



## ORLANDO: AN IMAGE OF THE IDEAL ANDROGYNY

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### ABSTRACT

This paper intends to examine the protagonist, Orlando, an androgyny, in Virginia Woolf's biographical novel *Orlando*, and explores Woolf's reversal of the conventional sexual stereotype. In Woolf's opinion, there is no clear-cut difference between men and women. An androgyny with qualities of both sexes is an ideal being. This notion is significant to the feminist movement or gender studies of her own time as well as today.

**Keywords:** *Orlando*; androgyny; Virginia Woolf

### 1. Brief Introduction to the Novel and Woolf's View on Androgyny

*Orlando* is a well-known biographical novel by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941). Its protagonist, Orlando, is often regarded as a typical example of Woolf's ideal being, a combination of both male and female qualities. Woolf describes Orlando as an escapade, half-laughing, half-serious. Her notes in her diary tells us that the Orlando in real life is her beloved friends, including men and women, the most important of whom is Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962).

Orlando, a wealthy young man with a high social status in the Elizabethan age, retains his youth for decades, then turns into a woman at the age of 30 late in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, without any help of surgery. Later she is married in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and even has a child. And finally, she wins a prize for a poem that she has been composing for over three hundred years.

Comic and ridiculous as the biography is, it explores many serious social problems. It is defined as "biography beyond biography and history beyond history" (Little 228). And in this biographical and historical account, one solemn topic is the gender issue. Here, Woolf demonstrates her creative perspective of an ideal and integrated individual who possesses both male and female qualities, a point she has presented early in her feminist critical work, *A Room of One's Own*, asserting that "the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness" (102). She also believes that a pure man or a pure woman is not a complete person, because "in the man's brain, the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over man" (*Room* 102). The perfect unity is an androgyny who can let the powers of both man and woman live together in harmony and cooperate mutually. In this sense, Orlando, an androgyny experiencing lives of the two sexes, is considered to be Woolf's ideal being.

## 2. Orlando as an Androgynous Being

Orlando's fantastic life falls into two phases. Before the age of thirty, he is a noble and wealthy young man carrying some womanly features. After thirty, she remains essentially the same individual despite the change of her sex identity. Her experience provides her a different perspective with regard to the gender issue.

### i. Orlando as a Man

Born in the Elizabethan Age, Orlando is an attractive and admirable young man who owns two important things for men of his time. One is his high social position. His grandfather and father are nobilities. So is he. The other thing is his right to inherit the wealth from his father. The two possessions are viewed as men's crucial privilege. Therefore, Orlando leads an admirable life of the nobilities.

Though he is a noble and wealthy young man, Orlando possesses by nature and birth some feminine qualities. A good case in point is his shapely legs that draw the Queen's attention. The beauty of legs is a physical attraction usually typical of women. Interestingly, Orlando is a young man who has "the finest legs" (Woolf 23)<sup>1</sup>. Another noted feminine quality is his shyness. He blushes easily at the sight of the Russian girl Sasha. What is worse, facing the one he loves, he sometimes "trembled; turned hot; turned cold" (38). It can be assumed that Andrew Marvell (1621-1678), the author of the famous poem "To His Coy Mistress", should have felt strange to see such a shy man as Orlando, for he holds, as most people do, that men should be bold in contrast to women's shyness.

It is very likely that Woolf deliberately creates a sexless being, hoping to draw readers' attention to Orlando as a complete and perfect human being. That accounts for a male Orlando with feminine qualities. An essential and consistent feature of Orlando as a complete and ideal being is his devotion to poetry. Writing poetry seems to prove his masculinity, though, it was the fashion among nobilities of the Elizabethan Age. Yet, Orlando's love of poetry is shown as following his own heart rather than running for fashion. Since his obsession with poetry is determined by his nature, this pursuit remains unchanged even after his change of sex identity.

### ii. Orlando as a Woman

Having been betrayed by his lover Sasha, Orlando plunges into deep thought. He spends much time thinking of love and does benefit a lot from such meditation. Meanwhile, he gradually becomes matured by taking an important part in the public life of his country and later being exposed to the alien life as an ambassador. At the age of thirty, he suddenly turns into a woman after a long sleep. Henceforward, she moves to the role of androgyny since she is now able to adopt a dual perspective. In another word, she is in a capacity to perceive things from the point of view of both sexes.

