

“Such is the indomitable nature of the spirit of the age:” A New Historicist Analysis of the Influence of Personal Struggles on Social Discourse through Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*

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Abstract. Virginia Woolf’s 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography* is commonly read as feminist or progressive literature. In the same way, societal values are not static. The continuous evolution of the feminist and social justice movements has meant that the nuance of *Orlando* as progressive literature has also evolved. This study employs Foucault’s theory of new historicism, which seeks to evaluate literature as an element shaping history, to trace these trends while mirroring them with Woolf’s constraints. A chronological review of feminist readings of *Orlando* found that Woolf’s interpretation of gender as a social construct supports key tenets of second-wave feminism and third-wave perspectives on androgyny but that *Orlando*, in its totality, falls short in fulfilling contemporary intersectional ideals. These findings are significant in clarifying the limit of literature as an apparatus for social justice, thereby ascertaining the scale of its impact.

Keywords. Woolf, *Orlando*, Foucault, new historicism, feminism.

Though she is primarily known for her “stream of consciousness” writing style, a large part of Virginia Woolf’s popularity was due to her 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*. The novel details the journey of Orlando, a young noble, as he or she navigates society over three centuries and undergoes a sex change. *Orlando* had far-reaching impacts on both the life of Woolf and the perception of her works. It was Woolf’s first commercially successful work (Kirkpatrick & Clarke, 1997), ensuring her and her husband’s financial stability for the rest of their lives. From a literary standpoint, it has been widely praised for its portrayal of the passage of time as a central part of the human experience (Chase, 1928), and it marked Woolf’s first digression from the “stream of consciousness” style that had characterized many of her previous works. However, Woolf originally wrote *Orlando* as a biography of her lover and close friend, Vita Sackville-West. As noted in a diary entry from October 1927, Woolf wrote *Orlando* to be a stylized biography of Sackville-West, one that started in the sixteenth century and ended in the modern age and included a change from one sex to another. This “truthful but fantastic” style was intended to be a method of writing about people while they were still alive, a way to paint a “grand historical picture” of one’s times in a singular moment (Woolf, 1953).

Scholars have studied *Orlando* from various viewpoints to understand its fictional and biographical elements. Most commonly, *Orlando* is studied from a feminist or queer lens, particularly one that reflects Woolf’s perception of Sackville-West. *Orlando* is first thought to exemplify the qualities of Sackville-West that Woolf finds most telling, such as her flamboyance, noble background, and social mobility. In addition, interpretations mostly center around how *Orlando*’s change of sex forces her into new roles and expressions that she has difficulty getting accustomed to. It is commonly viewed as a portrayal of Sackville-West’s regular defiance of gender norms through cross-dressing and sexual experimentation (Rognstad, 2012). It is, in most cases, seen to be indicative of Woolf’s liberal ideas about gender and sexuality. In *Orlando*, Woolf is seen to portray both as consequences of social constructs rather than biological predispositions. Smith, in 2006 argued that this biographical form of the novel was a way for Woolf to write about Sackville-West clandestinely, as she could not do so outright due to the refusal of the British public to acknowledge homosexuality.

This is notable as Woolf herself was not known to have some difficulty in assimilating into wider society easily. Though she was sociable when her mood was stable, she was prone to psychotic and depressive episodes (Garnet, 2011) that would eventually lead her to keep to herself and even commit suicide in 1941. For this reason, for most of her life, she was watched and cared for by her husband, Leonard Woolf, with whom she had a stable, yet in most ways platonic, relationship. It was only through Sackville-West's connections that Woolf could join the Bloomsbury Group, a network of English writers and artists that would help boost the popularity of her work (Forrester & Gladding, 2015).

Orlando is also read in terms of the themes underlying some of its more fantastical elements, particularly the ability of *Orlando* to live on over long periods. Sullivan, in 2005, argued that time is the antagonist in the novel — not because it is linear, but rather because it happens all at once, past, present, and future, and *Orlando*'s internal experience evades it. It is also read as a criticism of literature throughout these different periods, as evidenced by Woolf's so-called "parody" of common literary tropes, such as the portrayal of the polite and restrained lady when *Orlando* is in the Victorian era. Such was a period in which Woolf would have experienced substantial resistance in trying to gain recognition as an author due to her sex; for instance, in an 1837 letter to then-aspiring novelist Charlotte Brontë, poet laureate Robert Southey wrote, "Literature is not the business of a woman's life, and it cannot be." *Orlando*'s traversing through time is thus also read as a form of negotiation of Virginia Woolf with the "spirit of the age": an allusion to her quest to find where she and other female authors fit within literary history.

