

## Intermediate Sex in Virginia Woolf's Orlando<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

The literary genres used by several critics to describe Virginia Woolf's work, *Orlando*, published in 1928, include: religious allegory, fable, detective novel, doppelgänger literature, Scottish diabolical tales or the Gothic novel. It is still debated whether it is a science fiction story. However, the principal theme is the sexual identity of the protagonist, who crosses an 'ageless time', transforming his sex and sexuality throughout the journey of his/her soul. This is a clear rejection of the structure of Victorian novels, in which male characters dominate and female characters are scarce. *Orlando* was born a man and then, with the passing of the centuries—from 1600, the last years of Queen Elizabeth I, until the 20th century, in the royal political context of

England, that of the Suffragettes, when he becomes a woman and especially in writer. Despite what it has been barely mentioned, this novel is not sexist. As a matter of fact, the purpose of the work is to expose the needs of a lady of the Elizabethan era, the male and female stumbling blocks of Victorian society and the obstacles inherent to the obsessions of the self, where language is decisive for the marking of times.

According to Woolf, the sexual difference is given by education, but it does not intend to promote male-female duality, but to redefine femininity, while proclaiming that a mind must be androgynous.

**Keywords:** Androgyny, Art, Duality, Gender, Novel, Sexual Identity, Transformation.

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## El sexo intermedio en Virginia Woolf

### Resumen

Los géneros literarios que los críticos han utilizado para calificar la obra de Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, publicada en 1928, incluyen: la alegoría religiosa, la fábula, la novela policíaca, literatura de doppelgänger, cuentos diabólicos escoceses o la novela gótica. Todavía se discute si es un relato de ciencia ficción. Sin embargo, el tema principal es la identidad sexual del protagonista, quien cruza un “tiempo sin tiempo”, transformando su sexo y sexualidad a lo largo del recorrido de su alma. Este, es un claro rechazo a la estructura de las novelas victoriana, en las cuales dominan los personajes masculinos y escasean los femeninos. Orlando nace hombre para luego, con el pasar de los siglos – desde 1600, últimos

años de la Reina Isabel I, hasta el siglo XX, en el contexto político real de Inglaterra, el de las Sufragistas, cuando se da su transformación en mujer y sobre todo en escritora. Pese a lo apenas mencionado, esta novela no es sexista. En realidad, el fin de la obra es exponer las necesidades de una dama de la época isabelina, los tropiezos masculinos y femeninos de la sociedad victoriana y los obstáculos inherentes a las obsesiones del yo, en donde el lenguaje es determinante para la marcación de épocas.

Según Woolf, la diferencia sexual viene dada por la educación, pero no pretende fomentar la dualidad hombre-mujer, sino redefinir la femineidad, proclamando a la vez que una mente debe ser andrógina.

**Palabras clave:** Androginia, Arte, Dualidad, Género, Identidad Sexual, Novela, Transformación.

## Sexo intermediário em Virginia Woolf

### Resumo

Os gêneros literários que os críticos usaram para qualificar a obra de Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, publicada em 1928, incluem: alegoria religiosa, fábula, história de detetive, literatura doppelgänger, contos diabólicos escoceses ou romance gótico. Ainda é debatido se é uma história de ficção científica. Porém, o tema principal é a identidade sexual do protagonista, que atravessa um “tempo sem tempo”, transformando seu sexo e sexualidade ao longo da jornada de sua alma. Esta é uma clara rejeição da estrutura dos romances vitorianos, nos quais os personagens masculinos dominam e os femininos são escassos. Orlando nasce homem e depois, ao longo dos séculos – de 1600, últimos anos da Rainha Elizabeth I,

até o século XX, no contexto político real da Inglaterra, o das Sufragistas, quando ela se transforma em mulher e principalmente como escritor. Apesar do pouco mencionado, este romance não é machista. Na verdade, o objetivo da obra é expor as necessidades de uma dama da era elisabetana, os tropeços masculinos e femininos da sociedade vitoriana e os obstáculos inerentes às obsessões do eu, onde a linguagem é decisiva para a marcação dos tempos. .

Segundo Woolf, a diferença sexual é dada pela educação, mas não se destina a promover a dualidade homem-mulher, mas a redefinir a femineidade, ao mesmo tempo em que proclama que uma mente deve ser andrógina.

**Palavras-chave:** Androginia, Arte, Dualidade, Género, Identidade Sexual, Romance, Transformação.

## Introduction

'As long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking.'

Virginia Woolf (*Orlando*)

Adeline Virginia Stephen (1882-1941), born in London, was the daughter of the eminent man of letters Leslie Stephen, editor of one of the great linguistic supports of Victorian culture, the "Dictionary of National Biography". Julia Stephen, Virginia's mother, passed away when she was only aged 13. His father, Leslie Stephen, completely lost himself in his grief. Virginia's older stepsister, who mothered her, died two years later. Her father passed away when she was 22 years old. His favourite brother, Thoby, died of typhoid fever two years later. Virginia was left with the only family love link of her older sister, Vanessa, who was married and busy with her children.

All this series of family tragedies, comparable to those of the Uruguayan-Argentine writer Horacio Quiroga (1878-1937)-with whom she shares a suicidal fate-influenced the character of the novelist.

At the age of thirty, she married the politician and intellectual Leonard Woolf. The Stephens belonged to a social fringe between the middle class and the aristocracy, but unlike her brothers, neither she nor her sisters had attended university. However, Virginia spoke several languages and had extensive historical, philosophical, and literary knowledge.