At the beginning, Orlando is aware of the changes in her body, clothes and behavior. Looking at her naked body, which is combined of both the strength of a man and the grace of a woman, but she is not in the least bothered or confused. It seems that sex identity is only something connected with biology. Yet, she cannot escape the influence in regard to social behavior and manners for a woman. Confined to the coil of skirts, she can't take big manly strides as before. And she will have to wait for a seaman to rescue her if she gets drowned in the sea. All she is supposed to do is to behave properly and gracefully. As a lady, she must be modest, passive and helpless. It is the first time for Orlando to know about "the sacred responsibilities of womanhood" (157). She should have been taught as a little girl if she had been born a girl. But Orlando is born a boy. So she has to learn to realize this fact with her own effort.

What's more, Orlando has to learn about the significance of chastity for a woman. Chastity is in a tradition of a "woman's jewel" which she always runs mad to protect (154). Contrary to her present female, Orlando has been free to love and enjoy sex, without thinking too much about morality. That is what the male Orlando can and used to do. But can the female Orlando do the same? Awareness of the different social demands in this respect prompts Orlando into thinking about what he has once overlooked as a man.

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<sup>1</sup> Quotations from the novel will hereafter be referenced by page number only.

Apart from the realization of the importance of chastity, Orlando goes deep into woman's role at home and in society. She learns that at home, the life of the average woman is "a succession of childbirths" (229), and in society, a woman's role is no better than in family. She is expected and "educated" to be "modest, obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled even though she is not so by nature" (156-157). What's worse, she is considered as "children of a larger growth" (213). In other words, she is intellectually and psychologically inferior to a man.

Orlando undergoes a long process of change after the sex transformation. Observing the gender differences from the point of view of a woman, Orlando is disillusioned with the "superiority" of either sex. She would rather like to be a man and a woman at the same time, experiencing the strength and weakness of both (158). To sum up, her experience as a woman is a self-discovering process, leading her to see the changes as well as her essence as an individual.

Despite the changes after he becomes a woman, Orlando remains essentially the same individual in regard to her/his pursuit of poetry, understanding and principle of life and independent role in family and society.

First, poetry is still Orlando's pursuit in career. S/He is always writing her/his poem "The Oak Tree", and keeps the sheets of the poem safe. With the accumulation of life experience, her/his understanding of life is greatly enriched and matured. S/He writes down the line "life and a lover", and starts to meditate on the relations between the two, which is an everlasting topic for human beings. S/He has been thinking for years, decades, throughout her/his marriage, at birth to a baby, and when winning a prize. S/He keeps asking herself/himself many questions: What is gender? What is true love? What is marriage? What is life? It can be assumed that "The Oak Tree" is a reflection of her/his own understanding of life over three hundred years, which accounts for the popularity of the poem when it is finally published.

Then, as for her/his understanding and principle of life, no essential changes have taken place, except that s/he has been bettering and deepening her/his views on life. With the passage of time, s/he gets to know how to enjoy human spirit, namely, contemplation, solitude, love (160), which s/he has been all along pursuing. Additionally, like before, s/he sticks to a free life, discarding social conventions, rules and restrictions, and meaning and desiring only to please herself. Holding to such a principle, Orlando occasionally wears men's clothes on excursions into London's rougher areas because s/he is happy with the convenience of trousers and the fantastic experience as a different sex (221-222). S/He lives as a happy and free individual, not as a given sex, for s/he understands that the two sexes intermix. S/He even does not bother to define herself/himself as a man or a woman because it is difficult and meaningless to do so. What matters most to her/him is that s/he still leads the life that brings her/him comfort and joy.

