“If I Saw You Would You Kiss Me?”: Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

The "LONGEST AND most charming love letter in literature," Nigel Nicolson calls *Orlando* (202). But the real-life relationship between Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West prompted more reserved comment from the two men—Virginia's nephew, Quentin Bell, and Vita's son, Nigel Nicolson—who first characterized it with authority. Bell tells us that Virginia in the beginning "felt shy, almost virginal, in Vita's company, and she was, I suspect, aroused to a sense of danger" (116). He concludes cautiously: "There may have been—on balance I think there probably was—some caressing, some beddig together. But whatever may have occurred between them of this nature, I doubt very much whether it was of a kind to excite Virginia or to satisfy Vita" (119). In *Portrait of a Marriage*, Nicolson confirms Bell's account (204–06) and hastens to add the weight of his own authoritative judgment: "Vita and Virginia did no damage to each other... The physical element in their friendship was tentative and not very successful, lasting only a few months, a year perhaps. It is a travesty of their relationship to call it an affair" (207).

But it is also a travesty of their relationship to reduce it to petty niggling over what they did or did not do in bed. In contrast to the hesitant, ambivalent relationship nephew and son describe, the letters between Virginia and Vita, published in 1978 and 1984 respectively, reveal an attachment that lasted in its physical expression not just the "few months, a year perhaps" that Nicolson first speculated but at least two years beyond that and probably more, and it continued in emotional intensity until Virginia's death in March 1941. As coeditor of Virginia's letters, Nicolson no longer minces words: "It was the deepest relationship which Virginia ever had outside her family"; "They loved each other" (Woolf, *Letters* 3: xix, xxi). Vita's coeditor concurs: "Rarely can an enterprise of the heart have been carried out so near the verge of archetypal feeling" (Sackville-West, *Letters* 11). Nevertheless, while Nicolson still bridles at the erotic significance of the relationship—"They slept together perhaps a dozen times"; "a strange and pleasurable experience, but unintoxicating, terminable" (xxi, xxii)—Leaska ignores it.

The novel that celebrates Virginia's love for Vita has generated its own share of critical ambivalence, although in this case Virginia, not her biographers, gives the cue for misconception in diary entries labeling *Orlando* "an escapade," something written "for a treat," "too much of a joke perhaps" (3: 131, 161, 164). The nonchalance of the joke, however, is belied by the ardor of her absorption in the project. On 9 October 1927, she writes to Vita with excitement: "But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and its all about you and the lustrs of your flesh and the lure of your mind." Four days later: "I'm so engulfed in Orlando I can think of nothing else... I make it up in bed at night, as I walk the streets, everywhere. I want to see you in the lamplight, in your emeralds. In fact, I have never more wanted to see you than I do now" (*Letters* 3: 428–29, 430). By December the significance of the project—and her engagement in it—brooks no disguise:

Should you say, if I rang you up to ask, that you were fond of me?
If I saw you would you kiss me? If I were in bed would you—
I'm rather excited about Orlando tonight: have been lying by the fire and making up the last chapter.

(*Letters* 3: 443)

Yet the extent to which Vita and Virginia did love each other—profoundly and, in every sense of the words, erotically and sexually (the frequency or infrequency with which they went to bed is irrelevant)—is something that continues to be resisted, denied, ignored, qualified out of significance, or simply unrecognized, even by the feminist revolution that has enshrined Virginia as its saint. There seems to be an unspoken agreement that whatever else one might call Virginia—aexual, bisexual,
androgynous—she was not a "sapphist." Trautmann, for example, borrows the term homoemotionality from Wolff's ambivalent Love between Women (17, 86, 119) to describe Virginia's relationships with women, associating it on the one hand with a "fierce sexlessness" and on the other with "that bisexual state of mind called androgynous" (32, 33). The assumption seems to be that lesbian love is only or primarily sexual, that love involving the emotional intimacy of minds and hearts requires a different term. Yet no one categorizes heterosexual relationships on the basis of such dubious distinctions. In a recent collection of feminist essays, Jean Love acknowledges Virginia's "venture into eroticism" but quotes Bell and Nicolson to support her opinion that it was nothing more than a brief experiment and then proceeds to read Orlando as a "means of gaining perspective and detachment" (192), "a requiem mass" for a part of her life she was ready to leave behind (218).1