The Stephens were members of Bloomsbury, a group of British intellectuals who, during the first third of the 20th century, had a prominent role in the literary, artistic, and social fields. Among the features that defined them, a certain radicalism was evident in their rejection of sexual taboos; glaring restrictions from the previous Victorian age. According to Alex Zwerdling, the permissiveness of the

group was truly extraordinary: homosexuality and lesbianism were not only practiced, but widely debated. Adulterous relationships were accepted as part of the family circle. Regarding these love affairs, we note that Virginia, before meeting her future husband, Leonard Woolf, was briefly engaged to her friend Lytton Strachey, who, in turn, had had several hetero and homosexual relationships. However, our artist was in love with Violet Dickinson, to whom she wrote passionate love letters. It is very likely, therefore, that Virginia, through her sexual identity, developed, in her intimacy, a strong attraction towards transvestism and transsexuality, themes dramatized in the character of Orlando. To these is added the effect of Freudian psychoanalysis, already present in the final part of the Victorian era in the novels discussed in the preceding chapters, endowing its protagonist with a new androgynous sexual identity; the "third" or "intermediate sexuality", citing Carpenter, capable of surpassing the narrow limits of heterosexuality.

Bloomsbury was then profoundly feminist, applying a libertarian feminism that challenged the ethics of a society that saw men as the foundation of power and authority. In the following passage, Fuster García argues:

This revolution not only brought changes in its content but also in its form -the novelistic technique-, the group experimented with different narrative techniques such as the manipulation of time and the genre of the "Stream of consciousness" or flow of consciousness, through the cultivation of inner monologue.

Goldman indicates that the periods between November 18, 1910, and June 29, 1927, mark the development of the writer's feminist aesthetic. Shortly after sunrise, on Wednesday June 29, 1927, Virginia witnessed the total eclipse of the sun. This fact was supremely inspiring in Virginia's life and had a strong

influence on her literary career. He had just published *To the Lighthouse* a month earlier and was already preparing for Orlando (a novel he would describe at the time as 'a writer's holiday'), *A Room of One's Own* and *The Waves*.

The eclipse of the sun was of great importance to her: she even recorded it in her diary and drew it for an essay. A landscape described in the novel *Orlando* also appears to be drawn from the event.

Woolf's writing seems extraordinarily photological, Goldman writes; his predilection for the luminous is debated everywhere. His diary entry describes the world without sun, without light, and without color: a condition that is not appreciated by the author. There is the traditional hierarchical binary opposition: light/dark (where light is positive, dark is negative). The light, therefore, the sun, represents the masculine. According to Freud, the sun symbolizes the father, while the feminine has been associated with what rational knowledge transcends, dominates or simply leaves behind. In this passage, Goldman writes:

The sun may be regarded as the primary metaphorical instance of patriarchal supremacy, as the very light of masculine subjectivity which, from Genesis on, has cast femininity in its shadow, relegating woman to darkness and chaos.

At the very beginning of the twenties, in 1922, Virginia Woolf's life was shaken by the meeting with the English novelist and garden designer, Victoria Maria Sackville West, better known as Vita, who would be the source of inspiration for the novel *Orlando: A Biography*, which she began to be written between October 7th and 8th, 1927, and fully being completed on March 17 of the following year, being her most rapidly written novel. In a letter sent to her on October 9th, 1927, Virginia explains the birth of her new masterpiece:

Yesterday morning I was in despair...

(...) and at last dropped my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando: A Biography. (...) But listen, suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita...

A clear confirmation of what was previously anticipated in that letter, would shortly come after when she wrote: 'It might be the most amusing book... Vita should be Orlando, a young nobleman...& it should be truthful but fantastic.'

The Sackville-Wests belonged to one of the most noble families in the UK. As a matter of fact, Knole, Vita's castle had been a gift from Queen Elizabeth I to her ancestors. Virginia fell in love with her, ten years younger; The two had a secret relationship that would last for years. Victoria was also famous for her aristocratic life, her solid marriage, and her affairs with women. Daughter of this sentimental relationship is the novel *Orlando* (1928), in which Vita inspires the character of Orlando, an androgynous being who will love men and women at different points of his/her fictional double life.

In reality, the novel was written in a fit of jealousy, in revenge for Victoria having abandoned Virginia for another woman. Nigel Nicolson (1917-2004), one of Vita Sackville-West's two sons and a biographer, confirms that Woolf wrote about her mother's sexual adventures with both genders, defining Orlando as 'the longest and most charming love letter in literature.' Despite the previous clarification, the critics of the time did not capture the elevated content of the novel, classifying it as a minor work with respect to the previous novels of the writer, such as *To the Lighthouse* or *Mrs. Dalloway*, for instance. *Orlando* was published on October 18th, 1928, by the Hogarth Press. In spite of not receiving good reviews for being a futuristic novel, the

sales of copies skyrocketed, achieving 8,000 copies sold in the United Kingdom and 13,000 in the United States, during the first six months.

I am Writing *Orlando* half in mock style very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth & fantasy must be careful. It is based on Vita, Violet Trefusis, Lord Lascelles, Knole &c.

Woolf's concept of androgyny is compatible with deconstructive notions of subjectivity. Hence, Virginia argues against an enlightened universalism that defines humanity as disembodied Reason, and reduces sexual difference to a merely phenomenal form. Her concept of androgyny is the rejection of equality. The change of sex experienced by the literary character, although it alters its future, did not have to change its essence. According to Quentin Bell, Virginia showed an enormous interest in topics related to sex changes, in an event in September 1927 (just over a year before publishing *Orlando*), a fact that, presumably, served as a great inspiration.

