

# **A Bid for Freedom: Talking Back in Virginia Woolfs *Orlando***

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*Orlando*, published in 1928, was, according to Virginia Woolf's diary, "extraordinarily unwilling [...] as if it shoved everything aside to come into existence" (*Writer's Diary* 118). Woolf took great joy in writing *Orlando*, giving up her strict "time chart" to abandon herself to "the pure delight of this farce" (118). Woolf's experience is manifest in the spirited tone of the book, a rebellious "mytho-biography" of Woolf's friend and sometime lover Vita Sackville-West that resists, at every turn, restrictive representations of gender, the artist, and time.

*Orlando's* protagonist begins as an Elizabethan nobleman who enters the service of his queen at an early age. He goes on to have his heart broken by a Russian princess, become an ambassador to Turkey and, approximately halfway through the text, he awakes in his bed as a woman. The remainder of the novel follows the female Orlando through a series of geographical locations and literary periods as she contends with questions of gender, creativity, marriage, independence, and fame. Orlando, a character that transcends time and gender, is neither the real Sackville-West nor a purely fictional subject: she is both. By virtue of Woolf's non-traditional methods of rendering the subject, Orlando is ultimately irreducible. Published the year before *A Room of One's Own*, in which Woolf decries the reduction of women to one-dimensional beings within patriarchal texts, *Orlando* embodies a potent challenge to the Victorian script that would limit women to the role of an "Angel in the House."<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Virginia Woolf draws the phrase "Angel in the House" from the title of Coventry Patmore's 1864 poem depicting a model Victorian wife. According to Woolf, this "phantom" was "intensely sympathetic. She was immensely charming. She was utterly unselfish. She excelled in the difficult arts of family. She sacrificed herself daily." It was

I believe that *Orlando* prefigures the speech act that contemporary feminist scholar bell hooks labels "talking back." In her important 1989 book of the same title, hooks defines "talking back" as "an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (8). Viewed in the context of the misogynistic ideological underpinnings of Woolf's own intellectual milieu—namely, those of the Cambridge Apostles—*Orlando* can be read as an articulation of female resistance, a challenge to Apostolic theory that aimed to render women both "nameless and voiceless." Woolf's satiric reinvention of the "art of biography" defiantly mocks the male-dominated history of western letters, even as it challenges oppressive Victorian ideological concepts of gender roles. Surprisingly, restrictive attitudes about women's roles were alive and well in Woolf's own intellectually progressive Bloomsbury Group.

Julie Anne Taddeo has recently examined how certain members of the Bloomsbury Group perpetuated repressive notions of gender difference. Specifically, she examines the group of men who attended Cambridge University together and then became regular guests at the home of Virginia and Vanessa Stephen. Several of these men, including Lytton Strachey, E. M. Forster, Roger Fry, and Woolf's eventual husband Leonard Woolf, were part of the elite Cambridge Conversazione Society. This Society, also known as the Apostles, believed in a Platonic ideal of fraternal love. They held that the only "pure" form

this ideal of feminine virtue, says Woolf, that she ultimately had to kill in order to write ("Professions for Women" 236-37).

of love occurred between men—that women were degrading to men and were not to be considered intellectual or moral equals. The Apostles divided the world along Platonic lines into "reality" and the "phenomenal." "Reality," for them, referred to themselves and anything related to the Society. Everything else, including politics, the masses, and all women, belonged to the "phenomenal" world (Taddeo 203).

The Apostles actively cultivated their ability to ignore the very existence of women. Threatened by the admission of women to Cambridge, Roger Fry, in a paper titled "Ought We to Be Hermaphrodite," suggested the "terrific thought" that no woman had ever existed nor could be said to exist as long as the Society admitted only males to Apostolic "reality" (qtd. in Rosenbaum 252). Through this ideological lens, women are reduced to mere shadows in the "phenomenal" realm; in other words, nothing to be concerned with or even, in fact, to *see*.

Many of the Apostles at this time were gay or bisexual, and their need for exclusivity may well have been in the interest of creating safe space for themselves. The sexual openness of the Bloomsbury Group is well documented, and I do not mean to diminish the importance of their radicalism for gay and bisexual men. However, as Karyn Z. Sproles, Julie Ann Taddeo, and Louise DeSalvo note, their tolerance did not extend to the realm of lesbian desire. According to Virginia Woolf's diary, E.M. Forster, himself homosexual, "said he thought Sapphism disgusting, partly from convention, partly because he disliked that women should be independent of men" (qtd. in Sproles 4). Forster's comment reveals not only his own homophobia regarding female eroticism, but

also ironically reinforces the Victorian heterosexist paradigm, which the "Bloomsberries" purported to loathe.

