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# “Ransacking the Language”: Finding the Missing Goods in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*

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A few days after Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West began their love affair in December 1925, Woolf wrote in her diary:

[Vita] shines in the grocers shop in Sevenoaks [...] pink glowing, grape clustered, pearl hung [...] There is her maturity and full-breastedness: her being so much in full sail on the high tides, where I am coasting down backwaters; her capacity I mean to take the floor in any company, to represent her country, to visit Chatsworth, to control silver, servants, chow dogs; her motherhood [...] her in short (what I have never been) a real woman. (*Diary III*, December 21, 1925)

For Woolf, Sackville-West is a “real” woman; she images her as mature, capable and womanly, something that she herself is not, or at least she imagines she is not. Sackville-West is a magnificent ship, while Woolf herself coasts or is stalled, presumably without wind, a sail, or high tides. Woolf’s identification with Sackville-West and who Woolf imagines her to be are of paramount importance when we consider that Woolf writes Vita Sackville-West’s story in *Orlando: A Biography*. In July 1927, Woolf began to conceptualize “a biography beginning in the year 1500 & continuing to the present day, called Orlando: Vita; only with a change about from one sex to another” (*Diary III*, October 5, 1927).<sup>1</sup>

Woolf uses almost precisely the same images of Sackville-West in her diary as she does in *Orlando* when describing the title character. In *Orlando*, when Shelmerdine, her future husband, first encounters Orlando, he tells her he had guessed her name, “For if you see a ship in full sail coming with the sun on it proudly sweeping across the Mediterranean from the South Seas, one says at once, ‘Orlando,’ he explained” (251). In this interchange, there is a movement

from the actual—Virginia looking at Vita—to the imaginary—Virginia images her to be like a magnificent ship—to the fictional—Orlando as a fictional representation of Vita—to a moment that foregrounds a dynamic space between the real and representation, a gap if you will. For in Shelmerdine's admiration of Orlando and metaphorization of her as a ship, we are brought back to Vita, and, ineluctably, Woolf. The image of Vita/Orlando as a ship runs throughout *Orlando* and signals a fundamental aspect of the text—its doubleness, its self-conscious awareness of the play between fiction and the real.<sup>2</sup>

Further, in this interchange between representation and the real, Woolf does not leave us simply with a gap, but rather writes in the spaces in between. She writes in the space of “not” (fiction or real) or of neither/nor. In other words, Woolf writes, in the interstices, the story of a woman—literally, figuratively, biographically and autobiographically. I suggest it is specifically the story of a woman not simply because Orlando becomes a woman in the text and the text thematizes what it means to be a woman, nor because it is “about” Vita Sackville-West. Rather it is specifically the story of a woman because the fantastic content in the novel is directly linked to the undecidability/impossibility of the form of the novel and of the protagonist. That is, what happens in the novel—the impossible story of the protagonist rather unremarkably changing from a man to woman and living 400 years—and what it thematizes—language's inability to adequately represent the “thing itself”—mirrors the undecidability of the text—is it a biography, an autobiography, fantasy, etc.—and the impossibility of the form of “woman.” In other words, what is Orlando? Is she a Woman? If so, how can she be represented? In short, the text echoes the difficulty of representation in the difficulty of representing woman for herself, as herself. The consequences of this doubling of/in the text are profound: Woolf re-animates the form of biography, produces a text where Vita can read/see herself, as can Woolf, and enables both women to have compensatory stories of their own. Woolf's work, then, suggests that a doubleness is needed to produce the self as woman, to represent (her) self.

In what follows, I move between the real and its representation in order to show the something “other” that Woolf builds between. I suggest that Woolf foregrounds the doubleness that is needed to produce the self as woman in language and in culture; that is, Virginia needs Vita to represent herself and vice versa, and this parallels the conundrum of language for women—the only way to represent oneself is through a doubled otherness. In other words, if according to poststructuralists, language is always (at least) one step away from the thing itself, and if woman, according to feminism, occupies the space of object/thing (in culture), then woman is always one step away from herself as well—a twice removed relative of language.

Situating *Orlando* within a matrix of biographical, cultural, and literary concerns, I contend that Woolf's peculiar and fantastical (auto)biography of Vita Sackville-West effects a double compensation. By attending to the tensions between the real and the fictional/fantastic and the public and private, I suggest that the text restores lost loves and lost objects to both Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf. The other compensation the novel effects is located at the level of representation: *Orlando* is a complex interplay between Woolf and Sackville-West that produces not only Sackville-West's "biography" but Woolf's own story of the inadequacy of language and the inadequacy of representation for women.

*Orlando* was of such a personal nature that Woolf felt compelled to ask Sackville-West for permission to write about her. Woolf writes to Sackville-West, "But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its [sic] all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind. [. . .] Shall you mind? Say yes, or No" (Woolf, *Selected Letters of V. W.* 231).<sup>3</sup> Not only did Woolf conceive of doing something that stretched and complicated the boundaries of her personal life and relationships, she also felt that she was going to perform something quite extraordinary in terms of literature. She remarks in the same letter to Sackville-West that with *Orlando*, "I could revolutionize biography in a night." Woolf conceived of *Orlando* as a new kind of biography, a kind of third "thing"—a fusion of the substance of truth and the artistry of fiction. In fact, this new biography produces the substance of truth in the sense that a fictionalized Vita (as Orlando) reveals essential aspects of her character that a factual biography might not. In her diary Woolf writes, "I am writing Orlando half in mock style very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth and fantasy must be careful. It is based on Vita, Violet Trefusis, Lord Lascelles, Knole & c" (*Diary III*, October 22, 1927).<sup>4</sup> One would surmise that this careful balance must be maintained so as not to let the reader off the hooks of history and the real or to hang those she mentions too painfully upon them.

