stirring but unacted part of Cleopatra in all her infinite variety intuited by Mrs Swithin. The chain of allusion casts a little more light, perhaps, into the baffling and puzzling dark country of female character that Woolf's fiction explores, and suggests an evolutionary rather than a revolutionary model for her modernist experiments in fiction. Here is Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature*, in 1739:

Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. The mind is a kind of *theatre*, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the *theatre* must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos'd. . . . All the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties. Identity depends on the relations of ideas. . . . All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union. (1.4.6.4, 1928: 252–53)

Given Hume's reference here to the theater, and the knowledge that his and his philosophical contemporaries' prose reveals of Shakespeare's plays, it is hard to believe that the reference to the "infinite variety" of self-representational possibilities is fortuitous. This passage concerning the empirical evidence (or lack of it) for continuous personal identity suggests the possibility of extreme skepticism about the existence of a

“self” as such, distinct from its multiple manifestations. While we cannot doubt that Hume entertained the idea as a theoretical possibility (and bequeathed it as a problem to subsequent philosophical approaches to personal identity), both the Shakespearian echo and the subsequent sections of the *Treatise* suggest that his understanding was more complex. Taking into account the continuities of experience offered by memory and imagination and inevitably mediated through language, the allusion to Shakespeare’s heroine makes a little more sense of the reference it shares with Woolf’s Mrs Brown. The quotation in both cases refers to Enobarbus’s description of Cleopatra’s enthralling charm:

Age cannot wither her, nor custom stale
Her infinite variety: other women cloy
The appetites they feed: but she makes hungry
Where most she satisfies (Shakespeare 1995: II.2.245–48)

The Egyptian queen plays all characters, but cannot be caught in any one: this epitome of character as performance both does and does not conceal the anonymity of essence. It is not that Cleopatra does not exist as a person; on the contrary, her stage presence for the audience and fascination for the other characters within the frame of the play emphasizes her plenitude, if not superfluity, of “character.” The point is rather than these multiple representations reveal some truths about the selves “she” can play without exhausting the possibilities for who she “is.”

Character underpinned what Charles Taylor has called the “repertory” of the “social imaginary” of eighteenth-century culture (2004: 115). It was a commodity equivalent to *reputation* — particularly for women; in ethical, political and economic discussion it is inseparable from representation. Enlightenment writing configured the relationship between the “study of the mind of man” and the representation of “private” character in striking ways: its public story of character was one of communicability; character was about persona: “self” was a public projection as much as a private attribute. In Alexander Pope’s first *Moral Epistle*, “Of the Characters of Men,” Viscount Cobham was put forward as an exemplary representative, legible to others and securely placed in the social narrative. Possession of such a character implied a right to portray and articulate it, to define it for others, and to gain advantage from its security. Irrespective of genre, in polite culture the personal attributes and social function of “character” were inextricable. Pope’s Second *Moral Epistle*, “To a Lady, of the Characters of Women,” provocatively summarizes the gendered nature of public character and connects its material and ethical connotations through metaphors of inscription and impression:

Nothing so true as what you once let fall,
 "Most Women have no Characters at all."
 Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear,
 And best distinguish'd by black, brown, or fair. (1963: 560)

The poem is a highly sympathetic sequence of studies in frustration: of women distracted by their own economic and cultural inconsequence, fitfully desiring and disdaining the goods, the status, or the experiences of tenderness that might render their existences, for a moment, stable and meaningful. In the body of the poem Pope audaciously represents women as either prey to fixed obsessions or (more like some of Woolf's female characters) labile creatures, driven by the conditions that constrain them to "impotence of mind." Excluded from consequential action by a polity that permitted only men to develop the prudent, regulated public forms of "character," expected instead to embody compliance and accessibility, they become wildly plastic, liable to unpredictable and uncontrollable metamorphosis. "[G]reat Atossa . . . Scarce once herself, by turns all Womankind," whirls about in undirected rage against the conditions of her life: "No thought advances, but her Eddy Brain / Whisks it about, and down it goes again" (1963: 563–64).