When it comes to her/his role in family and society, Orlando retains an independent role as usual, though it seems that the author provides little information about Orlando's family life. Still, it cannot be a mistake to view her/him as an independent person in family. In the past when he was a man, he gave free rein to his love for Sasha although he was engaged. After he became a woman s/he is still devoted to poetry, regardless of the conventional idea that pre-Victorian women writing on literature is thought to be something insane and ridiculous. In another word, she has never worried about her/his family members controlling her/his personal life. S/He has always been her/his own master. In society, Orlando also plays an independent role. The term "independence" here means that Orlando seldom gives in to those conventions against her/his natural temperament. S/He won't give up literature simply because it is thought to be unsuitable to women. Besides, s/he won't yield completely and submissively to the conventional demand of marriage. Her/His unwillingness to be bound by marriage is determined by her/his nature as an independent person.

### 3. Study of Masculinity and Femininity

For centuries, there have existed certain rules of gender identification. Men, for instance, are supposed to be "straight-edged, sharply pronged and formidable" (Susan 580), while women "softly curved and held the food in a rounded well" (Susan 580). This is a visual description of the gender difference. Lin Yutang (1895-1976),

a famous Chinese writer, claims in *My Country and My People* that most women, West or East, are traditionally encouraged and educated to be womanly women with feminine virtues such as quietness, passiveness, grace, obedience, industry, ability in household work, and respect for men (137). In contrast, men are generally brought up to be powerful, competent, active, brave, wise, strong and, in a word, superior to women.

Owing to the limited space, here we discuss only three of the worst predominant traditional ideas concerning masculinity and femininity. Body difference comes as the first disparity between men and women although they are generally regarded as an imprecise, misled and misleading idea by feminists. Biologically determined as the human body looks, the common notion represents men's original superiority over women. Women's subjectivity can be traced back to the creation of woman in *The Holy Bible*. According to Genesis, The Lord God makes an assistant and companion for Adam with the latter's rib. Adam says, "This is now bone of my bones, and flesh of my flesh: she shall be called Woman, because she was taken out of Man. (2)" This may largely account for the conventional belief of men's superiority over women in the patriarchal society. Besides, Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) points out in *The Second Sex* that for some reasons like menses and childbirth, women do seem to be physically weaker than men. So, in many countries, most girls are discouraged from sports activities (2: 380). In some countries or regions, girls have been carefully kept away from powerful and violent activities for centuries. Even in the contemporary society, people are apt to regard women boxers as masculine women, and are surprised at their brevity but not attracted by their power. The notion of feminine delicacy and fragility can best be observed from the popular beauty contests in many countries, West or East, poor or rich, small or big, where women with feminine qualities are more appreciated than those with masculine ones. The most favorable image of a woman is one with long curled hair, big breasts, round hips, long legs but short skirts; in short, a slender, lovely and sexy figure. It is rare that a powerful woman with short hair, broad shoulders, strong limbs can win Miss America or Miss Universe. The female body has long been defined as weak and beautiful in our patriarchal culture.

What's worse, women's bodies have always been targeted to please men. In the West, women used to wear heavy crinoline and thick full skirts in order to create shapely figures (Beauvoir 1: 185). In the East, take China for example, foot binding is said to make women more sexually attractive to men. Such feet are praised as "golden lilies" in poetry (Lin 163). When we turn from history to the present, we still see the predominant influence of men's aesthetic criteria of feminine beauty. High-heel shoes are everywhere. Weight-loss campaign prevails in mass media. All these requirements on female bodies deprive women of their natural capabilities rather than add to their beauty (Beauvoir 1: 85).

This notion concerning body difference can likely lead women to a loss of interest and confidence in intellectual, political and social areas. As Simone de Beauvoir finds out that, some women, having admitted their physical inferiority, lose their heart and enthusiasm in work (Beauvoir 2: 380). Accepting male physical superiority, even a Tom-boyish woman will gradually become submissive and passive in physical, intellectual, and political fields.

### 3. Masculine Qualities vs. Feminine Qualities

In addition to biological difference, there are a lot of other socially and culturally defined differences between women and men.

First of all, good women should be "pure", and they should protect their chastity. Although young women are sexually matured and want to give expressions to their sexual desire, they have to suppress their desires and pretend to be innocent, and pure (Beauvoir 2: 371), because they are expected and educated to be so. Women have to obey social rules that are always against their natural temperament. Worship of chastity is something of a psychological obsession and it reveals women's obligations to social morals. Men, however, are exempt from them (Lin 139). For men, it is regarded as appropriate and normal to deprive a woman of her virginity (Beauvoir 1: 181).