Not only does she mix the "thing itself" and fiction, Woolf also conceives of *Orlando* as "a way of writing the memoirs of one's own times during peoples [sic] lifetimes" (*Diary III*, September 20, 1927). *Orlando* becomes, then, not only a private love letter, but "a piecing together of national culture" (Raitt 20). On one hand, we have a specific relationship between two women and the knowledges they shared between themselves on loves, literature, etc., and on the other hand we have a *roman à clef* about one of England's "most well-known families, and one of the most notorious women in the country" (Raitt 25). However, the distinction between public and private is as difficult to maintain as is the distinction between fact and fiction in *Orlando*. Woolf's perceptions of Sackville-West produce Woolf as a kind of shadow character—whether as

Orlando (writer, lover), Shelmerdine (lover of Orlando), or biographer (lover constructing the beloved).

Because of the complex interplay between the deeply personal and the overtly public and political, any consideration of *Orlando* needs to take biographical and autobiographical issues into account.<sup>5</sup> How does a woman writer write about another? And what does that writing say about the self? What does it mean for a woman to construct a biography of the woman she loves and what might that have to do with a question of women and/in representation in general? What does it say about each of its two subjects—the “biographer” (here I mean Woolf, not the fictional biographer) and the subject spoken about—and their particular fantastical and psychical spaces? I would suggest, in partial answer to these difficult questions, that Woolf is acutely aware of language’s de-centering effects—particularly on and in the body of woman.<sup>6</sup> *Orlando* serves as a text for Woolf, and the character Orlando serves as a pretext for Woolf. That is, *Orlando* is neither a biography nor an autobiography, yet both, and Orlando is neither a woman nor a man, but both, and language neither represents Orlando nor a woman, yet does. What is important here for understanding *Orlando* is that Woolf’s model of biography is an ironic one that questions its own form; her form is a “structure of otherness” that already contains within itself a self-reflexive split between biographer and subject, between the subject and representation.<sup>7</sup> To put it simply, biography, in the way that Woolf employs it, is already split, already othered. *Orlando* is also complex in its address of the other, for it addresses an individual (another) who is an other—Sackville-West—and who is an other culturally as a sapphist. It also simultaneously addresses a culture—one that allows published lesbian representation to be fantastical while real (in the sense that *Orlando* is about Vita Sackville-West), but not realistic as is Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness*, the infamous lesbian novel published and banned the same year in England. *Orlando* addresses a culture that can allow a kind of (compensatory) fantasy of Sackville-West as Orlando but will not tolerate overt (that is, readily apprehensible), “inversion,” as lesbianism was then called.<sup>8</sup>

These public/private and fact/fiction splits are profoundly interwoven in any consideration of *Orlando* and this is particularly true when we look at the ways the text has been named generically.<sup>9</sup> The mixture of fact with fiction has made *Orlando* difficult to classify, much in the same way as Orlando has been difficult to classify—that is, is s/he a man, a woman, an androgyne, etc? Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* has been variously described as a *roman à clef*, a kunstlerroman, an anti-novel, metafiction, magical realism, an autobiography (and a specifically female one at that), and a biography.<sup>10</sup> For my purposes, Marjorie Garber’s “*fairy tale à clef*” and Nigel Nicholson’s “the longest and most charming love letter in literature” are perhaps the most fitting descriptions of *Orlando*; both play with the line between the real and its representation, and both neatly

encompass the idea that Woolf's public, sapphic love letter to Sackville-West necessarily had to be a fairy tale, necessarily had to turn fact into "fiction."<sup>11</sup> Without the fantastic elements of unnatural time (where Orlando ages only thirty-six years but lives around four hundred years) and unnatural sex changes (changing rather unremarkably, at least to herself, from a man to a woman), the book, like *The Well of Loneliness*, might well have been banned.<sup>12</sup>

The idea of the *fairy tale à clef* speaks to an inherent contradiction in the text of *Orlando*. *Roman à clef*, from which the phrase is drawn, means a novel with a key—actual persons presented in a realistic world under fictitious names. If one has the key, then, one knows who is who—for example that Orlando is Vita Sackville-West. The *roman à clef* is a sort of "I know you know," where the known is not named but nonetheless understood, revealed and concealed simultaneously. A *fairy tale à clef* signals two things: the narrative as fairy tale implies the realm of folk literature and the oral tradition, while the *à clef* part signals a tale of actual persons under other names or guises. These disguised, actual people (one expects) will experience adventures of a more or less supernatural, magical, or fantastical kind. The *fairy tale à clef* is in a sense a double veiling—covering people and events through name changes and then covering them once more through the magical nature of the fairy tale. *Orlando* as *fairy tale à clef*, then, speaks to deep structures of culture (insofar as it is fairy tale) and reveals expectations surrounding one's proper place in gender, class, and heterosexuality. Simultaneously this phrase references the real (as *à clef*) through a rendering of private actions in public. This form prompts us to ask just how the scandalous real life adventures of an aristocratic, married woman who sleeps with other women might fit (or not) within the matrix of fairy tales that generally presume and enforce strict adherence to patriarchal hierarchy, heterosexuality and a happy home.<sup>13</sup>

The tensions between the real and the fantastic and between the public and private are replicated in the idea of "the most charming love letter in literature," which foregrounds questions of audience. Whom does Woolf address in her letter? Whom does she name and interpellate? Does Woolf become lover and Sackville-West beloved? Does the public nature (i.e., its publication) of this love letter change its private matter—especially if it is a sapphic love letter? I suggest that as a letter, *Orlando* is a narrative of seduction, a rewriting of the self (for both Woolf and Sackville-West), and a representation of history. This latter occurs on an overt textual level—*Orlando* moves through four hundred years of English history—and on a contextual level—*Orlando* is the story of Vita Sackville-West and her history of love, writing and privilege. Not accidentally, public and private histories are fused within the text as well as outside of the text.<sup>14</sup>

Three months before *Orlando* was published, *The Well of Loneliness* was tried for obscenity in Great Britain and was eventually banned. As Sherron Knopp

remarks, "What was on trial, as Vita and Virginia were both acutely aware, was sapphism" (28). She cites this letter from Sackville-West to Woolf on learning that the book had just been banned,

I feel very violently about *The Well Of Loneliness*. Not on account of what you call my proclivities; not because I think it is a good book; but really on principle [. . .] Because, you see, even if the *W. of L.* had been a good book,—even if it had been a great book, a real masterpiece,—the result would have been the same. And that is intolerable. (*V. S.-W. Letters to V. W.* 279–78)<sup>15</sup>

