

*"Orlando's Voyage
from Woolf's pen to Potter's lens"*

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HOW THE NOVEL HAS BEEN SEEN

“Players and painted stage took all my love
And not those things that they were emblems of.”

W. B Yeats

In our time, it would be needless to say that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* invites us to reconsider the very notions of literature and sexuality that the book itself is so much invested in. Today, *Orlando* is most often read as a feminist work that explores the boundaries of gender and sexuality and the limits of women writers within literary history, and as a sharp critique on the possibilities of biography. Still, the critical relationship between the book as a physical object and the text it contains has often been overlooked.

A complex text to read, open to several interpretations, it has led publishers to feel quite free to exploit those various interpretations visually on the book covers. Moreover, being influenced by the author's gender, Woolf's critical acceptance itself also seems to have “tinted” the different covers of the book. Throughout the twentieth century, *Orlando* the book has been presented in a number of ways, which have somehow reflected certain attitudes towards the text that have paved the way to specific readings, to the detriment of others.

Orlando was often first read by Woolf's contemporaries as merely a gossipy portrait of Vita Sackville-West, and "was taken as the delightful joke that Woolf herself claimed it to be. It was a hugely successful joke – not just critically, but financially as well, both in England and America. It was *Orlando* that enabled the Woolfs to purchase their first car, and it put them on stable financial footing for the rest of their lives."¹ Nevertheless, the novel was also simultaneously read as a serious work of literature.

Reviews through the mid-forties continued to approach the novel from different angles, noting, for example, Woolf's concern with time, or pointing out that the book's point seemed to be that there was more than one person in each body, and that each individual had, potentially, at least, various selves. Still, this does not mean the novel came into its own from the beginning. And neither did its feminist interpretations. To a great extent, of course, the reason why today we read the book as undoubtedly feminist is that we are far more sensitive to gender issues than the readers of long ago since these issues are now part of our social consciousness; but partly, we are probably just reacting to what we are given to read.

Anyone casually glancing at most of the book covers from these last decades is likely to suspect that issues of gender and sexuality are

¹ Tetterton, Kelly. "Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: The Book as Critic," paper presented to The Fifth Annual Virginia Woolf Conference at Otterbein College, June 18, 1995.

involved in the text. But if we are more “alert” regarding the sexual issues in *Orlando* today because of the novel's packaging, we may also be less immediately aware of other aspects of the novel for the very same reason.

In Kelly Tetterton's words:

“The glory in whimsy and fantasy is lost from these contemporary covers, but these very elements were the ones highlighted in previous incarnations. The 1946 Penguin paperback features a young boy in Renaissance dress writing beneath a tree while an airplane flies overhead; the 1960 Signet cover features a technicolor version of the ice skaters from the Great Frost. These covers present the text to the reader as wonderful escapist fantasy, at the very least de-emphasizing feminist interpretations of the novel.”

Woolf herself tries to direct our reading of the text with visual cues –the photographs- in probably as much the same way the publishers have done with their covers. As a matter of fact, it is worth pointing out how paperback covers may both reflect and reinforce the critical attitudes of the day, and may lead readers to focus on one particular reading of a novel as complex as *Orlando* before they even open the book at all.

THE BOOK'S CONNECTIONS TO VITA SACKVILLE-WEST

“Only connect prose and passion, and both will be exalted,
and human love will be seen at its height.”

E.M. Forster, *Howard's End*

By studying Woolf's correspondence with Vita while Vita was traveling in the Orient in 1926 and 1927, a link can be found to the theme of travel and female desire in *Orlando*. Also, through reference to Vita's *Knole and the Sackvilles*, historical parallels to Vita –which Woolf exaggerates- have been traced. Some of such parallels are:

- ✓ Orlando's androgynous look (just like Vita herself) and his/her sexual adventures, which resemble various Sackvilles. (Orlando also merges Shakespeare's characters of the young lovers Orlando and Rosalind, from *As You Like It*. Both Orlandos are aristocrats deprived of their fathers' wealth.)
- ✓ Vita's affair with Violet Trefusis (during which Vita sometimes dressed as a man), the basis of the Sasha episode;
- ✓ Vita's literary aspirations and winning a prize for a poem whose title was “The Land;”
- ✓ the 16th century Thomas Sackville to whom Elizabeth I gave Knole;

- ✓ the lists of items Orlando buys in the passage when Knole is fully furnished, which resemble the many lists in Vita's book about Knole;
- ✓ the fact that some of the Sackvilles had been ambassadors, and Vita had been to Persia;
- ✓ Vita's family scandal: Lord Sackville, her grandfather, had five illegitimate children by a married Spanish gypsy. The male children were not allowed to inherit Knole, but his daughter (Vita's mother) married the heir, Lord Sackville's nephew. (In 1910, the illegitimate heirs brought a very publicized lawsuit over the ownership of Knole, which eventually impoverished the Sackville estate leading to the sale of Knole in 1947.)