The idea of an immortal human being, capable of wandering through different periods of history, has been contemplated by many writers. The most striking examples are that of *Dracula*, an old legend turned into a novel by the Irish writer Bram Stoker (1847-1912). There are also some, full of disturbing transformations, such as that of *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a masterpiece by Scotsman Robert Louis Stevenson (1850-1894), or another of sexual deception, such as that of the French novel Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850), *Sarrasine*, whose character is a eunuch, part woman, part man, who drives her lover mad. *Orlando's* great attraction is then the relationship between literature, sex and gender that leads to the mystery of transformation.

However, it was only from 'the 1970s onwards that *Orlando* began to be read as a

feminist text among literary critics, and today, among the English-speaking reading public, it has become a key text for the feminist and queer movements.'

After its publication, in 1928, the novel was received unevenly among literary critics of the time; same fate suffered by Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray*. Many, who still savoured and considered *To the Lighthouse* Virginia's best novel yet, were utterly disappointed in reading *Orlando*.

Leone claims that the lack of realism in the novel was also accused, as the main character seemed too fantastic to him. In fact, we know that the noble Orlando lives for about three hundred and fifty years, well divided between the two sexes. The work begins in the last years of the reign of Elizabeth I (1533-1603), coming to an end exactly on October 11, 1928, the year women won the vote.

in the United Kingdom, date on which, as far as it is known, Vita ended the relationship with Virginia. *Orlando* is a novel that must be chiefly framed within the modernist current, directly influenced by experimentalism, and is distinguished by its desire to break with the Victorian heritage. It is part of the avant-garde literature in the English language, which had its heyday between 1900 and 1940.

In the film *Orlando* (1992), by director Sally Potter, the action actually begins in the year 1600. Therefore, we can deduce that the young protagonist must have been born in the last twenty years of the sixteenth century, exactly in 1584 if we follow the date of the film itself: 'But since he was sixteen only...'

### Catharsis and Transformation

From the first verses we realize that, throughout the work, sexual identity will not be treated like any other topic: He — for there

could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it — was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters.’

Woolf informs us about the noble Orlando: he is young, rich and beautiful and with a great passion for animals. His first encounter with a historical character is with Queen Elizabeth I; it will not be the only one, in his/her almost four centuries of life. Soon Orlando becomes her favourite, during her last years of reign, and consequently, he will be granted honours and possessions. Once arrived at court, he quickly learns the art of seduction, provoking the queen’s jealousy, and finally being expelled by her.

Orlando has several suitors, whom he always rejects: (...) ‘now noticed that her teeth were crooked, and the two-front turned inward a sure sign of a perverse and cruel disposition in woman, and so broke the engagement that very night for ever.’

He writes sonnets to three ladies, Clorinda, Favila and Euphrosyna, without any genuine interest in them. It is a “formal love”, more dictated by his noble status than by feeling. He is finally engaged to Lady Margaret O’Brien O’Dare O’Reilly Tyrconnel, known by the pseudonym “Euphrosyna”, in the sonnets. She ‘wore Orlando’s splendid sapphire on the second finger of her left.’

Suddenly, on a visit to England by the Russian ambassador, something happens, causing a change of course in Orlando’s feelings. A person of medium height appears, dressed in oyster-coloured velvet, with bands of some unknown greenish skin. He, not knowing her sex, is immediately attracted and begins to observe her minutely: ‘Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished.’ She is Princess Marusha Stanilovska Dagmar

Natasha Iliana Romanovich, who had come in the entourage of the Muscovite ambassador. Orlando doubted her relationship to his uncle. What he did know was the reason for the visit: to attend the coronation of the new king. Historically we can deduce that we are talking about the coronation of James I of England and VI of Scotland, successor to Elizabeth I, sovereign of the two countries between 1603 and 1625. Noticing so much interest, his fiancée, Lady “Euphrosyna” became jealous. Speaking languages, at that time, was a virtue that few had. Orlando and “Sasha”, the princess’s nickname, began to relate to each other through French, which they both spoke:

Thus began an intimacy between the two which soon became the scandal of the Court. Soon it was observed Orlando paid the Muscovite far more attention than mere civility demanded. Moreover, the change in Orlando himself was extraordinary. Nobody had ever seen him so animated.

The refined young man lives proves to be totally smitten by the princess. He loses his head completely, forgetting at times his engagement to Lady Margaret, who had the supreme right to his attentions. Indeed, she ‘Yet she might drop all the handkerchiefs in her wardrobe (of which she had many scores) upon the ice and Orlando never stooped to pick them up.’ As time went on, Orlando was less and less careful to hide his feelings. He was delighted, ‘would take her in his arms, and know, for the first time, he murmured, the delights of love.’

The philological difference between the languages—English and Russian—also entails a difference in manners. Sasha lacked the words to express her feelings. English was too open, too candid, too caramelised for her who, no doubt, was determined to live in Russia, ‘She was determined to live in Russia, where there were frozen rivers and wild horses and men, she said, who gashed each other’s throats open’.

On the other hand, Orlando was not even thinking about his wedding to Lady Margaret, scheduled for next week.

Her kinsmen would abuse him for deserting a great lady; his friends would

deride him for ruining the finest career in the world for a Cossack woman and a waste of snow — it weighed not a straw in the balance compared with Sasha herself. On the first dark night they would fly. They would take ship to Russia.

