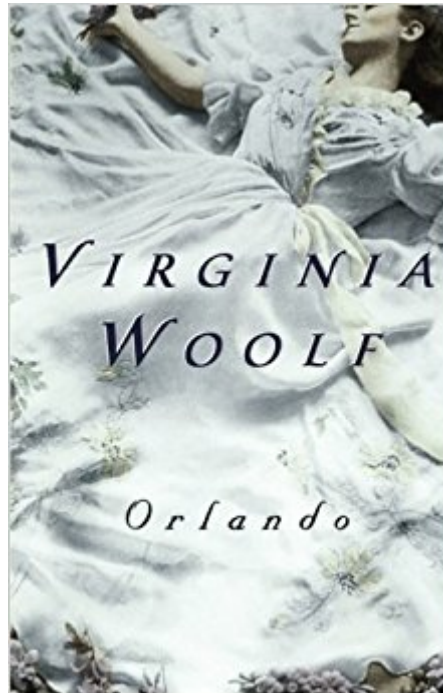




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Orlando: A Biography



Synopsis

In her most exuberant, most fanciful novel, Woolf has created a character liberated from the restraints of time and sex. Born in the Elizabethan Age to wealth and position, Orlando is a young nobleman at the beginning of the story-and a modern woman three centuries later. "A poetic masterpiece of the first rank" (Rebecca West). The source of a critically acclaimed 1993 feature film directed by Sally Potter. Index; illustrations.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

In 1928, way before everyone else was talking about gender-bending and way, way before the terrific movie with Tilda Swinton, Virginia Woolf wrote her comic masterpiece, a fantastic, fanciful love letter disguised as a biography, to Vita Sackville-West. Orlando enters the book as an Elizabethan nobleman and leaves the book three centuries and one change of gender later as a liberated woman of the 1920s. Along the way this most rambunctious of Woolf's characters engages in sword fights, trades barbs with 18th century wits, has a baby, and drives a car. This is a deliriously written, breathless-making book and a classic both of lesbian literature and the Western canon.

'Together these ten volumes make an attractive and reasonably priced (the volumes vary between L3.99 and L4.99) working edition of Virginia Woolf's best-known writing. One can only hope that their success will prompt World's Classics to add her other essays to the series in due course.'

It is difficult for me to define my opinion of this book. I try to ignore the idol worship that happens with writers that have been declared "great" for several decades - they're fashionable, and it's fashionable to like them, but I try to form my own opinion. This is one of the few books that's actually been very difficult. There's a lot to really like about it, but there's a lot that just isn't my cup of tea. I like that the author quite obviously adores the main character, somehow that makes it very personal and lovely to read, but at the same time her portrayal of that character seems quite flat - nothing truly bad or negative happens or is described - yet somehow Orlando seems to grow as a character without much in the way of struggles. I like the way the author plays with time and gender and social norms quite a bit. The florid, romantic, stream-of-consciousness writing style did get horribly old in places, but just when I was ready to put the book down, she'd make fun of herself for writing that way. So much so, the author was almost her own character in the book, which I quite liked. But at the same time, a lot of the book I just didn't get anything from, because of the style maybe (I read and understood the words but they held no meaning on any level for me). I went back and reread a couple sections to make sure I wasn't just sleepy or distracted, and sometimes that was the case, but usually there just wasn't anything in that section for me. Maybe those were the more personal portions of the love-letter that, since I wasn't Woolf or her GF, I couldn't understand. I'm glad I read it, I've already recommended it to others (with the caveats above), but I might have to read more Woolf to sort out better how I feel about this book.

The most brilliant portrayal of a transsexual experience in modern history. Even when Magnus Hirschfeld was publishing his treatise on the transsexual phenomenon, Woolf relates an account of the intricacies of gender identity undiscovered by social scientists and biologists. Published in 1928, Orlando has been billed as one of Woolf's best imaginative works however, such criticism was never seen in the light of reality but a surreal depiction of the writer's portrayal of a young man who wakes up one day as a woman, as if in the ordinary course of his life. As Woolf suggests of her character's reaction to the change "Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. (Woolf, 139. Modern transsexuals have explained only recently in their writings, their internal thinking stays the same, only the external body appears different to others. Although Woolf's work set the precedent for post modernist literature, infusing elements of fiction into biography, she weaves the internal struggle of her former lover, Vita Sachville-West's life, together with her own perceptions of gender and

