Queens and queenliness: Quentin Crisp as Orlando’s Elizabeth I

Glyn Davis

Sally Potter’s Orlando, an adaptation of Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel, first screened at film festivals in 1992, before being released in cinemas internationally in 1993. The film opens in 1600, with Orlando (Tilda Swinton) serving as a poet and page in the court of Queen Elizabeth I (Quentin Crisp). Crisp’s appearance in Orlando is fleeting. The role, in its brevity, is comparable with Judi Dench’s appearance as the same monarch in Shakespeare in Love (John Madden, 1998): somewhat infamously, Dench won an Academy Award for her performance, though she is only on screen for a few minutes.

Crisp’s scenes as Elizabeth I – in keeping with other cinematic depictions of this particular monarch – are visually spectacular. The Queen arrives by long-boat, at night, at a stately home which is decorated inside and out with bouquets and candles. At a banquet, Orlando recites a poem for the monarch, which she finds distasteful. On the following day, Orlando accompanies the Queen, wolfhounds and courtiers on a walk through formal gardens, where Elizabeth attaches a garter, venerable symbol of royal esteem, to Orlando’s leg. Finally, Orlando visits the Queen in her bedroom; after Elizabeth has been undressed by her ladies-in-waiting and helped into bed, she and Orlando have an intimate conversation. During this encounter, Orlando is advised by the Queen: ‘Do not fade; do not wither; do not grow old.’ And so he doesn’t: the remainder of the film depicts various episodes from Orlando’s life over several centuries. Halfway through it, Swinton’s character changes from male to female. Looking in a mirror, she declares ‘Same person. No difference at all. Just a different sex.’

On 25 December 1993, the same year that Orlando attained widespread distribution in cinemas, Crisp appeared on British television’s Channel 4, presenting the channel’s first ever Alternative Christmas Message. Subsequently, this has become a mainstay of the channel’s festive programming, scheduled
head-to-head with Elizabeth II’s own speech. Over the years, contributions to the programme have included the overtly political (Margaret Gibney, a schoolgirl from Belfast, made a plea for peace in 1997; controversially, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the president of Iran, was awarded the slot in 2008) and the more lightly comedic (Sacha Baron Cohen as Ali G in 1999, Marge Simpson of The Simpsons in 2004). Crisp’s inaugural message overtly counterposed his role as a queer queen against Elizabeth II’s status as monarch. If it is possible to say that the televised Crisp was ‘playing’ Elizabeth II – if only at the level of a satirical equivalence – then he shares a connection with Helen Mirren: they are the only two actors to play both Elizabeths. (Mirren took the titular role in the HBO miniseries Elizabeth I (Tom Hooper, 2005), and played Elizabeth II in The Queen (Stephen Frears, 2006) and the play The Audience (2013 and 2015).)

The programme opened with a red flag, embroidered with the letters ‘QC’, flapping in the wind. (Crisp’s initials might also be read, of course, as ‘Queen’s Counsel’.) Slow-motion footage of Crisp being driven in a horse-drawn carriage around Central Park, New York, was sound-tracked by a clumsy attempt at ‘God Save the Queen’ played on a bugle. Delivered from an armchair in front of a fire, the speech was announced with a subtitle: ‘QUENTIN CRISP, THE QUEEN’. Crisp was not dressed as Elizabeth II for his Alternative Message (more’s the pity); rather, he wore a sensible combination of brown blazer, blue vee-necked
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sweater and purple cravat. In a poker-faced *double entendre*, he connected his ‘queen’s speech’ to his role in *Orlando*: ‘A reginal theme has permeated my year.’ Introducing a clip from Potter’s movie, he commented that ‘The film connects the many moments of English history with what, regrettably, I believe is called “gender-bending”.’ Most of the remaining Alternative Message advocated life in the United States, recommending that others in the UK should follow Crisp’s lead and emigrate. Later on the same day, he also appeared on Channel 4’s show *Camp Christmas*, alongside a roster of famous queer figures, including Melissa Etheridge, Derek Jarman, Ian McKellen, Armistead Maupin, Martina Navratilova – and Australian comedian Gerry Connelly, impersonating Queen Elizabeth II.

This chapter revisits the early 1990s, and Quentin Crisp’s two brief performances as ‘the Queen’. It explores three distinct but interrelated topics. In the first section, the ‘fit’ between Crisp’s ‘queenliness’ and his roles as Elizabeth I and II are examined. Do aspects of the persona and life story of this ‘stately homo’ (a term Crisp used in reference to himself) make him an appropriate choice for either impersonation? Next, attention is turned to debates about queer cinema that circulated in the early 1990s, and the complicated position that Potter’s *Orlando* and Quentin Crisp occupy in relation to these. Both ‘gay’ and ‘queer’, mainstream and marginal, Crisp’s appearances as ‘the queen’ occurred at a significant turning point for gay/queer film and culture. Finally, the chapter examines Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and asks whether it can be retrospectively categorised as a ‘queer’ text. If so, in what ways is this queerness manifested? And how is this related to Woolf’s attitudes towards the monarchy? The significance of Crisp’s role in Potter’s film, I will suggest, is its yoking together of the queerness of Woolf’s novel with the author’s equivocal attitude towards royalty.