By virtue of their public roles, men enjoy a metonymic or representative function that stabilizes their transactional relation to their surroundings. Deprived of public expression, women (with a few exceptions) are situationally defined, their "character" not a property in which a public self can claim ownership. If women *are* "seen" in private, it is men who are doing the looking. In public, by this time, women were being looked at as characters in the theater, as Kristina Straub (1992) and others have pointed out, but the actresses who played them were, socially, women of "no character": projecting female roles on stage effectively forfeited that reserve of private integrity from public view that was held to constitute the feminine character. The issue, once again, concerns representational possibilities rather than social and political realities; at all social levels and in all walks of life there were, of course, women (as recent biographies of figures as different as Sarah Churchill and Mary Robinson show) who occupied positions of influence and exercised power in despite of prevailing economic and political disenfranchisement.⁵ The gendering of representation is constitutive: the reservation of feminine character in public (the kind of self-reserve embodied in Pope's addressee Martha

⁵ See, for example, Vickery 1998; Field 2003; and Byrne 2004.

Blount) is a kind of necessary supplement that enables the masculine poet to construct a public character. Pope's "Matter too soft a lasting mark to bear" would be given scientific standing in the physiological psychology of Dugald Stewart, who described women's "muscular system" as inferior in strength to men's, but possessing "a greater degree of that mobility by which the principle of sympathetic imitation operates," and thereby explaining their "tendency to mimicry" (1854: 240). Stewart is an antecedent of Woolf's satiric portrait of "angry Professor von X" in *A Room of One's Own*, "engaged in writing his monumental work entitled *The Mental, Moral, and Physical Inferiority of the Female Sex*" (2000: 29).

In Pope's epistle, the unrepresented but autonomous woman ("Martha Blount") to whom the poem is addressed and who frames the catalogue of distorted types opens a textual space for the exercise of the poet's art. Under this conceit she (not Martha Blount the woman, but the conventional object of address) becomes, to an extent, a projection of the man by whose permission she comes into textual being — his own poetic "character" authorizing the representation in the final word:

The gen'rous God, who Wit and Gold refines,
And ripens Spirits as he ripens Mines,
Kept Dross for Duchesses, the world shall know it,
To you gave Sense, Good-humour, and a Poet. (Pope 1963: 569)

The "woman of character" (here, by implication, only Martha Blount) is known by her reservation both from the body of the poem and from the public sphere. Her character as a lady depends — in this impersonation of her character by a man — upon her neither representing herself, nor being represented, in marketplace or text. And yet here is the poet making her representation a marketable commodity in his poem. Her "infinite variety" of private character stabilizes in the poetic character of the speaker.

As objects of fascinating difference to the gaze of the male poet-observer, Pope's characterless women imply, paradoxically, both a realm of domestic, "private" experience controlled by the formal constraints imposed by poetic decorum, *and* a mobile, anarchic world of surfaces and performances inimical to continuous or integral identity.⁶ With no

⁶ Questions of gender in relation to Pope's poetic voices are complex; there has been much recent discussion of the poems' ambiguous play with images of "manliness" and "effeminacy." See, for example, Hunter 2008: 170ff and Cohen 1999 and 1996.

representative or public “character” to sustain, the women of no character represented in the epistle were weathervanes of impulse, condemned (like Woolf’s Katharine Hilbery in *Night and Day* to “rambl[e] over an infinite variety of thoughts that were too foolish to be named” [1919: 496]). If this was their existential and ethical plight in a socialized world (such is the cultural critique of the poem), it equally made the rhetorical figure of “woman” poetically available to register passing impressions of experience; they became the vehicles and the containers of the sensationist ethics and aesthetics of the later Enlightenment. In the literature of sensibility the process of socialization was also, for women, about self-reservation from public scrutiny, with the home becoming a symbolic location of moral formation. Self-reflection in a private (construed in opposition to a “public”) sphere is one of the conditions on which nineteenth-century realist fiction would come to depend.

As already implied, in eighteenth-century moral economies not only gender but class was a determinant of character representation: only those in a position to commodify themselves and others in the symbolic exchanges of the marketplace or social hierarchies possessed a public “character.” In a rebellious gesture signaling what would subsequently be regarded as a “Romantic” re-evaluation of class and character representation, Robert Burns’s *Jolly Beggars* made the point that accountable character was a privilege, and a burden, of status:

What is TITLE, what is TREASURE,
 What is REPUTATION’S care?
 If we lead a life of pleasure,
 ’Tis no matter HOW or WHERE.
 . . .
 Life is all a VARIORUM,
 We regard not how it goes;
 Let them cant about DECORUM,
 Who have character to lose. (1969: 169)

The *Beggars* are characters by virtue of having dispensed with “character” as a marketable token of respectability. The “Variorum” reminds us not only of the conventional association between character and consistency, but also of the textual connotations of its representation.

