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Orlando

VIRGINIA WOOLF



COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

ORLANDO

A Biography



Virginia Woolf

Introduction and Notes by
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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Wordsworth Classics are inexpensive editions designed to appeal to the general reader and students. We commissioned teachers and specialists to write wide ranging, jargon-free introductions and to provide notes that would assist the understanding of our readers rather than interpret the stories for them. In the same spirit, because the pleasures of reading are inseparable from the surprises, secrets and revelations that all narratives contain, we strongly advise you to enjoy this book before turning to the Introduction.

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INTRODUCTION

Birth of a novel

For Virginia Woolf, the composition of *Orlando: A Biography* was a lark, 'mere child's play' compared to the more serious *The Waves* which would follow. In important ways, however, *Orlando* is embedded in the fabric of all of Woolf's concurrent work, embodying in the more playful form of fantasy many of her serious philosophical and literary concerns. Yet *Orlando*'s origins remain rooted in Woolf's desire for 'fun'. 'For the truth is,' Woolf wrote in her diary on Monday, 14 March 1927, '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.'¹ In the same diary passage, Woolf indicates several fertilising influences for this new work. The narrative

¹ *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume III, p. 131. All diary references are from this volume unless otherwise noted and will be indicated by page number in the text.

should be like a 'Defoe narrative for fun', pointing to Woolf's 1926 publication of an essay on *Robinson Crusoe* in *Nation and Athenaeum*, an essay in which she acknowledges the powerful influence of the perspective of great writers. Indeed, Woolf was even toying with a title, *The Jessamy Brides*, which would allude to the 'Ladies of Llangollen', Lady Eleanor Butler and Sarah Ponsonby, a famous eighteenth-century lesbian couple whose lifestyle would suggest the 'sapphism' Woolf wished to include in her evolving conceptualisation.

Orlando in the flesh

By 20 September, Woolf had returned once more to the notion of a book, this time about her friends, specifically Vita Sackville-West, who should be 'Orlando, a young nobleman' (p. 157). Within three weeks, in early October, Woolf had decided that the book should be 'a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another. I think, for a treat, I shall let myself dash this in for a week . . .' (p. 161). Woolf and Vita Sackville-West had met in December 1922; and Woolf was immediately so taken with Vita's 'patrician' bearing and heritage that she wrote just a month later asking Vita for a copy of the family history she had written, *Knole and the Sackvilles*. Knole, the hereditary home of the Sackvilles and Vita's birthplace, would become the architectural centrepiece of Woolf's novel, as Vita, her aristocratic ancestors and her contemporary lovers would people the novel's landscape. Woolf was also well aware, shortly after meeting Vita, that she was 'a pronounced Sapphist – and may . . . have an eye on me, old tho I am'.² At least two observations about Vita, then, had emerged early as themes

in Woolf's imagination: her aristocratic background and history coupled with her unorthodox sexuality, richly suggestive of destabilising views of sex and gender.

Vita first learned of Woolf's plan to make her the subject of her new novel on 10 October 1927, when Woolf wrote to her, ' "But listen: suppose Orlando turns out to be about Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind? Shall you mind?" ' Vita's reply gushed: ' "My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando." ' ³

² *The Diary of Virginia Woolf*, Volume II, p. 19.

³ Woolf to Vita Sackville-West and reply from Vita Sackville-West, quoted in Victoria Glendinning, *Vita: A Biography of Vita Sackville-West*, p. 181.

As Woolf worked imaginatively to transform Vita into Orlando, the images necessary for illustrating the text took on an importance almost equal to the textual construction; so, accompanied by Vita, Woolf went to Knole to select from among numerous family portraits which would give just the right look to her 'biography'. 'Orlando as a Boy' reproduces a sixteenth-century portrait of the Honorable Edward Sackville, son of the 4th Earl, while two other family portraits serve as illustrations of 'The Archduchess Harriet' and 'Orlando as Ambassador'.