Unexpectedly, everything goes wrong. Sasha does not show up for her final rendezvous with Orlando, before setting sail for Russia. After a long wait, the young lover will not find his ship at the quay and seeing it already so far out at sea, he will curse having given his heart to the charming princess:

Rounding a bend of the river, he came opposite that reach where, not two days ago, the ships of the Ambassadors had seemed immovably frozen. (...) But the Russian ship was nowhere to be seen. (...) The ship of the Muscovite Embassy was standing out to sea. (...) Standing knee-deep in water he hurled at the faithless woman all the insults that have ever been the lot of her sex.

After his love affair with Sasha ends badly, Orlando falls out of favour with the most powerful nobles of his time and is finally banished from the court. Not least it should be remembered that 'the Irish house of Desmond was justly enraged.' From there, 'Orlando retired to his great house in the country and there lived in complete solitude.'

Virginia Woolf's text is very specific with regard to the marking of time, and the dates are precise. Orlando's first catharsis takes place 'One June morning — it was Saturday the 8th he failed to rise at his usual hour, and when his groom went to call him, he was found

fast asleep. Nor could he be awakened.' He was as if in a deep lethargy, similar to that experienced by some animals in cold winters; his breathing was almost imperceptible. His servants tried to rouse him in various ways, but to no avail. Therefore: 'Still he did not wake, take food, or show any sign of life for seven whole days.' He did so, finally, after seven days at the same time as usual; a quarter to eight. He immediately expelled from his room the whole tribe of shrieking godmothers and healers, and went back to his life as if nothing unusual had happened. Everything the same as before, Orlando felt more relaxed, though, 'he appeared to have an imperfect recollection of his past life.' The only memory of "his past life" surfaced at the sound of Sasha's name, which caused a sudden change in his mood. Apart from this "detail", Orlando decided to give himself up to a life of total solitude, closed in on himself and even indulging in deep thoughts of dissolution and death. From time to time, he relapsed into his sorrows of love and found no meaning to his existence, as 'he stood there shaken with sobs, all for the desire of a woman in Russian trousers, with slanting eyes, a pouting mouth, and pearls about her neck.'

At the beginning of the 18th century, the nobleman Orlando is still quite physically attractive: 'That he had a pair of the shapeliest legs that any Nobleman has ever stood upright', which can sometimes lead to serious "headaches". Thus, in order to avoid the harassment of Archduchess Henrietta Griselda of Finster Aarhorn, the Queen's cousin, who was visiting the English Court, he decided to ask for a transfer to another country; he was appointed ambassador for a mission in Turkey. There, a revolution breaks out and, in it, we witness the definitive catharsis that will lead the young nobleman to wake up transformed into a woman. 'And still Orlando slept. Whatever science or ingenuity could do to waken him they did. But still he slept.' Only on the seventh day of their lethargy did the unruly burst into their room, 'but seeing him

stretched to all appearance dead they left him untouched, and only robbed him of his coronet and the robes of the Garter.' The great lethargy often experienced by Orlando is synonymous with a profound transformation of his being, like a change of skin, where the past and the past are forever left behind. When he wakes up, Orlando learns from a document that he has married the dancer Rosina Pepita—a clear allusion to Vita Sackville's grandmother—the daughter, it seems, of a gypsy.

When it was first published, detractors of Woolf's novel emphasised the lack of realism at the moment of the protagonist's sex change. If we deem that this text has a context behind it—in this case the struggle for women's rights and his relationship with Vita Sackville-West—this transformation takes on a great social-historical significance through literature. Orlando does not notice any difference in his personality, and finds that it is the clothes that determine his attitudes. The androgynous character of the protagonist is basic to understanding the novel:

The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. (...) The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. (...) Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.

Leah Leone argues that "she only begins to feel like a woman as others treat her with new expectations, triggered by her dress. 'Implicit in these expectations, driven by Victorian society, is Orlando's inability to govern himself independently, so he loses the social and judicial rights he enjoyed as a man'. We find testimony to this in the following passage:

The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it. Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us. (...) So, having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which was to be found, even in her face.

By and large, things start getting worse for the new Lady Orlando, as she is forbidden to inherit her castle and to exercise any political rights. Leone strengthens this concept with the following consideration:

In short, the only thing that has changed for Orlando is his anatomical sex, but society now imposes a host of restrictions on him that he was unaware of when he was a man. In this way, Woolf makes a strong social critique, demonstrating the arbitrariness of the rights that were granted or restricted to women.

Perhaps to avoid polemicising, Woolf's narrator exclaims: 'But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can.' In other words, the problem is not the sexuality of the main character, but to argue the differences that it entails on a social level.

The acceptance of the new state emerges from its first moments in this exclamation: 'Praise God that I'm a woman!' Orlando reflects on one fact: all his loves had been women, but now, 'it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man.' Such a long statement takes us back to Virginia's private life, in which she was married to a man, but in a sentimental relationship with a woman: Vita Sackville-West; it is uneasy then not to notice the likenesses. (Lady) Orlando's new

condition allows her to further clarify her ideas and feelings:

For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity.

The concepts of Beauty bring back memories of Wilde's aesthetic theory, who claimed that Art and Beauty win out and are placed on a pedestal far above Life. This is what Woolf wants to convey, also through her physical descriptions of Orlando together with the attentive and detailed description of landscapes and places that represent a hymn to Beauty.