Woolf mixes some facts about Vita with some about her ancestors, but she includes some of Vita's own traits, such as her love of nature, animals and solitude, and her long periods of melancholy, which she would spend in bed for days or even weeks. However, Woolf parodies conventional biography in a number of ways. For example: she gathers facts from hearsay and bits and pieces of illegible documents; the narrative voice is often pretentious and long-winded, resorting to numerous scholarly devices, but making no attempt to explain why Orlando lives 400 years or how he/she changes sex, for instance. The only point at which the narrator gets shy and evasive is when introducing the fact that Orlando has had a child –imitating 19th century coy manners–.

WOMEN'S VOICES OF OLD IN DOLBY STEREO

Like *Little Women* (Armstrong, 1994), *Sense and Sensibility* (Lee, 1995), *The Portrait of a Lady* (Campion, 1996), or *Mrs. Dalloway* (Gorris, 1997), to mention just a few, Sally Potter's *Orlando* (1993) is one of the finest representatives of the several classic adaptations by female directors and production executives that, over these last ten years, have tried to recapture for contemporary audiences the voices of outstanding female literary authors of the past. Most of these films have been adapted by female screenwriters from works also written by female writers, and/or focusing on female main characters.

The proliferation of film adaptations from historically distant novels has often been viewed as return of the classics movement, and the reason for their popularity has not always been fidelity to their source. Instead, some critics argue, this "return of the classics" reflects a conservative reaction against postmodernist filmmaking trends that undermine traditional plot and character. In line with this view, this movement has been as the embodiment of an "increasing concern with manner over matter" and a "therapeutic turn from cultural complexity"².

² Quoted in "Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*: The Book as Critic," by Tetterton, Kelly.

However, even when the rather idealized past portrayed in many of these films may have never existed, its screen representations offer viewers the fantasy of a time when life was less complex, and give them some much needed time out from their current everyday troubles and fears. Furthermore, despite their concern with fidelity, most of the female filmmakers of these adaptations have left enriching, distinctive signatures upon their works. These transpositions of various source texts show female figures shaped by a contemporary female sensibility for a contemporary, women-dominated audience that looks forward to learning not just about a past literary era, but particularly, about women writers' account of that past.

A remarkable representative of this "return of the classics" movement is Sally Potter's adaptation of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The film has widely been described as grand or stately, and most critics have agreed that Potter has managed to translate Virginia Woolf's colorful, vibrant vision into satisfactory entertainment using, in Susan Gerhard's words, "a spoonful of narrative to help the postmodern medicine (sexism, imperialism, film, and the male bias of history) go down. The resulting film is a visual pageant, but the elegant choreography and outsized costumes offer a stark contrast to the situation this film speaks to—specifically, England's demise. Nearing the year 2000, the country has downsized its imperialist role in the world."

Both in the book and the film, Orlando himself also sees his privileges “downsized.” Quoting Gerhard again, “He was born to be wild (i.e. male) in the 16th century and invested with a home by his admiring mentor, Queen Elizabeth I, played by writer, sometime actor, and gay-celeb Quentin Crisp, in the 17th. But by the 18th century, he started losing things: love, his male privilege, and, finally, his home. It takes until the 20th-century close for Orlando to come to terms with the loss--as s/he sits beneath the oak tree and the angel-winged Jimmy Somerville coos, ‘At last, at last, free of the past, neither a woman nor a man,’ overhead”³.

Potter's first mainstream success, the film was a huge box office hit, especially in the UK, where it ranked number one overtaking American blockbusters. Interestingly, Woolf's *Orlando* may be regarded as a rather strange choice of source material, since it has not held the same classic status as *Mrs. Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*, Woolf's most popular works. The film's success as a “classic” could probably be explained, at least partly, as the result of Virginia Woolf's own prestige as a writer, since the novel came into vogue –to an extent- for some time, only after the release of the film.