Woolf did not, however, concern herself merely with choosing from among Vita's family portraits; she took an active role in having Vita herself photographed for three illustrations, one of which was made in London in a professional photographer's studio. Of the photography session in the London studio of Lenare, Vita wrote to her husband, Harold Nicolson: "I was miserable draped in an inadequate bit of pink satin with all my clothes slipping off – but V. [Virginia] was delighted and kept diving under the black cloth of the camera to peep at the effect" (quoted in Glendinning, p. 182). Additionally, Woolf pressed her sister, the painter Vanessa Bell, into service by having her photograph her daughter Angelica, repeatedly, to achieve just the right effect for the portrait of 'The Russian Princess as a Child'. For those who knew Vita and her circle or Woolf and her Bloomsbury circle, any doubts that might have lingered regarding the connections of the text with Vita would have been firmly dismissed by the illustrations.

Looking in the mirror

'Orlando,' Vita's biographer writes, 'is a phantasmagoria of Vita's life spread over three centuries' (Glendinning, p. 203). The novel's landscape is peopled with Vita's loves and acquaintances. Sasha, the Russian princess, is Violet Trefusis, a woman with whom Vita had an intense and passionate early love affair; Lord Lascelles, another early lover, who had proposed marriage to Vita, is the transvestite Archduke/Archduchess Harriet; and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine is Harold Nicolson, Vita's husband. Even Orlando's lengthy, evolving poem 'The Oak Tree' is Vita's own *The Land* thinly disguised; Woolf directly quotes from it and satirises its Hawthornden Prize by awarding the fictional version a fictional 'Burdett Coutts' Memorial' prize.

Arguably Vita's greatest love, though, was the 'land', her family estate Knole, lost to her and inherited by her uncle Charles when her father died on 28 January 1928 leaving no male heir. Woolf, well aware of this loss, recorded in her diary shortly afterwards, 'Lord Sackville is dead . . . & I passed Knole with Vita yesterday & had to look away from the vast masterless house, without a flag. This is what she minds most'

(*Diary* 3, p. 174). In the same entry, Woolf notes that she is 'hacking rather listlessly' away at the last chapter of *Orlando*. Woolf instinctively knew, though, how Knole must stand at the centre of the novel; for, as Vita's son Nigel writes, '... the novel identified [Vita] with Knole forever. Virginia by her genius had provided Vita with a unique consolation for having been born a girl, for her exclusion from her inheritance, for her father's death earlier that year' (Nicolson, p. 208).

On 11 October 1928, the same date as that given at the close of the novel, an advance copy arrived for Vita at Long Barn in the morning mail. She read the entire day, later writing to her husband Harold that she had read it ' "in such a turmoil of excitement and confusion that I scarcely know where (or who!) I am . . . Parts of it make me cry, parts of it make me laugh; the whole of it dazzles and bewilders me." ' Later the same day, she wrote to Woolf that she felt Virginia had invented a new kind of narcissism, for she found herself ' "in love with Orlando" ' (Glendinning, p. 202). Vita's mother, Lady Sackville, though, reacted quite differently to the novel, defacing the book with marks and comments and gluing a newspaper photograph of Woolf into the flyleaf, writing next to it, 'The awful face of a madwoman whose successful mad desire is to separate people who care about each other. I loathe this woman for having changed my Vita and taken her away from me' (Glendinning, p. 206). Lady Sackville's actions and behavior were becoming increasingly erratic and manic as she hovered close to madness herself.

The most compelling comment from Vita's family, however, and the most frequently quoted about the novel, comes from her son, Nigel Nicolson, who writes in a study of his parents:

The effect of Vita on Virginia is all contained in *Orlando*, the longest and most charming love letter in literature, in which she explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the centuries, tosses her from one sex to another, plays with her, dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds, teases her, flirts with her, drops a veil of mist around her, and ends by photographing her in the mud at Long Barn, with dogs, awaiting Virginia's arrival next day.

[Nicolson, pp. 202-3]

Readers of the longest love letter in literature

Once she put the finishing touches to the manuscript, *Orlando* appeared to Woolf 'gay & quick reading I think; a writers holiday' (*Diary* 3, p. 177). As her husband read the manuscript with an editor's eye, Woolf reflected further that *Orlando* was not 'I think, "important"

among my works' (*Diary 3*, p. 184). *Orlando's* object, Vita Sackville-West, the book's first outside reader, was overwhelmed with pleasure at the book's flattery and in love with her image in the book; but, she secretly confided to her husband, she was confused by some of the book's symbols – the wild goose, for example – and disappointed that Orlando should marry and have a child. Rather, Orlando, as the image of her 'inviolable self', should be left to stand alone (Glendinning, p. 204).