Critical discomfort with the novel mirrors biographical discomfort with the relationship. Those who dislike Orlando complain that it is too deeply rooted in Vita's life to have general appeal. Love, for example, contends that its biographical elements lack the "greater reach and power of transformation" of those in To the Lighthouse (192). But since lovers are as significant as parents in most people's lives, one cannot help wondering if it is the sex of the lover rather than the novel itself that lacks broad appeal. At least one critic makes no secret of her attitude: "I want to say from the outset that I am not interested in what Quentin Bell once called 'the coarse physiological facts' of their physical affair" (Hawkes 49). Others just discreetly look the other way. As Wilson notes (170), Orlando receives little or no mention in works in which one would expect it to be central (Marder, Bazin, Marcus). Those who admire the book hasten to admit that it is only a minor interlude amidst more serious acts of creation—as Vita was (so the biographical version runs) in Virginia's attachment to Leonard. Thus Leaska, who in 1984 coedited Vita's letters, judged Orlando "brilliant but incongruous" in 1977 and omitted it from The Novels of Virginia Woolf: From Beginning to End. The few critics who treat the novel sympathetically and at any length locate its claim to serious consideration elsewhere than in the sexual politics that are its raison d'être—in its genre as antinovel, for example (Wilson), or in its revisionary treatment of English history and literature (Harper). Thus, like the relationship that inspired it, the book is ignored, dismissed as an anomaly, or explained as something other than it is.

Nevertheless, Orlando was less of a joke than Virginia usually let on and more than mere personal indulgence. To her own typically self-deprecating assessment ("not, I think 'important' among my works"), she juxtaposed Leonard's with obvious self-vindication: "L. takes Orlando more seriously than I had expected. Thinks it in some ways better than The Lighthouse; about more interesting things, & with more attachment to life, & larger. The truth is I expect I began it as a joke, & went on with it seriously" (Diary 3: 184–85). I want to argue, of course, that Leonard was right and that criticism has not even begun to suspect how right. The things we joke about, after all, are often those we care about too much to risk seriousness. But to see just how large and attached to life Orlando is, one must first get the relationship between Virginia and Vita right and then see it in context: what it meant to regard oneself as a lesbian (or, to use the term Virginia and Vita prefer, sapphist) and to engage in lesbian relationships in the 1920s and what it meant to write about one's perceptions and experiences.

Initially, of course, it was Vita who was the sapphist—a "pronounced Sapphist, & may, thinks Ethel Sands, have an eye on me, old though I am," Virginia wrote in February 1923, two months after meeting Vita (Diary 2: 235). By January 1925, it is not clear whose eye is on whom when she boasts in a letter to Jacques Raverat about "My aristocrat . . . [who] is violently Sapphic, and contracted such a passion for a woman cousin, that they fled to the Tyrol. . . . To tell you a secret, I want to incite my lady to elope with me next" (Letters 3: 155–56; my emphases). By December 1925, with Vita's departure to join Harold in Persia imminent, it is Virginia who is chafing with impatience: "Well, it is partly that devil Vita. No letter. No visit. No invitation to Long Barn. She was up last week and never came. So many good reasons for this neglect occur to me that I'm ashamed to call this a cause for weeping. Only if I do not see her now, I shall not—ever: for the moment for intimacy will be gone next summer" (Diary 3: 48).

In contrast to Bell's vision of a timid, asexual Virginia pursued by a Vita "very much in love" and motivated by "a masculine impatience for some
kind of physical satisfaction" (116), letters and diary entries suggest a Virginia eager for Vita's intimacy and fully aware of its probable sapphic consequences. For her part, Vita seems, both before and after the encounter at Long Barn, to have been acting exactly as she assured Harold she was in 1926: "I am scared to death of arousing physical feelings in her, because of the madness. I don't know what effect it would have, you see: it is a fire with which I have no wish to play" (Nicolson 206). Although neither alludes explicitly to what happened between them, Vita's terse diary entries for 17 December 1925 ("A peaceful evening") and 18 December ("Talked to her till 3 am. Not a peaceful evening"); qtd. in Woolf, Letters 3: 223) sound very much like someone worried about fire. Virginia, in contrast, sounds like someone startled to have discovered in practice what she already knew in theory—"These Sapphists love women; friendship is never untinged with amorousity"—and she expresses relief that her "fears & refrainings" had proved to be "sheer fudge" (Diary 3: 51). In her letter to Vita on 22 December—"I woke trembling in the night. . . . Ah, but I like being with Vita" (Letters 3: 224)—she sounds like someone happily abandoned to the flames. Looking back on the occasion a year later, Vita wishes in a letter "that we could put the clock back. . . . I should like to startle you again,—even though I didn't know then that you were startled" (Sackville-West, Letters 151). Still another year later, she humorously congratulates herself for the aggression by which she made Virginia's acquaintance in the first place and thereby "lay the train for the explosion which happened on the sofa in my room here when you behaved so disgracefully and acquired me forever" (238). If Virginia did not actively solicit or initiate the lovemaking at Long Barn, Vita certainly had the impression she wanted and expected it.

