

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*, COLERIDGE, AND JANE ELLEN HARRISON

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928) one of the markers of cultural difference between the protagonist and the gypsies she meets in Turkey is linguistic: they have no word for 'beautiful', and when Orlando wishes to remark the beauty of a sunset, she has to point and to say, in their language, 'good to eat.'¹ In a recent edition of the novel, I suggested that Woolf's source for the idea may have been Samuel Taylor Coleridge.² In the second of his 'Essays on the Principles of Genial Criticism' (1814), Coleridge reports 'a very intelligent traveller', describing the inhabitants of Dahoma, Africa, and saying that 'in their whole language they have no word for Beauty or the beautiful; but say either it is very nice, or it is good'.³ The essay had been reprinted in Joseph Cottle's *Early Recollections, Chiefly Relating to the Late Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1837), Leslie Stephen's copy of which was among Virginia Woolf's books.⁴

¹ V. Woolf, *Orlando* (London, 1928), 130.

² M. H. Whitworth, ed., *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf (Oxford, 2014), 209. The phrase is not annotated in the editions by R. Bowlby (Oxford, 1992), S. M. Gilbert (London, 1993), or J. H. Stape (Oxford, 2008).

³ S. T. Coleridge, *Shorter Works and Fragments*, in *Collected Works*, 16 vols, ed. K. Coburn (London, 1969-2002), XI, 364.

⁴ Holleyman and Treacher Ltd., *Catalogue of books from the library of Leonard and Virginia Woolf: taken from Monks House, Rodmell, Sussex and 24 Victoria*

However, my annotation does not tell the entire story. The classicist and anthropologist Jane Ellen Harrison notes in her *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (1912), that in at least two languages, Hebrew and what she calls 'Mexican', the word for 'good' meant 'good to eat'.⁵ It was a point that she reiterated in her *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (1921) in support of her argument that the religious impulse is directed 'to one end and one only: *the conservation and promotion of life*'. To primitive man, evil consists of 'hunger and barrenness', while good is 'food and fertility.' She continues: 'The Hebrew word for "good" meant originally good to eat. The word was primarily applied to ripe fruits; it meant luscious, succulent.'⁶

The dates in the manuscript of *Orlando* suggest that Woolf drafted the passage between 20 and 29 November 1927.⁷ Her knowledge of Harrison, and admiration for her, are well documented.⁸ Woolf alluded to her in *A Room of*

Square, London and now in the possession of Washington State University Pullman, U.S.A. (Brighton, 1975), Index, 13.

⁵ J. E. Harrison, *Themis: A Study of the Social Origins of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1912), 139.

⁶ J. E. Harrison, *Epilegomena to the Study of Greek Religion* (Cambridge, 1921), 1.

⁷ V. Woolf, *Orlando: The Holograph Draft*, ed. S. N. Clarke (London, 1993), 106, 121; the passage itself appears on p.112 of Clarke's edition.

⁸ P. Maika, *Virginia Woolf's Between the acts and Jane Harrison's con/spiracy* (Ann Arbor, Michigan, and London, 1987), M. C. Carpentier, *Ritual, myth, and the modernist text: the influence of Jane Ellen Harrison on Joyce, Eliot and Woolf* (Amsterdam, 1998), and J. Mills, *Virginia Woolf, Jane Ellen Harrison, and the spirit*

One's Own as 'a bent figure, formidable yet humble, with her great forehead and her shabby dress'.⁹ They may have been introduced in 1904 when Woolf was staying in Cambridge with her aunt Caroline Emelia Stephen.¹⁰ She certainly met Harrison in Paris in April 1923.¹¹ Leonard and Virginia Woolf's Hogarth Press published her *Reminiscences of a Student's Life* in 1925. Woolf last visited her in February 1928, and attended her funeral in April of that year.¹² However, while there have been sustained readings of *To the Lighthouse* and *Between the Acts* in relation to Harrison's works (by Carpentier and Maika respectively), *Orlando* has received at most a passing mention. If Woolf ever owned a copy of *Themis* it must have been lost following the bomb damage to her Mecklenburgh Square home in 1940; but a copy of the *Epilegomena* was in the library of Leonard and

of modernist classicism (Columbus, Ohio, 2014). There are extensive references to Harrison in J. Marcus's *Virginia Woolf and the Languages of Patriarchy* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1987).

⁹ V. Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas*, ed. A. Snaith (Oxford, 2015), 13.

¹⁰ V. Woolf, letter to Violet Dickinson, [22 October 1904], *The Letters of Virginia Woolf*, ed. N. Nicolson, 6 vols (1975-80), I, 145. See also Marcus, *Virginia Woolf*, 86.

¹¹ V. Woolf, letter to Leonard Woolf, [25 April 1923], letter to Vanessa Bell, [28 April 1923], and letter to Jacques Raverat, 30 July 1923, *Letters*, III, 30-31, 32, 58-59.

¹² A. O. Bell, ed., *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, 5 vols (London, 1977-1984), III, 176, 181.

Virginia Woolf when it was sold to Washington State University, and was very probably part of Woolf's source for the remark in *Orlando*.¹³ In her diary for September 1921 she mentions James Strachey coming to Monks House and reading what she refers to as 'Jane's pamphlet': 'pamphlet' fits the *Epilegomena*, which is only 40 pages long.¹⁴

Though Harrison was part of the source for the phrase in *Orlando*, Coleridge is not entirely irrelevant. Harrison mentions the synonymy of 'good' and 'good to eat', but does not introduce 'beautiful' into the discussion. It seems that in the passage in *Orlando*, Woolf combined the observations from Coleridge and Harrison to make the beautiful identical to the 'good to eat'.

Michael H. Whitworth

Merton College, Oxford

¹³ Holleyman and Treacher Ltd., *Catalogue*, Index, 27.

¹⁴ A. O. Bell, ed., *Diary*, II, 136.