

WORLD'S CLASSICS



**VIRGINIA WOOLF**

**ORLANDO**

THE WORLD'S CLASSICS



VIRGINIA WOOLF

*Orlando*

A BIOGRAPHY



*Edited with an Introduction by*  
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## BIOGRAPHICAL PREFACE

VIRGINIA WOOLF was born Adeline Virginia Stephen on 25 January 1882 at 22 Hyde Park Gate, Kensington. Her father, Leslie Stephen, himself a widower, had married in 1878 Julia Jackson, widow of Herbert Duckworth. Between them they already had four children; a fifth, Vanessa, was born in 1879, a sixth, Thoby, in 1880. There followed Virginia and, in 1883, Adrian.

Both of the parents had strong family associations with literature. Leslie Stephen was the son of Sir James Stephen, a noted historian, and brother of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen, a distinguished lawyer and writer on law. His first wife was a daughter of Thackeray, his second had been an admired associate of the Pre-Raphaelites, and also, like her first husband, had aristocratic connections. Stephen himself is best remembered as the founding editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, and as an alpinist, but he was also a remarkable journalist, biographer, and historian of ideas; his *History of English Thought in the Eighteenth Century* (1876) is still of great value. No doubt our strongest idea of him derives from the character of Mr Ramsay in *To the Lighthouse*; for a less impressionistic portrait, which conveys a strong sense of his centrality in the intellectual life of the time, one can consult Noël Annan's *Leslie Stephen* (revised edition, 1984).

Virginia had the free run of her father's library, a better substitute for the public school and university education she was denied than most women of the time could aspire to; her brothers, of course, were sent to Clifton and Westminster. Her mother died in 1895, and in that year she had her first breakdown, possibly related in some way

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to the sexual molestation of which her half-brother George Duckworth is accused. By 1897 she was able to read again, and did so voraciously: 'Gracious, child, how you gobble,' remarked her father, who, with a liberality and good sense at odds with the age in which they lived, allowed her to choose her reading freely. In other respects her relationship with her father was difficult; his deafness and melancholy, his excessive emotionalism, not helped by successive bereavements, all increased her nervousness.

Stephen fell ill in 1902 and died in 1904. Virginia suffered another breakdown, during which she heard the birds singing in Greek, a language in which she had acquired some competence. On her recovery she moved, with her brothers and sister, to a house in Gordon Square, Bloomsbury; there, and subsequently at several other nearby addresses, what eventually became famous as the Bloomsbury Group took shape.

Virginia had long considered herself a writer. It was in 1905 that she began to write for publication in the *Times Literary Supplement*. In her circle (more loosely drawn than is sometimes supposed) were many whose names are now half-forgotten, but some were or became famous: J. M. Keynes and E. M. Forster and Roger Fry; also Clive Bell, who married Vanessa, Lytton Strachey, who once proposed marriage to her, and Leonard Woolf. Despite much ill health in these years, she travelled a good deal, and had an interesting social life in London. She did a little adult-education teaching, worked for female suffrage, and shared the excitement of Roger Fry's Post-Impressionist Exhibition in 1910. In 1912, after another bout of illness, she married Leonard Woolf.

She was thirty, and had not yet published a book, though *The Voyage Out* was in preparation. It was accepted for

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publication by her half-brother Gerald Duckworth in 1913 (it appeared in 1915). She was often ill with depression and anorexia, and in 1913 attempted suicide. But after a bout of violent madness her health seemed to settle down, and in 1917 a printing press was installed at Hogarth House, Richmond, where she and her husband were living. The Hogarth Press, later an illustrious institution, but at first meant in part as therapy for Virginia, was now inaugurated. She began *Night and Day*, and finished it in 1918. It was published by Duckworth in 1919, the year in which the Woolfs bought Monk's House, Rodmell, for £700. There, in 1920, she began *Jacob's Room*, finished, and published by the Woolf's own Hogarth Press, in 1922. In the following year she began *Mrs Dalloway* (finished in 1924, published 1925), when she was already working on *To the Lighthouse* (finished and published, after intervals of illness, in 1927). *Orlando*, a fantastic 'biography' of a man-woman, and a tribute to Virginia's close friendship with Vita Sackville-West, was written quite rapidly over the winter of 1927-8, and published, with considerable success, in October. *The Waves* was written and rewritten in 1930 and 1931 (published in October of that year). She had already started on *Flush*, the story of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's pet dog—another success with the public—and in 1932 began work on what became *The Years*.

This brief account of her work during the first twenty years of her marriage is of course incomplete; she had also written and published many shorter works, as well as both series of *The Common Reader*, and *A Room of One's Own*. There have been accounts of the marriage very hostile to Leonard Woolf, but he can hardly be accused of cramping her talent or hindering the development of her career.