**THE END OF AN ERA: CRISP’S REIGN AS QUEEN**

Quentin Crisp was born in Surrey, England, on 25 December 1908. (His Alternative Message was aired on his eighty-fifth birthday.) He lived as an overt homosexual during decades in which male homosexuality was illegal. In 1968, the year after it was decriminalised in England, his autobiography *The Naked Civil Servant* was published. Crisp had intended, in a nod to Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, to call his book *My Reign in Hell* – a title which would have framed his experiences as those of a netherworld monarch – but his agent insisted otherwise.† *The
Naked Civil Servant details Crisp’s childhood, his patchy periods of employment (most notably as a nude model for art classes) and his manifold sexual encounters with other men. The book was made into a television film in 1975, starring John Hurt and directed by Jack Gold; in 2009, Hurt reprised the role in a sequel, An Englishman in New York, directed by Richard Laxton. On the heels of the success of the 1975 film, Crisp began performing a one-man show, comprised of a mixture of personal anecdotes and reminiscences and a question-and-answer session with the audience. The show toured for many years. In 1981, Crisp emigrated to New York, where he remained until his death in 1999.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, Crisp became a renowned public figure, and was repeatedly interviewed on television. His stage show was broadcast on Channel 4 as An Evening with Quentin Crisp in 1980. Jonathan Nossiter's documentary Resident Alien, which follows Crisp around New York, was released in 1990, two years before Orlando. Although Crisp had made one or two minor appearances as an actor in films and television programmes, his role in Orlando was the first to garner any significant publicity and critical attention. And yet his love of cinema was substantial. Reflecting on the 1950s in The Naked Civil Servant, he writes:

I managed to go to the pictures … on an average once a week for many years; sometimes I went three times in three consecutive days and, very occasionally, twice in one day, thus spending seven hours out of twenty-four in the ‘forgetting chamber’. Real life became for me like a series of those jarring moments when the screen goes blinding white, the jagged edge of a torn strip of film flicks one’s eye-balls and there is a flash of incomprehensible numerals lying on their sides (like a message in code from Hades) before the dream begins again. [...] I was still a devotee of the divine woman. In my lifetime she changed her name three times, calling herself first Brigitte Helm, later Greta Garbo and finally Marlene Dietrich. I thought about her a great deal, wore her clothes, said her sphinx-like lines and ruled her kingdom.²

Crisp’s idols, then, who had the status of powerful monarchs, were the larger-than-life screen queens of an era that was starting to fade from view. These were figures with whom his own identity melded, melted: it is feasible, in his dandy-with-maquillage attire, that he ‘wore her clothes’, or at least his own interpretation of them, but unclear exactly how he ‘ruled her kingdom’. Crisp had little time for a new generation of stars such as Marilyn Monroe, or directors such as Antonioni, both of whom he criticises in The Naked Civil Servant.
However, he wrote a film column for the gay-orientated magazine Christopher Street throughout the 1970s and 1980s; a collection of these pieces, entitled How to Go to the Movies, was published in 1984.

Although Crisp was infatuated with a certain generation of silver screen royalty, he rarely commented on the English monarchy. Through his autobiography, subsequent books and public appearances he shaped an identity as a raconteur and entertainer, delivering carefully crafted and rehearsed epigrams and witticisms. Not unlike a member of the royal family, Crisp’s answers were rarely spontaneous or off-the-cuff; he was always performing himself. The one member of royalty that Crisp did pass judgement on, negatively, was Diana, Princess of Wales (Diana Spencer). In an interview with Thom Nickels, he commented:

I don’t know how she became a saint. She was a Lady before she became Princess Diana so she knew the racket. Royal marriages have nothing to do with love. You stand beside your spouse and you wave and for that you never have a financial worry until the day you die and you are photographed whenever you go out … what more could she want?  

Crisp was compared to royalty by writers and journalists. John Walsh, in the Independent, referred to Crisp as ‘England’s first queen of hearts’, an appellation also used of Diana. For Guy Kettelhack, ‘he was one of the seminal presences of the twentieth century – right up there with, and sharing many of the traits of Garbo, the Queen Mum, and Muhammad Ali’. For these authors, then, Crisp’s cultural position was comparable to those of both Diana Spencer and Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother, the wife of King George VI. These are tantalising figures of comparison, as both had some cultural currency with (certain factions of) gay men – Diana in part for her work with people with HIV/AIDS, the Queen Mum for her alleged reputation as a fan of a party and a tipple.

For Sally Potter, however, Crisp’s persona squared neatly with the role of Elizabeth I. In an interview with Penny Florence, she discussed her casting decisions:

[W]ith Quentin, there are so many ways in which he’s right for the part of Queen Elizabeth I, from physical resemblance onwards to the fact that he is the Queen of Queens, the true royal of England, and persecuted, the Englishman in exile par excellence. For me part of the secret pleasure of casting Quentin was restoring to him his true status as an iconic figure on the cultural scene.

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This quotation raises two provocative questions. First, what qualities account for ‘true royalty’? Potter here dismisses the regular markers: bloodline, class position, family history. Crisp – born Denis Charles Pratt – grew up in a household which, though not in poverty, was far from wealthy. The phrase ‘the Queen of Queens’ configures an alternative regal lineage employing distinct criteria, avoiding considerations of wealth and heredity; it installs those gay men who have lived openly, brazenly and flamboyantly throughout history as royalty, with Crisp as their figurehead. Second, Potter associates persecution and exile with the monarchy. Elizabeth I experienced persecution early in life at the hands of her sister, Mary I, who had Elizabeth confined at the age of twenty in the Tower of London for allegedly plotting with Protestant rebels. After two months in the Tower, Elizabeth was moved to Woodstock, where she was placed under house arrest for almost a year. Crisp’s *The Naked Civil Servant* details countless incidents of persecution, presenting a litany of abuse endured. However, the comparison falters. Elizabeth I returned from exile and, soon after, ascended to the throne. Crisp, in contrast, willingly chose exile from England, the country in which he experienced decades of difficulty. The last twenty years of his life, most of which he spent in New York, were arguably his ‘golden age’. For both queens, however, their periods of suffering made them sympathetic to a broader public.