Consequently, weakness in profession becomes a female virtue in men's eyes, in contrast to men's tough, powerful and formidable images at work. "Fragility, thy name is woman." Shakespeare's statement has

influenced people generation after generation. Women are always good at household chores since men willingly give them the floor in domestic affairs. On the contrary, competence and power have traditionally been viewed as masculine traits, so men work outside, attacking the fierce outside world, and keeping their women safe and inactive at home. They are so capable and tough that they should feel ashamed to cry at moments of frustration because tears mean weakness, in most people's eyes and are thus reserved only for women.

The third and most important difference between a man and a woman is that the former is the active Subject while the latter the passive Other (Beauvoir 1:11). All the distortions of women's bodies and minds stem from the patriarchal society where men's ideology takes the upper hand over that of women. Claiming to be the Subject of the world, men, according to their own institutions, force various feminine qualities upon women to make them sexually attractive and socially powerless. Femininity pleases men largely because they get satisfaction from their masculinity by contrast (Susan 583). Women, defined as the Other, with little authority to establish their own qualities, have to passively accept men's criteria rather than voicing their own opinions.

#### 4. Final Objective for Feminist Movement

To challenge the patriarchy, the feminist movement has long been striving for the final goal: political rights and equality in society (Dai 28). Mrs. Thatcher has become a symbol of women's success in politics. Yet, it is far from feminist final objective. The equality in politics and society will be their unswerving end. Feminists' goal is undoubtedly positive and conducive to women's life. This is the idea in Woolf's *Orlando*. But instead of the ultimate goal of feminist movement that emphasizes the differences between men and women, Woolf embraces the unity and co-existence of the two.

As is revealed and analyzed above, the overwhelming idea Woolf presents in *Orlando* is that there is no essential difference between men and women. There are three consistent aspects in the ideal—natural temperament, literature, and love.

As for Orlando's natural temperament, s/he likes being herself/himself. S/He seems to remain indifferent to the sex transformation. S/He admires her/his body that is combined of a man's power and a woman's grace. By this, Woolf intends to challenge the patriarchal idea and point out the truth that it is meaningless to separate women from men in terms of their biological difference. "But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can" (139), the confession represents Woolf's disapproval of the notion of sex difference. One's body, biologically determined, has nothing to do with her/his social identity. Male or female, thin or fat, tall or short, everything comes into being by nature. When there is any change to anyone, it will not affect a person essentially. That's why Orlando yearns to be a gypsy because all gypsies wear trousers and they are free to travel on foot, horse back or in trucks or vans if they like (140). Their life without much gender hindrance or taboo is what Orlando longs for.

In regard to literature, we learn that it is Orlando's life-long interest and pursuit. Her/His poem "The Oak Tree" has been going on for centuries. All the while, s/he has been making acquaintances with different poets and writers of different periods. Through this s/he has developed her/his talent in literature, and finally wins a prize for the poem in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. In England, we know, there was hardly any serious writing done by women before the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, as Woolf confirms in her essay "Women and Fiction" that "The history of England is the history of the male line, not of the female" (344). The case is more or less the same in other parts of the world. The patriarchal society discouraged women from writing, thus the core of literature in most countries is masculine (Woolf, "Women" 346). Given this background, Orlando should be a progressive woman image as s/he is in a capacity of a woman who has been devoted to writing throughout her/his life. In a sense, literature is Orlando's interest and pursuit. S/He is an "absent" woman poet or writer who has been writing all along in the history of British literature.

Talking of women writing as a profession, Woolf casts doubts about their freedom in creating activities, supposedly the freest of all professions open to women. She concludes in her speech<sup>2</sup> on women's professions

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<sup>2</sup> Woolf gave a speech on women's professions to the London National Society for Women's Service on 21 January 1931. Her essay "Professions for Women" is based on that speech.