Reuniting concerns of class and gender, Burns’s contemporary Janet Little (the so-called “poetic Milkmaid”) pointed out with some acerbity that the “characterless” card was one a man could afford to play as a woman simply could not. After all, it was precisely a masculine careless-

ness about “decorum” that might lead to a permanent loss of a woman’s “character.” This was both the plight and the opportunity of Moll Flanders, who, having lost her character, could go anywhere but was nobody (until she refashioned her social standing in America). A writing woman risks the double loss of personal and poetic reputation when she dares to project herself out of the closet:

Burns, I’m tauld, can write wi’ ease,
 An’ a’ denominations please;
 Can wi’ uncommon glee impart
 A usefu’ lesson to the heart; . . .
 Of politics can talk wi’ skill,
 Nor dare the critics blame his quill.
 But then a rustic country quean
 To write — was e’er the like o’t seen?
 A milkmaid poem-books to print;
 Mair fit she wad her dairy tent . . .
 Does she, poor silly thing, pretend
 The manners of our age to mend?
 . . .
 All this and more, a critic said;
 I heard and slunk behind the shade⁷

Janet Little fashioned a poetic voice out of skepticism that a woman, and, in particular, a working-class woman, might ever be permitted to represent, rather than to be the object of representation. Her poetry (like many eighteenth-century portrayals of lower-class and servant figures) withholds private character from scrutiny and preserves or reserves identity from public function. The question of whether women are “by nature” capable of reflection beyond the narcissism of the closet and the sympathetic mirroring of male projections, cannot be disentangled from their textual representation. It foregrounds the paradox that women are at once “characterless,” and have *more* “character to lose” than men. At the same time, the performative aspects of female character seeking to escape its social constraints that resonate so jarringly with the poetic decorum of the heroic couplet suggest that public and private will not find stable alignment in a gendered dyad (see Nussbaum 1984).

Pope’s characterless women, then, share their representational fluidity with representatives of very different social status. A figure like Moll

⁷ Janet Little, “Given to a Lady who Asked Me to Write a Poem” (1792): <http://digital.lib.ucdavis.edu/projects/bwrp/Works/LittJPoeti.htm#p113> (June 5, 2011).

Flanders, who as the legal historian Nicola Lacey has noted (2008: 3), is “a thoroughly autonomous woman, brimming with agency and enterprise,” is also, in polite terms, a woman of no character at all. The same year as *Night and Day*, Woolf’s 1919 celebration of Defoe (which, like *Between the Acts*, forebodes the “approaching dissolution” of a world) is preoccupied with female characters, Moll and Roxana, whose fictional destinies whirl them anchorless around the very margins of social existence. “The briskness of [Moll’s] story is due . . . to the fact that having transgressed the accepted laws at a very early age she has henceforth the freedom of the outcast” (1984: 64). She is a woman of no character. This questionable freedom, Woolf suggests, is what releases her to lively representation: “the list of the qualities and graces of this seasoned old sinner is by no means exhausted” (65). Moll and her friends, she writes, delighted Defoe and delight his reader for their “courage and resource and tenacity. . . . Their fortunes had that infinite [sic] variety which he praised and relished and beheld with wonder in his own life” (68). Again we find the “anonymous glory” of self-dissolution transferred from the author’s character to his fictional characters.

A century before Woolf’s essay on Defoe, and a century after Defoe wrote, William Hazlitt (a master of the form from whom she learned a great deal about pacing and pithiness) picked up Enobarbus’s praise as a shorthand for the capacities of the imagination: “that faculty which represents objects, not as they are in themselves, but as they are moulded by other thoughts and feelings, into an infinite variety of shapes and combinations of power” (1902, V: 4). Co-opting the phrase to the character-creating capacity itself, Hazlitt wrote “Shakspeare [sic] is almost the only poet of whom it may be said, that

“Age cannot wither, nor custom stale
His infinite variety.”

His nice touches of individual character, and marking of its different gradations, have been often admired; but the instances have not been exhausted, because they are inexhaustible. (1817, I: 207)

In Hazlitt’s Romantic redaction, the male author, Shakespeare, co-opts the chameleon characteristics of feminine sensibility exhibited by his character Cleopatra.