In relation to Crisp’s Alternative Message, and the themes of persecution and sympathy, it is worth noting that 1992 was identified by Elizabeth II as her ‘annus horribilis’: Prince Andrew and Sarah Ferguson separated; Anne, the Princess Royal, divorced her husband Mark Phillips; Charles and Diana separated; the Queen was pelted with eggs by protestors during a visit to Dresden; a fire broke out at Windsor Castle; the operations of the royal finances were reformed, with the Queen having to pay income tax for the first time; and the Queen sued the *Sun* newspaper for printing her Christmas speech before it aired. In 1993, then, when Crisp impersonated both Elizabeths, the royal family was at a low ebb, fragmented and falling apart. As Crisp’s Alternative Message screened opposite Elizabeth II’s speech, the viewing public had a difficult choice to make: to which ageing dame, suffering in adversity yet attempting to express some sort of hopeful sentiment, would they give their time and attention?

Potter implies that Crisp had a physical resemblance to Elizabeth I, which aided his casting in the role. Many portraits of Elizabeth I were produced
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during her decades-long reign. The best-known is the ‘Darnley’ portrait, painted around 1575–76, which art historian Roy Strong attributes to the Italian artist Federico Zuccari. The ‘Darnley’ portrait provided a ‘face pattern’ which was then used for many authorised paintings of Elizabeth into the 1590s. This not only freed the monarch from having to sit repeatedly for her portrait, but also prevented her likeness from ageing. Elizabeth I’s distinctive ‘look’ is largely cosmetic: red hair; auburn, gold, black and orange clothing; negligible eyebrows; a prominent ruff. Although she and Crisp may have shared a strong nose, it is possible for numerous and diverse actors to impersonate Elizabeth I with the aid of costume designers and hair and make-up artists.

There are other ways in which the casting of Crisp in Orlando could be read as appropriate. Elizabeth I did not marry or have children, and was known as ‘the Virgin Queen’. Christopher Haigh, in his biography of Elizabeth I, reveals that a Scottish emissary said to the Queen, ‘[Y]our Majesty thinks that if you were married you would be but queen of England, and now you are both king and queen!’ Crisp, despite the erotic exploits detailed in The Naked Civil Servant, lost interest in sex. In an interview late in life, he revealed that he had been celibate for almost fifty years. In 1981, he published a second volume of autobiography entitled How to Become a Virgin. Elizabeth I’s behaviour was often provocatively masculine: in a famous speech that she delivered to her troops at Tilbury in Essex, she said ‘I know I have the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too.’ In
contrast, Crisp often acted in provocatively feminine ways. As the documentary *Resident Alien* makes clear, Crisp was familiar with the value and advantages of rehearsal and honing delivery in relation to performing his own persona. And yet, elsewhere, he was dismissive of his performance in *Orlando*:

I don’t really act. I say the words the way I would say them if I meant them. But I don’t know how people act. I’ve never understood that. I asked a girl who came from America to England … and she admitted she had been to a drama school. And I said, ‘What did they teach you?’ And she said, ‘They taught me to be a candle burning in an empty room.’ I’m happy to say she was laughing while she said it, but she meant it. I’ve never learned to be a candle burning in an empty room. So I go on the screen, and I say whatever I’m told to say.¹⁰

Of his appearance in *Orlando*, Crisp commented: ‘It was hell to do. I wore a bonnet so tight it blistered my stomach. I wore two rolls of fabric tied around my waist with tape, and then a hoop skirt tied around my waist with tape, and then a quilted petticoat, and then a real petticoat, and then a dress. And I could never leave the trailer in which they were put on me without someone lifting up the whole lot.’¹¹ Sometimes it’s hard to be a woman: Crisp’s statement, and the bed-chamber scene in Orlando, highlight the clothing toil that has been experienced by many members of the monarchy across the centuries – and, indeed, by many women in general. He was prepared, he said, to take ‘two and a half hours’ to ‘reconstruct myself’ in the morning, but Elizabeth I’s layers of clothing still proved a formidable hurdle, a qualitatively distinct challenge.¹²

Crisp’s scenes in *Orlando* are announced with two intertitles: ‘1600’, ‘DEATH’. Elizabeth I died in 1603: *Orlando*’s opening scenes take place at the end of the monarch’s reign. In the early 1990s, Crisp, too, was nearing the end of his life. Elizabeth bequeaths Orlando a house, but orders him to embody an alternative approach to time: ‘do not wither; do not grow old’. As an heir of sorts, Orlando moves through time periods, genders, locations, all without ageing a day. Orlando acts as a successor, a changing of the guard. So too with the actors playing these roles: Crisp’s drag gives way to Swinton’s androgyny. Can this narrative and teleological manoeuvre be interpreted as a ‘clearing of the ground’, with one form of otherness (Crisp’s homosexuality) replaced by something fresh (Swinton’s queerness)? How might *Orlando*’s gay/queer politics be unpacked, and how are these imbricated with its representation of royalty?
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REVISITING THE QUEER CINEMA ‘MOMENT’

The late 1980s and early 1990s, the time of Orlando’s production and release into cinemas, was a rich cultural period in terms of representations of gay/queer sexuality, and one marked by debate, disagreement and dissent. Potter’s Orlando became a key text in three distinct but overlapping discussions, concerning the relationship between heritage cinema and sexual difference, stereotyping and attempts to identify and define ‘queer cinema’.

British heritage cinema in the 1980s and 1990s was most often associated with Merchant-Ivory Productions – the films of producer Ismail Merchant and director James Ivory, personal and professional partners who regularly worked with the screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala. The Merchant-Ivory stable became synonymous with adaptations of novels by E. M. Forster and Henry James – including A Room with A View (1985) and Howards End (1992) – although their output, produced across more than four decades, was more diverse than this characterisation admits. During the 1980s, the British heritage drama more broadly, with its emphases on repressed passions, actorly talent, realist attention to detail and spectacular depictions of grand architecture, had found some space for representations of homosexuality, most notably in Another Country (Marek Kanievska, 1984), The Bostonians (James Ivory, 1984) and Maurice (James Ivory, 1987).