Newly arrived in her London home of Blackfriars, the aftermath of her new condition hits home with a bang when she learns 'she was a party to three major suits which had been preferred against her during her absence, as well as innumerable minor litigations, some arising out of, others depending on them.' He was charged with three counts:

(1) That she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one Rosina Pepita, a dancer; and had had by her three sons, which sons now declaring that their father was deceased, claimed that all his property descended to them.

As a result, all her assets were seized, and her titles suspended while the investigation continued. At this point, the author's strong criticism of the restrictions suffered by the female sex over the centuries is evident. Through the character's sexual transformation, the norm regulating Victorian sexuality,

including literature and historiography in Europe at the time, is altered in such a way that Lady Orlando's experience gives a new meaning to the whole of modern English history. Despite these events, Orlando becomes more and more aware of her new inner strength: 'I am growing up, (...) I am losing some illusions, (...) 'perhaps to acquire others.' And so, the option of accepting the archduke's marriage proposal, in order to regain his possessions and legitimate rights, is not even considered:

As the sound of the Archduke's chariot wheels died away, Orlando felt drawing further from her and further from her an Archduke (she did not mind that), a fortune (she did not mind that), a title (she did not mind that), the safety and circumstance of married life (she did not mind that), but life she heard going from her, and a lover.

What does matter, however, is her new feeling in her new condition as a female being who is not willing to "sell herself". Virginia Woolf qualifies the issue of the new sexuality by comparing the portrait of Orlando the man with that of Orlando the woman:

We shall see that though both are undoubtedly one and the —same person, there are certain changes. (...) The man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion. (...) The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity.

Perhaps many speak of the writer's bisexual vision. Perhaps, instead, we should understand it as the journey of a soul flowing through time, discovering the facets of its innate dual nature. These are concepts that today, in the 21st century, can be understood; certainly, they were not easily understood at the beginning of the last century:

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.

Lady Orlando's return to her house in the London borough of Blackfriars is the occasion for a meticulous description of her surroundings (...) 'was fast deserting that end of the town, it was still a pleasant, roomy mansion, with gardens running down to the river, and a pleasant grove of nut trees to walk in.' And from there, the impetus to regain the two things she longed for: life and a lover. No doubt another thing he needed to regain was the approval of royalty and the upper class, which, before his amorous misadventure with Sasha, he had, as well as the praise of Queen Elizabeth I, who had bestowed honours, property, and attentions on him.

An encounter with her other literary benjamins, the poets and writers Alexander Pope (1688-1744), Joseph Addison (1672-1719) and Jonathan Swift (1667-1745), makes her realise how little regard her opinion and talents as a single woman are held in.

A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions, admires her understanding, or will refuse, though the rapier is denied him, to run her through the body with his pen.'

This is no longer Orlando's opinion. After meeting Nell, with whom he develops a sincere friendship—Orlando was very fond of women's society at the end of the 18th century: 'all was shadow; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun.' A century in which 'a woman's normal life was a succession of

covenants. 'She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded. Thus, the British Empire came into existence,' Through her friendship with the prostitute Nell, who introduces her to her circle of friends, the possibility of female friendship is shown in a novel. Our biographer tells us that accounts of other women by women are very rare in literature, since most of the famous authors, up to that point, have been men.

Once we entered the next century, the narrator describes some of the changes in dress: 'Rugs appeared; beards were grown; trousers were fastened tight under the instep. The muffin was invented and the crumpet. Coffee supplanted the after-dinner Port.'

As far as for women's clothing regards, in the 19th century—we are already at the beginning of the Victorian age—the criticism of the rigid corsets is strong, which Orlando can now personally experience by stating that the dress she was wearing was the heaviest and stupidest she had ever worn in her life; none like it to restrain her movements. As already reported in the previous chapter, Victorian women's dresses could weigh between 5 and 15 kilos.

In this journey through time, we have reached the middle of the 19th century. Orlando has not found happiness; he has lost fame and love. So, lying in a field with a broken ankle, she considers that "death is better. I have known many men and many women. I haven't understood any of them. I might as well stay here, in peace, under heaven alone". But something suddenly happened: "the horse stopped. Madam," cried the man, throwing his foot down, "you are wounded! I am dead, sir," she replied. Minutes later they were engaged: his name was Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine Esquire.

Having loved Sasha, more than two centuries before, when he was a boy, Orlando now experiences the love of a man. Significant and shocking is the phrase uttered when introduced to Shelmerdine, 'I'm dead, sir!', The fact that she says this, while literally clinging to the earth, suggests to Erica Johnson that:

(...) However corporeal she may be and however profound

her literal and literary connection to the land may be, as a woman she is a ghost in the machine of national identity. Orlando's identification of herself as dead articulates her legal and social status as we see in the pending lawsuits.

Several considerations are now necessary. To begin with, in such a short time,

Orlando and Shel were already engaged, without knowing much about each other. Sasha and Orlando talked a lot without really saying anything important to each other. In fact, Sasha is an example of the impossibility of capturing the essence of a person, despite countless conversations, although it is true that neither of them spoke their native language and often seemed to get lost in translations that slowed down communication and gave rise to misunderstandings. The different courting manners between the early 17th century and the mid-19th century should also not be forgotten. The male Orlando is extremely busy writing sonnets to Sasha and less attentive to listening to her, probably. Instead, Shel and Orlando tell each other everything important, each getting to the other's essence, without a single word. It is an engagement of two souls who meet again in a new incarnation:

They had guessed, as always happens between lovers, everything of any importance about each other in two seconds at the utmost, and it now remained only to fill in such unimportant details as what they were called; where

they lived; and whether they were beggars or people of substance.