sexuality, with an historical account of a young transsexual aristocrat's adventures over the span of centuries. Unlike a biography of her time, the action is secondary to the internal story. This is more of an account of how her lover (and as suggested by this author--Woolf herself), struggles with her own gender identity; a thinking so similar to transsexualism and conflict with a Eurocentric binary gender system. Here, the biographer (narrator) describes: the reaction to Orlando's change of sex, as it may appear in a scientific journal today;"[b]ut 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. (Woolf, 138). Woolf captures the failure of the general public to grasp the concept of gender reassignment when she has the narrator express dismay in the lack of Orlando's reaction where "Orlando was a man till the age of thirty (Similar to our understanding of modern transsexuals who start their transition at middle age) when he became a woman and has remained ever since." (Woolf, 139)'. Woolfe's use of metaphor and foreshadowing is uncanny. The pyrotechnic displays prior to the deep sleep of Orlando depicts change. She puts Orlando on a ship called the 'Enamoured Lady,' and she is suddenly the object of the Captain's and other males' attention and realizes that the sexual fantasies of men creates a dilemma for her as a woman, where she must shield her own desires as a woman. Woolfe precisely proclaims that '(Orlando) remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled... (and) "Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires ... for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature." Woolfe does not stop at her proclivity to undress Orlando's gender identity but lays bare the confusion of sexual preference. Although a woman herself, Orlando proclaims that "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 feeling which she had had as a man." (Woolf, 161). Where she gives in to sensual thoughts of a man, the Captain on whose arm she trembles and remembers that she had once been a Duke and Ambassador, "that she, who had been lapped like a lily in folds of paduasoy, had hacked heads off, and lain with loose women among treasure sacks in holds of pirate ships..." Woolfe reveals a metaphoric character, the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn and Scan-op-Boom in the Roumanian territory, seen in chapter three as a woman, and in a later chapter is shown to be a man, the Archduke, who suddenly professes his love for her. Woolfe's ability to produce a character like the Arduke Harry who today would fall somewhere on the transgendered scale, is amazing, for a woman in her time. Yet through all its carefully crafted language and delightful parody, the gender message she professes is much the same today as it may have been then, that "Clothes ... change our view of the world and the world's view of us...."

Orlando challenges the Eurocentric binary gender construct of the world she lived in. Here, the writer's own indictment of the unrealistic bounds placed on women is evident and transposed by her narrator and Orlando's own expository reflections, "In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only that clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above." (Woolfe, 189). Here, Woolfe appears to challenge more than the unfairness and imperfections of gender traditions on women. She uses comparisons of the formalities of being a nineteenth century man and woman to make her point. Additionally, the most introspective journey in Orlando, is of a person who is not questioning her own gender identity, but defining it. Woolfe appears to depict, not confusion, but knowledge by the transsexual main character of her own identity, and choosing to adapt to it by changing the way the world looks at her, by changing sex. It is the world that suffers the confusion. Woolfe makes generalities about other persons hiding their sex in the clothing of the other gender, suggesting there are numerous persons in her era that suffer from some sort of gender dysphoria. After reading Orlando, and comparing it with the writings of transsexual, transgendered and social scientists, Woolfe describes so clearly the struggle a transgendered person experiences, that critics should look more closely at this writing. Woolfe's narrator states: "Of complications and confusions which thus result every one has had experience;" and as though afraid to delve deeper, she leaves this general question to "note only the odd effect it had in the particular case of Orlando herself." As Woolfe so eloquently portrays the posttranssexual experience, "having now worn skirts for a considerable time, a certain change was visible in Orlando, which is to be found even in her face..." and where the narrator wonders, had both the man and woman of Orlando's time worn the same clothes (in other words, different sexes but same gender) it is possible their outlook may have been the same too." (Woolfe, 188). Yet the most profound statement made in the text reveals Woolfe's secret exposition: "The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex. And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather than more openly than usual---openness indeed was the soul of her nature---(Woolf, 189). Thus, Woolfe explains that Orlando chose to change his sex because he was in fact a woman, a woman's soul in a man's body. This book is highly recommended to all who are ever wonder what it is like for a transsexual to alter his sex, and begin living as the gender opposite of his or her sex. And for those who never wondered, it is a great read, full of insightful commentary on the possibility of a gender continuum and expanding the boundaries of a binary gender system of a phallogocentric society.

I admit I went into this novel with some pre conceived thoughts about Orlando. The synopsis on various sites really doesn't do the book justice. I'd read To The Lighthouse prior to this novel and I admit I was somewhat prejudiced. To say I was surprised by Orlando is an understatement. The concept, the style and prose was for this reader an eye opener. Prose that I could fall into and savour. I'm rating it highly because of it's uniqueness and it is a book that you can not be ambivalent about. To me that is what reading is all about.

One of the most insightful psychological dramas ever written. Miss Woolf got to the core of the problems with human unkind. Better than anyone yet. The issues discussed in this brilliant novel explain much about what drives the rush to protecting classes of predators and political correctness. To describe accurately the premise of the novel would require mentioning the politically incorrect term of "gender confusion". Making the novel these days undiscussable. All the most descriptive things in life now are.

Wow - I really disliked the protagonist until he became a woman. He was just too privileged and shallow and annoying for my taste. This is an odd, interesting story. It was fascinating when Orlando starts to see all the ways it is different to be a man and a woman in his (her) culture. How, really, the primary purpose of women, is to live for men. There are some interesting takes, too, on transgender. (And not just with the main character.) I thought the fantasy of the story was interesting, especially for the time it was written. Woolf is an intriguing writer. Though I did think the story a bit slow at times.

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