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*The Years* proved an agonizingly difficult book to finish, and was completely rewritten at least twice. Her friend Roger Fry having died in 1934, she planned to write a biography, but illnesses in 1936 delayed the project; towards the end of that year she began instead the polemical *Three Guineas*, published in 1938. *The Years* had meanwhile appeared in 1937, by which time she was again at work on the Fry biography, and already sketching in her head the book that was to be *Between the Acts*. *Roger Fry* was published in the terrifying summer of 1940. By the autumn of that year many of the familiar Bloomsbury houses had been destroyed or badly damaged by bombs. Back at Monk's House, she worked on *Between the Acts*, and finished it in February 1941. Thereafter her mental condition deteriorated alarmingly, and on 28 March, unable to face another bout of insanity, she drowned herself in the River Ouse.

Her career as a writer of fiction covers the years 1912-41, thirty years distracted by intermittent serious illness as well as by the demands, which she regarded as very important, of family and friends, and by the need or desire to write literary criticism and social comment. Her industry was extraordinary—nine highly-wrought novels, two or three of them among the great masterpieces of the form in this century, along with all the other writings, including the copious journals and letters that have been edited and published in recent years. Firmly set though her life was in the 'Bloomsbury' context—the agnostic ethic transformed from that of her forebears, the influence of G. E. Moore and the Cambridge Apostles, the individual brilliance of J. M. Keynes, Strachey, Forster, and the others—we have come more and more to value the distinctiveness of her talent, so that she seems more and more to



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stand free of any context that might be thought to limit her. None of that company—except, perhaps, T. S. Eliot, who was on the fringe of it—did more to establish the possibilities of literary innovation, or to demonstrate that such innovation must be brought about by minds familiar with the innovations of the past. This is true originality. It was Eliot who said of *Jacob's Room* that in that book she had freed herself from any compromise between the traditional novel and her original gift; it was the freedom he himself sought in *The Waste Land*, published in the same year, a freedom that was dependent upon one's knowing with intimacy that with which compromise must be avoided, so that the knowledge became part of the originality. In fact she had 'gobbled' her father's books to a higher purpose than he could have understood.

Frank Kermode

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WHAT is *Orlando's* editor to do? She—but there is every doubt of her sex—finds herself in the hopeless situation of dealing with a book which is already a parody of the kinds of scholarly enterprise which her introduction might try to emulate. The novel—but is it a novel?—satirizes the conventions of biographical and historical writing, and—worst of all for the immediate undertaking—it even includes parodies of the conventional front and back, the preface with acknowledgements and the index of names, not to mention a couple of spoof footnotes put in as it were to boot by the pseudo-editor of the pseudo-biographer.

The editorial problem is compounded by the fact that these are not isolated elements, for which separate commentary on, say, 'humorous aspects' might be appropriate while leaving the body of the book and its message or merits intact. Right from the start—the very first sentence muddles the expectations of reading by stopping to fuss over the validity of a masculine pronoun—the biographer-narrator is teasing us, making us aware of his—though once more, there is every doubt of his sex—activities in such a way as to draw attention to his being anything but an objective reporter of given facts, even when he is following proper biographical practices to the letter. Here again, the would-be editor is doomed if she imagines she can come along and sort all this out, neatly restoring all the planks and joistings of a solid narrative and well-covered biography that the book she is dealing with has just loosened up, showing them to be much less sturdy than they seemed.

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As a last scholarly resort, the editor may head towards that thing called 'other evidence', located outside that other thing called 'the text itself', in other words to that traditional locus of verifiable backgrounds and intentions which can always be counted on to yield some plausible quotation to bolster up an otherwise collapsible argument. But there she finds herself no more securely placed. There are some minor but no doubt honourable satisfactions to be gained from the careful picking up of piecemeal evidence—burrowing around in the chippings of diaries and letters as Orlando's biographer tells us he does among certain 'tantalizing fragments' (p. 122). It is from these that he pretends to reconstruct his account of the revolution in Constantinople, including the revolution in Orlando's sex; and since he lets all the gaps show, rather than welding them into apparent coherence, the inference to be drawn for the value or pertinence of such endeavours is not encouraging. In this particular instance, moreover, it is not only that the method comes unstuck, but also that almost everything Woolf says about *Orlando* and her plans for it seems to reinforce the stance, or anti-stance, suggested by the novel itself.