Originally a dancer and choreographer, Potter first came to be considered a major filmmaker with *Thriller* (1979). The film deconstructs Hitchcock's *Psycho* and Puccini's *La Boheme* from a female point of view and reveals

³ Gerhard , Susan, “Orlando,” (<http://www.planetout.com>).

the gender and class politics of both works, which soon earned it a reputation as a feminist avant-garde classic. In 1983, Potter directed her first feature film, *The Gold Diggers*. The movie was fiercely attacked by critics, who tagged it as lacking a plot and found Potter's experimental style unintelligible, thus destroying her chances of achieving the mainstream success she badly longed for.

FIDELITY AND UNFAITHFULNESS

“The truth is rarely pure and never simple.
Modern life would be very tedious if it were either,
and mother literature a complete impossibility.”

Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest*

Both Potter and her lead actress, Tilda Swinton, have repeatedly reported their fascination with Woolf's novel, and Potter has emphatically pointed out how rigorous her adaptation process had been in order to render a faithful adaptation, which keeps the core, essence, and spirit of the book, and is really true to its source –although not in every single detail–.

The question of fidelity has long been at the heart of the study of film adaptation. More often than not, however, adaptation studies have

simply compared films to their literary source texts only to end up privileging the latter. Thus, film adaptations have almost always been considered lesser sub-products. As a reaction to this approach, other film scholars have regarded the study of adaptation as a crude way of examining film, and have come to favor methods that deal with film as film. Furthermore, since literary adaptations account for almost fifty per cent of all commercial film releases, new ways to conceptualize adaptation issues have been sought.

One of such recent reconceptualization approaches, which has given new impulse to adaptation studies, considers filmmakers' relationships to their source texts within the context of film production. The difficulty of capturing the author's voice in a film is complicated even more since filmmakers usually adapt source texts from historically remote times. Besides, as post-structuralism shows, defining authorial intention often reveals more about readers' interpretive predispositions than about authors' narrative purposes. Accordingly, "measuring a film's fidelity to the narrative voice of its source thus becomes a way to uncover a filmmaker's biases in regard to her or his source text, as well as the social contexts of both works".⁴ This new view constitutes a reorientation of the study of adaptations.

⁴ Hollinger, K. and Winterhalter, T., "Orlando's sister, or Sally Potter does Virginia Woolf in a voice of her own," *Style*, (http://www.findarticles.com/cf_dls/m2342/2_35/97074182/print.jhtml), summer 2001.

Even if scholars were not particularly interested in fidelity issues, for most filmmakers fidelity is a crucial aspect of not only production but also promotion. Actually, film adaptations are often advertised by promotional material that points out the extent to which the core, or essence, of their source text has been captured and rendered. As film scholars have demonstrated, however, literary works are not just re-rendered on the screen, and there are certain narrative features that cannot be transferred from one medium to another. Additionally, adapting a book's spirit to the screen is especially complex since such process will inevitably entail a subjective judgment of what the book's true essence is.

In Woolf's *Orlando*, the narrator is consistently skeptic about the possibility of being objective, and does not believe that meaning can be stable or fully grasped.

“Green in nature is one thing, green in literature another. Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together and they tear each other to pieces.”(7)

“As she wrote she felt some power (remember we are dealing with one of the most obscure manifestations of the human spirit) reading over her shoulder (...)” (131)

In Hollinger and Winterhalter's words: “Exploring the ‘silver dregs in the bottom of her net,’ Woolf's narrator sees meaning as little more than a curious residue of language and questions her ability to label ‘rightly or

wrongly' anything that constitutes 'the real self' of Orlando. Finally, she sighs that 'the great fish' of the essence of things 'who lives in the coral groves' will never be caught, although one 'fling[s] words after it like nets'.⁵ Thus, Potter's assertions that her film is faithful to the book may seem rather contradictory with one of the book's central themes: the lack of a single essential core in people –and things in general.

According to Potter, adapting does not entail enslaving oneself to the source. Thus, she thought she had a right to resort to what she herself has called radical changes to manage to render on the screen what she loved in the book. However, a number of commentators –both conservative and liberal– have found the film unfaithful to Woolf's novel. Some conservatives, for example, have stated Potter's project was doomed to failure from the beginning, since the source was "unadaptable," and a number of feminists have deemed the film an outrageous violation of the book.