Fry, Strachey, Forster, and of course Leonard Woolf all figured prominently into Virginia Woolf's creative and professional life. It is no wonder that Woolf, when thinking of Cambridge, would "vomit [...] a green vomit which gets into the ink and blisters the paper" (*Letters of V. Woolf and Lytton Strachey* 38). Woolf's anger might have easily found its way into her fiction, but the pages of *Orlando* are, in fact, not blistered. Woolf is highly aware of the ways in which personal resentment can cloud women's writing. She describes, in *A Room of One's Own*, the "indignation" evident in Charlotte Brontë's prose that keeps Brontë from getting "her genius expressed whole and entire" (69). With this in mind, Woolf keeps the "green vomit" for her letters to Strachey and off the pages of *Orlando*. Throughout her book, Woolf maintains a carefully objective tone, even as she assertively resists Victorian misogyny.

To this end, Woolf cultivates what Karyn Z. Sproles describes as an "ironic tone [...] sustained by the fully developed, self-aware narrative voice of the Biographer" (95). Woolf's Biographer, whose voice in the novel practically constitutes another character, acts as the satirical filter for Woolf's anger.<sup>2</sup> Woolf comments on the reductive nature of traditional biography, as well as traditional representations of women in fiction. Woolf's Biographer

<sup>2</sup> Woolf's Biographer, in spite of claims to "enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatever" (220), self-reflexively uses the pronoun "he" throughout the text. I have followed suit.

foregrounds the process of biography throughout *Orlando*, self-reflexively commenting upon the difficulty of capturing a life in letters.

Woolf was undoubtedly concerned with revolutionizing the art of life-writing. In her 1927 essay, "The New Biography," Woolf offers a metaphor to describe the "problem of biography"; that is, the problem of uniting truth—"something of granite-like solidity"—and personality—"something of rainbow-like intangibility"—into "one seamless whole" (149). In *Orlando*, Woolf satirizes the traditional biographer's method as that of "plod[ding], without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade" (65). Such an approach gives the reader only external facts and none of the complexity of the human subject. Woolf's Biographer frequently asserts his intention to render a complex character rather than to simply deliver a panegyric. In the opening pages of the book, he sets the reader up for inevitable contradictions by confessing, "directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand disagreeables which it is the aim of every good biographer to ignore" (15). Here, Woolf points out the hesitation of traditional biographers to render their subjects in a less than favorable light. Woolf's Biographer, by contrast, refuses to "ignore" the "disagreeables." He refuses to be a "good biographer"—instead, he ventures to tell the truth, even when it is contradictory or unflattering.

The Biographer's refusal to be "good" can be seen as a direct challenge to Woolf's father Leslie Stephen, editor of the massive British *Dictionary of National Biography*. Woolf describes the "Victorian biographer" disparagingly as

"dominated by the idea of goodness. Noble, upright, chaste, severe; it is thus that the Victorian worthies are presented to us" ("The New Biography" 151). Woolf's Orlando, however, is not "above life size" like Stephen's "Victorian worthies" (151). Rather, Orlando is an emotionally complex subject who repeatedly threatens to "slip out of one's grasp altogether" (*Orlando* 268). Woolf's Biographer tackles the paradoxical elements of character and foregrounds the instability and the complexity of the subject throughout the text.

*Orlando* begins with a description of the title character "in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (13). This frankly disturbing image of the brutal young nobleman is curiously at odds with the Orlando who soon pulls down a writing book and attempts to describe "as all young poets are for ever describing, nature" (16). Woolf's Biographer incorporates this paradox fluidly, however, and it is only one of the means by which the instability of the subject, Orlando, is made manifest.

Christine Froula glosses Orlando's aggression in the opening scene as a "parody" of the "violence that attends the formation and performance of identity" (181). Indeed, Woolf immediately foregrounds the performance of gender, opening the novel by emphasizing Orlando's male status: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex" (i). Woolf's jarring qualification of the pronoun "he" ironically creates the very doubt it purports to dispel. Having brought us into this curiously unstable world, the Biographer "now undercuts contingencies of gender, class, race, nation, historical moment, age—all the self/ other dynamics by which identity is formed and sustained—with a scene of writing" (Froula 181).