Although these films are notable for their analyses of the repression and conservatism of the times they depict – analyses which also had relevance for the years of Thatcher’s rule in the UK during which they were produced – their narratives unfolded in a linear and realistic fashion, without formal or stylistic innovation.

Many theoretical considerations of heritage cinema have attempted to interrogate the political ramifications of a body of films that seems to revel in the spectacular pleasures of stately homes and ‘authentic’ costumes, which takes delight in the trappings of the well-to-do. Richard Dyer, in his essay ‘Homosexuality and heritage’, draws a valuable contrast between history and heritage:

History is a discipline of enquiry into the past; heritage is an attitude towards the legacy of the past. Both have to deal with what comes down to us, what is left over, from the past. However, whereas historical enquiry uses an examination of the left-overs to try to understand what happened in the past and why, a heritage sensibility values them for their own sake, savours the qualities and presence of dwellings, costumes, artworks, objects.13

Heritage cinema, then, appears to wallow in the surface. However, as Andrew Higson and others have noted, heritage films are often riven with contradictions,
their pretty spectacle set off against elements of social critique. For example, notes Dyer, despite ‘its middlebrow respectability and focus on a homophobic past, heritage cinema in general has been surprisingly hospitable to homosexual representation’. This serves to insert homosexual characters into the past, restoring them to history; it may also, as with films such as Another Country and Maurice, locate moments of lesbian and gay defiance, resistance and courage within these eras.

However, these titles benefit from comparison with a group of British period films made between the late 1970s and the early 1990s that revisited particular moments in history with explicit artifice and staginess, deploying a more complex form of queerness – films which lie outside the heritage canon. This group would include Derek Jarman’s Jubilee (1978), in which Elizabeth I journeys from the period of her own reign to that of her namesake, Caravaggio (1986) and Edward II (1991), as well as Isaac Julien’s Looking for Langston (1989). Jubilee and Caravaggio have personnel connections with Orlando: Tilda Swinton was a regular Jarman collaborator, and featured in several other films by the director, including War Requiem (1989), The Garden (1990) and Edward II. Further, Caravaggio’s costumes were designed by Sandy Powell, who also worked on Orlando. Powell has repeatedly designed costumes for film representations of royalty, including The Other Boleyn Girl (Justin Chadwick, 2008) and The Young Victoria (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2009).

The films by Jarman and Julien, in particular, offer alternative models of envisioning queer sexuality in earlier historical periods, different ways of understanding the relationships between sexual alterity and history. In a 2009 interview about Orlando at London’s National Film Theatre, Tilda Swinton related Potter’s film to British heritage cinema, and the difficulties that they faced in creating their own contribution to the genre:

The only people who made costume films were Merchant-Ivory, and their kind of attitude to costume films was, generally speaking, nostalgic and hagiographic about a kind of traditional grid. … We knew for sure that whatever we did … we wanted to rock that – we wanted to keep some kind of present contact between the audience and the character.

Julianne Pidduck, writing about Orlando’s design, highlights how the film marks its difference from the standard format of heritage cinema through its artificiality:

[Orlando’s] historical moments are not produced … through the conventions of realism (even as applied within more traditional costume drama), but rather
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through the metonymic excess of elaborate set design and splendid overblown costume. The staged fantastical setting of each movement calls attention to the film’s irreality. [...] The excess of the costumes and ridiculousness of the infinite ritual and pomp offer a kind of ongoing visual satire of the historical conventions of bourgeois English manners, gender comportment and, less rigorously, empire.¹⁷

Indeed Potter herself, in an interview about making the film, has noted that she did not attempt to make a ‘realistic’ period drama:

I always said to the design teams: this is not a costume drama, this is not a historical film, it’s a film about now that happens to move through these periods. Research and find out all the things we can and then throw them away. We’re going to stylize, we’re going to leave out, exclude certain colours or textures or shapes. The usual approach to costume drama is in the genre of realism, where a room is made to look like a room as it is thought to have looked then. But the premise of Orlando is that all history is imagined history and leaves out all the most important bits anyway.¹⁸

Orlando, then, aligned its approach to heritage cinema with those of Jarman and Julien. The problematic limits and conservative politics of the form led Potter, instead, to the deployment of a more playful postmodern aesthetic.

In addition to differences of opinion regarding the form of heritage cinema, and how it could accommodate – or be reconfigured by – queerness, a further topic of debate at the time of Orlando’s making related to cinematic stereotyping. The year 1987 saw the publication of the revised, expanded edition of The Celluloid Closet, US gay rights activist Vito Russo’s historical account of the limited stereotypes used by mainstream cinema to represent lesbian and gay characters. (A documentary of the same name, based on Russo’s book and directed by Rob Epstein and Jeffrey Friedman, was released in 1995. One of the documentary’s talking heads – who memorably compares homophobia with a distaste for green vegetables – is Quentin Crisp.) In the wake of this book’s release, the ongoing debate relating to media employment of queer stereotypes escalated, with a variety of writers, activists and filmmakers contributing to the discussion.