Potter's main thematic concerns deal with impermanence, female experience, the mutability of everything, and an ironic view of the British class system and its colonialist attitudes. Yet, she has often focused on her interpretation of Woolf's concept of androgyny, which, in her view, constitutes the core of both the book and film. In fact, she seems certain her Orlando accurately reflects Woolf's androgynous hero in search of the

⁵ Ibidem 4

essential self. Nevertheless, Woolf's conception of androgyny does not seem as simple as Potter thinks –i.e. masculinity and femininity as a sort of clothing of an essential self, as identities one can choose-, but rather – especially for gay and lesbian critics– as a way to deconstruct the traditional binaries.

Although Woolf's narrator is reflected in the film when commenting upon the social constrains of gender identity by saying that maybe it is the clothes that wear us, and not the other way around, Woolf's use of androgyny aimed, mainly, at dismantling a male gender role that had been construed for imperial and economic reasons mostly. In this light, Potter's figure of the androgyne seems far less likely than Woolf's to inspire reflection leading to some form of social change. Potter views the essential self as existing beyond gender or property, presenting masculinity and femininity just as constructs that can be transcended, as a sort of prison one can break free from if we manage to attain some non-gender related state hidden inside the core of our selves.

For queer theorist Judith Butler, for example, Potter's notion of the essential self behind sexual identity and gender constructions supports, rather than subverts, the sexual status quo by “subsum[ing] the body into an androgynous mind/self that is beyond politics: a manifestation of the postfeminist refrain that we don't need feminism anymore, that we have transcended it just as we have transcended gender difference

because women have achieved their goals.” (qtd. in Hollinger and Winterhalter)

Another way in which Potter reduces the subversive potential of Woolf's representation of the androgyne is by suppressing the lesbian subtext in the novel. As a matter of fact, Potter has stated that rather than following Woolf regarding a critique of sexuality around the suggestiveness of sapphism, she felt the figure of lesbian was to be avoided in the film. She has even stated she feared that considering the film lesbian would trivialize it. Thus, some critics have found Potter's attitude toward lesbian issues to reflect just a one-dimensional understanding, as merely in terms of sexual practice, a definition that dismisses lesbianism as a political identity and a public position. In her view, asserting oneself as a lesbian (or, arguably, a gay) involves having to publicize one's sexuality widely in order to claim one's sexual identity.

Turning to the plot of the story, the film pays no attention to Vita, and changes or omits parts that are significant to the connections to Vita's life, such as the references to the gypsy dancer Pepita (Vita's grandmother). Besides, Potter alters both the narrative's beginning and ending. Rather than open with Orlando's display of manhood by slashing a Moor's head with a sword, Potter introduces Orlando as he is reading a book of poetry, standing beneath the oak tree. In both novel and film, Orlando experiences a gender change. While, in the novel, the change

seems to stem from Orlando's acknowledgment of history's deep-rooted connection with war and masculinity, in the film, this transformation seems more strictly related to Orlando's witnessing the bloodshed scenes of the battles in Turkey.

Additionally, Woolf's ironic, farcical treatment of Orlando's relationship with Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire –whose very name exudes parody– is not present in the film. Played by Billy Zane, Potter's masculine "Shel" emerges as *the* great love of Orlando's life replacing Sasha, who, in the novel, always remains the female love Orlando can never forget. Also, Potter reinforces heterosexuality in the film by eliminating the female Orlando's various women friends and lovers.

Finally, Potter's Orlando gives birth to a daughter –not to a male heir as she does in the novel–, thus losing Knole. By having Orlando give birth to a male child, Woolf shows that so long as sons ascend to positions of cultural power there is little hope that certain instances of oppression and destruction in history will disappear. By giving birth to a female child and losing Knole, Potter's *Orlando* interrupts the male military tradition, and the land is therefore free of such patterns of domination. Thus, Potter seems to cast Orlando and her daughter into a rather idealized new women's world, where the child is shown playing about with a video camera in her hands, suggesting the beginning of a new discourse for creativity and viewing. The look of the little girl offers a fresh change of

perspective that places women as central, authoritative figures of narration, a role that has been traditionally the privilege of men.

Radical changes such as these were absolutely necessary for Potter to arrive at the postfeminist realm of gender equality she portrays in the film's end. As Orlando runs forward pregnant across the battlefields, the child (whom she carries through explicit scenes of WWI trench warfare) becomes a visible sign that she is leaving the militaristic male world behind. Woolf, however, wanted to point out that the perpetuation of war across history is deeply rooted in society's gendered structure. Furthermore, by distancing from Woolf's ending (Orlando calling for her absent husband as she sees what she thinks is his airplane in the sky), Potter's Orlando returns to the oak tree and has a vision of an angel singing in the sky. And asked by her daughter why she is sad, Orlando looks right into the camera and states she is in fact happy.