Just how nearly and frighteningly this trial must have touched Sackville-West's heart can be guessed from the major public scandal and personal trauma that erupted over her three year affair (1918–21) with Violet Keppel (Sasha in *Orlando*). Though Sackville-West had married Harold Nicholson in 1913, they maintained a somewhat unusual relationship that allowed for various kinds of other relationships, with the explicit assumption that each was to be the other's primary, though not sexual, focus.<sup>16</sup> Friends since childhood, Vita Sackville-West and Violet Keppel had become lovers in 1917 and spent two years running away together and repeatedly being brought back to their respective and respectable positions in society. Mitchell Leaska and John Phillips, the editors of Violet Keppel's letters to Sackville-West, recount the extent to which the affair was known publicly: "All Paris was talking [. . .] all London was [. . .] buzzing with gossip of the two runaways" (25). In fact, rumor had it (and this was true) that Violet and Vita were gambling recklessly in Monte Carlo and dancing together—Vita dressed as a man—in the Café de Paris (Leaska and Phillips 25).

The pressure of conforming, at least on the surface (that is, in public), to normative heterosexual respectability was intense and eventually separated the passionate and dramatic lovers. The mothers of both daughters played active roles in thwarting the two lovers' relationship. For example, Alice Keppel, Violet Keppel's mother (and also King Edward VII's mistress), forced an unwilling and suicidal Violet, in June 1919, to marry Denys Trefusis, threatening to cut her off financially and to disown her if she did not.<sup>17</sup> For his part, Trefusis promised Violet on his word as a gentleman not to have sexual contact with her. Despite all this, or because of this, in February 1920, Sackville-West and Violet (now) Trefusis decided finally to abandon their husbands, go to France, and spend their lives together. Lady Sackville (supported by Violet's mother) engineered a plan to have the husbands, Denys Trefusis and Harold Nicholson, fly a rented airplane to France and force Violet and Vita back to their duties.<sup>18</sup> The men succeeded largely due to Harold's revealing (via information he had from Lady Sackville) to Vita Sackville-West that Denys Trefusis had had some sort of sexual liaison with Violet, though what really happened is unclear.<sup>19</sup>

These were not all of Lady Sackville's efforts; she also pressured Sackville-West not to publish *Challenge* (a novel of Vita and Violet's affair with the protagonists in the guise of Julian and Eve, respectively) in England.<sup>20</sup> This is another instance of the private suppressed for the public.<sup>21</sup> I will return to these mothers, husbands, and the trappings of heterosexuality in a moment. My point here in bringing up Violet and Vita's affair is this: given the public's knowledge of Sackville-West's "proclivities" and of her wild affair with Violet, given the general atmosphere of homophobia and specific condemnation of lesbianism at that time (occasioned by the banning of *The Well*), for Woolf to write a public, sapphic love letter, to dedicate the book to V. Sackville-West, and to include photographs of Vita Sackville-West as Orlando, was audacious and remarkable to say the least.<sup>22</sup> Knopp comments, "The remarkable achievement of *Orlando*—and Virginia's *public* gift to Vita—is the book's joyous celebration, in the very teeth of society and psychiatry, of just such a personality as Vita's and its attendant 'connections'" (30). Knopp also notes that "[t]he publication of *Orlando* in the midst of this scandal gave Virginia her first public triumph. Leonard Woolf, noting that the book sold twice as many copies in six months as *To The Lighthouse* had in a year, calls it the turning point in her career" (28).

This public triumph is also echoed by a private one, for embedded within this interchange between autobiography and biography, *Orlando* is also a document that both produces and overcomes loss. That is, the text is an enactment of what I call melancholia with a difference; the novel is fundamentally concerned with loss, but loss that is recuperated, made a success of. This happens both within the text and outside, and on a number of linked levels: a personal level—Vita loses Violet, Virginia loses Vita, Vita loses Knole (her ancestral home); a textual level—Orlando loses Sasha, Orlando loses the male place of privilege; a cultural level—both Vita and Virginia suffer through losses forced in part by the confines of gender, heterosexuality, and marriage. Each of these losses, however, is at least partially recovered through the writing of *Orlando*.

Before I consider the nature of these losses and their recuperation, I would like to set the frame through which I see these mechanics of loss functioning. According to Freudian psychoanalysis, the ego or character is fashioned through loss. As Freud writes in *The Ego and the Id*,

We succeeded in explaining the painful disorder of melancholia by supposing that [in those suffering from it] an object which was lost has been set up again inside the ego—that is, that an object-cathexis has been replaced by an identification. At that time, we did not appreciate the full significance of this process and we did not know how common and how typical it is. Since then we have come to understand that this kind of substitution has a great share in determining the form taken by the ego and that it makes an essential contribution towards building up what is called its "character." (18)



Loss, then, is constitutive of the self, or, as Freud eloquently puts it, the “ego is a precipitate of abandoned object-cathexes and it contains the history of those object-choices” (19). To put it simply, the ego identifies with the lost object (which need not necessarily be a person or an actual object, but can also be an ideal) and sets up that lost object inside the ego, so that a kind of compensation is effected.

In what follows, I offer some biographical details surrounding *Orlando*, not to prove that the novel grows out of actual events, but rather to indicate how the novel might be a metaphorical recovery of what Woolf and Sackville-West could not, as women and as lovers, have. That *Orlando* might stand as a kind of compensation for Sackville-West and also as a way of recovering a sense of self in another’s biography of her, is clear from the response she sends to Woolf on first reading *Orlando*.