Orlando's "fluent" writing is abruptly halted by the difficulty of capturing "the shade of green precisely" of a laurel bush (*Orlando* 17). The Biographer succinctly sums up Orlando's creative struggle: "Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another" (17). We may see in Orlando's difficulty a parallel to the Biographer's own persistent struggle with capturing a life in letters. As Froula articulates, the laurel bush is no more the word "green" than Orlando is the pronoun "he" (Froula 182). "From the outset," Froula maintains, "gender is metaphor, poetry, fiction" (182). We find ourselves in a reality in which "the thing itself (*Orlando* 17) is consistently difficult to pin down, and always open to interpretation. The meta-fictional voice of the Biographer throughout *Orlando* ensures that we do not forget this idea.

Toward the end of the novel, having lived through more than three centuries, the still youthful Orlando attempts to call upon a "single self," but finds that she has "a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for" (308, 309). Here, Woolf highlights the impossibility of rendering any subject completely, even as she foregrounds the complexity of her own rendering. Woolf farther illuminates the necessity of departing from biographical conventions by asserting that "the true length of a person's life, whatever the *Dictionary of National Biography* may say, is always a matter of dispute" (305). Woolf here alludes directly to the work of Leslie Stephen, making explicit the difference between conventional biography and her own innovative way of writing a life. By doing so, she "talks back"—quite literally—to the patriarch, her father.



Orlando's transformation from one physiological sex to another is a significant fictive element of this biography. Woolf's approach enables us to see Orlando as both male and female, unsettling our ideas of what each gender category implies. Orlando is undisturbed by the sudden sex change—she feels no internal difference when she wakes up as a woman:

Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity (138).

The impact of Orlando's transformation is external—that is, her life circumstances change in the future as a result. Orlando's sense of self, however, remains untroubled, indicating the possibility that both male and female selves have existed within her all along. Woolf's representation of gender identity transcends expected binaries, as in life Sackville-West herself transcended such binaries.<sup>s</sup> Ultimately, Orlando finds that she is able to move fluidly between genders by changing her costume and has "no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive" (221). Woolf's version of biography offers a far more complex representation of the subject than traditional

Vita Sackville-West's autobiography, published posthumously by her son Nigel Nicolson, offers great insight into her identification with both "masculine" and "feminine" gender roles. Though in many ways happily married to Harold Nicolson, Sackville-West fell deeply in love with Violet Trefusis and often dressed as a man in order to appear in public with her. Sackville-West describes her cross-dressing as "marvelous fun" and recalls that she "had never felt so free in [her] life" (Sackville-West *Portrait of a Marriage* ill).

biography allows. At the same time, it "talks back" to traditional binary models of gender by depicting a fluid model "wherein the pleasures of life were increased and experiences multiplied" (*Orlando* 221).

Though it is tempting to read *Orlando* as a fictionalized account of Sackville-West's life, strictly biographical readings are problematic. Hermione Lee, one of Virginia Woolf's biographers, maintains "a simplified reading of Vita 'as' Orlando [...] won't do" (485). Lee emphasizes the experimental nature of *Orlando*, calling it "a masterpiece of playful subterfuge" in which Woolf "suggests her preference for sexual amorphousness and complexity" (485). Lee here highlights one of *Orlando's* meta-biographical functions; namely, Woolf's daring commentary on the social construction of gender.

Nancy Cervetti, too, finds straightforward biographical readings "reductive," and cites several examples of critiques that have focused on "the personal and romantic [...] biography or therapy," including Nigel Nicolson's famous description of *Orlando* as "the longest and most charming love letter in literature" (Nicolson 202). Readings that limit the text to an unproblematic homage to Sackville-West overlook many of the radical ways in which *Orlando* functions as an articulation of human complexity transcending traditional binary models of gender.

Cervetti highlights Mitchell A. Leaska's odd explanation for his exclusion of *Orlando* from *The Novels of Virginia Woolf*. Leaska claims that "to have included a discussion of that brilliant but incongruous piece of phantasy between these covers would have been tantamount to committing a violation of literary

kinship" (xii). Cervetti is rightly concerned that such restrictions of this radical text work to "discount its effect and prevent it from influencing and altering other texts and other discourses" (Cervetti 133). Initially conceiving the idea for *Orlando*, Woolf herself wrote "it should be truthful but fantastic" (*Writer's Diary* 112); her use of fantasy, then, can itself be seen as a way of getting at truth. Julia Briggs points out that by treating time and sex "as if both were convenient fictions," *Orlando* "energetically resists the 'facts of life'—birth, death, and our subjection to the bodies we have been given" (Briggs "The Secret" 200). Woolf's text fabricates a reality in which "the truth" of human complexity is revealed through Orlando's "fantastic" subversion of time and gender.

