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Orlando’s Pursuit of Love

—Reread Virginia Woolf’s Orlando: A Biography—

WANG Xiaoli *

Introduction

Many people think Orlando: A Biography (1928) is the most extravagant, most exuberant novel of Virginia Woolf that was published at the midpoint of her career. Those who open the book of Orlando and expect another novel in the vein of Mrs. Dalloway (1925) or To the Lighthouse (1927) will discover, to their joy or disappointment, that once more Woolf has broken with tradition and convention and has set out to explore another dimension of writing. In Mrs. Dalloway, Woolf uses the method of stream of consciousness to display a whole day’s life of the protagonist, which is a revolutionary idea at that time. In Orlando, she has carried the stream of consciousness technique a step further; she not only presents a succession of thoughts and sensations passing through the mind, but also uses a new form to display it. Orlando combines biography and novel together. It tackles the idea of biography while pushing fiction into new shapes. Thomas S. W. Lewis describes Orlando as “a novel, a biography, and a history of the Sackvilles.” Here we may say that Woolf made another progress in literature. Orlando is not Woolf’s most famous work, but it is one of her most intense considerations of gender and time. The extraordinary character Orlando begins life as a young nobleman in the sixteenth century and moves through numerous historical and geographical worlds to appear as a modern woman writer in the 1920s. During these three hundred years, Orlando grows from sixteen to thirty-six years old, and changes sex from a man to a woman. Woolf examines the meanings of masculinity and femininity as these definitions have changed in Europe over the course of three hundred years. The distinguished representation of time and gender is regarded as the peculiarity of Orlando.

In this unique novel, Woolf’s protagonist breaks the boundary of gender and time to search for love. He has romances with several persons. Here, I want to focus on four main characters with whom Orlando has unpleasant love affairs. They are Queen Elizabeth I, Sasha, Archduchess Harriet who later turns out to be Archduke Harry, and Shel. After the failure of his love with the first three people, Orlando experiences several big shocks, and then transforms himself into the other sex to start a new life. She finds that it is better to be a woman than a man. It costs her a long time to find a husband. At last, she meets Shel and marries him. But, she finds her marriage life is not interesting and is the same as death. Orlando starts a new life. She becomes an independent modern woman writer at the end of the novel.

Love Affairs

Experiencing life both as a male and a female, Orlando appears as a man at first. The first one who
loves Orlando or it may be said his first lover is Queen Elizabeth I. In fact, the model of the protagonist, Orlando, is Woolf’s close friend, Vita Sackville-West. The book, Orlando, is a composite history of the Sackville family. Knole House in Kent is the historic background of Vita’s ancestral home. In the novel, Knole House is symbolized by the great monastic house which is a present of the Queen to Orlando’s family as the symbol of her love to him. Giving such a huge house shows how passionate her love is, since he has all qualities that the old woman loves. She even names him her treasurer and steward. To him, “she was so worn and old” (26), he does not love her. Her passion is too intense, so Orlando is abashed. At this time, Woolf describes the young Orlando as a debauchee. While currying the Queen’s favour, Orlando dates many young girls. He thinks, “The flower bloomed and faded. The sun rose and sank. The lover loved and went. . . . Girls were roses, and their seasons were short as the flowers.” (28) Here, women are compared to flowers. Orlando’s taste is broad. He likes many youthful women, but at the same time it means he can’t love anyone of them truly. If women are flowers, their beauty is limited; they bloom for a season and then die. Withering with age like a flower, the old Queen has no power to compete with young women whom Orlando loves. Although she decides not to grow old, she can’t stop the passing of time. Although she is the Queen of the country, she can’t live several hundred years like Orlando. The Queen is very angry about “man’s treachery” (27), but without being able to change Orlando’s mind she dies.

One is reminded that the Queen who is all skin and bone is too old to become his lover. But, how about the young Russian Princess Sasha? Why can’t they be together at last? In fact, Orlando loves Sasha very much from the beginning. He is very excited. Because of Sasha, his manhood wakes, and “Nobody had ever seen him so animated. In one night, he had thrown off his boyish clumsiness; he was changed from a sulky stripling . . . to a nobleman, full of grace and manly courtesy” (40-41). We have no doubt that he loves Sasha. However, Sasha’s feeling is vague from the beginning to the end. He can’t understand her. After they become really close, he considers that, “She was like a fox . . . like nothing he had seen or known in England” (45). Although she gives him a fresh impression, he knows nothing about Sasha. Sasha is changeable and uncontrollable. Governed by passion rather than knowledge, Orlando is infatuated with Sasha. It is worthwhile to notice that when they talk to each other for the first time, Woolf indicates that, “perhaps it would have been better for him had he never . . . answered that [Sasha’s] voice; never followed the light of those [Sasha’s] eyes . . . .” (39-40). This sentence foreshadows the later regrettable result that Orlando is forsaken and hurt by Sasha. Joanne Trautmann comments that “he suffers when he meets Sasha . . . Soft one minute, savage the next, Sasha reminds Orlando of his pet white fox. . . .” In fact, the Princess’ name is very long. Orlando calls her Sasha for short. “[I]t was a name of a white Russian fox he had had as a boy—a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel, which bit him so savagely that his father had it killed” (43). The fact that the fox, Sasha, has hurt Orlando is another hint of his grieving and their impossible union. Also, owing to the fact that all know Orlando was betrothed to another woman before he met her, they can’t earn the recognition of others. Their romance ends when Sasha breaks her promise. The betrayal of Sasha is a big shock to Orlando. Later, he sleeps day and night for seven days at a time. Trautmann points out, “Orlando undergoes his first trance because he has experienced a loss too painful to
face directly.”7 “Then it seemed to him that life was not to living any more” (68). It is the complete downfall of Orlando’s hopes.