My darling,

I am in no fit state to write to you. [...] I can only tell you that I am really shaken, which may seem to you useless and silly, but which is really a greater tribute than pages of calm appreciation,—and then after all it does touch me so personally, and I don’t know what to say about that either, only that I feel like one of those wax figures in a shop window, on which you have hung a robe stitched in jewels. It is like being alone in a dark room with a chest full of rubies and nuggets and brocades. Darling, I don’t know and scarcely even like to write so overwhelmed am I, how you could have hung so splendid a garment on so poor a peg. Really this isn’t false humility; really it isn’t. I can’t write about that part of it, though, much less ever tell you verbally. [...] Also, you have invented a new form of narcissism,—I confess,—I am in love with Orlando—this is a complication I had not foreseen. (*V. S.-W. Letters to V.W.* 288–89)<sup>23</sup>

The image of the wax figure in a shop is telling; it points to Sackville-West as a kind of blank slate that Woolf has decorated with fantastic words—magical writing. Woolf makes an exquisite garment of and for Sackville-West, in *Orlando*, brocaded and jeweled; no wonder Sackville-West falls in love with herself. Woolf in fact restores Sackville-West’s ego and allows Sackville-West to see herself and her life in an idealized way. Indeed, Sackville-West took to signing her letters “Orlando” to Woolf and her other lovers. This restoration of the ego is accompanied by an imaginary restoration of the family’s estate, Knole, to her. In reality, because Sackville-West was a woman, she could not inherit Knole, the 500-year-old home that she adored.<sup>24</sup> It passed to her Uncle Charlie—a loss that prompted Sackville-West, upon reading descriptions of it in *Orlando*, to write to Virginia, “you made me cry with your passages about Knole, you wretch” (*V. S.-W. Letters to V.W.* 289). In *Orlando*, however, Woolf restores the family home to Orlando, magically and impossibly, at the same moment she is legally declared a female.<sup>25</sup>

As I previously noted, Sackville-West's affair with Violet Trefusis was particularly painful and distressing. Sackville-West blames herself for being unable to carry out her grand passion with Violet. Vita, safely ensconced at home with a loving Harold and money to spare, ends her autobiographical account of her affair with Violet:

I am writing [...] in the midst of great unhappiness. [...] It is possible that I may never see Violet again [...] it is also possible that she may not choose to live; in any case it has come about indirectly owing to me, while I remain safe, secure and undamaged save in my heart. The injustice and misfortune of the whole affair oppresses me hourly. (Nicholson 144)

In *Orlando*, Woolf rewrites this passionate and painful affair to Sackville-West's advantage. Woolf allows Sackville-West to see herself as the scorned lover in Sackville-West's affair with Violet through her paralleling of the Orlando/Sasha story with Vita and Violet's story. In reality, Sackville-West abandoned Violet and Violet maintained that Sackville-West was her one love. In *Orlando*, Sasha betrays Orlando twice, once in an apparent liaison with a Russian sailor and again when she fails to come at the appointed hour so that they may run away together. In life, Sackville-West refused to rescue Violet from marriage with Denys Trefusis, even though she knew she could have prevented it with a few words. Sackville-West writes, "I sat quite dazed in my room holding my watch in my hand and watching the hands tick past the hour of Violet's wedding. All that time, I knew, she was expecting a prearranged message from me, which I never sent" (Nicholson 123). Sackville-West again abandons Violet after the revelations from Harold mentioned above, even though Violet explains that she had never "belonged" to Denys, and Denys himself assures Sackville-West, "I promise you that there has never been anything of that kind between Violet and me" (Nicholson 139). Sackville-West must have known these protestations of fidelity were at least in spirit (and likely in fact) true, for she maintains steadfastly in her autobiography that she knows that Violet is "hers." She writes: "Violet is *mine*, she always has been, it is inescapable. [...] She was *mine*—I can't express it more emphatically or more accurately than that, nor do I want to dress up an elemental fact in any circumlocution of words" (24).

If Sackville-West reads a more ideal version of herself in *Orlando*, Woolf idealizes Sackville-West for herself, changing her from a gallivanting lover to one more constant and true. A number of accounts assert that in addition to Vanessa Bell, her sister, and Leonard Woolf, her husband, Woolf deeply loved Sackville-West.<sup>26</sup> Sackville-West's nature, however, was not precisely constant (except in an unusual way to Harold) and two years after Sackville-West and Woolf became lovers, Sackville-West began having an affair with Mary Campbell in September, 1927—the first of many subsequent affairs. Woolf

was very jealous and wrote to Sackville-West (after Vita told Virginia of the affair): "Yes you are an agile animal — no doubt about it, but as to your gambols being diverting [...] I'm not so sure. [...] I'm a fair-minded woman. You only be careful in your gamboling, or you'll find Virginia's soft crevices lined with hooks" (Woolf, *Selected Letters of V.W.* 229). Obviously, writing *Orlando* was one way of capturing Sackville-West, establishing a kind of power over her life, laying claim to it and wooing her as no other lover had.

Virginia's soft crevices were indeed lined with hooks, for despite her romanticization of Sackville-West in *Orlando*, the love letter was not a completely positive portrait; Orlando's protagonist was a trifle clumsy, bent on fame, and only a mediocre writer.<sup>27</sup> This latter failing was perhaps the most insightful (and hurtful) aspect for Woolf to reveal to the world. In *Orlando* Woolf uses the image of the wild goose to indicate the literary genius that always eludes Orlando's abilities:

But the goose flies too fast. I've seen it, here — there — there — England, Persia, Italy. Always it flies too fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets (here she flung her hand out) which shrivel as I've seen nets shrivel on deck with only sea-weed in them. And sometimes there's an inch of silver — six words — in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves. (313)

Orlando, despite love, fortune and literary fame for "The Oak Tree," is never able to grasp "the great fish" of genius, of superb and original writing.<sup>28</sup> Ironically and sadly, Sackville-West did not grasp the significance of the wild goose in *Orlando*. Sackville-West writes to Harold, "What does the goose stand for? Fame? Love? Death? Marriage?" (qtd. in Glendinning 204). Sackville-West's biographer observes, "Vita had a literal mind. [...] [the passage about the goose] may perhaps be read as the other nameless thing, after Knole, that Vita most desired. Not fame, nor love, but genius or greatness — the true art of expression and feeling that was always just out of her reach" (204).<sup>29</sup> It should be noted, however, despite Woolf's estimation of Sackville-West's writing — "she writes with a pen of brass" — that in their lifetimes, Sackville-West was hugely successful (both financially and popularly), much more so than Woolf. For example, Glendinning notes that Sackville-West's

*Seducers in Ecuador* was reviewed at the top of the page [of *The New York Evening Post*], along with a languorous drawing of its author. The notice by Joseph Collins ends, "It is an amusing story well told, which can do more in an hour's reading to make the reader think and meditate on the values of what he considers realities than a great many novels do." *Mrs. Dalloway*, reviewed below, got a cooler reception from Walter Yust: as a novel, "It lacks that quality of illusion which can turn the day [...] into a life richer than any single figure groping through it. [...]" (141)

It is interesting to note in this snippet of a review that the quality found lacking in Woolf's work is that of "illusion." The reviewer picks up precisely my point of Woolf's work being, in one way, without illusion (that is, it has the substance of truth) while being full of "artistry."