True, the physical side of this affair did not involve the kind of fiery passion that Vita so characteristically generated in others, that erupted in international elopements, destroyed marriages, and precipitated threats of murder or suicide. But if it was not a raging conflagration, it was nonetheless a real fire: "Please come, and bathe me in serenity again. Yes, I was wholly and entirely happy. If you could have uncorded me—you would have seen every nerve running fire—intense, but calm" (Woolf, Letters 3: 306-07 [Dec. 1926]). Nor did it exempt Virginia from feeling the jealous emotions of any hurt lover when her "calm fire" did not prevent Vita from pursuing other lovers—Mary Campbell especially, but one could name half a dozen others. Vita became interested in Mary Campbell in May 1927. In June she wrote Virginia a teasing letter:

Do you know what I should do, if you were not a person to be rather strict with? I should steal my own motor out of the garage at 10 p.m. tomorrow night, be at Rodmell by 11.5 (yes, darling: I did record on Friday, getting from Lewes to Long Barn in an hour and 7 minutes,) throw gravel at your window, then you'd come down and let me in; I'd stay with you till 3, and be home by half past six.

But, you being you, I can't; more's the pity. Have you read my book? Challenge, I mean? Perhaps I sowed all my wild oats then. Yet I don't feel that the impulse has left me; no, by God; and for a different Virginia I'd fly to Sussex in the night. Only, with age, and soberness, and the increase of considerateness, I refrain. But the temptation is great.

(Sackville-West, Letters 209)

Vita's playful contrast between Virginia and Violet Trefusis, with whom Vita had "eloped" in 1920 and about whom she had written Challenge, is more appropriate than either Vita or Virginia could realize at the time, but Virginia's response is equally significant: "You see I was reading Challenge and I thought your letter was a challenge . . . whereupon I wired 'come then.' . . . You won't think from this that I mean I seriously expected you: it was all a kind of tipsy vision of driving along the downs with you in the dawn. I was very excited all day" (Letters 3: 391-92). For Virginia the stimulation of the mind provided pleasure as real and immediate as stimulation of the body.

But if she could not play the role of Violet herself, she did not want anyone else to have it either. By 4 July her usual affectionate banter changes to the undisguised sarcasm of jealousy:

Yes you are an agile animal—no doubt about it, but as to your gambols being diverting, always, at Ebury Street [Vita's London address] for example, at 4 o'clock in the morning, I'm not so sure. Bad, wicked beast! To think of sporting with oysters—lethargic glucous lipped oysters, lewd lascivious oysters, stationary cold oysters,—to think of it, I say. Your oyster has been in tears on the telephone. . . . I'm a fair minded woman. You only be a careful dolphin in your gambolling, or you'll find Virginia's soft crevices lined with hooks. (3: 395; my interpolation)

Still smarting with jealousy when she writes to Vita on 9 October to propose an Orlando about "you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind," she adds in parentheses: "heart you have
none, who go gallivanting down the lanes with Campbell." On 14 October, after telling Vita how she is "engulfed" in making up Orlando and longing to see Vita "in the lamplight, in your emeralds," she warns: "If you've given yourself to Campbell, I'll have no more to do with you, and so it shall be written, plainly, for all the world to read in Orlando." When a furious Roy Campbell discovered his wife's affair a month later and an upset Vita turned to Virginia for sympathy, Virginia's response—"I hate being bored" I said, of her Campbells & Valery Taylors; & this she thought meant I should be tired of her" (Diary 3: 165)—made Vita cry. Vita wrote to Virginia the next morning: "Darling forgive me my faults. I hate them in myself, and I know you are right. But they are silly surface things. My love for you is absolutely true, vivid, and unalterable" (Sackville-West, Letters 242-43), and Virginia answered the same night: "You make me feel such a brute . . . And I'm half, or 10th, part, jealous, when I see you with the Valeries and the Marys. . . . I'm happy to think you do care: for often I seem old, fretful, querulous, difficult (tho' charming) and begin to doubt" (Woolf, Letters 3: 435).