About the same time, Jane Austen’s Anne Elliot in *Persuasion* (1818) presented a different inflection on the role of the characterless woman. “She was only Anne. . . . Anne is nobody” — but her lack of a voice is in the terms of the novel an indication of constant character; in self-

projection, Anne is the very antithesis of Cleopatra's infinite variety. Her passion for Wentworth has been subdued to the persuasion of others, but not erased; she has become estranged from the authentic self that the novel persuades us she has, and she must find that self again, replace silenced self-division by voiced integrity. The novel's plot turns on her awakening capacity to re-persuade herself back into "life" through acknowledgement of her continuing love for him. The rhetorical function is not irrelevant: Anne is a passionate embodiment of the novel's demonstration of how persuasion drives social interaction to direct and shape individual lives. She is a study in its shaping force on character, and on character's capacity to resist such pressure; her "self" emerges in the tension between public acquiescence and private resistance that allows a reader to infer authenticity and integrity of being "behind" the social events of dialogue. It is this inferred "self"—implied as much in what is not articulated as in what is—that engages our sympathies with her dilemma. In this sense the novel is justly regarded as a proleptic masterpiece of Victorian realism.

Persuasion sets out the gendered nature of relationships between character and representation rather bleakly. In a private conversation in a drawing room full of people in Bath, Harville and Anne debate the relative constancy of men and women in love. Wentworth sits nearby, ostensibly writing, but reflecting the conversation's movement in his thoughts; the scene's dramatic irony speaks to the still-unresolved relationship between them. Anne accepts Pope's division between public agency and private consciousness, but draws the reverse conclusion about its effect on female character more generally:

"We certainly do not forget you, so soon as you forget us. It is, perhaps, our fate rather than our merit. We cannot help ourselves. We live at home, quiet, confined, and our feelings prey upon us. You are forced on exertion. You have always a profession, pursuits, business of some sort or other, to take you back into the world immediately, and continual occupation and change soon weaken impressions." (253)

Women's characters, that is, are formed in self-reflection and sequestration, and therefore their love for men, once established, is not subject to change or distraction; men's characters change with the contingency of the transactions that define them. Men live in a world of public time, an onward narrative of progress, and the impression made on them by love soon weakens under pressure of other pursuits; women, confined in the domestic sphere, experience time as duration and endurance — that

living-ness of continuance I referred to earlier. When a man is a soldier or sailor or statesman, he is only that, and forgets his affective relationships (those metaphorical transactions of feeling between individuals that are the basis of sympathy). A woman's character, on the other hand, is defined by these movements of the heart endured and intensified by lack of external distraction.

Harville appropriates literature to his argument: "all histories are against you, all stories, prose and verse. . . . Songs and proverbs all talk of women's fickleness." Yes, she agrees, and they are all written by men: "Education has been theirs . . . the pen has been in their hands. I will not allow books to prove any thing" (254–55) — neatly reminding the reader that identifying with character is an implicit compact between writing and reading to effect persuasion by occluding the fictional nature of representation. Exactly this point is made — with a neat shift in gender — by Hewet to Rachel Vinrace in Woolf's first novel *The Voyage Out* (1915): "Of course we're always writing about women — abusing them, or jeering at them, or worshipping them; but it's never come from women themselves" (1990a: 225). The allusion is not random: Austen's *Persuasion* makes a small but significant appearance in the novel's exposition — a hint that Woolf's reader would be expected to take. Anne's internal dialogues register the embodied component of character in her reactions to the lively flow of conversational exchange around her; at moments her breath is literally stifled, precluding self-expression. Her character resides in these implied private "feelings"; they are a product of a style that internalizes voice as thinking "overheard" by the reader. Anne's style, the style of self-expression silenced in deference to others, is her refuge in singularity, her manner of coping with her single state until time shall redeem it in the re-appearance of Wentworth as her suitor.

Devoted to subduing her love's expression, Anne is a person without interest for the other characters in the novel, while the narrator gives the reader privileged access to those habits of character that would have been approved by eighteenth-century moralists: steadfastness in adversity, integrity, feeling for the misfortunes of others, and so on. For most of the novel she is (like Martha Blount in Pope's poem) closeted, reserved from the public "view" of other characters, but known to the reader through the conversational interactions of that represented space of shared subjectivity articulated by the narrative voice. She is (and this may be one reason why the novel appealed to Woolf more than its Victorian successors *Middlemarch* or *The Portrait of a Lady*) endowed with a power of internal reflection not through the magisterial mediation of an all-seeing

narrator who arranges a pivotal scene of self-revelation accomplished in a character's self-reflection (like Dorothea Brooke's or like Isabel Archer's famous midnight meditation in Chapter 42 of Henry James's novel), but because the reader is invited to imagine Anne as continuously conscious through painful introspection anterior to the passionate expression of loss that propels this scene into the reader's sympathies. That is, we are invited to create her character in Humean fashion as unified and continuous through the projective activity of our own memory and imagination, and to "read" her feelings (as at a different point in the novel she attempts to read Wentworth's and her own) in relation to a past which is always present to her. Anne has, it is implied, an agonistic character beyond representation or self-representation; condemned to suffer because she may not speak her feelings in the hearing of others, her character is to be characterless. We are beginning to approach something like the experimental representation of Woolf's Mrs Swithin.