Woolf's *Orlando* signals two categories—compensation and inadequacy—in the production of her (auto)biography of Sackville-West. For Sackville-West, *Orlando* is a compensation for losses—a kind of mourning for Violet/Sasha, for the loss of Knole. The novel returns these "objects" to Sackville-West and adds the bonus of mirroring her as a magnificent, magical figure wearing a "robe stitched in jewels." It is also a revelation of her imperfections—chief among them her lack of genius as a writer. The biography notes (gently) a number of other imperfections as well:

A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The Leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? [. . .] Am I? Spoilt? Perhaps (here another self came in). My books? [. . .] Facile, glib, romantic. But (here another self came in) a duffer, a fumbler. More clumsy I couldn't be. (310–11)

For Woolf, *Orlando* is a compensation for the loss of Sackville-West, a mourning of her. She gets to keep a "fixed" Sackville-West, a woman who will not betray her, as well as a vision of Sackville-West as a kind of idealized version of herself—a woman who could write, have children, be sexual, be aristocratic, have affairs and do all the things that she felt unable to accomplish. On the other hand, Woolf can criticize her for lacking a necessary something in her writing. In this way, Woolf also critiques herself, identifies and displaces onto another person her own fears about the inadequacy of her writing.

On a broader and more public level, Woolf sets up the image of Sackville-West inside the cultural imaginary, i.e., turning the British cultural refusal ("loss") of overt homosexuality into a public gain: the novel is a success; it is funny, entertaining, and an object of public attention. Thus private losses (Woolf losing Sackville-West, Vita Sackville-West losing Violet) turn into public gain for Woolf and perhaps more ambivalently for Sackville-West. Woolf, as "melancholic," gets to write about Vita endlessly; the public, scandalized/entertained, gets to talk about Sackville-West endlessly.<sup>30</sup> Woolf receives praise (it was her best selling novel to date) and keeps a part of Sackville-West. The public gets to keep the staging of loss (the book) even though the real Sackville-West fades into Harold and gardening and death. No one, after all, wants to introject Stephen Gordon, the "tragic invert," or *The Well's* depression, but the culture is quite willing to be entertained, take in Orlando; she is innocuous enough, clumsy even, only "a girl" after all in the end, lucky enough to own Knole, have a husband and a boy child. Vita becomes simply an actor in a fairy tale and lives conventionally and happily ever after.

If *Orlando* as a text mitigates a series of losses in the real world through rewriting, it also thematizes within the text how representation or, rather more particularly, how literary language finds itself at a loss. But like the melancholic's recuperation of the lost object through constant speaking about it, the text offers a recuperation of the object while bemoaning the inadequacy of language. There are a number of self-reflexive examples in the text: the biographer's professed inability to convey his subject, Orlando's frustrated inability to describe Sasha, the failure of language to match Nature, the rendering of Orlando's change into a woman as indescribable, and Shelmerdine and Orlando's love which is described as inexpressible. However, despite words like "failure," "inexpressible," and "indescribable," the objects and passions are nevertheless evoked. Using Woolf's phrase "ransack the language," we can envision what takes place over and over again in the novel. The original meaning of the word "ransack" is to search a house for stolen goods, and in the novel we find there is a constant search in and through the house of language for stolen goods—the "thing itself." But those goods are never found, only what "the thing itself" has been encrusted with, so that when one strips away the barnacles, one finds nothing. One must concentrate on the barnacles then.

Take for example Orlando's difficulty in describing Sasha. When he sees Sasha, he thinks:

what was she like. Snow, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire? None of these. She was like a fox, or an olive tree; like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is yet clouded—like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha. For in all she said, however open she seemed and voluptuous, there was something hidden; in all she did, however daring, there was something concealed. So the green flame seems hidden in the emerald, or the sun prisoned in a hill. (47)

On a literal level, at first only a set of natural objects can evoke Sasha—alabaster, cherries, cream, or an olive tree (fittingly Renaissance in character). But Orlando rejects these; they are too direct—no object in nature dissembles sufficiently for a comparison. Something is always hidden; woman embodies the duplicity of language and the veiled nature of truth in language. Language itself then is found wanting. But yet, the precious natural objects (cherries, cream, etc.) remain as traces; they remain in play even while being revoked. And indeed despite the initial overt rejection of these natural objects, they return, as in the last line, "So the green flame seems hidden in the emerald, or the sun prisoned in a hill." This method of pointing to the inadequacy of language while using it brilliantly is analogous to Woolf's pointing out the wild goose of genius that eludes Orlando (and by identification herself) while simultaneously enacting her very own genius of and through language.