Far from being a way to create distance in the relationship, Orlando was a way to heighten intimacy—not a substitute for physical lovemaking but an extension of it.

II

All this explains why Orlando meant so much to Virginia but not why it should mean so much to anyone else besides Vita. In addition to its private inspiration, however, Orlando is also a public proclamation—public enough that Virginia's "suppose" ("suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita") is weighted with a concern for consequences that would not let her proceed without Vita's permission: "Suppose, I say, that Sibyl next October says 'Theres Virginia gone and written a book about Vita' and Ozzie [Dickinson] chaws with his great chaps and Byard [of Heinemann] guffaws, Shall you mind? Say yes, or No" (Letters 3: 429).2 Queried by someone mentioned in the preface, in fact, Virginia was quick to apologize ("Ought I to have asked your permission?") and make excuses ("Why is Orlando difficult? It was a joke, I thought. Perhaps a bad one. I don't know. But I enjoyed writing it, and I should enjoy still more answering any questions about it, if put in person" [3: 553]). Nor did Vita underestimate what Virginia was asking: "My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando. . . . You have my full permission" (Sackville-West, Letters 238).

Challenge provides an illuminating perspective on Orlando. Written in 1918-19, in the middle of the affair with Violet, it was published in 1924—but only in the United States. Although Vita transformed herself and Violet into "Julian" and "Eve" and moved the action to a Greek island, both families found the characters so identifiable they had the book withdrawn from publication in England (Stevens 44).3 Virginia had some of the facts wrong in January 1925 when she wrote to Raverat about her sapphic aristocrat's flight to the Tyrol, but the gist of the story had been public scandal. It is no wonder, then, that Vita was "terrified" when Virginia conceived a work in which "Sapphism [was] to be suggested," based on a personal involvement that was neither casual nor insignificant and focused on the life of a publicly known, easily identifiable "pronounced Sapphist." And it is no wonder Virginia took special care in her strategy: "I am writing Orlando half in a mock style very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word. But the balance between truth & fantasy must be careful" (Diary 3: 162).

The risks involved came into even sharper focus when they are juxtaposed with another literary project about sapphism taking shape in 1927. Radclyffe ("John") Hall, an acquaintance of Vita's, was a dashing sapphic aristocrat herself and author of five successful novels. She was a member of the PEN club (Poets, Essayists, Editors, and Novelists), to which Vita also belonged (and into whose membership she had tried, unsuccessfully, to lure Virginia at the beginning of their friendship), and in 1927 her fourth novel, Adam's Breed, won the Prix Femina, which in 1928 went to Virginia for To the Lighthouse.4 Lady Una Troubridge, who shared John's life until her death in 1943 only two years after Virginia's, records the genesis of The Well of Loneliness this way:

It was after the success of Adam's Breed that John came to me one day with unusual gravity and asked for my decision in a serious matter: she had long wanted to write a book on sexual inversion, a novel that would be accessible to the general public who did not have access to technical treatises. At one time she had thought of making it a "period" book, built around an actual personality of the early nineteenth century. But her instinct
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had told her that in any case she must postpone such a book until her name was made; until her unusual theme would get a hearing as being the work of an established writer.

It was her absolute conviction that such a book could only be written by a sexual invert, who alone could be qualified by personal knowledge and experience to speak on behalf of a misunderstood and misjudged minority.

It was with this conviction that she came to me, telling me that in her view the time was ripe, and that although the publication of such a book might mean the shipwreck of her whole career, she was fully prepared to make any sacrifice except—the sacrifice of my peace of mind.

She pointed out that in view of our union and of all the years that we had shared a home, what affected her must also affect me and that I would be included in any condemnation. Therefore she placed the decision in my hands and would write or refrain as I should decide.

(81–82)

Although Una's stiff solemnity is poles from Virginia's lively wit, the parallels between the two projects are striking. Like Orlando, The Well was to be a biography, a psychological “case history.” Like Orlando, it jeopardized personal reputation, and explicit permission was sought and granted. As with Orlando, style and strategy were extremely important.