Similar concerns emerge in nineteenth-century transatlantic contexts. A case study in this story of character, characterlessness, and infinite variety emerges in the literary career of a — now — much less well-known feminist writer of the nineteenth-century America. Elizabeth Oakes Smith was in the late 1830s forced by failure of her husband's investments to become primarily responsible not only for raising their family but for its subsistence; like her British contemporary Margaret Oliphant, Oakes Smith published prolifically across more than half of the nineteenth century: articles, novels, poems, children's literature, essays on women's issues and on Native American culture, and an unfinished autobiography. The phenomenal output of this active many-voiced participant in the literary marketplace between 1838 and 1890 falls into generic phases identifiable by shifts in her literary signature or "public character": initially, novels, sentimental stories, and poems in genteel publications like the *Ladies' Companion* and *Godey's Lady's Book*, which she published either anonymously or in her married name; from the 1840s these were supplemented and eventually supplanted by literary and moral essays over non-committal initials and an extravagant heteronym, "Ernest Helfenstein" (whom she killed off in 1848), and finally — her name having itself become a marketable commodity — political essays and reviews with popular social reach in the *New York Tribune* and *Phrenological Journal of Science and Health*, in the written character she had made her own, as "Elizabeth Oakes Smith."

This literary trajectory corresponded to shifts in focus of her life, from homemaker combining the domestic roles of wife and mother with

those of breadwinner, to public figure: lecturer, feminist, and essayist; the serial self-naming achieved sequential correspondence between the author's successive personations and the "character" of her writing for different audiences. Oakes Smith offered herself to the public arena, as an embodied oxymoron: a fluidly performative identity whose persuasive power lay in the projected integrity of her womanhood.⁸ Her emergence as a political activist and reformer in 1851 exposed her writing to an exacerbated version of the double reflectiveness of character and representation in women, as this opened out in nineteenth-century America from the domain of literary to political representation, and from the domestic scene of reading to that of the public platform.⁹ As an advocate of female suffrage she argued that in order to explore and express their own individuality women needed to be freed from ascribed character which kept them in domesticity and subjectivity. She was perfectly aware that in so doing, they exposed themselves to the instabilities and uncertain reactions elicited by passionate performance, and lost the social protection of "character." This is the kind of response Martha Blount might have written to Pope. It is, also, a thought behind Virginia Woolf's most famous essay on woman's self-expression, *A Room of One's Own*.

Oakes Smith's essay "Characterless Women" published in *Graham's American Monthly* in October 1842 explored precisely this paradox, invoking the oppressiveness of socially ascribed character. Such a "character," she argued, makes a woman vulnerable to being represented, "taken" by an observer. "We talk of vain women, coquettish, masculine, sensible, dull, witty, &c., running through all the defective grades of character." It is "the crowning grace of womanhood," on the other hand, "that she is characterless." A true woman, she went on, like Shakespeare's Cleopatra "a creature of infinite variety" (Smith, quoting Shakespeare, 1842: 199), will perplex identification by her multiplicity of passionate self-representations; the powerful contradictory responses these arouse in Antony within the play evoke a corresponding response in the unspecified contingent body that is the theater audience of any particular performance.

⁸In this respect she reads as an exemplary instance of the essentially performative nature of gender recently theorized by Judith Butler; see, especially Butler 1999. On the American "cult of true womanhood," see Welter 1976.

⁹Harriet Martineau's account of her travels in America made a caustic note of the treatment accorded to female suffragists at public meetings, as reflecting the "political non-existence of women" in the United States; see her *Society in America* (London: Saunders & Otley, 1837).

“Character” may be designated; “infinite variety,” by contrast, exceeds the capacity of representation. This kind of characterlessness represents the ability to escape the confines of ascribed identity; it seems to point to an idea of pure, “free” being beyond social projection and containment, at once independent and responsively related. A characterless woman, writes Oakes Smith, is “equal to all contingencies”; her “faculties or powers are developed by circumstances, rather than by spontaneous action; and this implies the possession of all that is peculiar to her sex, but all in harmonious adjustment” (1842: 199). The essay distinguished, that is, a responsive self-expressivity from the Romantic interiority that found its apotheosis in, for example, Coleridge’s *Hamlet*. It proposed the fluidity of character-in-context, precisely not containable by a legible leading trait or “ruling passion.”