As *Orlando* came out, Woolf and Vita escaped to France on holiday; but upon her return, Woolf was faced with the realities of the marketplace and reviewers. The most immediate problem was that the book was doing poorly in advance sales; booksellers insisted on shelving it in 'Biography' because Woolf had so subtitled it, and Woolf lamented in her diary, 'No one wants biography' (*Diary 3*, p. 198). Yet by the end of the first week after publication the tide had turned and *Orlando* was selling beyond the record sales for the Woolfs' Hogarth Press.

Woolf had next to contend with reviewers, who were generally very complimentary; but, characteristically for Woolf, she first singled out one of the most negative of her critics, J. C. Squire, writing that he 'barked in the Observer' (*Diary 3*, p. 200) as she worked to convince herself that his criticism would not touch her 'rock of self esteem'. Squire, chief reviewer for the *Observer*, had not been entirely negative: he found the book charming, attractive and amusing, on the whole 'a very pleasant trifle' ('Prose-de-Société', p. 229). Desmond MacCarthy, a friend and member of the Bloomsbury circle, gave *Orlando* the most extended piece of criticism he had yet written on Woolf, hailing its beauty and originality, 'when . . . she is least tethered to external realities by her subject, it is then her lyric fantasy and power of soaring or ironic description is likely to reach its greatest perfection' ('Phantasmagoria', p. 225). Yet despite his praise for the novel, MacCarthy had reservations about its stream-of-consciousness style and felt that there was cause for the critically alert to be discontented with the modern novel.

Other reviewers sensed most keenly its fantasy, its charm, its cleverness and its mockery, and raised the issue repeatedly of its playful blurring of the distinctions of form between biography and fiction. Among the ugliest comments, one Woolf never read, is Aldous Huxley's in a letter to D. H. Lawrence: 'A tiresome book by Virginia Woolf – *Orlando* – which is so terribly literary and *fantaisiste* that nothing is left in it at all. It's almost the most highly exhausted vacuum I've ever known.'⁴ Perhaps the keynote struck among most reviewers,

though, can be summed up by Storm Jameson, a woman novelist and sympathetic reviewer, who wrote that Woolf's novel lacked humanity: 'Her genius . . . has no roots in our common earth' ('The Georgian Novel', p. 245).

By 7 November 1928, Woolf was reflecting upon the aftermath of *Orlando*'s publication and acting as her own, very acute, critic. 'Orlando is of course,' she wrote in her diary, 'a very quick brilliant book. Yes, but I did not try to explore . . . Orlando taught me how to write a direct sentence; taught me continuity & narrative, & how to keep the realities at bay. But I purposely avoided of course any other difficulty. I never got down to my depths & made shapes square up . . .' (*Diary* 3, p. 203).

Body, space, and place: intersections in current readings of Orlando

Orlando's charm has not dimmed in the fifty years which have passed since its publication, but the question facing contemporary readers of Woolf is whether charm is, indeed, all the novel can offer. Was Woolf, along with others of her critics, too harsh in the judgement that the novel fails, ultimately, to make 'shapes square up'? By revisiting several of the older critical opinions blended with the ways in which recent critical conversations can open up the text, we may uncover more substance in *Orlando* than Woolf herself credited.

Orlando's biographer

An important initial confusion about the way *Orlando* should be read suggests an early critical tack on the novel, the confusion about its genre. Was the novel fiction or biography? *Orlando* is undeniably, though, 'biographical', indeed even autobiographical in its entanglement of its anonymous and genderless narrator with her/his subject. For Woolf, by confronting the influence of her father, Sir Leslie Stephen, first editor of the *Dictionary of National Biography*, breaks with the past of Victorian biographical modes and reconstructs fiction and biography in her own shape. In earlier stages in the evolution of Woolf's thinking about biographical form, she had clearly indicated her alliance with more contemporary notions of biographers' manipulations of fact and departures from a strict observance of reality. In reviewing the work of Vita's husband, Harold Nicolson, in *Some People*, Woolf published an essay, 'The New Biography' (1927), in which she applauds Nicolson's blend of reality and imagination. Biography has served two aims, Woolf suggests, the search for truth and for personality, which she translates into 'granite' and 'rainbow'. The twentieth century, Woolf felt, has been accompanied by a change in biography

wherein the biographer no longer acts as the servant of the subject but as equal and as artist in his/her own right. Nicolson, Woolf argued, has come close to accomplishing a primary aim of the 'new biography', namely, the possibility of marrying granite to rainbow, despite the dangers of mixing fact with fiction. 'For it would seem that the life,' Woolf wrote, 'which is increasingly real to us is the fictitious life; it dwells in the personality rather than in the act. Each of us is more Hamlet, Prince of Denmark, than he is John Smith of the Corn Exchange' (p. 155).