The stakes could not have been more effectively dramatized by what followed. The Well of Loneliness appeared in July 1928—four months after Orlando had been completed. Three months before it would be published. Almost immediately, it was blasted by the editor of the Sunday Express for its “undiscussable” subject matter and temporarily banned; in November, despite witnesses prepared to testify in its behalf, among them E. M. Forster, Desmond McCarthy, Julian Huxley, Vita Sackville-West, and Leonard and Virginia Woolf, it was declared obscene and banned permanently (for a detailed account of the proceedings, see Brittain).

Although Bloomsbury may have been “as willing to discuss buggery as it was to discuss Boethius” (Trautmann 17), the general public, it turned out, fell somewhere between the Sunday Express editor—“I would rather give a healthy boy or a healthy girl a phial of prussic acid than this novel” (Brittain 57)—and Leonard Woolf's mother (as reported by Virginia in a letter to Vanessa):

I am seventy six—but until I read this book I did not know that such things went on at all. I do not think they do. I have never heard of such things. When I was at school there was nothing like that. . . . But I think much of Miss Radclyffe Hall's book is very beautiful. There is the old horse—that is wonderful—when she has to shoot the old horse. . . . All that about the old horse and the old groom is very beautiful. But the rest of the book I did not care for.

(Letters 3: 525–26)

In fact, the literary merits of the book were irrelevant. What was on trial, as Vita and Virginia were both acutely aware, was sapphism. Vita wrote from Potsdam (31 Aug. 1928):

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. (I think of writing to Jix [Home Secretary William Joynson-Hicks] suggesting that he should suppress Shakespeare's Sonnets.) 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.

(Letters 279–80)

Virginia makes the same point in a satiric letter to Quentin Bell (1 Nov. 1928):

At this moment our thoughts centre upon Sapphism—we have to uphold the morality of that Well of all that's stagnant and lukewarm and neither one thing or the other; The Well of Loneliness. I'm off to a tea party to discuss our evidence. Leonard and Nessa say I mustn't go into the box, because I should cast a shadow over Bloomsbury. Forgetting where I was I should speak the truth. . . . Most of our friends are trying to evade the witness box; for reasons you may guess. But they generally put it down to the weak heart of a father, or a cousin who is about to have twins.

(Letters 3: 555)

The 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 (143), and Bell matter-of-factly attributes its success to the sudden “topicality” of “the sexual theme” (139).

III

But what is the “sexual theme”? Orlando is obviously not about the sapphic love of Vita and Virginia, even in a disguised way. The hero/heroine loves men and women over the course of four hundred years, but no one of these is the subject. The
central relationship is between Orlando and the Biographer, but although Virginia acknowledged the erotic pleasure it gave her to think and write about Vita, there is nothing overtly or even covertly erotic in the relationship between Orlando and the Biographer in the novel. If Orlando has any claim to be regarded as a lesbian novel, it is one of the best-kept secrets in literary history—having eluded even those who should be the first to know. Foster sees Orlando merely as a positive portrait of bisexuality as a whole, and even that only “as it were in the abstract” (287). In a chapter devoted to the 1920s, “Radclyffe Hall’s ‘Obscene’ Best Seller” (179–95), Klaich shrugs off the sexual highjinks of Orlando as, “well, pure fantasy” (189). Faderman mentions Orlando only as an example of works that “hide their lesbian subject matter by whimsical devices” (392).

Like Quentin Bell, Faderman neglects to identify Orlando’s “lesbian subject matter.” But whimsy was only one part of Virginia’s formula. The other part was truth—not just about Orlando’s real identity but about sapphism itself, as a fact of life better confronted than repressed as undiscussable or exploited as pornography—the same truth Radclyffe Hall wanted to exemplify with her masculine/feminine heroine, Stephen Gordon, and the same truth Vanessa and Leonard feared Virginia would speak in the witness box and so “cast a shadow over Bloomsbury.” One reason it has not been recognized perhaps is that recent critical enthusiasm for the concept of androgyny has isolated Woolf from more relevant discussions of masculine and feminine gender traits, namely the “technical treatises” Radclyffe Hall mentions, by Carl von Westphal, Richard von Krafft-Ebing, and Havelock Ellis—the pioneering nineteenth-century “sexologists,” whose theories about gender and sexual identity supply common denominators for both the literary characters of Orlando and Stephen Gordon and the real-life self-images of Vita, Sackville-West and Radclyffe Hall.