Of direct relevance to this chapter’s exploration of Orlando, and Quentin Crisp’s performance in the film, the continued association of homosexuality with camp and drag was one such stereotype. For some commentators, camp had become an outmoded and unnecessary tactic, associated with a closeted
era before the birth of the gay rights movement. Daniel Harris, for instance, argued:

As the forces of social stigma and oppression dissipate and the factors that contributed to the making of the gay sensibility disappear, one of homosexuals’ most significant contributions to American culture, camp, begins to lose its shape. […] Camp cannot survive our ultimate and inevitable release from the social burden of our homosexuality. Oppression and camp are inextricably linked, and the waning of the one necessitates the death of the other.¹⁹

Diva worship and effeminate behaviour were seen by such critics as relics of homosexuals’ oppressed and miserable past. Furthermore, it was argued, camp had become increasingly mainstreamed since the 1960s, understood by a widespread percentage of the population and no longer solely the preserve of gay men. For other authors, however, camp’s deployment by gay men persisted because of its critical and political charge. The contributors to the edited collection The Politics and Poetics of Camp, for instance, published in 1994, held to a hard-line argument that camp is an inherently political discourse and its deployment by straights a mere appropriation. Drag, like camp, was also subject to similar scrutiny, defended and pilloried in equal measure: an embarrassing relic to some, a deconstructive practice highlighting the performative nature of all gendered behaviour to others.

Orlando is a rich text in relation to these debates. What Crisp derogatorily referred to as the film’s ‘gender-bending’ in his Alternative Message takes a number of forms, encompassing both camp and drag. Crisp’s own scenes playfully highlight his association with feminine clothing and behaviour by placing him in the regal dress he so disliked, and he modulates his voice away from his regular deep, harsh drawl, making it higher and more gentle. The interactions between Elizabeth I and Orlando play across marked differences of status and age, and are additionally complicated by the fact that both Crisp and Swinton are cross-dressed. At other points in the film’s diegesis, the fragility of gender as a performance is highlighted further. Elizabeth I’s herald is played by musician Jimmy Somerville, who sings in falsetto (Somerville also made an appearance in Looking for Langston); Orlando attends a play in which a female character is obviously played by a man; Shelmerdine (Billy Zane), Orlando’s lover, is portrayed in a notably feminine manner, with long hair and pouting lips.

It is tempting to read the death of Elizabeth I in Orlando as a comment on the place of camp and drag in queer culture of the early 1990s, as a ‘clearing of the
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ground’. This is partly related to casting decisions. Quentin Crisp may have been ‘true royalty’ for Potter, but not for some gay men. As John Walsh commented in an interview with Crisp, his ‘relations with the American gay community are far from cordial. He is too old-style camp, he says, too bouffant and retrograde to be approved of in the clone zones of San Francisco and Greenwich Village. He’s an embarrassing throwback, and an argumentative one.’ 20 In contrast, Swinton’s Orlando seems to put forward a possible new queer ideal – one that is slippery, hard to read, evades categorisation. Indeed, the character arguably personifies Eve Sedgwick’s definition of queerness as ‘the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone’s gender, of anyone’s sexuality aren’t made (or can’t be made) to signify monolithically’. 21

The first encounter between Elizabeth and Orlando is fraught: the Queen objects to the content of Orlando’s poem, which seems to be a comment on ageing. A rapprochement is quickly reached. However, there is perhaps a provocative comment being made here about an older form of gay culture and its relationship to youth. The Queen warns Orlando not to age or wither. Is the passing of youth the worst thing that a queen can envisage? The brief argument between Elizabeth and Orlando (which does not appear in Woolf’s novel) invites comparisons with other cinematic representations of this monarch, in which she is depicted as aggressive, combative, even tyrannical. For instance, it is worth contrasting this relationship in Orlando with the rivalry in The Virgin Queen (Henry Koster, 1955) between Elizabeth (Bette Davis) and Beth Throgmorton (Joan Collins). For Elizabeth, Beth’s relationship with Sir Walter Raleigh (Richard Todd) is a challenge on a number of levels: Beth is younger, able to bear children, healthier and arguably more able to do as she pleases. Although Beth does not wish to be queen, there are echoes in The Virgin Queen’s narrative of another Bette Davis movie, All About Eve (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950). These films, of course – All About Eve, The Virgin Queen – are touchstones for an older gay male culture in thrall to the power of the diva, the form of gay culture that Daniel Harris (amongst others) denounced as outmoded. That it is possible to identify resonances of both, however fleeting and allusive, in Orlando’s opening scenes, contributes to a sense that Potter’s film is concerned with searching for a queer alternative, a radical successor (and one who is not merely the next crowned sovereign).

Is Orlando, then, an instance of ‘queer’ cinema – in particular, of New Queer Cinema? In 1992, having attended a number of film festivals – Amsterdam,
Sundance and Toronto – at which *Orlando* was one of several independent lesbian and gay films screened – B. Ruby Rich penned an article for the *Village Voice*, arguing for the existence or coming-into-being of a new cinema movement which she termed ‘New Queer Cinema’. Rich’s essay was swiftly reprinted in *Sight and Sound*, accompanied by several additional short articles; a three-day international conference on New Queer Cinema also took place at the ICA. For Rich, the ‘new queer films and videos’ were ‘united by a common style’. As she wrote:

Call it ‘Homo Pomo’: there are traces in all of them of appropriation and pastiche, irony, as well as a reworking of history with social constructionism very much in mind. Definitively breaking with older humanist approaches and the films and tapes that accompanied identity politics, these works are irreverent, energetic, alternately minimalist and excessive. Above all, they’re full of pleasure.22

Rich, then, claimed that the dominant connection between the New Queer Cinema films was a stylistic or aesthetic one, and that this style was to be understood as a ‘homo’ incarnation or variant of postmodernism; a concern with revisiting history was identified as a major preoccupation.