Orlando, as a text about constructing lives, histories and fictions, accepts all these as variable forms and plays with the notions of stability. The novel provides a fantasy of events counterpointed by a rather conventional biographical style in which Orlando is characterised by history, house, physical appearance, social life and personality.⁵ Woolf's use of an obtrusive narrator – her *alter ego*? – calls the real, the substantial, the factual, into question. The narrator peppers the text with asides both inside and outside parentheses, including digressions and additions: '(There was a serenity about him always which had the look of innocence when, technically, the word was no longer applicable.)' (p. 10).⁶ Such asides also include discussions of the biographer's art: '(For that was the way his mind worked now, in violent see-saws from life to death stopping at nothing in between, so that the biographer must not stop either, but must fly as fast as he can and so keep pace with the unthinking passionate foolish actions and sudden extravagant words in which, it is impossible to deny, Orlando at this time of his life indulged.)' (p. 21). The narrator takes further aim through mockery of the biographer's method. In the opening paragraph of Chapter 2:

The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write *finis* on the tombstone above our heads. [p. 31]

5 See Pamela Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism*, p. 77, for more on this subject.

6 All quotations from the novel are taken from the Wordsworth Classics edition and are indicated by page number in parentheses.

Further, Woolf mocks the biographical convention of a 'Preface' by singling out numerous greats of English literature to thank, including, of course, Defoe, at the head of the list. In addition, Woolf includes many of her family, friends and acquaintances, ending the list 'which threatens to grow too long' with mention of her husband for his 'profound historical knowledge' and her niece, Angelica Bell, 'for a service which none but she could have rendered' (p. 4) – that of model for one of Woolf's illustrations. Woolf's index, a feature quite appropriate to this 'mixed' genre and unique in Woolf's novels, includes mostly proper names, many of them literary figures, and appears to conform to standard usage. But under the listing for 'Orlando', for example, Woolf itemises interesting details as much as more important events, including a pointer to the name of Orlando's 'great-grandmother Moll' (shades of Daniel Defoe), and the hilariously tongue-in-cheek item, 'becomes a woman'.

Even Woolf's photographs as documentary evidence are clearly compromised since they are distinctly *not* whom they are said to portray. Notable among these is the deliberate anachronism of the photograph of Woolf's niece, Angelica Garnett, to portray the sixteenth-century Russian princess, Sasha.

In the year before *Orlando* came out, Harold Nicolson had published an outline of the field of English biography, entitled *The Development of English Biography*. What he suggests as the future of biography might well be said to describe the trajectory of Woolf's novel, 'The biographical form will be given to fiction, the fictional form will be given to biography. When this happens, "pure" biography, as a branch of literature, will have ceased to exist.'⁷

Perhaps inspired by Nicolson's words, Woolf certainly conceived *Orlando* in their spirit. For, not only was she rejecting the form of Victorian biography and the figure of her father as its guiding light, she was rejecting as well her father's opinion of Daniel Defoe as 'father' of the English novel. Woolf quarrels with Defoe as a 'Truth-Teller' in 'Phases of Fiction', a work at which Woolf laboured concurrently with *Orlando* and published in *The Bookman* in the spring of 1929. Truth unadorned, Woolf felt, left a disagreeable sensation and was likely to degenerate into perfunctory recording of facts. 'A desire for distance,' Woolf wrote, 'for music, for shadow, for space, takes hold of us' (p. 103).

⁷ quoted in Avrom Fleishman, *Virginia Woolf: A Critical Reading*, p. 136

Orlando's body, a question mark of form

The desire for distance, music, shadow and space forge the fantasy of *Orlando's* fictional form, a form rendered especially complex by the gender of its author, its narrator and its protagonist; indeed, the novel clearly demonstrates the impact of *gender* upon *genre*. The opening lines of the novel – 'He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it . . . ' (p. 5) – suggest, in their determination to assess with certainty the sex of the protagonist, the element of doubt introduced by clothing that points toward transvestism. Woolf's insistence upon masquerade throughout the text signals her intent to challenge society's assumptions about sexuality.