Stephen Gordon, of course, exemplifies the classic paradigm. Her masculine tastes and accomplishments, her men’s ties and cropped hair, her riding and fencing like a man, her intellectual literary career, her general ease with male activities and prerogatives, coupled with an aversion to female passivity and domesticity, all signal the sexual “inversion” behind her radical usurpation of male sexual privilege. Although modern readers generally regard Stephen as an extreme stereotype, Hall did not miscalculate the extent to which other late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lesbians, including the hero/heroine of Orlando, perceived themselves in ways similarly dictated by the “scientific” theories of the day. Vita does not refer to the technical literature on sexual inversion as directly as does Hall, whose heroine literally discovers herself in the pages of Krafft-Ebing (232), but the secret autobiographical account that she began in 1920, “in an impersonal and scientific spirit,” was intended to supply the kind of intimate information that “a professional scientist could acquire only after years of study and indirect information, because I have the object of study always to hand” (Nicolson 106).

The psychological portrait she constructs confirms the classic characteristics of the “invert” exemplified by Stephen Gordon. Her childhood is one, like Stephen’s, in which she did “dangerous things. . . . [K]ept my nerves under control, and made a great ideal of being hardy, and as like a boy as possible” (Nicolson 5). She “raised” an “army” and “commanded amongst the terrorized children of the neighborhood,” had a “khaki suit” but shed “tears of rage. . . . because I was not allowed to have it made with trousers” (12). Then she gets to Violet and the first experiences of friendship: “I feel I am doing this part very badly, very confusedly; it is very difficult to do, because I am afraid of taking too seriously what would, normally, have begun and ended as the kind of rather hysterical friendship one conceives in adolescence, but which had in it, I protest, far stronger elements than mere unwholesome hysteria” (23–24); “I want to be frank. I have implied, I think, that men didn’t attract me, that I didn’t think of them in what is called ‘that way.’ Women did” (29).

What Vita and Hall describe is not the dispassionate balance of masculine and feminine traits that constitutes an androgynous ideal, although androgyny may be involved in the pleasure both associate with male prerogatives, but the dominance of one set of traits over another to generate distinct kinds of erotic attraction. The focus on erotic engagement makes their concerns, in fact, more threatening than mere androgyny, as Vita implies in an “apologia”:

I am not writing this for fun, but for several reasons which I will explain. (1) As I started by saying, because I want to tell the entire truth. (2) Because I know of no truthful record of such a connection—one that is written, I mean, with no desire to appeal to a vicious taste in any possible readers; and (3) because I hold the conviction that as cen-
turies go on, and the sexes become more nearly merged on account of their increasing resemblances, I hold the conviction that such connections will to a very large extent cease to be regarded as merely unnatural, and will be understood far better, at least in their intellectual if not in their physical aspect... I believe that then the psychology of people like myself will be a matter of interest, and I believe it will be recognized that many more people of my type do exist than under the present-day system of hypocrisy is commonly admitted.

(Nicolson 105-06)

Although she speculates that the increasingly androgynous development of the sexes will lead to greater intellectual acceptance of personalities like her own, she entertains no illusions that it will generate greater understanding of the erotic attraction involved. Indeed, even as the "sexologists" cleared the way for seeing conventional social, legal, and moral sanctions as wrongheaded and inappropriate, they contributed another obstacle when they labeled sexual "inversion" a pathology.

Neither Vita nor Radclyffe Hall escaped such obstacles in their desire to present sapphic love accurately and honestly. At the end of *The Well*, Stephen imagines herself surrounded by thousands of "marred reproachful faces" with "the haunted, melancholy eyes of the invert," and her last words are an agonized prayer for the mere "right to our existence." Vita is less melodramatic, but she associates her love for Rosamund and Violet with "my perverted nature," a "brutal and hard savage" side of her that would "drive over" Harold "like an armoured chariot," in contrast to the "seraphic and childlike" side capable of devotion through "years of marriage." Her awareness of this "Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde personality," moreover, she attributes to an "intuitive psychologist" (34-35). The most she expects from a "spirit of candour" and from "the progress of the world" is not an end to disapprobation for "such personalities" and "the connections which result from them" but mere "recognition, if only as an inevitable evil" (106).

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."