The social reality recognized by Oakes Smith, however, was that female behavior was bound by the constraints of class; required to sustain the “character” of respectability in economic adversity, her language kept the revolutionary possibility of female character carefully contained within the universally acknowledged representations of “Shakespeare,” the acknowledged male authority on female character (1924: 56). The representation at issue was not political but theatrical. From a feminist perspective, this might seem like a failure of purpose; but there may be something more interesting going on. Finding her examples of “characterless women” in Shakespeare’s plays, Oakes Smith emphasized the performative over the reserved nature of character and (again in contrast to male Shakespearians) insisted on the dramatic exchange involved in its representation, as a transaction between performer and observer. Crucially, though, this did not involve reflection through male subjectivity. The characters she was interested in were precisely *not* those like *Hamlet* whose interior self-wrestlings were empathized into self-expression by the Romantic critics of closet Shakespeare and pursued in nineteenth-century novels of psychological realism, but those like *Cleopatra* or *Rosalind* who played out their multifarious modes of being on a very public stage. Foregrounding the existence of these characterless characters in the exchange of dramatic representation, performance rather than reflection became the scene of projected identity. Public representation might mask private subversion.

Oakes Smith herself did, indeed, have “a character to lose,” and her associates were afraid that she was on the brink of throwing it away: her desire to hear Fanny Wright lecture at Clinton Hall in New York in 1839 aroused scandal amongst friends and relatives, who did not object to her

“progressive proclivities” so long as these were not exercised in public (1924: 82).¹⁰ Her attendance explicitly flouted the warning issued by the General Association of Massachusetts on the occasion of her abolitionist colleague Angelina Grimke’s lecture tour in 1837: “We cannot . . . countenance any of that sex who so far forget themselves as to itinerate in the character of public lecturers and teachers.”¹¹ But her insistence on femininity as a positive aspect of feminism — that woman in a domestic context was not, simply, at best a “softer man,” but a being who could perform in several contexts — brought her into trouble with fellow suffragists. “To me a woman without shades of character — without the tenderness of sex, while she is endowed with passions akin to manhood, is an anomaly” (Wiltenburg 540). Performed oxymorons can be troubling. Her presidency over the platform at the Syracuse convention for women’s suffrage of 1852 was vetoed by Susan B. Anthony when she turned up wearing a fancy low-cut white dress rather than the obligatory male-impersonating Bloomers. Displaying herself on the stage in the unsullied costume of “private” womanhood she made the paradoxes of representation all too apparent — and avoided the caricatured representation of male cartoonists. But what, or who, therefore, *was* she, this being who sent out such confusing semantic signals, in a self-representation that set the *spectacle* of fashion into visual collision with its performative enactment of the right of women to self-representation?

The apparent triviality of the issue masks its indication that Oakes Smith’s sense of the cultural politics of female character on the public stage may have been both more profound and more troubled than that of her peers. Representing female fashion in the marketplace, as it were, made visible the implication of women as *women* in the public world of consumer economics, and negated assumptions that a woman in the public sphere was simply a denatured man. She challenged the conventionally-understood difference between the stage (the proper location of performance) and “the world’s stage” — the domain of reality which required conformity of the performed to conventional expectations. To put it another way, her performance of “womanhood” on the political “stage” enacted a metaphor (“whiteness,” candor, or purity of character) so as to force on her audience an unwelcome representation of how historical reality was itself conventionally determined.

¹⁰ The account details how her respectable friends deserted her when she took to the platform and became a “public” figure.

¹¹ Quoted in Gustafson 35.

At one level Oakes Smith's admiration for Cleopatra was typical of Victorian responses to Shakespeare's Egyptian queen, which hovered between fascination with her "infinite variety" and alarm over her blatant sensuality. She was portrayed in paintings by Millais, Alma-Tadema, and others; represented in poetry and plays by Tennyson and Shaw, and played on stage by Isabel Glyn, Lily Langtree, and Sarah Bernhardt (Woolf wrote an essay about Sarah Bernhardt, who fascinated her). A wonderful contemporary anecdote has it that "after watching Sarah as Cleopatra, lasciviously entwined in her lover's arms, an elderly dowager was heard to say: 'How unlike, how very unlike the home life of our own dear queen!'" (Ziegler, Dolan, and Roberts 1997: 83). There are — there *must* be, surely — no incongruities between *this* queen's acted and unacted parts.