New historicism is a literary theory formulated by Michel Foucault that seeks to interpret literature as an element of the culture that produced it. In this case, *Orlando* could not have existed solely to represent Sackville-West or Woolf's apprehensions. Rather, these themes result from Woolf's wider interactions with her time's social and cultural norms. As they are read over time, they are continuously reinterpreted and shape history. The new historicism theory views literature as a cultural product and not necessarily of individual genius.

Postmodernist theory can seem out of place for a novel like *Orlando*, which has been read as a biography over decades. However, Newton (1988) argued that because new historicism seeks to incorporate literary works into wider history, it can be especially useful for social movements such as feminism in rewriting the male dominance of "objective" historiography (Newton, 1988). For example, new historicism may be useful in understanding Woolf's conflict with literary historiography (De Gay, 2007) in that it will be able to detail better not only the specific issues that Woolf grappled with as a female author but also how they reflected in *Orlando* and intersected with other issues such as race and class. With this in mind, the question arises: how are Virginia Woolf's struggles in conforming with the social conventions of her time reflected through her work *Orlando: A Biography*? Two sub-questions were thus formulated to elicit the needed data: How did *Orlando* allegorize the personal struggles of the relationship between Woolf and Sackville-West? How did such writing shape the feminist movement throughout history?

The first question aims to unravel the personal struggles of Woolf when she wrote *Orlando* by exploring her diary entries and letters at that time to understand how specifically she was impacted by the conditions of her time. The second question is thus posed to understand how these struggles have been used in feminist critiques. In particular, the new historicism theory will be employed in answering the second question.

This study may be significant because it aims to elaborate on new ways to understand *Orlando* and the feminist movement's interpretations of literature. It may enrich a deeper appreciation of Virginia Woolf and her role in literary history and social justice and can help cement Virginia Woolf's legacy as an introspective writer beyond her "stream of consciousness" style.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Foucault's theory of new historicism emerged in the 1980s as a method of exploring the relationship between literature and context and as a form of resistance against traditional methods of literary analysis, which sought to interpret all forms of literature against a broader backdrop of moral traditions. New historicism is characterized, first and foremost, by its reliance on diversity: early new historicists saw it as a way to counteract what they felt was an unjustified hegemony of British and American values, which were integrated into existing types of formalist literary criticism such as historicism and Arnoldian tradition. It was precisely new historicism's contrarian encouragement of cultural elaboration and nuance that led to its quick adoption into global literary circles, notably among Asian researchers in the West and Asia, who used it to represent elements within their culture's respective histories. However, with its increased utilization, a question regarding new historicism became

increasingly prominent and received increasingly different answers: how is it carried out? This question—and the murkiness behind its multiple answers—has brought itself to the forefront of criticism against new historicism (Williams, 2003).

One must first turn to Foucault's philosophies regarding power to understand new historicism. Foucault's theory of power/knowledge states that the immeasurable power that exists everywhere can be wielded through the accumulation of knowledge. Foucault believed that with more knowledge, one's capacity to control their surroundings increased. Additionally, Foucault posited an interconnection between power and resistance: that is, as power exists outside institutions, any resistance to constitutive governance, provided it is by a free subject, is itself an assertion of power. In feminist contexts, this has been interpreted to stress the importance of a woman as an active agent mediating her experiences, particularly against male power and force (Deveaux, 1994).

New historicism, then, and the understanding of cultural context as a whole, can be interpreted as a method to wield power for oneself or as an attempt to subvert the control of time and geographical barriers in readings of certain texts (Gearheart, 1997). Alternatively, it can be examined as an attempt to elucidate existing power dynamics between authors and the societies they inhabited. Thus, new historicism is a quest for knowledge: for information regarding institutions, often political, economic, and social, that led to certain literary pieces being created.