Rich’s definition of New Queer Cinema’s shared style seems to neatly summarise *Orlando*’s aesthetic, and to square with Pidduck’s and Potter’s comments on the film’s artificial staging and design. In this regard, it is valuable to compare *Orlando* with some of the key films often named in relation to New Queer Cinema: *Poison* (Todd Haynes, 1991), *The Hours and Times* (Christopher Münch, 1991) and *Swoon* (Tom Kalin, 1992). Like *Orlando*, these films also feature reconstructions of particular periods in history: *Swoon* is set in the 1920s and focuses on the murderers Leopold and Loeb; *The Hours and Times* imagines an affair between Brian Epstein and John Lennon; *Poison* has three disparate narrative strands, including a Genet-influenced prison story and a sci-fi/horror tale about infection. In all of these examples, the historical authenticity usually associated with period drama is replaced by staged reconstruction which draws attention to its own fabrication, continually exposing its workings as fiction – and thus, ‘history’ as a fictional discourse.

Dennis Altman relates *Orlando* to *The Crying Game* (Neil Jordan, 1992), stating that both ‘can be described as “queer”’ because ‘they unsettle assumptions and preconceptions about sexuality and gender and their inter-relationship’.23 Altman is not the only author to connect these two films: at the time of
Orlando’s release, many reviewers did the same, thanks to both featuring revelatory ‘gender switch’ moments. For Andrew Moor, The Crying Game’s queerness is productively imbricated with its handling of national politics:

Jordan plays out his love plots within the conflict in northern Ireland. These ‘Troubles’ are the crying game the film addresses. The gender issues imaginatively allegorise the politics of the six counties. Sexual boundaries, the film suggests, are as artificial as the border dividing Ireland, and crises of category in the realm of sex and gender are connected to other crises in the realm of nationhood.  

Sophie Mayer has made a similar argument regarding Orlando’s status as a queer film:

Making Somerville the Herald to Crisp’s Virgin Queen was a bold statement that queer alternatives were right there in British history, and had always been part of British culture as a fierce and exciting undercurrent of difference within the mainstream. […] Orlando makes a [subtle] argument for a redefinition of Britishness as queer, feminine, Eurocentric, downwardly mobile and experimental.

Orlando, then, may be positioned as an instance of New Queer Cinema, in particular through its excessive and artificial aesthetic, its deconstructive approach to heritage cinema’s mise-en-scène. More broadly, the film can be framed as queer as a result of its complex engagement with drag, camp, sexuality and gender performance, and the productive ways in which it connects these to specific moments in history – including the reign of Elizabeth I.

Virginia Woolf, Queerness, Royalty

Having established the queerness of Potter’s Orlando, does this retrospectively enable the identification of Woolf’s source novel as queer, or proto-queer? Further, how might such an ascription be related to the book’s handling of royalty – and, indeed, Woolf’s broader attitudes towards the monarchy?

Virginia Woolf’s position within the history of lesbian fiction is well established, and has been explored and dissected by a wide range of authors. Orlando is a key title here, as aspects of its content are based on the life of Vita Sackville-West, with whom Woolf had an affair lasting several years. The book was originally to be called ‘Orlando: Vita’; though styled as a ‘biography’, Victoria Glendinning’s description of Orlando as ‘a phantasmagoria of Vita’s
life spread over several centuries’ is more accurate. Specific characters are indebted to real-life individuals: Sasha, the Russian princess, is Violet Trefusis, another of Sackville-West’s lovers; the transvestite Archduchess Harriet is Lord Lascelles, who had proposed to Vita; Shelmerdine is Sackville-West’s husband Harold Nicolson. Orlando’s poem ‘The Oak Tree’ is a veiled version of Vita’s *The Land* (1926), and incorporates appropriated lines from the latter. Vita’s son Nigel Nicolson famously called *Orlando* ‘the longest and most charming love letter in literature’.

The first edition of *Orlando* contained eight illustrations, including a photo of Woolf’s niece Angelica, portraits drawn from the Sackville-West family collection and three photographs of Vita. Each was falsely captioned, as though the images were of the book’s characters: Vita became Orlando, Angelica was ‘the Russian Princess as a child’. The painting that alleged to be ‘The Archduchess Harriet’ was actually Marcus Gheeraerts the Younger’s portrait of Mary Curzon (1585–1645), Countess of Dorset, who was married to Edward Sackville, 4th Earl of Dorset. What is notable about this portrait is its resemblance to another by Gheeraerts: his painting of Queen Elizabeth I made around 1592, known as the ‘Ditchley’ portrait. The pose, styling and clothing of Countess and Queen are similar. This contributes an additional layer to *Orlando’s* complex blurring between ‘real-world’ personages and the book’s characters. Elizabeth I appears fictionalised in the novel; an illustration ‘informs’ readers that Mary Curzon’s likeness is ‘of’ the Archduchess Harriet (who turns out, in Woolf’s story, to be a dissembling Archduke Harry in drag); the painting of Curzon resembles a well-known portrait of Elizabeth I. To put this more explicitly: Mary, who is dressed like Elizabeth, is announced as the character Harriet, who is really cross-dressing Harry. The choice of this image by Woolf, then, operates as playful recognition that the dress of the gentry – and, as a result of the resemblance to Elizabeth I, the stylings of the monarchy – can serve as a spectacular gendered performance that obscures the sexed body beneath. In Sally Potter’s film, it is worth noting, Archduke Harry (John Wood) does not cross-dress, behaviour that might have manifested as a second ‘drag Queen’ and undercut the impact of Crisp’s regal role.

This distinction between novel and film draws attention to one of Woolf’s book’s queerest elements: its panoply of unstable identities. Orlando’s fantastical change of sex from male to female allows readings of the character as variously heterosexual, bisexual or transsexual. The book’s narrator, discussing Orlando’s new sex, reflects on the limitations of binaries and the imbrications of sex and gender: ‘Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every
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human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. Of the complications and confusions which thus result everyone has had experience. These confusions are manifested in the narrative: when Orlando first sees Sasha, he notes her ‘extraordinary seductiveness’ but cannot identify her as male or female; Orlando and Shelmerdine, despite being engaged, both voice suspicions about the other’s ‘real’ sex. Indeed, Orlando is a novel which, as Merry Pawlowski notes, ‘calls the whole notion of sexual fixity into question’ – a novel in which the hazy gendered and sexual identities of a significant number of characters operate as ‘dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning’, to recall Eve Sedgwick’s phrasing.