Indeed *he* will become just as 'unequivocally', at the midway point of the novel, a *she*. Earlier readers of the novel tended to focus upon Woolf's notion of 'androgyny' as a way to escape the limitations of sex, a positive resolution of oppositions into unity.⁸ However, more recent feminist readings have suggested that Orlando's androgyny embodies 'not only a sexual ambiguity but a textual one as well' (Caughie, 'Double Discourse', p. 486). The most often quoted statement of Woolf's androgynous position which follows Orlando's change of sex from man to woman poses a series of contradictions in the narrator's position on clothing and its relationship to sexual identity (Caughie, *Virginia Woolf and Postmodernism* p. 80).

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every 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.

[pp. 92–3]

The passage emerges from the confusion of a narrator, who, just before, has claimed that clothes are indeed 'but a symbol of something hid deep beneath' (p. 92).

If androgyny is a metaphor for change, a way of interpreting the self as theatrical, as role-playing at sexuality, the staging of the scene of the sex change is the most theatrical moment of the novel. Orlando falls into a lengthy sleep for a second time in Constantinople. Before *s/he* awakes, an elaborate masque plays itself out in his/her boudoir,

8 See, as examples, Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf*, p. 182; Herbert Marder, *Feminism and Art*; Carolyn Heilbrun, *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*.

signalling that something momentous is about to happen. The narrator introduces the allegorical Ladies of Purity, Chastity and Modesty to contend with the biographer's Truth. All three sisters cry out against Truth: ' "Truth come not out from your horrid den. Hide deeper, fearful Truth. For you flaunt in the brutal gaze of the sun things that were better unknown and undone; you unveil the shameful; the dark you make clear, Hide! Hide! Hide!" ' (p. 66). As they take their leave in the face of Truth's victory, the Ladies recall:

'those who love us, those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness . . . ' [p. 67]

With one final blast of the trumpet of Truth, Orlando wakes, and, as the narrator no longer has a choice but to confess the truth, s/he tells the reader: 'he was a woman' (p. 67). Woolf surely means to flaunt here a triumph over 'conventions of sexual repression and bourgeois respectability' (Marder, p. 114; Fleishman p. 148). More importantly, though, Woolf 'foregrounds the principle of uncertainty underpinning the novel's structure' (Parkes, p. 449).

Woolf was able, thereby, to call the whole notion of sexual fixity into question in a way that a writer like Radclyffe Hall, whose novel *The Well of Loneliness* (1928) dealt openly with the subject of lesbianism, could not. At approximately the same time that Hall's book was placed on trial for obscenity and condemned in Britain, Woolf's *Orlando* became a bestseller. Indeed, the masque evokes the air of a trial where the three Ladies act as censors of what can be said about the transsexual body at the same time that the scene seems to predict Hall's trial in October of 1928, which Woolf herself would attend as a potential witness against censorship (Hankins, pp. 184-5).

Recent criticism suggests that, rather than view *Orlando* as the quintessential androgynous text, readers should notice how Woolf brings 'feminism squarely into the queer realm by confronting the sexually ambiguous protagonist with his/her own complicity in the misogynist sex/gender system and by encouraging a feminist conversion experience' (Hankins, p. 182). Woolf may have felt that Vita, no feminist herself, needed to be taught a lesson in lesbian feminism through the fiction of Orlando's body.

Orlando's tapestry, an intertextual space

The ambiguously sexed body of Orlando stands at the centre of an elaborate narrative tapestry woven through not only with Woolf's other works which occupy proximate temporal space in genesis and composition but also with all the literary authors and works which she chose for allusion. 'For masterpieces are not single and solitary births,' Woolf wrote later in *A Room of One's Own*, 'they are the outcome of many years of thinking in common' (p. 68).