Though it was Foucault who first conceptualized new historicism, his proponents built the framework for its methodology. One of the founding proponents of new historicism, Stephen Greenblatt, outlines four specific enabling presumptions behind its practice. These have been widely adopted by critics up to the contemporary age and will be used as a basis in this project to adhere to this standard. They are as follows:

1. Literature has a historical base, and literary works are not the products of a single consciousness but many social and cultural forces. In order to understand literature, one has to take recourse to the culture and society that gave rise to it in the first place.
2. Literature is not a distinctively human activity hitherto believed but another vision of history. It has obvious implications for literary theory and the study of literary texts.
3. Since literature and human beings are shaped by social and political forces, it is impossible to talk of an intrinsic human nature that can transcend history. Furthermore, since history is not a continuous series of events but ruptures, there is no link between one age and another or between men of different ages. This being the case, a Renaissance man is rooted in his Renaissance idiosyncrasies just as a modern man is rooted in his. A modern reading of a Renaissance text cannot be the same as a Renaissance reading. A literary interpretation can reconstruct the ideology of the age through a given text.
4. Caught in his historicity, a historian cannot escape his formation's social or ideological constraints. Moreover, he cannot fully understand the past objectively on its terms (Williams, 2003).

The guiding principle behind these four claims is clear: new historicism seeks not to interpret a given text for what it is but rather, why it is the way it is. Although this can sometimes happen in practice through the examination of the broad strokes of history (e.g., that of the Renaissance, in many new historicist readings of Shakespeare), new historicism separates itself from traditional historicism through its emphasis on the dissonant voices: on the "fragments" of history, or the minor circumstances, that led authors to adopt certain ideologies. Greenblatt was a known critic of traditional historicism, which he viewed as a monolith, reducing entire historical periods to singular, sweeping traditions (Pieters, 2000).

However, as Greenblatt aptly noted in his fourth enabling presumption, those who employ new historicism are limited by their cultural biases. Thus, he proposed an alternative method of new historicism, one in which one essentially "talks" to the past, and the conflict between one's interpretations of it and their present historicity is highlighted (Greenblatt, 1982). New historicist critiques, therefore, need not be monotonous discussions of history and context. Rather, they can also be discussions on change, in which historical occurrences are weighed against the present. In this way, as literary critics, we can maximize the breadth of knowledge we have and, thus, the power that stems from it.

This study employs new historicism to evaluate the trends of the feminist and social justice movements of the twentieth century.

In the same way that its titular character must adapt his or her mannerisms as he or she traverses through centuries, readings of *Orlando: A Biography* have varied over time. After its initial success, it was read first as a work of gossip: an exposé on the promiscuous aristocrat Vita Sackville-West and critiqued primarily for its portrayal of history. The novel's reputation as a feminist novel was cultivated many decades later in the wake of the so-called "second wave" of feminism (Tetterton, 1995) and, in recent years, has been subjected to criticism incorporating contemporary ideas of race and gender (Caputi Daileder, 2013). This discussion will trace said trends of literary criticism of Orlando in the decades immediately following its publication up to the present and introduce Michel Foucault's theory of new historicism as a tool to localize and synthesize feminist criticisms.

Popular Reception and Historiographical Criticism

Orlando: A Biography by Virginia Woolf was first published by the Hogarth Press in 1928, immediately making an impact unprecedented by Woolf's previous works. In its first six months alone, it sold twice as many copies as *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's most successful book, in its first year (Knopp, 2006). Bell, in 1972 noted that this success might be due partly to the sudden topicality of its subject matter, as its inspiration, Vita Sackville-West, was known for her homosexual proclivities. Shortly before Orlando's publication, *The Well of Loneliness*, a homosexual romance novel by Radclyffe Hall, had been embroiled in a scandal and later banned for its so-called "obscenity" and "undiscussable subject matter" (Knopp, 2006, p. 28).

Whatever its cause, Orlando's uniqueness helped cement it in conversation and literary criticism even in its early years. The earliest review of the novel, 1928 New York Times column by Cleveland B. Chase printed barely two weeks after Orlando's publication, noting that it did not follow the "stream of consciousness" writing style characteristic of her previous works. Chase went on to call it a "literary application of Einstein's theory of relativity," praising Woolf's ability to not only reveal the innermost thoughts of her characters but also to portray their interactions as consequences of time, going on to argue that Orlando's incredible abilities are a reflection of the memories that underlie human consciousness. Though lacking in structural criticism of the broader themes in the novel, this review is notable as it set the stage for the historiographical criticism of Orlando in the years to follow and granted, in part, a sense of the literary context of the novel that will be further evaluated in this study.