One day, the big Romanian Archduchess Harriet appears. Before she approaches him, Orlando feels a little attracted to her. But, when Orlando sees her face clearly, he is astonished at her ugliness. Because of her vehement chase, Orlando is scared. Orlando hopes he can find love this time, for he has been hurt seriously, but his hope disappears quickly. Archduchess Harriet is grotesque and startling both in manner and appearance.8 Her wooing, like the old Queen’s, is associated with a voracious and animalistic lust, so the young Orlando recoils in disgust. What the examples of Orlando’s love affairs make clear is that till now, Orlando hasn’t found a suitable love yet. He escapes to Constantinople as an Ambassador. There, he undergoes his second trance. After the trance, Orlando is awakened to a new self. He transforms himself into a woman. He/she becomes an androgynous character. She changes from male to female, and then knows what it is to live as a man as well as a woman. Trautmann states that “In her treatment of Orlando as an androgynous figure, Virginia Woolf is clearly glorifying those androgynous elements we have seen in Vita Sackville-West’s appearance and values.”9 Woolf thinks the androgynous feature of human being is admirable. She writes frequently in her novels, her diary, and A Room of One’s Own of the necessity for women to recognize their masculine qualities and men their feminine. She declares, “It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly.”10 In Orlando, she writes, “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes places. . . .” (171).

Having undergone two marvelous trances, Orlando changes into a woman. After his major love encounter (with Sasha), Orlando is shocked and falls into his first trance. At the second time, he is not only disappointed about the betrayal of Sasha and the ugly appearance of the Archduchess, but also disappointed about his whole life as a man. Male Orlando is childish and ignorant in some aspect, but female Orlando is more mature than before and has the best of both sexual worlds. She neither forgets she was a man nor refuses to be a woman. She can understand man and woman better than before. Howard Harper remarks, “The change of sex in the center of the story represents the crucial transformation of the relatively juvenile masculine values of Orlando’s youth into the more feminine values of maturity. . . .”11 Also, to borrow J. B. Batchelor’s phrase, “Orlando as a woman is far more understanding, far more knowledgeable.”12 Gradually, she begins to understand herself as a woman and feels it is better to be a woman. She feels that a woman “can more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit, which are . . . contemplation, solitude, [and] love” (146). She realizes that she can understand Sasha better than before. So she cries: “Praise God that I’m a woman!” (146)

Life and time continues. Orlando decides to go back to England to search for a new life and love. When she lands on her native shore, she is conscious that time has passed away in her absence. Many things are different. She thinks how fast the time passes, and compares the present and the past unconsciously. She decides to find ‘life and a lover’. “[I]t was in pursuit of this aim that she had gone to town and run about the world . . .” (220). During these years, she wants to find the lover who fits her best. Her desire for seeking a mate is very earnest. Though she has known many women and men, she discovers
that there is no one whom she can lean upon. So, she runs out and declares that she is nature’s bride. As Makiko Minow-Pinkney remarks that “Orlando is now almost on the point of stepping out of society and history into timelessness. . . .”  

Queen Elizabeth I, Sasha and the Archduke are far from her. They only exist in her remembrance now. She shows herself as a being who cannot be entirely restricted within society and history.

At this time, a man named Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine appears. Look at the scene in which they meet for the first time:

'Madam,' the man cried, leaping to the ground, 'you’re hurt!'

'I’m dead, sir!' she replied.

A few minutes later, they became engaged.

The morning after, as they sat at breakfast, he told her his name. (225-26)

From their encounter to their engagement and living together is very quick and only described in a few words. They take breakfast together like an old couple, but they still have not introduced themselves to each other. After he tells her his name, she says that she has known it already; he also guesses her name correctly. Orlando wonders about her speedy union with the man. No sooner does she declare her love than “an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously” (227). They have suspicions about their love. Orlando knows that he has given her a rare and unexpected delight. While she is considering their obscure love, the wind changed. The seaman, Shel, will go back to ship to sail round Cape Horn. Before he goes, they marry in a hasty wedding. Woolf concludes at last:

[I]n the space of three seconds and a half, everything had changed—she had . . . fallen in love, married Shelmerdine. . . . [S]he could not deny that she had her doubts. 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? . . . She had her doubts. (237-38)