The cultural history of Cleopatra's representation in Victorian Britain is secure, and has been well documented. I want to draw our attention back to the less obvious, but no less pervasive, textual reach of Shakespeare's play in discussions of the relationship of character to style (which is, after all, what Enobarbus is referring to, in Shakespeare's play). By-passing realists whom Woolf despised, I turn now to Oscar Wilde's dialogue "The Decay of Lying," as it entered its sardonic protest against literary naturalism:

As for the infinite variety of Nature, that is a pure myth. It is not to be found in Nature herself. It resides in the imagination, or fancy, or cultivated blindness of the man who looks at her. (1969: 4)

. . .

The only real people are the people who never existed, and if a novelist is base enough to go to life for his personages he should at least pretend that they are creations, and not boast of them as copies. The justification of a character in a novel is not that other persons are what they are, but that the author is what he is. Otherwise the novel is not a work of art. (1969: 14)

This, surely, is a further context in which we need to read Woolf's observations on the "infinite variety of fashions" in style, in an essay whose title echoes Wilde, "The Decay of Essay Writing." The Shakespearian allusion is implanted by association in the "stale" future of new devices entertained by the writer (2008: 3). All point back to Enobarbus's point that Cleopatra's "infinite variety" is an effect of artistry, of controlled self-representation. The same year (1889) Walter Pater, whose essay on style Woolf must have known, described "literary art" as "the representation of [external] fact as connected with soul, of a specific personal-

ity, in its preferences, its volition and power.” This helps to explain the otherwise puzzling connection between Woolf’s admiration for the flatly denotative style of Defoe and that experimental stream-of-consciousness she developed to render the continually forming and dissolving texture of experience which is character:

Such is the matter of imaginative or artistic literature — this transcript, not of mere fact, but of fact in its *infinite variety*, as modified by human preference in all its infinitely varied forms. It will be good literary art not because it is brilliant or sober, or rich, or impulsive, or severe, but just in proportion as its representation of that sense, that soul-fact, is true. . . . That imaginative prose should be the special and opportune art of the modern world results from two important facts about the latter: first, the chaotic variety and complexity of its interests, making the intellectual issue, the really master currents of the present time incalculable . . . and secondly, an all-pervading naturalism, a curiosity about everything whatever as it really is, involving a certain humility of attitude, cognate to what must, after all, be the less ambitious form of literature. And prose thus asserting itself as the special and privileged artistic faculty of the present day, will be, however critics may try to narrow its scope, as varied in its excellence as humanity itself reflecting on the facts of its latest experience — an instrument of many stops, meditative, observant, descriptive, eloquent, analytic, plaintive, fervid. (Pater 1889: 7–8; my italics)

Or to take another point of triangulation: throughout the 1880s and 1890s (a period when, as an aspirant writer for the theater, he was also peculiarly preoccupied with the performative nature of character as a key point of access to reality on the historical stage), Henry James’s attention shifted from minute renditions of consciousness in operation to “study of the histrionic character” (1987: 28). In *The Tragic Muse* (1890) Peter Sheringham, a diplomat who resists having his own character completely described in terms of his profession, reflects on the actress Miriam Rooth:

The idea of her having no character of her own came back to him with a force that made him laugh in the empty street: this was a disadvantage she was so exempt from that he appeared to himself not to have known her until tonight. Her character was simply to hold you by the particular spell; any other — the good-nature of home, the relation to her mother, her friends, her lovers, her debts, the practice of virtues or industries or vices — was not worth speaking of. These things were the fictions and shadows; the representation was the deep substance. (1899: 1037–38)

In his view, social and economic relations are inconsequential to Miriam’s make-up; self-representation (she is an actress) is everything. But in

fact, the novel suggests, Miriam is a thoroughly representative figure, the product of her age: in the words of one of those fascinated by her appearances, she is “the great modern personage” (259). Like another thoroughly modern character, George Eliot’s Rosamond Vincy in *Middlemarch*, who “even acted her own character, and so well, that she did not know it to be precisely her own,” Miriam appears to embody an antithesis to a Romantic ethos of selfhood, in which “character” is projected, and “identity” is essential (1994: 117). Peter Brooks sees her as an embodiment of Keatsian “negative capability” (2007: 83). But, as the passage from James’s *Tragic Muse* makes clear, this impression of her observer is itself a representation, and it is contingent on the source of reflection: that is, Sherringham’s own focalized consciousness. Playfulness with point of view and the conditions of fictionality readily obscures — as it conveys — the central conundrum of a performative being represented in the text as a reflection of another character.