Indeed, it was the relevance of Orlando's ability to traverse through centuries to the life of Vita Sackville-West that most early critics of the novel focused on. In his 1955 paper entitled "Orlando and the Sackville's," Baldanza asserts that in each period that Orlando found himself or herself in, a new consciousness of Sackville-West was being depicted, in line with the recurring theme in Woolf's previous novels and past correspondences that one person is at a given time composed of different versions of themselves. This claim is then supported through the enumeration of numerous parallels between the personages and settings in both Orlando and Sackville-West's lives, such as Knole, Sackville-West's ancestral estate, and the unnamed estate in which Orlando resides having similar structural and geographical features.

Hoffman (1968) adds to this by showing that the specific years in which the novel is set (included in the manuscript but omitted in the published version) align with the significant dates in the life of Thomas Sackville, Vita Sackville-West's ancestor to whom Knole was gifted to by Queen Elizabeth I in 1556. Thus, he asserts that Orlando is a biography of Sackville-West and a reflection of her ancestors' struggles navigating different eras of English aristocracy. For example, like Thomas Sackville, Orlando is a struggling poet whose desire to write conflicts with his duties as the Earl of Dorset. This detailing of similarities has been wholly helpful in establishing the biographical elements of Orlando, setting a precedent so that it would not be read merely as a novel but rather as the character portrait Woolf intended for it to be (Woolf, 1927).

It is notable, however, that early critiques of the novel tend to shy away from explicitly discussing gender and sexuality. Hoffman, for instance, concludes that the sex change that Orlando undergoes in the novel is Woolf's way of depicting the masculinity in Sackville-West's demeanor, unlike later critiques that would read it as evidence of the social relativity of gender. On the other hand, Baldanza speculates that the character of Sasha, the Russian princess Orlando has a short-lived romance with at the beginning of the novel, is a personification of a portrait of an unknown Russian woman in Knole, and not, as would be more common in later years, of Violet Trefusis, the woman that Sackville-West eloped within 1920.

That there exists an interweaving of both autobiographical and biographical elements is now a common idea across modern literary critiques of Orlando. Sackville-West's son Nigel Nicholson wrote that Orlando is an "extended love letter" — a representation of not only Sackville-West but also of Woolf's perceptions towards love. In line with this, Smith also argued that Orlando's inability to articulate his love for Sasha in the novel also reflects Woolf's inability to articulate her love for Sackville-West. It was through Orlando that Woolf is said to have expressed the traits that she and Sackville-West shared, such as love for the countryside, which Orlando, in the novel, escapes to.

Second-wave Feminism and Resurfacing as Feminist Literature

With the second half of the twentieth century came the rebirth of the feminist movement, which focused not simply on attaining suffrage at the turn of the century but against the widespread political and social discrimination experienced by women (Drucker, 2018). The growing traction of feminist ideals brought a resurgence in feminist critiques of literature, particularly those of notable female authors such as Jane Austen and Virginia Woolf (Tetterton, 1995). One of the earliest feminist critiques of Orlando, written in 1961 by Samuelson, asserts that Woolf's "defiant feminist spirit" (Samuelson, 1961, para. 1) is exhibited through Orlando's frustrations with the social norms brought about by her sex change. In addition, Samuelson interprets Orlando's gradual change in personality, evident in her becoming more vain and modest in the seventeenth century and increased independence in the eighteenth century, as a depiction of the traditional gender roles of women throughout history (Samuelson, 1961).

Moreover, Orlando's sex change may be read as a rhetorical awakening of the woman persona, as in Jocson (2020)'s interpretation of *Gambito's Fear and Batgirl*. Indeed, such would be a Foucauldian assertion of power from Orlando. By becoming a woman, that is, by awakening her inner womanhood, Orlando resists a society comfortably inhabited by her male persona. Therefore, Orlando's sex change is a medium through which Woolf exposes the plurality of self of the feminist psyche. Woolf writes Orlando as a combination of binary oppositions to societal norms: Orlando is male yet female, young yet old. According to Jocson (2020), together, dichotomies comprise the fluid image of a woman.