In her allusions to *Orlando*, Woolf comes back repeatedly to words such as 'wild', 'satiric', 'joke', 'fun', 'escape', 'fantasy'—words which she never normally uses about her projects for writing and which seem to mark off this novel as an experiment in a rather different mode from the kind she undertook in what it then seems preferable to call her more 'serious' fiction. 'I want to kick up my heels and be off', Woolf remarks in her diary when she is getting out her first conception of the novel, and there the phrase nicely evokes the way that *Orlando* is both running away from it all, a gleeful escape from confinement, and some-

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thing 'off', offbeat and off-beam, a little risqué for the safely tethered novelist. In both senses, *Orlando* is Woolf showing 'off'. Here is the diary entry in more detail:

No attempt is to be made to realise the character. Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note—satire & wildness. The Ladies are to have Constantinople in view. Dreams of golden domes. My own lyric vein is to be satirised. Everything mocked. And it is to end with three dots . . . so. For the truth is I feel the need of an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books whose form is always so closely considered. I want to kick up my heels & be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas & tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; & it will rest my head before starting the very serious, mystical poetic work which I want to come next.<sup>1</sup>

Satire, Sapphism, Constantinople, and a host of other 'tiny stories' all duly turn up in *Orlando*, as well as the absence of realism in the portrayal of the central character and the mockery of 'my own lyric vein' (the 'Time Passes' section of *To the Lighthouse*).

A glance at the initial reception of the book when it was published in 1928 seems to confirm its success in the author's own terms, as critics echo the phrases of exuberance almost as if they had been looking over her shoulder as she sat writing her diary. This is Conrad Aiken in the *Chicago Dial*:

The tone of the book, from the very first pages, is a tone of mockery. Mrs Woolf has expanded a *jeu d'esprit* to the length of a novel. . . .

There is thus an important element of 'spoof' in *Orlando*: Mrs

<sup>1</sup> *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie, 5 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1977-84), iii. 131.

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Woolf apparently wants us to know that she does not herself take the thing with the least seriousness—that she is pulling legs, keeping her tongue in her cheek, and winking, now and then, a quite shameless and enormous wink.<sup>2</sup>

Or Raymond Mortimer: 'The first thing to say about the book is that it is a lark. The preface is a parody of prefaces and the whole book is written in tearing high spirits.'<sup>3</sup>

But the larking around and the leg-pulls were not always left at that: some reviewers went further. Desmond MacCarthy saw *Orlando* as more than a diversion: 'In *Orlando*, which is pure fantasy, she appears to have found herself more completely than ever before.'<sup>4</sup> Then there is the letter from Vita Sackville-West, finding herself 'completely dazzled, bewitched, enchanted, under a spell. It seems to me the loveliest, wisest, *richest* book that I have ever read,—excelling even your own Lighthouse.'<sup>5</sup> Admittedly, Sackville-West, to whom the book was dedicated in recognition of her crucial part in its conception, could hardly have been a more interested reader. From the other side, Arnold Bennett, never a great admirer of Woolf's work (as she was not of his), characterizes *Orlando* as 'a very odd volume'. Beginning with an evocation of how everyone is talking about the book, Bennett then denies the importance which that fact might suggest. His comment that 'You cannot keep your end up at a London dinner party these weeks unless you have read Mrs Virginia

<sup>2</sup> Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (ed.), *Virginia Woolf: The Critical Heritage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), 235.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 241.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 222.

<sup>5</sup> Louise A. DeSalvo and Mitchell A. Leaska (ed.), *The Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1985), 288.

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Woolf's *Orlando* 'immediately relegates it to superficiality, ephemerality, and snobbery, all three at once. But Arnold uses the very same vocabulary to talk about what he does not like as do those who see these qualities as positive: 'a play of fancy, a wild fantasia, a romance, a high-brow lark'.<sup>6</sup>

It may seem odd that both detractors and advocates agree with the author herself and with the book's dedicatee about the kind of thing *Orlando* is. We might then wonder whether this disagreement of value over a matter where there is apparent consensus does not suggest some further questions about fantasy and parody, kicking heels and pulling legs: about whether the very playfulness of fantasy may not, sometimes, be a way of saying the most serious things. (This might explain too why those who dismiss *Orlando* because it is 'only' a lark do not always simply say that and no more, but see a need to condescend to it too: 'The succeeding chapters are still more tedious in their romp of fancy';<sup>7</sup> 'an addiction of parenthetical whimsicalities that are not particularly effective'.<sup>8</sup>)

This agreement over the style coupled with a division of critical estimates has continued to characterize writing about *Orlando*, though with less disapproval on the negative side and more elaborate argument on the positive. One recent example of the dismissive mode which Woolf partly adopts herself—*Orlando* as a respite from the serious work—is Susan Dick's book, which slips a solitary paragraph on *Orlando* into a brief section entitled 'From *To the Lighthouse* to *The Waves*'.<sup>9</sup> At the other extreme is

<sup>6</sup> *Critical Heritage*, 232.

<sup>7</sup> Arnold Bennett, *Critical Heritage*, 233.

<sup>8</sup> *New York Times*, *Critical Heritage*, 231.