Woolf’s book also unsettles other ‘fixities’. Orlando poses as a ‘biography’ – a titling and generic act of misdirection which initially confused booksellers – but features an admixture of fictional material, real historical figures and fictionalised versions of actual individuals. Woolf intended the book to fall between genres, tones, registers. Whilst writing Orlando in 1927, she noted in her diary, ‘It has to be half laughing, half serious: with great splashes of exaggeration.’

The book also troubled definitions of ‘the historical novel’ and ‘the epic saga’ by featuring a protagonist who traverses several hundred years within one relatively slim volume. For Elizabeth Freeman, it is the biographer-narrator’s tracking and pursuit of Orlando across the centuries that gives the novel its queer charge:

If we read Orlando’s biographer as historiographer, and his object Orlando as a figure for the past itself, then the writing of history is also figured as a seduction of the past and, correspondingly, as the past’s erotic impact on the body itself. […] Woolf’s methodology, then, centres on an avowedly erotic pleasure: an ars erotica of historical enquiry that takes place … between and across the bodies of lusting women.

Orlando distributes its queerly sexed and gendered characters throughout and across numerous historical periods. In doing so, it effects a similar project to those New Queer Cinema films, mentioned above, which revisit particular eras in order to uncover the configurations of sexual alterity they enabled, abided, nurtured.

Elizabeth I’s appearance in Woolf’s Orlando, as with that in Potter’s adaptation, is brief. The depiction of the monarch is ambivalent, mixing the respectful
with speculative sexual perversity. As Orlando bows before the Queen, offering her a bowl of rosewater, the biographer draws a sympathetic portrait:

For she was growing old and worn and bent before her time. The sound of cannon was always in her ears. She saw always the glistening poison drop and the long stiletto. As she sat at table she listened; she heard the guns in the Channel; she dreaded – was that a curse, was that a whisper? Innocence, simplicity, were all the more dear to her for the dark background she set them against.  

And yet on the following page the teenage Orlando is seduced by the Queen, fifty years his senior. The description of this defloration interweaves abject detail with thinly veiled innuendo:

[S]he pulled him down among the cushions where her women had laid her (she was so worn and old) and made him bury his face in that astonishing composition – she had not changed her dress for a month – which smelt for all the world, he thought, recalling his boyish memory, like some old cabinet at home where his mother’s furs were stored. He rose, half-suffocated from the embrace. ‘This’, she breathed, ‘is my victory!’ – even as a rocket roared up and dyed her cheeks scarlet.

Queen Elizabeth I’s speech to her troops at Tilbury, referred to earlier, concluded with the phrase ‘we shall shortly have a famous victory over those enemies of my God, of my kingdom, and of my people’. Woolf’s use of the words ‘This is my victory!’ may be a comic allusion to this utterance, triumph in battle equated with conquest in the boudoir. As the Queen is stained with success, Orlando experiences Oedipal confusion, the monarch’s ‘astonishing composition’ redolent of ‘his mother’s furs’ – Woolf’s evocative, multivalent phrases conflating the reginal and vaginal. Sally Potter’s adaptation, despite its assortment of queer riches, shies away from showing sexual congress between Orlando and the Queen, Swinton and Crisp; no rockets roar up.

Woolf’s engagement with the monarchy in Orlando echoes across her other writings, surfacing in novels, essays and diaries. A sustained reflection on the monarchy occurs in Mrs Dalloway (1925), for instance. Clarissa is buying flowers in Mulberry’s on Bond Street when a car with window blinds passes by. ‘But nobody knew whose face had been seen. Was it the Prince of Wales’s, the Queen’s, the Prime Minister’s?’ Clarissa decides it was ‘probably the Queen’. There follows a rumination on the power and longevity of the royal lineage:

The face itself had been seen only once by three people for a few seconds. Even the sex was now in dispute. But there could be no doubt that greatness
was seated within; greatness was passing, hidden, down Bond Street, removed only by a hand's-breadth from ordinary people who might now, for the first time and last, be within speaking distance of the majesty of England, of the enduring symbol of the state which will be known to curious antiquaries, sifting the ruins of time, when London is a grass-grown path and all those hurrying along the pavement this Wednesday morning are but bones with a few wedding rings mixed up in their dust and the gold stoppings of innumerable decayed teeth. The face in the motor car will then be known.

Clarissa here equates the monarchy with ‘greatness’ and ‘endurance’, and draws a distinction between ‘ordinary people’ and royalty: the attitude expressed is deferent, almost submissive. Published just three years later, Orlando is notably less reverential, less in awe of royalty, and prepared to take liberties in its depictions of real historical figures.

In 1934 Woolf expressed an alternative view of the monarchy in a review of The Story of My Life by the Romanian Queen Marie. This piece of writing was entitled ‘Royalty’, and opened by comparing the titular focus with animals:

Royalty to begin with, merely as an experiment in the breeding of human nature, is of great psychological interest. For centuries a certain family has been segregated; bred with a care only lavished upon race-horses; splendidly housed, clothed, and fed; abnormally stimulated in some ways, suppressed in others; worshipped, stared at, and kept shut up, as lions and tigers are kept, in a beautiful brightly lit room behind bars. The psychological effect upon them must be profound; and the effect upon us is as remarkable. Sane men and women as we are, we cannot rid ourselves of the superstition that there is something miraculous about these people shut up in their cage. […] Now one of these royal animals, Queen Marie of Roumania, has done what had never been done before; she has opened the door of the cage and sauntered out into the street.