Beyond resistance to patriarchal norms, the second wave of the feminist movement was characterized by an openness toward sexuality. Vita and Virginia's romantic relationship once considered too taboo a discussion for literary criticism, gradually became the more widespread lens through which Orlando was interpreted, spearheaded by critics such as Kellerman, who in 1978 wrote that Orlando's frenzied, lovestruck descriptions of Sasha in the novel matched Vita Sackville-West's descriptions of Violet Trefusis in her posthumously-published memoir *Portrait of A Marriage* (Nicolson, 1998). Kellerman paralleled Orlando's desire to run away with Sasha with Sackville-West's elopement, arguing that Woolf's writing of Sasha and Orlando's relationship as a heterosexual one was the "careful balance of truth and fantasy" (Woolf, 1953, p. 141) was necessary for Woolf to keep Orlando palatable to heteronormative values of the mainstream. Kellerman even went so far as to call out earlier critics, such as Baldanza, for "ferreting out the history of the Russian Princess (Kellerman, 1978, p. 142)," that is, denying the relevance of Trefusis in Sackville-West's life (Kellerman, 1978).

This representation of Sasha as a model of Trefusis has since stood the test of time. Critiques of Orlando in the 1980s and the 1990s mainly extended from this idea, with Knopp in 1988 asserting that the novel was a product of Woolf's jealousy towards Sackville-West. It was because, shortly before Orlando was written, Woolf had read Sackville-West's novel *Challenge* and Sackville-West's experiences during her elopement with Violet Trefusis. During this time, Sackville-West was also having an affair with another woman, Mary Campbell. Orlando, according to Knopp, was Woolf's attempt to rebuild, or, in a sense reclaim, the intimacy that she had once shared with Sackville-West, with the sex change a representation of Sackville-West's bisexuality and the different attitudes she had towards partners of different genders. The central relationship in the novel was not that of Orlando and Sasha, but it was of Orlando and the unnamed biographer writing the account of his or her life. For this reason, Knopp argued, Orlando was more expressive of Woolf's feelings for Sackville-West than vice versa (Knopp, 1988).

What, however, are feelings without the agency to express them? Sackville-West and Woolf both had to make sacrifices in order to maintain their places in society in their time: Sackville-West still had to go back to her husband after two years spent running away with Trefusis; she had to give up her claim

to Knole, her ancestral home because she was not a male; even Woolf, following Knopp's interpretation, had to mask her love for Sackville-West in a fictional novel because she could not express it in everyday life. This line of reasoning led Smith in 2006 to argue that Orlando is not so much about what Woolf and Sackville-West shared, but rather, that it is a novel that attempts to mitigate, rather unsuccessfully, everything that they have lost. Smith cites Orlando's continued inability throughout the novel to articulate his or her feelings as evidence that Woolf herself found language wholly inadequate in conveying this. This study is especially relevant to the present one as it shows that the linguistic qualities of a novel, and not purely its content, may serve as evidence supporting given claims. Thus, comparing Woolf's word choices relative to others in her time may be a helpful way to gather insights into how she interacted with her culture.

Aside from her liberal ideas concerning sexuality, succeeding critiques of the novel explored Woolf's viewpoints on gender. Burns (1994) noted that the humor in Orlando's transformation exists not because of his or her genitalia but because of her gender, that is, the societal roles that he or she must now fit into. Burns asserts that the ambiguity of Orlando's gender is regularly underscored throughout the novel through clothing, as Orlando regularly cross-dresses regardless of what his or her sex is. This is an issue that comes up primarily in courtship, as "fixing" his or her gender by dressing appropriately becomes something that Orlando must do in order to court someone prior to the twentieth century. Burns took this as evidence of Woolf's belief in androgyny and the arbitrary nature of gender or as proof that, as societal norms become more restrictive, "it is clothes that wear us and not we them" (Burns, 1994).