Shel had been a soldier, a sailor and an explorer of the East. He was on his way to Falmouth, a small place on the south coast of Cornwall, where he was determined to embark on his brigantine for the most desperate and splendid of adventures: rounding Cape Horn in the middle of a hurricane. The lack of further details seems to be deliberate on Woolf's part, as she wants to focus her characters on the fundamentals, that is, their feelings. Time, names, past and sexual identity do not matter. It is a feeling without restrictions and conditioning; a clear rejection of the tendency of the structured Victorian era. The author's literary innovations are a clear and forceful rebellion against what she perceives as the pomposity and prudishness of Victorian writing. Thus, the vision and essence of the 19th century are inversely proportional to the message of this novel and the feelings of its main actor.

Exploring her femininity is pleasurable to Orlando, and Shel is the first to show her the pleasures of being a woman. He is a true gallant treating her like a lady. However, following this story, one has to wonder whether it is the writer's task to follow reality, narrating events without the help of a novelist or poet who can transform them, breaking the previous codes of writing. There is certainly a real basis in the description of Orlando's androgynous character, namely his relationship with Vita Sackville-West, but its evolution leads us to understand this novel as a parody of a biography, rather than a biography itself. Besides, biographies are usually true, but Virginia Woolf challenges us to question whether her hero-heroine represents a true story. In Orlando, everything is "being done", everything is in motion through the sensory experience of its main character, who, it seems, has no difficulty in sustaining different roles, as her sex changes far more

frequently than is conceivable. In such a way, they increased the pleasures of life and multiplied their experiences, enjoying the love of both sexes equally.

In the following passage it is easy to understand the writer's disinterest in defining sexual identity: 'Oh, Shel, don't leave me', she cried. 'I love you with a passion', she said. No sooner had those words left her mouth when a terrible suspicion swept over them. 'Shel, you're a woman', she said. 'Orlando, you're a man', he said. Here, technically the two are in a heterosexual relationship, but in this last passage we understand that it is not a traditional relationship, as was the previous one with Sasha. The most obvious conclusion is that both Orlando and Shel are really two androgynous beings capable of playing both roles; Sandra Gilbert defines it as the love of a feminine man for a masculine woman. What Virginia seems to be advocating here is the importance of human connection while avoiding the traps of gender and definition. Sure, Orlando and Shel's marriage has the appearance of social respectability, but that is not comparable to the true love they feel. In the same conversation with Shel, the clear realisation of being a woman, or at least having a feminine essence, finally stands out: 'I am a woman,' she thought, 'a real woman, at last.' And, unfortunately, being a woman means not being able to dispose of her former property, as the final judgments of the above-mentioned lawsuits confirm: 'The lawsuits are settled,' she read out... 'some in my favour, as for example... others not.' In his favour, the annulment of the Turkish marriage, when he was ambassador in Constantinople. The alleged children he had with Pepita, the Spanish dancer, were declared illegitimate, so they did not inherit, which could be advantageous. The bad part concerns her sex, which is declared indisputably, and without a hint of doubt, feminine. Consequently, the properties that until that date had not been confiscated, pass to the male successors, or in the absence of marriage. But there will be

no lack of marriage or successors. Orlando gets it all back by marrying Lord Palmerston, although, despite the titles, he is left in poverty because he cannot manage them directly. 'Orlando was a woman—Lord Palmerston has just proved it', a woman we find, at the end of the novel, writing at her table and demonstrating great talent and full aptitude for the role. Even more damaging is what spinsterhood does to her poetry and to her "eternal" work "The Oak": without the protection of social commentary that a husband would provide, her art would have little outlet. Hence, the decision to get a husband so that she could write. Victorian society forces her to marry and she does, but in her own way and with someone who complements her nature: Shel. As long as Orlando is married, an open marriage or a loving marriage does not seem to be a concern. It is the fact of marriage, rather than its substance, that seems to concern the Victorians. What may seem like a step backwards in terms of female independence—and it is—is a victory of Art and Beauty over life itself, in the pure aesthetic style of Wilde.

The next and final step is motherhood, the fruit of her relationship with Shelmerdine: 'Orlando happily gave birth on Tuesday 20 March at three o'clock in the morning', a date that our biographer marks with chronological precision. Having a child, then, is the ultimate proof of being physically a woman, although her gender is more complex than her biological body. To teach the duality of things as integrated parts of the same being appears to be Virginia Woolf's real intention in writing and narrating such a story.

### **The relationship with the land and the environment**

Thus, at the age of thirty, or thereabouts, this young Nobleman had not only had every experience that life has to offer, but had seen the worthlessness of them all. Love and ambition, women and poets were

all equally vain. Literature was a farce. (...) Two things alone remained to him in which he now put any trust: dogs and nature; an elk-hound and a rose bush.

Undoubtedly, for the attentive 21st century reader with an open and searching mind, Orlando is a novel and an engaging novel. It is full of facts, visual insights and superb descriptions of salons, cities and landscapes. It can be divided into three historical eras: Elizabethan England, including the taverns and drawing rooms of 17th century London, the gaiety and levity of the 17th century, where Orlando meets Nell Gwynn, the first female actress to tread the theatrical stage and mistress of the monarch Charles II, "The merry monarch" 1660-1685), who strolled through Whitehall arm in arm. Last but not least, the twisted sensibility of the 19th century; the Victorian era.