That Woolf is obsessed with the gap between language and its object (and how that gap might be filled) is clear from the passage where Orlando, not incidentally, considers the question, "What is Love?" He finds that,

Every single thing, once he tried to dislodge it from its place in his mind, he found thus cumbered with other matter like a lump of glass which, after a year at the bottom of the sea, is grown about with bones and dragon-flies, and coins and the tresses of drowned women. (101)

I read this as indicating the impossibility of dredging up the "thing itself"—especially when it comes to love. It is always at a distance from us (at the bottom of the sea) and welded to death, money, and mythology; indeed, it is inseparable from them. This theme is again foregrounded in the following sentences, making a more explicit connection to language as construction. Orlando is annoyed that he cannot get to the thing itself and asks,

"Why not say simply in so many words—[. . .] Confound it all [. . .] why not simply say what one means and leave it?" [. . .] So then he tried saying that grass is green and the sky is blue [. . .] Looking up, he saw that, on the contrary, the sky is like the veils which a thousand Madonnas have let fall from their hair; and the grass fleets and darkens like a flight of girls fleeing the embraces of hairy satyrs for enchanted woods. "Upon my word," he said [. . .] "I don't see that one's more true than another. Both are utterly false." And he despaired of being able to solve the problem of what poetry is and what truth is and fell into a deep dejection. (101–02)

Like the previous passage where the lump of glass was grown about with things, any consideration of the world is infused with mythology. Here, the grass and the sky are laden with religious and Greco-Roman myth (Madonnas and the satyrs). The similes that come to Orlando's mind, the sky being like the color of Madonnas' veils or that the grass's movement is like fleeing girls, are telling in and of themselves, for they once again show an interchange between women and nature. What is important to note in this passage is that "the natural"—the grass, the sky—already are encumbered with myths of and representations of women and their sexuality. Finally the passage ends with precisely the conundrum of language that Woolf highlights: that even though the images used to convey the objects are "false," the objects are nevertheless conveyed.

The objects are nevertheless conveyed. I repeat this phrase for it seems to me that this is Woolf's achievement. Woolf demonstrates the doubleness of language; she laments its inadequacy while effectively and fantastically achieving her ends. At the same time, she stages the loss of Vita while simultaneously producing her. Vita as biographical object (and object of Virginia's affection) is conveyed to an admiring and scandal-mongering public, and in this conveyance, this movement, the loss is made good; the lost object, albeit in an altogether other form, is found or more precisely its preciousness is rendered visible and

hence the loss is made more palatable, perhaps even recuperated. This writing not only enables Woolf to stabilize Vita, but also provides Woolf with a ship of her own so to speak—one that allows her to keep afloat in what she called the “great lake of melancholy.” Finally, the text provides the audience with its own doubled vision; one that visions the real and the fictional, the public and the private, and the tolerable and the intolerable concurrently.

I close by providing a paradigmatic example from the text of *Orlando* to show just how Woolf rendered the intolerable (whether it be language “inadequacy,” sapphism, or loss) tolerable. Orlando’s final inscription into womanhood occurs towards the end of the text when the spirit of the Victorian Age overtakes her. In this age, images of gold wedding bands and marriages haunt her, despite the fact that she thinks them “distasteful” (242). Orlando nonetheless feels compelled to don the garb of womanhood and take a husband. However, Woolf makes it clear that Orlando’s “deep obeisance” to the age is performed with her mind full of contraband. Woolf writes:

Orlando now performed in spirit (for all this took place in spirit) a deep obeisance to the spirit of her age such as—to compare great things with small—a traveler conscious that he has a bundle of cigars in the corner of his suit case, makes to the customs officer who has obligingly made a scribble of white chalk on the lid. For she was extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have to pay the full fine. She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth. (265–66)

This image of smuggling something across the border is an important one for *Orlando* and for Woolf and for Sackville-West. Orlando smuggles the past, her desires and her writing through the gates by marrying. Orlando thinks,

She was married, true; but if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (264)

Vita Sackville-West, like Orlando, like the princess in the fairy tale, bows to the official sanctity of marriage. But unlike the princess, she still has her “muddles,” as her husband Harold used to refer to them, as does he. Woolf gets to smuggle a love affair across the borders of conventionality and tradition in a form marked fantasy. Simultaneously she expresses language’s lack and her losses all the while using them to their fullest potential. That is, while she tells us the suitcase is empty, it is actually full of cigars.

## Notes

1. That their relationship was indeed a love affair is clear. I cite only a few sources. Joanne Trautmann Banks, editor of Woolf's selected letters, writes, "The invitation came [Vita invites Virginia to Long Barn], and on 17 December Virginia went to stay with Vita for three nights. It was the beginning of their love affair. They slept together only a few times, but their emotional tie was strong, even when Vita took other lovers, as she soon did" (200). Louise DeSalvo and Mitchell Leaska, editors of Vita's letters, tell us, "On December 17 [...] their love affair began—without alarm, it seems, on Virginia's side, nor guilt on Vita's" (76). Victoria Glendinning, Vita's biographer, offers this account, "in the evening [of the 17<sup>th</sup>] came the 'moment of intimacy' that Virginia had envisaged, in Vita's sitting-room, with Virginia lying on the sofa by the fire. Vita wrote [in her diary]: 'talked to her till 3 A.M.—Not a peaceful evening.'" (149).
2. Pamela L. Caughie calls *Orlando* a "doubled discourse." Her insightful reading of *Orlando* argues that it works as a "feminist text not because of what it says about sexual identity but because of what it manages not to say; not because of what it reveals about the relation between the sexes but because of what it does to that relation; not because its protagonist is androgynous but because its discourse is duplicitous" (41).
3. Vita writes to Virginia, "My God Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando. What fun for you; what fun for me. You see, any vengeance that you ever want to take will lie ready to your hand. Yes, do go ahead, toss up your pancake, brown it nicely on both sides, pour brandy over it, and serve it hot. You have my full permission" (*Letters of Vita Sackville-West to Virginia Woolf* 238).
4. The editor of Woolf's diaries, Anne Olivier Bell, glosses this passage: "Violet Trefusis, née Koppel (1894–1972), with whom Vita, often disguised as a man, had had a passionate and dramatic love affair between 1918–1921 (see Nigel Nicholson, *Portrait of a Marriage*). Henry, Viscount Lascelles (1882–1974), who married the Princess Royal in 1922 and was to succeed his father as 6<sup>th</sup> Earl of Harewood in 1929, had courted Vita before she engaged herself to Harold Nicholson in 1913. Sasha the Russian Princess and the Archduchess Harriet in *Orlando* were based upon what VW learned of these two from Vita" (*Diary III* 162).
5. As Jean O. Love remarks, "Because *Orlando* is so peculiarly bound to Virginia's friendship," its true genesis must be sought in Woolf's diary entries beginning in 1922 when Virginia met Sackville-West for the first time (193).
6. My discussion here has been influenced by Shoshana Felman. She suggests that women, because of their positioning in culture as Other, cannot produce autobiography that is self-present to themselves. Felman writes "that none of us, as women, has as yet, precisely, an autobiography. Trained to see ourselves as objects and to be positioned as the Other, estranged to ourselves, we have a story that by definition cannot be self-present to us, a story that, in other words, is not a story, but *must become* a story. And it cannot *become* a story except through the *bond of reading*, that is, through the *story of the Other* (the story read by other women, the story of other women, the story of women told by others)" (14). Here, Felman points out that women's autobiography is unavailable to them, is, in fact, a missing category because of their position in culture as Other.
7. In its ambiguous position as (auto)biography, *Orlando*, like de Man's estimation of autobiography, "veils a defacement of the mind of which it is the cause" (de Man 930).
8. One need only think of the last line of *The Well* to see the meager compensation demanded from culture, "Give us also the right to our existence!" (437)
9. The public and private nature of the novel has changed over time. When *Orlando* was first published in 1928, contemporary reviewers acknowledged that it was all about Vita Sackville-West and Knole; that was public knowledge. However, the public meaning of *Orlando* has changed and become very faint over time. By the fifties and in America the public Sapphic nature of the novel was largely unknown. Obviously this was not only a function of a time and place change, but also the lack of historical and contextual details. *Orlando* had no infamous obscenity case to keep it in the public view as did *The*