IV

In one sense, of course, the fantasy is a dodge. Stephen Gordon learning to fence "like a man" from ex-Sergeant Smylie might be the tomboy next door—or in your own house. Orlando "slicing at the head of a Moor which hung from the rafters" never lived next door to anybody except in a Renaissance romance. The passing of centuries and the changing of sexes might cause bafflement in *Orlando*, but moral outrage would seem excessive, even foolish. If one found Stephen Gordon's predilections disturbing, however, every realistic detail in the five-hundred-page novel could help fuel a frenzy of moral outrage—as it did.

In another sense, though, *Orlando's* fantasy is no dodge at all. Within the realistic parameters of *The Well of Loneliness* a woman who acts like a man can only see herself and be seen by others as "a freak," "flawed," "maimed," "abnormal," and (the cliché lurks just in the background) "unnatural." But Virginia's fantasy annihilates such categories to embrace a more profound truth about gender and sexual identity than Hall's realism can articulate:

We may take advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman—there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory—but in future we must, for convention's sake, say "her" for "his" and "she" for "he"—her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life. . . . (138)

Orlando is not a woman acting "like" a man: Orlando is a man. *And a woman*. The situation admittedly puts a strain on conventional language and thinking, but there is nothing "unnatural" about it. *Orlando* takes the "dual personality" Vita described in her diary and transforms the "brutal" side that loved Rosamund and Violet into the romantic passion of a Renaissance nobleman, while the "seraphic," "childlike" side capable of "years of marriage" becomes the Victorian woman who marries Shelmerdine/Harold Nicolson with all due respect for nineteenth-century standards of female behavior.

What society or psychiatry might make of the situation is its own problem. Virginia declared her thoughts about psychiatry in a letter to Molly McCarthy in 1924, when the Hogarth Press was publishing the complete works of "Dr Freud":

I glance at the proof and read how Mr A. B. threw a bottle of red ink on to the sheets of his marriage bed to ex-
cuse his impotence to the housemaid, but threw it in the wrong place, which unhinged his wife's mind,—and to this day she pours claret on the dinner table. We could all go on like that for hours; and yet these Germans think it proves something—besides their own gull-like imbecility. (Letters 3: 134–35)

With sly Chaucerian simplicidadness, Orlando's Biographer makes an equal shambles of the social prejudice and scientific theory surrounding sexual "inversion." Noting that Orlando's experience caused her neither pain nor surprise, the Biographer sees no reason for anyone else to be disturbed either:

Many people... holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. (139)

Orlando's "condition" is neither the congenital defect that Krafft-Ebing and others described nor the debilitating case of arrested development that Freud suggested but a simple natural fact.

Marriage, however, whether to a Shelmerdine or a Harold, would seem to indicate bisexuality rather than sapphism. Yet Vita distinguishes quite emphatically in her diary between the "companionship" that was the main ingredient in her attachment to Harold and the "passion" she felt for Violet's predecessor, Rosamund Grossvenor, even as she was becoming engaged: "I wasn't in love with him then—there was Rosamund—but I did like him better than anyone, as a companion and playfellow, and for his brain and his delicious disposition"; "It never struck me as wrong that I should be more or less engaged to Harold, and at the same time very much in love with Rosamund. The fact is that I regarded Harold far more as a playfellow than in any other light. Our relationship was so fresh, so intellectual, so unphysical, that I never thought of him in that aspect at all." (Nicolson 30, 33). Fortunately for Vita, Harold was as content with a predominantly "unphysical" relationship as she was.

The scene in which Orlando meets Shelmerdine begins with a survey of late nineteenth-century pressures to marry, with the human race "somehow stuck together, couple after couple" (242). Oppressed by what she sees—"It was strange—it was distasteful; indeed, there was something in this indissolubility of bodies which was repugnant to her sense of decency and sanitation" (242)—Orlando flees to the moor, breaks an ankle, and resolves to die as "nature's bride," until she is discovered by a man on horseback:

"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. It was Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire. (250)

The brisk style comically mirrors the matter-of-fact courtship Vita describes in her diary (Nicolson 31–32). In the instantaneous sympathetic understanding that brings Orlando/Vita and Shelmerdine/Harold together (from which physical attraction is conspicuously absent), Virginia's fantasy again puts the issues of sexual identity in the spotlight: "an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously: 'You're a woman, Shell!' she cried. 'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried" (252). In case anyone misses the point, it is repeated:

"Are you positive you aren't a man?" he would ask anxiously, and she would echo.
"Can it be possible you're not a woman?" and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once.