Erica Johnson bases her work on Orlando's relationship with the land:

Thus, Orlando's sex change in Constantinople occurs at least in part as a consequence of his response to orientalist terrain (...) Woolf makes it clear that the inhabitants of this landscape view it through an entirely different ontological lens. These clashing points of view lay bare the nature of Orlando's orientalist English gaze as he views the landscape of the exotic and hence unknowable East. Constantinople is feminized not only through the concrete details of Orlando's existence there, during which he wears unisex costumes (...)

The change of space makes it necessary to read the trip to Turkey 'as an interregnum during which a certain narration and bodily anarchy takes place'. Unlike ambassador Orlando, the gypsies know no national states; as a matter of fact, they do not recognise geographical boundaries, except between

land and sea. All this appears as a metaphor, translating these geographical boundaries with spiritual ones and implying different forms and possibilities of love. The frequentation of gypsy culture gives Orlando the opportunity to exchange his orientalist understanding of his surroundings for a more hermeneutic principle of understanding geography. Moreover, this change of scenery allows us to move not only into Orlando's inner states of mind, but also into previously unrecorded outer landscapes, namely the spaces occupied by women. His relationship with the land remains elemental and comes from his roots: 'The English disease, a love of Nature, was inborn in her, and here, where Nature was so much larger and more powerful than in England, she fell into its hands as she had never done before'. According to Johnson, 'The topography of Orlando's identity remains constant'. What Orlando does not yet know, however, is what awaits her on her return home as a woman, where she will be punished and disinherited by the same country that grants her admiration and ownership as a man.

In several passages we have testimony to his love for animals, irrespective of their sex: 'His heart was very tender. She could not endure to see a donkey beaten or a kitten drowned.' 'Yet through all these changes she had remained, she reflected, fundamentally the same. She had the same brooding meditative temper, the same love of animals and nature, the same passion for the country and the seasons.'

The house, the garden are precisely as they were. Not a chair has been moved, not a trinket sold. There are the same walks, the same lawns, the same trees, and the same pool, which, I dare say, has the same carp in it. True, Queen Victoria is on the throne and not Queen Elizabeth, but what difference.'

In the mid-19th century, a disappointed Lady Orlando finds herself lying in a field with a broken ankle and a desire to stay there,

lifeless: "I am dead!" she exclaims, replying to Shelmerdine. At this moment, when Orlando embraces nature and rejects society, nature provides her with true love to satisfy her needs.

Moving out of the role of the political subject as a woman, Orlando turns to geographical subject matter as a writer. Her manuscript, *The Oak Tree*, is based in England; therefore, Orlando needs to continue her relationship to this place from which she writes, as an organic connection between space and literary representation emerges throughout her large body of work. Orlando's dilemma of the need to maintain a place from which to write. The latter was the prelude to the essay *A Room of One's Own*, published in 1929.

In the final part of the novel, there is a beautiful description of the landscape and the animals that inhabit it: 'The deer stepped among them, one white as snow, another with its head on one side, for some wire netting had caught in its horns. All this, the trees, deer, and turf, she observed with the greatest satisfaction as if her mind had become a fluid that flowed round things and enclosed them completely.' The story of an androgynous being who feels intensely and merges with the Whole.

### Immortality and Art

Orlando was a nobleman who suffered from the love of literature. And though a handsome gentleman like him had no need of books, he was one of the aficionados of that vice. To write a book was a glory that obscured all the glories of blood and rank, as he himself claimed. And Orlando was by birth a writer, rather than an aristocrat. Clear, in this passage, is the reference to Vita, who was both. Orlando had been a melancholy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then amorous and exuberant; and then mischievous and mocking; and sometimes he had essayed prose, and sometimes drama: 'He had a heart of gold; and loyalty and manly

charm.' He had written some twenty tragedies, a dozen histories, and a score of sonnets when the order came for him to appear before the Queen at Whitehall, at the age of sixteen. Queen Elizabeth I, while he slept soundly, 'she made over formally, putting her hand and seal finally to the parchment, the gift of the great monastic house that had been the Archbishop's and then the King's to Orlando's father.' Y la reina (...) ideó para él una espléndida y ambiciosa carrera. Le dieron tierras, le asignaron casas. 'He was to be the son of her old age; the limb of her infirmity; the oak tree on which she leant her degradation.'

From our biographer, we know that he had been fond of books from a very early age. 'As a child he was sometimes found at midnight by a page still reading.' Before turning twenty-five, he had written an impressive number of 'some forty-seven plays, histories, romances, poems; some in prose, some in verse; some in French, some in Italian; all romantic, and all long.'

After the failure with Sasha, which leads to the first seven-day lethargy, Orlando withdraws into his cottage and his inner world, fully dedicated to the art of writing and reading the classics. It is the right time to seek out someone to advise him and advise him on his talent. He hires Nicholas Greene, a poet in poor physical and mental health, who then gives him a detailed history of his health over the last ten years: 'He had had the palsy, the gout, the ague, the dropsy, and the three sorts of fever in succession; added to which he had an enlarged heart, a great spleen, and a diseased liver.'