Orlando shares moments of conception with *The Waves*, which Woolf took to be her serious work to follow; with *A Room of One's Own*, which evolved from two talks Woolf was preparing to give on 'Women and Fiction' shortly after *Orlando's* publication; and with 'Phases of Fictions', also worked on concurrently with *Orlando* and published in the spring of 1929. But Woolf even returns to mock her earlier work, *To the Lighthouse* (1927), writing in *Orlando* as a deliberate reminder of its chapter 'Time Passes': 'how things remain much as they are for two or three hundred years or so, except for a little dust and a few cobwebs which one old woman can sweep up in half an hour; a conclusion which, one cannot help feeling, might have been reached more quickly by the simple statement that "Time passed" (here the exact amount could be indicated in brackets) and nothing whatever happened' (p. 47).

Orlando has its closest contact in themes, though, with *A Room of One's Own*, appearing to mitigate and repeat the wonderful core fiction of the latter work, the story of Shakespeare's sister. In setting up Judith as the imaginary sister of Shakespeare, Woolf strikes at the heart of the question why women could not have been 'Shakespeares' in Elizabethan England – the very fact of their sex would have prevented them from sharing public and literary space with men. Thus Orlando starts out life in Eliza's England a man, heir to lands, titles, houses, a queen's affection; and he wrote extravagant tragedies because he *could*.⁹ Woolf also uses Nick Greene as the same character who 'ruins' Shakespeare's sister in *A Room* and 'roasts' Orlando in a shameless parody, 'Visit to a Nobleman in the Country', for a comic reversal of what would later become the theme song of *A Room of One's Own*. When Greene tells Orlando, '“Had I a pension of three hundred pounds a year . . . I would live for Glawr alone”' (p. 43), he echoes Woolf's insistence upon 'five hundred pounds and a room of one's own' for women, with the added comic attraction of Nick's inability to pronounce the French 'gloire'.

⁹ See Winifred Holtby, *Virginia Woolf*, for a comparative discussion of both works.

Interestingly, however, the one work of Orlando's which survives three centuries, 'The Oak Tree', is only completed once Orlando is a woman in the twentieth century.

Literary allusions to other authors abound in the textual fabric of *Orlando* whether explicitly or otherwise, beginning with the novel's 'Preface'. There Woolf thanks writers from Defoe to Walter Pater – novelists, historians, biographers – in whose debt she remains. Defoe crops up again in a comic allusion to *Moll Flanders*: 'Then Orlando contrived to say something of grandmother Moll and her cows . . . ' (p. 41). Reference to D. H. Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, a book both recently published and banned for its sexual explicitness, appears in similar comic fashion when Woolf writes of Orlando, 'Surely, since she is a woman, and a beautiful woman, and a woman in the prime of life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin at least to think of a gamekeeper (and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking)' (pp. 132–3).

Orlando is filled as well with the more looming presence of Shakespeare as his/her name recalls comic sex reversals in *As You Like It* and Orlando views a performance of *Othello*, whose 'astonishing, sinuous melody of the words stirred Orlando like music' (p. 26). There is further a suggestion of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* in the protagonist's name, perhaps even first suggested when Woolf visited Knole and viewed tapestry scenes from Ariosto's work in one of the state bedrooms.¹⁰

Eighteenth-century writers actually enter the text as characters to be skewered for their lack of wit – Dryden and Pope, for example – as Woolf quotes from *The Rape of the Lock*. Johnson and Boswell are observed from a distance by Orlando in close conversation over tea. The nineteenth century brings on Orlando's desire to be married, and the first meeting between Orlando and Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, her husband-to-be, is a parodic reversal of the initial encounter between Jane and Rochester in *Jane Eyre*, when, lying out upon the darkening moor, Orlando first sees Shel:

The horse was almost on her. She sat upright. Towering dark against the yellow-slashed sky of dawn, with the plovers rising and falling about him, she saw a man on horseback. He started. The horse stopped

'Madam,' the man cried, leaping to the ground, 'you're hurt!'

'I'm dead, sir!' she replied.

[p. 123]

¹⁰ See Madeline Moore's edition of the Knole manuscript for more on this aspect of the novel's literary background.

Finally reaching the twentieth century, Woolf quotes from Vita's *The Land*, which she transformed as Orlando's 'The Oak Tree', to suggest the 'contraband' nature of Orlando's thought and writing:

And then I came to a field where the springing grass
Was dulled by the hanging cups of fritillaries,
Sullen and foreign-looking, the snaky flower,
Scarfed in dull purple, like Egyptian girls – [p. 131]

The phrase 'Egyptian girls', the 'spirit of the age' gently suggests to Orlando, may not quite pass the censors; but since Orlando now has a husband at the Cape, 'Ah, well, that'll do' (p. 131). Orlando (like Vita, her image), Woolf's narrator concludes, no longer need fight her age nor submit to it, 'she was of it, yet remained herself. Now therefore she could write, and write she did' (p. 131).