<sup>9</sup> Susan Dick, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Edward Arnold, 1989), 59–60.

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Susan Squier, who sees *Orlando* as nothing less than Woolf's 'literary emancipation', in which 'she confronted the influence of both literal and literary fathers to reshape the novel, and so create a place for herself in the English novelist tradition which was their legacy to her'.<sup>10</sup>

This is a large claim; but if it seems too much for a joke, serious scholars might be reassured by this other diary entry in which Woolf too seems to have rather grander designs for what she had first conceived as her escapade:

One of these days, though, I shall sketch here, like a grand historical picture, the outlines of all my friends. . . . It might be a way of writing the memoirs of one's own times during peoples [*sic*] lifetimes. It might be a most amusing book. The question is how to do it. Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman. There should be Lytton [Strachey], & it should be truthful; but fantastic. Roger [Fry]. Duncan [Grant]. Clive [Bell]. Adrian [Stephen].<sup>11</sup>

This is an interesting passage, because while on the one hand it could hardly be more direct in its prefiguring of *Orlando* (Vita and the book's hero(ine) are named and identified), on the other it adds a whole list of Woolf's friends who do not in fact come to feature in the book she began a few weeks later. The last part, suggesting an exploration of the lives of a group of friends, could be read in fact as another adumbration of Woolf's next novel, *The Waves*, which, in its difficulty and its studied seriousness, might seem to be the one most diametrically opposed to the lighter tones of this one. But what this passage then brings out is what is none the less shared between the two—and between *Orlando* and others of Woolf's novels.

<sup>10</sup> Susan Squier, 'Tradition and Revision in Woolf's *Orlando*: Defoe and "The Jessamy Brides"', *Women's Studies*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1986), 167.

<sup>11</sup> *Diary*, iii. 156-7.

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The casual 'one of these days' proposal expressly brings together memoirs and history, individual and collective stories, as related concerns, while 'Vita . . . as a young nobleman' adds two more questions: sexual identity (the woman as the man) and the novel as a personal testimony of love (Vita). Taken together, these four elements, two on each side, would seem to put forward once again the opposition between serious work (preserving a record, maintaining things in their place) and fun (the 'off' fantasies of love and sexual play). Susan Squier reinforces her case for the significance of the novel by a gentle relegation of the second strand. As though giving more weight to the soft implications of Nigel Nicolson's description of it as 'the longest and most charming love-letter in literature',<sup>12</sup> she calls it 'a serious work of criticism as well as a love-tribute'.<sup>13</sup> Yet the most serious, and wildly romantic contribution of *Orlando* might be its more dramatic suggestion that there is far more connection and interchangeability between these two than the conventional division would indicate.

This bringing together of work and love, of what is serious and what is fun, applies also, as we shall see, to the other kinds of division the novel addresses—between periods of history and phases of people's lives; between words and what they talk about; and, most of all, between the two sexes and their desires. What the diary calls the 'grand historical picture' will appear further on; but first, let us turn to the question suggested by outlines and memoirs and Vita as Orlando, which is the initial offered by *Orlando*'s own subtitle.

<sup>12</sup> Nigel Nicolson, *Portrait of a Marriage* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1973), 201.

<sup>13</sup> Squier, 'Tradition and Revision', 168.



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*Orlando* is not exactly a fake biography, of a purely fictitious subject; but nor is it much like a biographical *roman-à-clef*, in which the subject would secretly stand for some real-life personage. For it is as though all the doors had been left on the latch, or in some cases wide open, so that the reader, far from having to struggle with the lock, can be in no doubt as to who is being represented or intended in its hero(ine). From the outset, as we have seen, Orlando and Vita Sackville-West are identified, and the published version is openly dedicated to her. Not only that: the photographs, included in the first edition and reproduced here, are all of Vita or members of her family. *Orlando* is wearing its sources and inspiration on its sleeve: it is straightaway a tease to the conventions which ought to be keeping fiction and real lives officially separate. There is Vita herself, in the photographs, on the dedication page, for all the world to see and read: the fiction links it to a real person. Yet at the same time, the photographs show the 'real' Vita posing, taking on parts from her own life and her ancestors', so that real life itself is shown to be made up of imaginary identifications. All family album photographs have this quality: they are both a factual record—how it was, really, then—and also poses, a self-conscious construction of an image, both at the time of taking and in the mode of preservation and display. But Vita Sackville-West was something else as well.

Vita was the perfect subject for the exploration of multiple roles which the text of *Orlando* takes up. In effect, she lived her life as a conscious dramatic exhibition of this type of mobility. As writer, traveller, aristocrat, lesbian, mother, diplomat's wife (to name some), she was seen by Woolf as someone who shifted between far more roles than she did herself. The sheer number of possible designations