Greene traía consigo cierta negatividad y pesimismo sobre el estado del arte y de la poesía que consideraba muertos. 'How that could be with Shakespeare, Marlowe, Ben Jonson, Browne, Donne, all now writing or just having written, Orlando, reeling off the names of his favourite heroes, could not think.' According to the battered poet, the Greek era had been the golden age of the arts, and the

Elizabethan era had been lowered to an inferior level. Orlando, despite a good laugh, 'Orlando felt for his guest a strange mixture of liking and contempt, of admiration and pity, as well as something too indefinite to be called by any one name but had something of fear in it and something of fascination.' Indeed, he will be hurt by Greene's mockery, when Greene mocks his long poem, *The Oak Tree*.

In a profound disquisition, the narrator believes that the task of estimating the length of human life, not including that of animals, is beyond our capacity. Although we are convinced that it lasts for centuries, it lasts less than the petal of a rose. Definitely to the noble Orlando 'Life seemed to him of prodigious length. Yet even so, it went like a flash.' Hence, in a short period of time, our hero spent up to half of his fortune on the usual nightly banquets, which had otherwise been useful in gaining the esteem of his neighbours. In fact:

Held a score of offices in the county and was annually presented with perhaps a dozen volumes dedicated to his Lordship in rather fulsome terms by grateful poets. (...) For., it is for the historian of letters to remark that he had changed his style so amazingly.

Time marches on and our biographer points out that we have reached Tuesday 16<sup>th</sup> June 1712, the day Lady Orlando returns from a grand ball at Arlington House, where she had been displeased: "I don't care if I never meet another soul as long as I live", 'cried Orlando, bursting into tears.' The noble maiden had lovers galore; despite this, she felt that life was slipping away from her.

Lady Orlando triumphs in society and rubs shoulders with the poets and writers Joseph Addison, Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift. Alexander Pope, and Jonathan Swift, whom on the one hand she liked, as she had their

portraits hung in a circle, and on the other, she was repelled by their misogyny:

(...) tasted like wine after the fine phrases she had been used to, and she was forced to the conclusion that there was something in the sneer of Mr Pope, in the condescension of Mr Addison, and in the secret of Lord Chesterfield which took away her relish for the society of wits, deeply though she must continue to respect their works.

However, there are ongoing meetings: (she) 'kept her evenings free; began to look forward to Mr Pope's visit, to Mr Addison's, to Mr Swift's — and so on and so on.'

No solo los atendía y juntos y tenían largas disertaciones sobre el estado del arte, sino que también les ofrecía su vino y les pagaba por su tiempo y compañía, 'and accepted their dedications, and thought herself highly honoured by the exchange.'

Speaking of poetry and literature, she again recalls the futile experience she had had with the poet Nick Greene a century before, to whom she had also granted a lifetime pension to continue writing. Therefore, tired of the worldly life and the harassment of the archduchess, who is now an archduke, Orlando dresses as a man and befriends the prostitute Nell, who introduces her to other prostitutes, and they become friends.

Over time, the manuscript of his poem "The Oak" survives.

She had carried this about with her for so many years now, and in such hazardous circumstances, that many of the pages were stained, some were torn. She turned back to the first page and read the date, 1586, written in her own boyish hand. She had been working at it for close on three hundred years now.'

The biographer informs us that Lady Orlando is now a full-fledged woman of thirty-one or thirty-two. And in this very long journey through the centuries, she meets again Nick Greene, who 'was now sprucely dressed in a grey morning suit, had a pink flower in his button-hole, and grey suede gloves to match.' Orlando found it hard to believe that he was the same person. Greene's physical appearance had also changed; he had put on weight; a consequence of the good life he had had thanks to Orlando's pension. In short, he had polished himself up and was in his seventies. His vision of literature was more commercial. The old restless vivacity reflected in the composition of his stories, which, despite their brilliance, were not as spontaneous as before, seemed to have been extinguished in him. This may seem to be a criticism by the author of the misuse of art and literature by some.

Another singular aspect to note is Greene's change in his view of the writers and poets whom, in the previous encounter with Orlando, he denigrated and demeaned and are now cited as examples of a glorious past that is better than the present:

Ah! my dear lady, the great days of literature are over. Marlowe, Shakespeare, Ben Jonson — those were the giants. Dryden, Pope, Addison — those were the heroes. All, all are dead now.'

Greene insists on venerating the past and honouring those writers who model themselves on antiquity and write not for money, in these degenerate times: 'Here Orlando almost shouted 'Glawr!' Indeed, she could have sworn that she had heard him say the very same things three hundred years ago.' and,

de facto, suffered a terrible disenchantment. Sir Nicholas's verdict on "The Oak", however, was very different from the past. Finally, a recognition of Orlando's art, which during his eternal existence had had to do with his own manuscripts and those of others such as Shakespeare, Spenser and Milton, among others: 'Life? Literature? One to be made into the other? But how monstrously difficult!'

Lady Orlando had already turned 36, as the narrator informs us, although 'The true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute.' The twelfth stroke of midnight heralds the beginning of a new day: Thursday, the eleventh of October in the year Nineteen Hundred and Twenty-eight, the last sentence of the novel.

The search for eternity in Orlando's character, century after century, passes through the desire to write a poem that will become immortal. Being a poet is for Orlando an unfulfilled desire almost until the end of the story. He lives as a nobleman, he loves women and men, he travels physically and through time, but he will never know whether his poem, finished at the end of the novel, will achieve the eternity of literature. Orlando turns out to be someone with literary ambitions but little talent, and this last aspect is a parody of Vita Sackville-West:

Orlando is a writer's biography in a double sense, both of them fun and serious at the same time. It is a mock biography of a friend with literary ambitions but no genius, and of a genius who is the subject of her own irony and observation.

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