This utopian, romanticized sense of completion and gender equality Potter's ending suggests is not just "coming," as the lyrics of the final song state, but seems to actually have arrived for the cinematic Orlando. Woolf's oppressive "angel in the house"⁶ becomes Potter's angel of women's liberation from oppressive gender norms. Yet, Woolf never

⁶ In "Professions for Women," Woolf takes the figure of the "angel in the house" from a 19th century verse sequence about a self-sacrificing, gentle girl who becomes the icon of a Victorian lady. Woolf argues women must "kill" the angel that leads them to domestic subordination and servitude, and claim their right to meaningful work outside the home.

thought oppression via gender had come to an end; and she did by no means think we had achieved a higher state of awareness and transcended to a postfeminist state. Still, Potter's professed fidelity to Woolf allows her to end the film on a postfeminist note that is not present in the source text, and argue this postfeminist view is the one Woolf would have adopted herself if she were still alive.

ON GAZING AND BEING GAZED AT

Although direct address was not really that uncommon among avant-garde filmmakers when the *Orlando* was released, Potter's use of this technique was widely praised since critics saw it as quite revolutionary in mainstream cinema. In Swinton's words, it subverts the idea of being gazed upon as a woman. By establishing an unusually intimacy between Orlando and the viewers (especially at times of joy or distress, and when Orlando, as a woman, suffers gender discrimination by male-oriented British society), Potter finds a successful way of responding to the debate about the "exploitive, voyeuristic male gaze" that has dominated film studies since Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," published in 1973.

For Mulvey, mainstream film and its conventions depict a hermetically sealed world, indifferent to the presence of the audience, conveying a sense of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy. In line with this view, describing the use of camera regarding women Tania Modlesky argues that men visually control the movement and structure of the female body, thus controlling the gaze as well as the knowledge and power associated with it in mainstream filmmaking. However, within the first two minutes of *Orlando*, Potter begins her distancing from these traditions by having Orlando make visual contact with the camera and directly address the audience, casting out voyeurism.

Mulvey also argues that the presence of women is an indispensable element of display in typical film narrative, but their presence tends to freeze the flow of action due to erotic contemplation. Yet, once transformed from male to female, Orlando not only contributes to the development of the story line but takes it further and deeper than it has gone prior to the sexual transformation.

Mulvey also states that the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Still, Potter's Shelmerdine actually bears this objectification and even submits to it. Not only is he seen as desirable, but Orlando controls the looking. The camera lingers over Shelmerdine in a way usually reserved for women. Also, in the love scene between him and Orlando the role each character plays would be reserved for the other

sex according to Mulvey. At one point, Orlando sits up in the bed and stares at Shelmedine, and the point of view of the camera becomes an overhead, medium close-up of his face from Orlando's perspective.

In addition, Orlando's mode of direct address can be said to establish her as the author of the text –a prerogative traditionally awarded to men-, and to bring to the screen a successful codification of Woolf's stream of consciousness. Viewers are taken into the complex layering of narrative modes and the blurring of the distinction between artist and artistic creation found in Woolf's text. Just as Woolf's narrator frequently calls our attention to the workings of language by narrating Orlando's life and simultaneously commenting on the challenge of doing so, looking directly at the camera, Swinton reminds us everything we are seeing is an illusion on the screen.

Through the direct address technique Potter wanted to blur the identities between protagonist and audience to allow for a greater empathetic viewer response to an aristocratic character that she feared might otherwise be somewhat alienating. Also, Orlando's direct address to the viewer and his/her accompanying looks at the camera create a situation between protagonist and viewers that, unlike the male gaze, requires feedback, a returning look, and not just a receiving one.

All in all, then, despite its several differences from Woolf's text, Potter's *Orlando* can be seen as essentially faithful to its source in that both Woolf

and Potter try to create a special, new model of representation aiming at redefining –and, arguably, abolishing– gender constraints and boundaries. In Nuria Encico’s words: “not only is a female gaze viable and active within mainstream cinema, but (...) its existence within popular culture is necessary in order to bring about the changes Mulvey so rightly decreed as essential to the representation of women.”

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