Orlando's architecture, frozen in the flow of time?

Having published her centuries-long poem 'The Oak Tree', Orlando brings it to the very oak where she first conceived it and leaves it there as an offering, thinking '“a return to the land of what the land has given me . . .”' (p. 160). The unspoken phrase echoes the title of Vita's poem *The Land* and suggests the unbroken continuum between poem and place, implicating Orlando's insertion into the novel's spaces as a means of interrogating the fixity and flow of time and space, reality and fiction.¹¹

The novel spans three centuries, divided into six chapters, where each is marked by the age in which it occurs: the Elizabethan/Jacobean, the seventeenth century, the Restoration, the eighteenth century, the nineteenth century and, finally, the Victorian and modern periods. But the flow of centuries is always grounded by the land, the oak tree and Orlando's poem, suggesting Orlando's great house and estate, and by extension, Vita's Knole, as the central architectural and natural place, the home for both fictional character and living model. Woolf sketches the buildings and landscape of Orlando's estate:

There it lay in the early sunshine of spring. It looked a town rather than a house, but a town built, not hither and thither, as this man wished or that, but circumspectly, by a single architect with one idea in his head. Courts and buildings, grey, red, plum colour, lay orderly and symmetrical; the courts were some of them oblong and

¹¹ Christy Burns in 'Re-Dressing Feminist Identities', p. 348, suggests a reaction in Orlando's struggle for identity entangled with the composition of 'The Oak Tree' against Locke's essentialist philosophy of personal identity.

some square; in this was a fountain; in that a statue; the buildings were some of them low, some pointed; here was a chapel, there a belfry; spaces of the greenest grass lay in between and clumps of cedar trees and beds of bright flowers; all were clasped – yet so well set out was it that it seemed that every part had room to spread itself fittingly – by the roll of a massive wall. [p. 51]

The centrality of this impressive location is further underscored by its position as a centre between two additional spatial poles – East and West. London, as the embryonic site of Western Empire, emerges first as it appears during the Great Frost and the winter carnival made of the frozen Thames during the coronation of James I.¹² Here the ‘most brilliant society of England’ gathers, the King’s statesmen plan the ‘conquest of the Moor’, the ‘downfall of the Turk’, and admirals tell stories of the ‘north-west passage and the Spanish Armada’ (p. 16). Orlando as a youth is even implicated in the work of empire building as he imitates his ancestors by swinging at the old head of a Moor taken by one of his ancestors during the Crusades (p. 5),¹³ and the introduction of Sasha, the Russian princess, as Orlando’s first real love, inserts an element of the exotic as the East comes to the West.

The blending of these horizontally polar spaces suggests as well the blurring of fixity and flow that Woolf captures in her descriptions of the great frozen river. Here we gaze upon the ‘old bumboat woman, who was carrying her fruit to market on the Surrey side’, as she ‘sat there in her plaids and farthingales with her lap full of apples, for all the world as if she were about to serve a customer, though a certain blueness about the lips hinted the truth’ (p. 16). Time has stopped for the old woman, death in life and life in death, as she sits suspended in glacial, frozen space. London is a metaphor for solidification and fixity (Clements, p. 12) against which Woolf counterpoints the fluidity of Orlando’s passion for Sasha: ‘For as he looked the thickness of his blood melted; the ice turned to wine in his veins; he heard the waters flowing and the birds singing; spring broke over the hard wintry landscape . . .’ (p. 18).

With the death of the affair with Sasha, though, Orlando retires once more to the land, there to lapse into a trance-like sleep for seven days, a precursor to the transformational sleep in the East. Constantinople, where Orlando arrives as ambassador, stands poised against the

12 On the subject of English national identity and *Orlando*, see Jaime Hovey, ‘Kissing a Negress in the Dark’, pp. 393–404.

13 Michelle Cliff writes eloquently of the imperialist ‘European gaze . . . obsessed with the African head’ in ‘Virginia Woolf and the Imperial Gaze’, p. 97.