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that the obstacles against women are in reality immensely powerful, at least, until her time. This is so in writing professions, let alone other new professions. This speech was released in 1931. Yet, in *Orlando*, which was published in 1928, she has expressed her greatest expectation of an ideal individual, an androgyny without difficulty in profession.

Similar to Woolf's view, Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957), the first woman in Oxford, a talent in literature too, claims that women should be treated as a human, not a subordinate to men, when they are at work. She says in "Are Women Human?",

It is ridiculous to take on a man's job just in order to be able to say that "a woman has done it—yah!" The only decent reason for tackling any job is that it is *your* job and *you* want to do it. (545)

In the above remark, Sayers tells women to make sure if they really like their professions or simply to challenge the patriarchy. She later tells men that women should not be rejected if they really are to do something interesting and suitable to them. She relates in the same essay,

If any individual woman is able to make a first-class lawyer, doctor, architect or engineer, then she must be allowed to try her hand in it. Once lay down the rule that the job comes first and you throw that job open to every individual, man or woman, fat or thin, tall or short, ugly or beautiful, who is able to do that job better than the rest of the world. (546)

As a successful individual, Sayers is reluctant to identify herself as a woman. She regards herself as a human being. More importantly, she puts her theory into practice, competing with male students at Oxford, experiencing the life of a poet, teacher, editor, wearing outrageous clothes and smoking cigars (Sayers 542). More or less like Orlando, it is difficult to give her sex identity in terms of traditional views. But she has surpassed Orlando for she excels in every profession she takes while Orlando sticks only to poetry writing. Anyway, Woolf's imaginative Orlando and the real heroine Dorothy Sayers, have both reversed the stereotype that women are the weaker in profession.

Next comes to Woolf's idea of love. Obviously, there is no the Subject and the Other in Orlando's mind. When he is a man, he loves Sasha, totally carried away by his own passions. When she is a woman, she loves Shel, crying out to him directly, "I'm passionately in love with you" (251). She follows her own whims in choosing a partner, and seldom changes herself to please a person she loves. Neither does she mind whether she can meet another soul (life partner) in her life (195). With a detached view about love, s/he takes herself/himself as an integrated individual rather than a man or a woman. The sense of a perfect being, an androgyny, is revealed in the following interesting dialogue:

"You're a woman, Shel!" she cried.

"You're a man, Orlando!" he cried (252).

Woolf in fact is sarcastic about the sex difference in love. Her ideal love image is: there is a womanly part in a man and a manly part in a woman, and they intertwine. In short, Woolf prefers a being combined of qualities of both sexes, because "a great mind is androgynous" (*Room* 102). Thus, an ideal lover is like either Orlando or Shel who shows her/his true colors, namely, a combination of feminine and masculine qualities.

Now that we know that an individual is combined of both female and male qualities, we should respect him/her. The 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century have witnessed an exciting change in women. Wearing hair short, being tough, displaying political talent, women's images are no longer cut in the traditional picture. However, it is more difficult for men to expose or cultivate his feminine side, for they regard it as a weakness. They don't know that to be androgynous is actually a kind of freedom (Perrin 585). Androgynous men have a large range of choices open to them and can express their feelings as much as they like (Perrin 586). In contrast, the traditional good men have to appear to be tough, competent even though sometimes they feel soft, weak and helpless. They are not free human beings. That is because our society has not got ready to accept androgynous beings yet, even in an advanced era of Information and Technology.

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## 5. Conclusion

In searching for an overall picture of Orlando, we witness the development of an individual, from a melancholy, poetic young man to a free and creative woman, and finally into an androgyny who has qualities of both sexes, and experiences the happiness and weakness of both. We also find out that Orlando's thoughts, poetic talent and natural temperament remain essentially the same after he becomes a woman. Woolf's notion concerning the perfect androgyny has reversed the stereotyped concept that men differ from women in physique and intelligence. And we are left with the question if there is no essential difference between the two sexes, why should we always emphasize the sex difference and call for the equality? What we should do beginning from now is to work together to cultivate full human beings. Virginia Woolf has provided a model for us in the character of Orlando, it should be of some help and guidance to the present-day society as well as to women all over the world.

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