Woolf's subversion of gender categories serves the additional purpose of undermining the one-dimensional representation of women in fiction as seen through the male gaze. Woolf speculates upon the effect of this gaze in *A Room of One's Own*, observing that women in fiction are "almost without exception [...] shown in their relationship to men" (82). The reductive nature of this gaze, she suggests, might explain "the peculiar nature of woman in fiction; the astonishing extremes of her beauty and horror; her alternations between heavenly goodness and hellish depravity—for so a lover would see her as his love rose or sank" (83). Woolf's Biographer repeatedly satirizes this idea, with his commentary on the difficulty of capturing a life in biography without resorting to a one-dimensional rendering of the subject. Towards the end of the novel, the Biographer foregrounds this difficulty, saying, "If then, the subject of one's biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine, we may conclude that he or

she is no better than a corpse and so leave her" (190). Woolf here mocks the representation of women as subject in men's fiction—the urge to reduce the female character to a set of uncomplicated emotional urges.

Woolf also talks back to the reduction of women in fiction by drawing canonical male authors into her own text and mocking them. In particular, the neo-classical "wits" are the object of Woolf's satire, especially the Augustan poet and essayist Alexander Pope. During the eighteenth century, Orlando goes in search of intellectual stimulation and finds her way to Lady R.'s salon where, "certain it is that all were brilliant, and all were famous" (198). Yet, after three hours in their company, "the fact appears to be that they said nothing" (199). *Nothing*, significantly, is exactly what Woolf has them say in her text. Alexander Pope mistakes Orlando's miniscule yawn for an insult and "present(s) her instantly with the rough draught of a certain famous line in 'The Characters of Women'" (214). Woolf's Biographer, however, omits the offensive line, simply informing the reader that "Orlando received it with a curtsy" and went for a stroll "to cool her cheeks, for really she felt as if the little man had struck her" (214). Woolf does not endow Pope's insulting remark with the dignity of a quotation.

As Jane de Gay points out, Woolf "responds in kind to these writers' dismissive views of women by silencing them" (153). De Gay cites several examples of this, not least of which is the comic description of Orlando's first visit to the salon, in which Woolf deliberately excludes Pope's words: Then the little gentleman said,

He said next,

He said finally,\*

\* These sayings are too well known to require repetition, and besides, they are all to be found in his published work. (202)

Woolf, in drawing Pope within her text, does what traditional literary history does not—she silences him. The world of this text does not require the witticisms of Pope, nor of Dryden or Johnson or Boswell. In the blank white spaces following those commas, Woolf pushes Pope's voice from center to margin; in doing so, she makes room for her own alternative script.

Ultimately, Orlando rejects the world of the salon, with its atmosphere of violent misogyny—"for really she felt as if the little man had struck her" (214)—and goes in search of society elsewhere. Donning the clothes of a nobleman once more, Orlando gains entry into a coterie of London prostitutes. Here, as Terry DeHay points out, Orlando is admitted into "an alternative community," accessible only because her "man's dress allows her to negotiate the boundaries of class that separate her from these women and to discover alternative bases for community" (180). In Nell's rooms, Orlando rediscovers the "faith in human intercourse" that Alexander Pope and company had caused her to question (215).

As the Biographer tell us, "it is certain that Orlando had never known the hours speed faster or more merrily, though Mistress Nell had not a particle of wit about her" (153). Such is the effect of real conversation upon Orlando, and it does not end with Nell. Through her, Orlando forms bonds of friendship with other

women as well, and these are by far the most appealing portraits of her social interactions in the book:

So they would draw round the punchbowl which Orlando made it her business to furnish generously, and many were the fine tales they told and many the amusing observations they made, for it cannot be denied that when women get together—but hist—is that not a man's step on the stair? (154)

Here the Biographer interrupts his narrative at the arrival of a man who has come to hire Nell's services. The women momentarily become silent in order to preserve the privacy of their community. The Biographer cannot now finish his provocative sentence about what women "desire," for Nell's customer has taken "the very words out of our mouths" by asserting that "women have no desires" (219). Here, too, a "Mr. S. W." interrupts the narrative to offer his opinion that "when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other. When they are alone, they do not talk; they scratch" (219). The idea of Orlando, Nell, and the other women in this scene scratching at one another like hostile housecats is by this point so unlikely that Woolf does not even respond to "Mr. S. W." Her satire exposes the absurdity of misogynistic notions of female relationship.