Orlando is suspicious of their love because she spent over three hundred years searching for love but it does not last a long time. On one hand, her husband loves sailing better than her. On the other hand, what has to be noticed is the word “liked”; although she likes him, she does not love him. Furthermore, occasionally, she is carried back to bygones, and remembers Sasha. She admits that she still likes “other people”, and thinks her marriage will not be stable. Orlando’s love is difficult to find and difficult to keep. Later, Orlando gives birth to a boy. But, she is a little uneasy. She thinks time has passed over her. Sometimes, her eyes fill with tears. She comprehends that “the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past” (274). Orlando considers her life as an immensely long tunnel, and the house that she received from the old Queen belongs to history now. She thinks over her whole life. Orlando wants a lover who can give her passionate love, but she does not want an unsteady husband who appears suddenly then disappears speedily. Trautmann states that Orlando is very “like Vita who found the details of family life cloying in the extreme.”

To Orlando, her marriage is the same as death. For a long time, Orlando has a desire to receive a wedding ring that is the symbol of marriage. But, with the ring still on her finger, she has difficulty thinking of anything or writing anything. She is like a dying person. Near the end of the novel, Woolf
concludes that Orlando does not know love and “he or she is no better than a corpse . . .” (242). Her marriage life is monotonous. The only thing that she can do is to wait for her husband. She tells herself that “He was coming, as he always came, in moments of dead calm” (294). When she first meets Shel, she says, “I’m dead.” Their marriage begins in a gloomy mood. Also, Cape Horn where her husband sails is a very dangerous place. Many sailors have lost their lives before they arrive there. His sailing is the symbol of approaching to death. At the end of the novel, Orlando fancies the dead Queen Elizabeth I appears and Shel comes back at the same time. It suggests that Shel is dead like the Queen. Whether Shel is literally dead or not is not important. To Orlando, her marriage is like death.

Unpleasant love affairs make Orlando feel his/her life is the same as death. But, she decides to start a new life. She is a modern single mother at the end of the novel. Her poem that he/she used his/her whole life to write is published successfully. David Daiches concludes, “the main theme” of this novel is “the development of the hero-heroine through various phases to become finally the modern writer with a modern sensibility.” She is an unencumbered woman writer now, independent and free. Having experienced many adventures, Orlando grows up to a mature creature.

Conclusion

The distinguished novel ends in the “present moment” that is said by Judy Little as “a suitable symbol for the condition of a self who is free of the major illusions of many eras and the major illusions and stereotypes of both sexes.” Orlando is not restricted by history or gender. He/she exists surpassing their limitations. He/she goes from the sixteenth century to the twentieth century to searching for love, undergoing a spontaneous sex change in the process. He/she has loved both women and men. Although she gets married to a man who does not know her past and will not challenge to know her future, at last, she finds her marriage life is the same as death. But, the quest of love and life is eternal. That she does not find a steady love also means she is not restricted by anyone. She is a liberated woman of the 1920s. She is a free figure now; free from gender and time. Everyone who has had a relationship with him/her is dead, but she still exists in a timeless and androgynous world.

*Orlando* is unique both in content and style. Woolf challenged the restricting traditional systems in literature. She demanded a revolution in literary technique and subject matter. She reconsidered personality, plot and structure in a new light.

Notes:

1. This paper is a revision of the paper I read at the 37th annual convention of The Society of English and America Literature and Linguistics Nara Women’s University on 29 November 2008.
Woolf also writes in a letter to her nephew Julian Bell, “The old [forms] are too rigid; but then one must have a terrific technique to explode the old forms and make a new one.” For details see Joanne Trautmann Banks, ed., Congenial Spirits: The Selected Letters of Virginia Woolf (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1989) 374.

3. In fact, the model of the protagonist, Orlando, is Woolf’s close friend, Vita Sackville-West. The book, Orlando, is a composite history of the Sackville family.


8. In fact, Archduchess Harriet is a man named Archduke Harry who disguises himself as a woman because he wants to court Orlando.


14. Trautmann, 92.


This paper primarily concerns the love affairs of Orlando. There are four main characters with whom Orlando has unpleasant love affairs. They are Queen Elizabeth I, Sasha, Archduchess Harriet who later turns out to be Archduke Harry and Shel. After the failure of his love with the first three people, Orlando experiences several big shocks, and then changes gender from male to female to start a new life. Woolf praises the androgynous feature of human being by the experience of Orlando. However, male Orlando is childish; female Orlando is more mature than before. Woolf displays that it is better to be a woman than a man. Although she admires the androgynous characteristic of people, she shows her comparative dislike of man and sympathy for woman. Orlando gets married with Shel, but she feels her life seems to be like death especially when he leaves her to sail for ever. Yet, Orlando does not give up. The pursuit of love and life is eternal. The main theme of this novel is that after undergoing many adventures, Orlando grows up to become a mature creature. She finally transforms herself into a modern liberated woman with her life at the end of the novel.