Relative Progressivism in an Age of Social Justice

However, Woolf's ideas, though unique for her time period, were undoubtedly forged by her experiences as a female author. De Gay (2007) interpreted the real conflict in Orlando as one against time or the unseen "spirit of the age" that an unaging Orlando continuously has to adapt to. De Gay argues that through Orlando, Woolf satirizes common interpretations of historical periods, for instance, juxtaposing images of poverty and death with the Renaissance to question the notion that it "swept away all the values of the Middle Ages." This way, in addition to Orlando's sex change, Woolf could highlight the struggles she had as a female author; as a man, Orlando is far more eager to show his literary works off than he is as a woman (De Gay, 2007). Through this study, De Gay utilizes feminist values in pointing out what she believed Woolf saw as absurdity in literary historiography.

This interpretation is more consistent with the ideals of third-wave feminism, which, unlike its predecessor, focused on highlighting past female achievement as a means of dismantling the patriarchy (Drucker, 2018). Thus, succeeding readings of the novel was more attuned to ideals of social justice, which focuses on viewing minority issues as systemic problems requiring systemic solutions. In line with this, Rognstad (2012) explored the systemic nature of gender by asserting that Orlando was the product of Woolf's quest to forge the "androgynous ideal," or the person that would be successful in balancing both the masculine and the feminine aspects of their mind detailed in Woolf's earlier feminist essay *A Room of One's Own*. This is supported by studying Woolf's usage of pronouns. Though generally using he or she depending on Orlando's sex, Woolf sometimes intersperses the pronoun "they," which Rognstad takes as evidence that he or she still had both masculinity and femininity within her (Rognstad, 2012). However, this interpretation would have been contested by Cervetti in 1996, who argued that it is precisely the binary mode of thinking or the notion that any part of gender is something set in stone that Woolf wanted to mock through Orlando (Cervetti, 1996).

The increasing liberalism of readings of Woolf has called into question the contemporary relevance of her works. For a writer that in the late twentieth century had been lauded for her progressivism, Woolf in the 2010s was widely criticized for her writing of race, with Caputi Daileader in 2013 calling Orlando's slicing at the head of the Moor in the very first sentence of the novel "disturbing." Caputi Daileader argues that Woolf continually appropriates race throughout the novel with stereotypical descriptions of foreign characters, such as through Sasha, the Russian princess's, continual association with snow, and with her calling the non-Christian characters "savages." Particularly noted in the study is how Orlando's so-called "racial hermaphroditism," exemplified in how he or she joins a band of Romani people and can "become" one of them in the novel. Thus, Caputi Daileader implies that, aside from

gender, Woolf believed that fluidity of identity could extend to race or sexuality or that these innate traits were things that people could adopt as they saw fit (Caputi Daileader, 2013).

Conclusion

For Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* was a documentation of a storied relationship with Vita Sackville-West and, at its core, a character portrait marked by whirlwind romance and the constant need to hide. However, a story is more than its themes. What this review offers to future readings of *Orlando* is a way to reconcile its various interpretations by establishing their relativity to the time in which it was written. For instance, it was during the period of second-wave feminism that applying labels such as “feminist” to the novel, as Samuelson did, or “bisexuality,” such as Knopp did, became more widespread. In the late 1920s, when *Orlando* was first written, such terms were not yet distinct from homosexuality (Bauer, 1920). This consistent reinterpretation of literary critiques to fit modern societal values has allowed *Orlando* to remain relevant through the years. As Foucault’s theory of new historicism stipulates, literature can only remain relevant for so long as it can accurately mirror present societal values.

As society becomes more accepting of gender fluidity and more concerned with the intersectionality of identities, the pressure on *Orlando* to conform to contemporary values of race, class, and other characteristics grows stronger. Whether it’s in relatively monolithic or elitist interpretations of culture, Woolf may not always be able to deliver, and the promise of *Orlando* as a progressive novel dulls. However, in the same way, that she cannot accurately be represented from a contemporary lens, Woolf cannot be held to contemporary social justice standards that she never encountered. What societal conditions did she deal with that led her to adopt androgyny as an ideal? Did her pronoun choices represent her views of the gender binary, or were they just products of the linguistic precedence built by her predecessors? It is precisely this problem that is remedied through a new historicist interpretation of the novel. After all, whether Virginia Woolf was ahead of her time cannot be ascertained. Like her peers, she, along with all of her works, was simply a part of it.

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