Woolf praised Queen Marie’s book, claiming it was well written. She argued that its significance lay in revealing royalty to be normal human beings, no different from anyone else. However, she identified that this could have disruptive, even potentially revolutionary potential:

But what will be the consequences if this familiarity between them and us increases? Can we go on bowing and curtseying to people who are just like ourselves? Are we not already a little ashamed of the pushing and the staring now that we know from these two stout volumes that one at least of the animals can talk? We begin to wish that the Zoo should be abolished; that the royal animals should be given the run of some wider pasturage – a royal Whipsnade.
Woolf here identifies the fragility of the monarchy’s meticulously crafted enclosure, and the ease with which ‘the royal animals’ might escape. The public face of the monarchy, she suggests, is merely an impassive cover for ordinary passions and quotidian concerns.

Woolf works through these ideas in more detail in her 1936 diary, regularly shifting her opinions towards the monarchy. On 27 January she describes George V’s funeral procession:

[W]e saw the coffins & the Princes come from Kings X: standing packed in the Square democracy, though held back by Nessa [Vanessa Bell, Woolf’s sister], swarmed through; leapt the chain, climbed the trees. Then they came, the coffin with its elongated yellow leopards, the crown glittering & one pale blue stone luminous, a bunch of red & white lilies: after that 3 undertakers in black coats with astrachan [sic] collars: ‘our King’ as the woman next to me called him, who looks blotched & as if chipped by a stone mason: only his rather set wistful despair marked him from any shopkeeper – not an ingratiating face: bloated, roughened, as if by exposure to drink life grief & as red as a fisherboys. Then it was over. & I shall not try to see more. But the whole world will be afoot at dawn tomorrow.

In line with Clarissa Dalloway’s sense of reverential awe, Woolf here documents the spectacle of ‘democracy’, ‘the whole world’, clamouring to witness the dead King. She also draws attention to extravagant detail, to leopards and lilies. And yet Woolf inserts an honest critique of the appearance of the new monarch, Edward VIII, undercutting the passage’s recognition of the moment’s historical import.

Later in 1936, Woolf detailed the revelation of Edward VIII’s relationship with Wallis Simpson, and his abdication. Across several diary entries, her vacillating attitudes towards the affair and the monarchy were set down. On 7 December, she wrote:

All London was gay and garrulous – not exactly gay, but excited. We cant [sic] have a woman Simpson for Queen, that was the sense of it. She’s no more royal than you or me, was what the grocer’s young woman said. But today, before the PM makes his announcement to the House, we have developed a strong sense of human sympathy; we are saying Hang it all – the age of Victoria is over. Let him marry whom he likes. In the Beefsteak Club however only Lord Onslow & Clive take the democratic view. Harold [Nicolson] is glum as an undertaker, & so are the other nobs. They say Royalty is in Peril. The Empire is divided. In fact never has there been such a crisis. That I think
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is true. [...] Things – empires, hierarchies – moralities – will never be the same again. Yet today there is a certain feeling that the button has been pressed too hard: emotion is no longer so liberally forthcoming. And the King may keep us all waiting, while he sits, like a naughty boy in the nursery, trying to make up his mind.40

Riven with contradictions, this entry variously positions Woolf with two strands of general public opinion, a collective ‘we’ – Simpson can’t be Queen, the King should marry as he desires – and with ‘the nobs’, who believe that ‘Royalty is in Peril’. Three days later, Woolf writes:

Meanwhile ‘the people’ have swung round to a kind of sneering contempt. ‘Ought to be ashamed of himself’ the tobacconists [sic] young woman said. [...] He could have gone on with Mrs S. as mistress till they both cooled: no one objected. Now he has probably lost her, & thrown away the Kingdom & made us all feel slightly yet perceptibly humiliated. Its [sic] odd, but so I even feel it. Walking through Whitehall the other day, I thought what a Kingdom! England! And to put it down the sink … Not a very rational feeling. Still it is what the Nation feels.41

It is possible to detect in these entries aspects of Mrs Dalloway’s reverence, Orlando’s mixture of respect and glee-at-disruption and of the ‘Royalty’ review’s consideration of the possibility that monarchs are everyday folk with quotidian concerns. The diary entries also add to this mixture insight into the opinions of different classes regarding the monarchy, and a recognition of the way in which the status of royalty is bound up with nationalism, a nation’s understanding of its own power, position and status.

Orlando – Woolf’s queer, genre-defying fantasia – was her first written expression and exploration of an equivocal attitude towards the monarchy. Beginning the tale of her gender-switching protagonist with an encounter between Orlando and an ageing, lusty Queen inserted Elizabeth I into a tapestry of characters whose identities are wavering, opaque, unsettled. One of the major innovations of Potter’s screen adaptation is a purposeful blurring between the source book’s roster of ambiguous, vacillating characters and Woolf’s ambivalent attitude towards the monarchy. Casting Quentin Crisp as Elizabeth I enabled Potter to queer the Queen, and thus to highlight that issues of class, gender and sexuality are always necessarily interrelated. Woolf’s ambivalence about royalty is transformed into an evanescent revelling in the potential queenliness of Queens.
Glyn Davis

NOTES

6 Penny Florence, 'A conversation with Sally Potter', Screen 34:3 (Autumn 1993).
9 Nickels, 'His homosexual holiness'.
11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
15 Dyer, 'Homosexuality and heritage', p. 204.
19 Daniel Harris, The Rise and Fall of Gay Culture (New York: Ballantine, 1997), p. 34.
20 Walsh, 'England's first queen of hearts'.
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33 Woolf, *Orlando*, p. 10.

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