*Well of Loneliness*. Blanche Cook, in her fine article on a lesbian literary tradition, postulates that had more lesbians known about *Orlando* then perhaps fewer lesbians would have adopted *The Well* as the paradigmatic lesbian novel. She writes, "So most of us lesbians in the 1950s grew up knowing nothing about lesbianism except Stephen Gordon's swagger [. . .]. Now suppose we had read Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* instead. Suppose we had known that Orlando, the timeless androgynous changeling, was in fact Vita Sackville-West, and that upon writing 'the longest and most charming love letter in Literature,' Virginia Woolf had gone off to France with her, protected from slander and scandal by generations of aristocratic lineage, family money, and the strengthening power of all the love and friendships in queer old Bloomsbury [. . .]. Well, to begin with, some of us might never have swaggered" (719). The second "suppose" is an important one; context enables this text to be read as lesbian. This taking up of *The Well* instead of *Orlando* results, I would argue, not only from lack of access to history, but also from the difficulty of Woolf's writing in general (i.e., it is not realism). The mode of the *fairy tale à clef*, the veiling over of the subject, perhaps accomplishes one aspect of veiling better than the other—obscuring rather than provoking the reader's gaze.

10. See for example for *roman à clef*: Karen Lawrence 268, J.J. Wilson 170, David Roessel 398; *kunsterroman*: Du Plessis 61; an anti-novel: J.J. Wilson 173; metafiction: Boehm 196; magical realism: Suzanne Jill Levine throughout; an autobiography: Jacobus 23; a biography: Virginia Woolf herself, but also many other critics, see for example, Beth Boehm 194, and Elizabeth Cooley throughout.

11. Nicholson's phrase can be found in *Portrait of a Marriage* 225. Garber's phrase can be found in *Vested Interests* 134. I use the term "sapphic" after Sherron Knopp who noted that Vita and Virginia preferred this term. Her excellent article contextualizes *Orlando* in terms of what it meant for Virginia and Vita to regard themselves as lesbians and "to engage in lesbian relationships in the 1920s and what it meant to write about one's perceptions and experiences" (25).

12. Ironically, the category of the natural was precisely what Hall called into question with the notion of inversion as natural, congenital. Since *The Well* was meant as "realism," written as a thinly disguised (auto)biography along conventional literary lines (the well-made novel) and using public events (e.g. World War I, the British women ambulance drivers in France) and a relatively well-known and respected sexologist, Havelock Ellis, to preface the novel as authoritative mechanisms, it was taken as a "true picture" and thus, had to be confiscated. A fairy tale (with "impossible" changes) is always already understood as a representation of, a metaphor of something else. Thus, *Orlando* could get away with women loving women because its protagonist was not "real" (natural). For a fuller discussion of *Orlando* and *The Well*, see Parkes.

13. Obviously, the *roman à clef* also reveals cultural myths; the distinction I wish to draw here is that the *fairy tale à clef*, because of its fairy tale quality, has a more schematic, didactic and overt tale to tell about cultural expectations. What is doubly interesting about *Orlando* is that Woolf has it both ways. *Orlando* does get to be a fairy tale in a very traditional sense, in that in the end, Orlando subscribes to hierarchy, home, and heterosexuality. She marries the handsome prince, has a male child, inherits a castle, and lives (happily) ever after. Equally interesting and ironic is Vita's criticism of precisely that aspect of the novel, "Marriage and motherhood would either modify or destroy Orlando, as a character: they do neither." Glendinning interprets Vita's remark thus, "Vita, 'as a character' was herself modified by marriage and motherhood; she was disappointed that Orlando, the incarnation of her inviolate self, was not left to stand alone" (204). The conversion or concession to cultural norms is perhaps most clearly marked in Sally Potter's film version of *Orlando*.

14. I am mindful that placing *Orlando* in the context of "love letter" or (auto)biography runs the risk of personalizing and so de-radicalizing the text—See Cervetti for a further discussion of this; however, I see it as effecting a double radical move, one that takes the personal into the public and one that highlights that representation just cannot quite cover the figure of Orlando.

15. V. Sackville-West takes the word "proclivities" from one of Woolf's letters to Vita concerning Bloomsbury's defense of *The Well of Loneliness*; Woolf writes, "Leonard and Morgan Foster began to get up a protest, and soon we were telephoning and interviewing and collecting signatures—not yours, for your proclivities are too well known" (*Selected Letters of V.W.* 236).