Woolf's response to the representation of the female character within patriarchal texts is twofold. In addition to silencing those who would reduce women to one-dimensional beings, she also satirizes the reduction of relationships between women to those of animosity and competition. In

rendering Orlando's friendships with Nell, Prue, Kitty, and Rose, Woolf challenges the sexist notion that women are unable to relate to one another as dynamic, multi-faceted individuals. Woolf undermines this patriarchal misconception by literally replacing the canonical male authors with these truly witty prostitutes.

Woolf satirizes not only the reduction of female characters to limited sets of traits and ways of relating to one another, but also the reduction of their available plot lines. After a hasty marriage, we find our hero turned heroine at her writing table doing nothing but "sitting in a chair and thinking" (267). This is frustrating behavior indeed for the Biographer, but fortunately, "when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman's whole existence" (268). Woolf's Biographer mocks the reduction of women and the possible directions of our stories to the single motivation of romantic love. Further, the Biographer goes on to imagine more acceptable behavior his subject might engage in—"Surely, since she is a woman [...] she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin to think, at least of a gamekeeper" (268). This allusion to *Lady Chatterley's Lover* underscores Woolf's criticism of texts that limit women to the uni-directional, heterosexist storyline—what Carolyn Heilbrun calls the "individual erotic and familial plot" (46). This well-known narrative focuses on "love"—or, more accurately, woman's pursuit of marriage as life goal and narrative impetus—as opposed to "action."

In *Orlando*, Woolf consistently satirizes this way of narrating a life. She creates a character, first male and then female, who challenges not only traditional notions of representing the subject, but also the "erotic plot" to which women are so often restricted (Heilbrun 46). Far from being prescriptive, Orlando's story openly questions the traditional markers of the romance narrative. Woolf deliberately de-centers marriage and childbirth—primary, defining events in the heterosexist erotic script.

It is during the Victorian period that Orlando begins to feel the oppressive "spirit of the age" as a tingling sensation around the third finger of her left hand. Orlando comically attempts to stop the tingling by placing a ring on the finger but is unsuccessful. Still she laments, "I, who am mistress of it all [...], am single, am mateless, am alone" (246). The fact that "it was not Orlando who spoke but the spirit of the age" (246) emphasizes, however, that the pressure to marry is socially constructed. In a scene that, as Jane de Gay points out, parodies Romantic novels (de Gay 154), Orlando wanders, wild and alone, on the moors as "nature's bride," until she breaks her ankle and is rescued by her soon-to-be husband (*Orlando* 248).

Even the courtship period is truncated to a couple of lines of white space on the page between Orlando's declaration "I'm dead, Sir!" and the Biographer's bland announcement: "A few minutes later, they became engaged" (250). The effect is frankly comic, particularly when compounded with the following sentence: "The morning after as they sat at breakfast, he told her his name" (250). As de Gay points out, Woolf's parodic treatment "denigrates the institution



of marriage by suggesting that no time for deliberation is either desired or required" (154). Woolf trots out the traditional romance narrative, emphasizing its inadequacy by borrowing its exhausted plot points. At the same time, Woolf reduces these events to a few short pages within her own text rather than making them central to Orlando's development as a character. Similarly, Orlando's pregnancy and childbirth occupy only a few pages and, as Christine Froula aptly puts it, are enveloped "in such rhapsodic verbiage that a reader might almost miss it" (Froula 184). Courtship, marriage, and childbirth are all incidental rather than defining events in Orlando's alternative script.