The performative and the reflective seem, at least potentially, to be at odds in representation. It is an open question whether Miriam “really” has no character, or whether, being present to Sherringham only in the series of roles she performs either on stage or in his company, the reader is given — by the narrator, by design — no access to an interiority which may, equally well as not, “exist” as an unacted part behind or within the text. All her male admirers are transfixed by her performances, none has access to “who” she may “be.” Sherringham in particular is fascinated and appalled by the idea that her “identity resided in the continuity of her personations, so that she had no moral privacy, as he phrased it to himself, but lived in a high wind of exhibition, of figuration” (126). She is “an embroidery without a canvas,” continual representation without continuous substance; her “character” is not to have no character, but to have, as Sherringham puts it, “a hundred” (138, 139). The point is emphasized by his later reflection on “the simple circumstance of her infinite variety” (359). Once again, Shakespeare is the *point d’appui* for character, and for characterlessness. Such a “creature” exists only so long as she is being observed and realized in the representations of another, a man (himself a representative audience).

Behind all of these instances, I think we can lodge the problem of how to render in prose the infinite variety of experience in a reciprocal relation to the epistemological question about the nature of consciousness. It would be trite enough to infer that Woolf’s Modernism exhibits continuities with the writing it reacts against, or that Pater’s and James’s and Wilde’s *fin de siècle* concerns anticipate her stylistic experiments.

Certainly there is a case to be made that a continuing preoccupation with Cleopatra as a figure of the “infinitely varied forms” of style and a figure for feminine potentiality, representing the “dark country” of female experience, gained expression 200 years before 1910. Shakespeare’s Cleopatra, James’s Miriam Rooth, Pater’s style, and Woolf’s self-effacing Mrs Brown and Mrs Swithin are all representations of “infinite variety” (Woolf 1988, 3: 426) of character where an imagined plenitude surpasses the comparative paucity of public representation. In *Between the Acts* the penultimate scene in Miss La Trobe’s pageant is “The Victorians”; it prompts Mrs. Swithin (herself a relict of that reign) to muse, “I don’t believe . . . that there ever were such people. Only you and me and William dressed differently” (2011: 125). This might seem like a late recantation on Woolf’s part of the claim that “on or about December 1910 human character changed” (1988, 3: 421). But in concluding I want to draw out the skein of allusion just a little further. Claiming, with characteristic love of paradox, that nature imitates art rather than the other way round, Wilde’s Vivian in “The Decay of Lying” makes the following remark on his friendship with a woman “of very curious exotic beauty”:

what interested me most in her was not her beauty, but her character, her entire vagueness of character. She seemed to have no personality at all, but simply the possibility of many types. Sometimes she would give herself up entirely to art, turn her drawing-room into a studio, and spend two or three days a week at picture galleries or museums. Then she would take to attending race-meetings, wear the most horsey clothes, and talk about nothing but betting. She abandoned religion for mesmerism, mesmerism for politics, and politics for the melodramatic excitements of philanthropy. In fact, she was a kind of Proteus. (38)

This woman has as many characters as outfits. The absence of personality celebrated (is it that?) by Wilde, would re-enter history in Woolf’s writing in the form of a radical co-extension of self and circumstance. The pageant of history in *Between the Acts* is an image of the processual quality of character. It ends with “Ourselves”: “But what could she know about ourselves? The Elizabethans yes; the Victorians perhaps; but ourselves . . . ‘Myself’ — it was impossible” (128). That succession of moments concludes with “myself” — an impossible ending point, and the only possible ending point. All that remains are the unacted parts. In the infinite variety of potential forms, only some can be explored or lived; consciousness also involves the abandoned potentialities of the selves and characters who might have been lived. In the end (“Was that the

end?" [140]), the pageant's actors "lingered; they mingled. . . . Each still acted the unacted part conferred on them by their clothes. . . . Dispersed are we, the gramophone informed them. And dismissed them" (140–41). Woolf wrote *Between the Acts* as much with historical hindsight and personal foreboding as inevitably we now read it — character is as much about dissolution of personality as about its construction, about the infinitely varied unacted parts as well as those which pass across the stage.

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