16. See Glendinning, especially, 47–48, where Vita makes this remark to Harold before they were married (and while she was still having an affair with Rosamund Grosvenor), “Don’t let’s hate each other’s friends, and anyhow we can give and take about it can’t we?” See also Nicholson, 209.

17. Later, in order to keep Violet in check, Denys Trefusis threatened (during one of Violet’s many efforts to return to Vita) to divorce Violet and name Vita as co-respondent (Trefusis 37).

18. In a letter to Jacques Raverat, two years before Virginia and Vita became lovers, Woolf writes comically (as well as inaccurately and somewhat coldheartedly) of the story: “My aristocrat [Vita] [. . .] is violently Sapphic, and contracted such a passion for a woman cousin [sic, Woolf means Violet], that they fled to the Tyrol, or some mountainous retreat together, to be followed by a brace of husbands. The mothers of the girls are said to take it to heart” (*Selected Letters of V.W.* 191).

19. The account in *Portrait of a Marriage* is confusing as to what did or not did not take place, see page 139.

20. Vita’s mother also objected to the publication of *Orlando* and did her best to keep it from being reviewed. Victoria Glendinning writes, “One person who was appalled by *Orlando* was Vita’s mother. She defaced her copy of the book, scarring it with comments, underlinings and exclamation marks. She glued a newspaper photograph of Virginia — of whom up until then she had respectfully approved — on the flyleaf, writing alongside: ‘The awful face of a mad woman whose successful mad desire is to separate people who care for each other. I loathe this woman for having changed my Vita and taken her away from me’” (206). Her homophobic attitude is only matched by her desire for secrecy; she wrote to a reviewer (an old friend of hers) for the *Observer*, “I have turned my face to the wall. [. . .] I have spent years, hiding what Harold and Vita really are, I am sorry to confess it.” (qtd. in Glendinning 206). That Lady Sackville was (at the very least) unpleasant is supported by a number of accounts. For example, years after Vita and Violet’s affair, she told her grandson (Vita and Harold’s child) Ben (then age eighteen) about the affair, and that Vita had planned to abandon him forever. Ben told Virginia Woolf about this incident and she replied, “The old woman ought to be shot” (Nicholson 206).

21. That Lady Sackville had ample reason to want the novel suppressed is indicated by the fact that “Violet had adapted a saucy drawing she had made of herself and ‘Julian,’ smoking a cigarette, under a lamppost in Paris for the cover” (Glendinning 109).

22. Glendinning notes that “there was no attempt to conceal the original of *Orlando*: rather the reverse [. . .]. Raymond Mortimer, reviewing *Orlando* in the *Bookman*, wrote that ‘it was no secret that *Orlando* is a portrait of Mrs. Harold Nicholson, who writes under her unmarried name V. Sackville-West.’ American journals picked this up at once. The London *Daily Mail* headed its review, ‘Fantastic Biography: Mrs. H. Nicholson and *Orlando*. 300 Years as Man and Woman.’” (205).

23. Woolf replied in a telegram to this letter with, “Your biographer is infinitely relieved and happy” (qtd. in *V. S.-W. Letters to V. W.* 289).

24. Sackville-West said her female status in relation to Knole was, “‘a technical fault over which we have no control,’ as they say on the radio” (Glendinning 359).

25. Nigel Nicholson also notices this consolation; he writes “Virginia by her genius had provided Vita with a unique consolation for having been born a girl, for her exclusion from her inheritance, for her father’s death earlier that year. The book, for her, was not simply a brilliant masque or pageant. It was a memorial mass” (208). And, as I am suggesting, a kind of memorial that in part returns what one has lost.

26. The list of people who support this assertion is varied and long; I mention only a few: Nigel Nicholson, Dame Ethel Smyth, Victoria Glendinning, Anne Olivier Bell, Quentin Bell, and Mitchell Leaska.

27. Suzanne Raitt observes, “Beneath the desire to compliment and to flatter, so evident in *Orlando*, lay a more sinister impulse to punish and to hurt. The sexual and emotional ambivalence that was characteristic of their relationship is worked out in the text of *Orlando* itself, and in the conditions of its writings” (18). Raitt’s point is similar to the one I am advancing; her reading focuses on Woolf’s

disappointment and disillusionment with Sackville-West as a friend and lover, and *Orlando* as a way to "fix" Sackville-West forever, to secure Woolf against ever losing her.

28. "The Oak Tree" was patterned on Sackville-West's prize-winning book of poems.

29. For another reading of the meaning of the goose as an encoded lesbian signature, see Hankins.

30. I am not trying to suggest Woolf was a melancholic; rather simply that the structures Freud points out in his essay, "Mourning and Melancholia," provide a clear frame through which to understand Woolf's process. It is fascinating to note, however, how fully and completely Woolf has internalized the Freudian conception of melancholia with its attendant cultural valuations of proving nobility, genius and truth. See for example this passage in Woolf's diary, where she is distressed over the "looseness" of her writing: "And so I pitched into my great lake of melancholy. What a born melancholic I am! The only way I keep afloat is by working. [...] Directly I stop working I feel I am sinking down, down. And as usual, I feel that if I sink further I shall reach the truth. That is the only mitigation; a kind of nobility. Solemnity. I shall make myself face the fact that there is nothing—nothing for any of us. Work, reading, writing are all disguises; & relationships with people. Yes, even having children would be useless" (*Diary III*, 23 June 1929).

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*Situating Orlando within a matrix of biographical, cultural, and literary concerns, this essay contends that Virginia Woolf's peculiar and fantastical "biography" of Vita Sackville-West effects a double compensation. By attending to the tensions between the real and the fictional/fantastic and the public and private, I suggest that the text restores lost loves and lost objects to both Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf. The other compensation the novel effects is located at the level of representation. Orlando is a complex interplay between Woolf and Sackville-West that produces not only Sackville-West's "biography." It is also Woolf's own story of the inadequacy of language to name the "thing itself" and to represent women, a story that nevertheless self-consciously conveys through language the very things she suggests language is incapable of.*

**Keywords:** melancholia / feminism / lesbianism / Poststructuralism / biography