The traditional heterosexist script is further undermined by Shel's and Orlando's uncertainty about one another's gender:

[A]n awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously. "You're a woman, Shell" she cried. "You're a man, Orlando!" he cried. (252)

The "scene of protestation and demonstration" (252) that follows reinforces the fluidity of gender Woolf maintains throughout the novel. Christine Froula cites this exchange in her assertion that Woolf "disengage[s] sexual desire from sexual difference" (187). Indeed, gender ambiguity suffuses all of Orlando's erotic relationships. Upon first seeing Sasha, Orlando—at this point still a young man—is "ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question" (38). Yet Orlando's perception of Sasha is nonetheless erotically charged: "legs, hands, carriage were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had those

eyes" (38). As Nancy Cervetti points out, "the text marks seductiveness as independent of gender; instead, it's the very uncertainty that characters find so seductive" (128). Orlando is attracted to Sasha regardless of her gender; in his struggle to represent her in language, he reaches for images that carry no association of gender at all: "a melon, an emerald, a fox in the snow" (39). Similarly, Shel and Orlando are never satisfied that they have discovered one another's gender, continually asking "Are you positive you aren't a man?" and "Can it be possible you're not a woman?" (258). There is a delightful uncertainty, however, for it is "a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman" (258). Orlando and Shel happily perceive one another's transcendence of the traditional binary model of gender that would keep them tied to the old script.

Rather than living out the traditional script, Shel and Orlando embody an alternative model of heterosexual marriage, one free from Victorian ideals of women's roles. Woolf creates a marriage here founded on supportive friendship rather than the briefly flaring passions of the typical romance narrative or the oppressive strictures of the Victorian model. While Shel returns to his life as a sea captain, Orlando returns to her desk to write provocatively of "Egyptian girls" (265). That this marriage constitutes a departure from the traditional script is clear to Orlando, who wonders: "If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts" (264).

Nonetheless, from within the terms of this particular marriage, Orlando is at last able to finish the poem she has been writing her whole life.

Ann Ronchetti reads Orlando's marriage as "an example of wish-fulfillment on Woolf's part as a woman writer aware of the difficulties posed by cultural expectations" (88). Ronchetti goes on to say that "one cannot help but notice Orlando's infrequent thoughts of her absent husband and the virtual disappearance of her children in the novel's final chapter" (88). The absence of Orlando's child is certainly notable, and Ronchetti describes this as a "puzzling obliviousness" (88). I see it, however, as a deliberate decision to de-center these elements of the traditional romance plot available for women, while drawing the image of the woman as artist, "writing and thinking" (*Orlando* 268), from the margins to the center of the story.

In its humor, its fluidity, and its poetry, *Orlando* is, to borrow one of Woolf's own words, "incandescent." Woolf draws upon the tools available to the novelist in order to represent her subject in a way that traditional biography, with its emphasis on objective facts, does not allow. Woolf's Biographer does not avoid the complexity of the human heart; rather, he tries to find a way into "that riot and confusion of the passions and emotions which every good biographer detests" (16). Woolf uses imagination and intuition to give us a biography that does better than stick to the facts, the deeds—it gives us a fully developed character and an exciting alternative to the heterosexual plot.

Ultimately, Woolf articulates a multi-faceted perception of her subject and a new direction for women's stories as well. Not only is *Orlando* about Vita

Sackville-West—"the lusts of [her] flesh and the lure of [her] mind" (Woolf *Letters* 237)—it is, as Sackville-West herself wrote, a treasure of another kind. In her letter to Woolf upon reading the novel, Sackville-West describes the richness of the text as "being alone in a dark room with a treasure chest full of rubies and nuggets and brocades" (Sackville-West *Letters* 289). Sackville-West's response speaks not only of how the text functions as biography, but also the possibilities for living a full, rich life that *Orlando* engenders.

In her biography of Woolf, Hermione Lee relates *Orlando* to *A Room of One's Own* by calling upon Woolf's discussion of "Chloe and Olivia" (82). Woolf imagines a contemporary text by a woman author in which two women sharing a laboratory "like" one another—"for perhaps the first time in literature" (82). "If Chloe likes Olivia," writes Woolf, "and Mary Carmichael knows how to express it she will light a torch in that vast chamber where nobody has yet been" (84). Woolf here envisions a future in which women, far from being mere "shadows" in the "phenomenal realm," can illuminate themselves and each other in all their complexity. Both texts, says Lee, are "bids for freedom [...] Both set their women free from histories of repression and limitations" (520). In *Orlando*, Woolf does indeed offer a vision of freedom—freedom from the limited representations of traditional biography and, more significantly, from the limited plotlines of the oppressive Victorian script. In doing so, Woolf assertively "talks back" to the misogynist reduction of women endemic to her own artistic sphere, and articulates a vision of human complexity that itself serves as "a torch in that vast chamber."

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