And so they would go on talking... (258; emphasis mine)

Critics are quite right to call the relationship with Shelmerdine androgynous, but the primary implications of Orlando's character, as I argue, and the focus of the book have to do with a different kind of relationship.

Once she has become a woman, Orlando continues to don male clothing to seek out the company of her own sex. More important, Sasha, the Russian Princess, haunts the memory of Orlando the woman as powerfully and pervasively as she dominates the passions of Orlando the man. The fantasy that first validates Vita's masculine tendencies by giving her a Renaissance boyhood in which
Sapphism and the Subversiveness of Orlando
to fall in love with Sasha/Violet insists with equal rigor on the reality and profundity of a woman's love for a woman:

And as all Orlando's loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man. For now a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity. (161)

Even minor female characters like the prostitutes Nell, Prue, Kitty, and Rose (216–22) have a serious dignity not bestowed on more prominent male characters. The anomaly of Orlando's marriage to Shalermertime, in fact, occasions the clearest acknowledgment of theme in the novel:

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)

For she was extremely doubtful whether, if the spirit [of the age] had examined the contents of her mind carefully, it would not have found something highly contraband for which she would have had to pay the full fine. She had only escaped by the skin of her teeth. She had just managed, by some dexterous deference to the spirit of the age, by putting on a ring and finding a man on a moor, by loving nature and being no satirist, cynic, or psychologist—any one of which goods would have been discovered at once—to pass its examination successfully. And she heaved a deep sigh of relief, as, indeed, well she might. . . . (265–66)

The examination Orlando passes by “the skin of her teeth” could not be plainer, and The Well of Loneliness provided a timely illustration of the “full fine” one could expect to pay for not passing.

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But the real triumph is Virginia's. “You will never succumb to the charms of any of your sex—What an arid garden the world must be for you!” she wrote to Vanessa in 1927 while the ideas for Orlando were taking shape (Letters 3: 381). It makes sense that Orlando should follow To the Lighthouse, her most deliberately and consciously autobiographical novel, for it is part of the same impulse, so close to her and so potentially explosive that it required juggling—even to herself—to distance it. If it was easier to write, it was also rooted in a less problematic relationship than the one with her parents: the whole autumn in which the work went “so quick I can't get it typed before lunch” is colored by the pleasure it gave her (Diary 3: 164). There was urgency, too. “Launched furtively but with all the more passion” in October (161), Orlando seemed in retrospect, in December 1927, “extraordinarily unwilled by me but potent in its own right. . . . as if it showed everything aside to come into existence” (168).

Nor is Orlando less “experimental” than the novel that preceded it. If To the Lighthouse seemed to require “a new name. . . . to supplant 'novel.' A new ______ by Virginia Woolf. But what? Elegy?” (Diary 3: 34), Orlando, she boasted, would “revolutionise biography in a night” (Letters 3: 429). There is a clue to what she meant as early as November 1926, when she wondered whether the method of To the Lighthouse could now serve a different use—such as:

. . . some semi mystic very profound life of a woman, which shall all be told on one occasion; & time shall be utterly obliterated; future shall somehow blossom out of the past. One incident—say the fall of a flower—might contain it. My theory being that the actual event practically does not exist—nor time either. (Diary 3: 118)

Orlando's Biographer “untwine[s] and twist[s] again”—through four hundred years of family, cultural, social, and intellectual history—the "odd, incongruous strands" of Vita's psyche (Letters 3: 429), so that ordinary time and actual events, the mainstays of conventional biography (witness critical efforts to pin down how many times Vita and Virginia went to bed, how many months, years, the “affair” lasted), have least to do with the more significant realities of personal identity Virginia was intent on capturing. Her success is attested by Harold in a letter from Berlin on 15 October 1928: “It really is Vita—her puzzled concentration, her absent-minded tenderness. . . . She strikes magnificent and clumsy through 350 years” (Woolf, Letters 3: 548n).
But Leonard's praise suggests more: "in some ways better than The Lighthouse; about more interesting things, & with more attachment to life, & larger." The single "incident" that "contains" Orlando's life in this revolutionary biography, so that the future really does "somehow blossom out of the past" (although the "actual event practically does not exist—nor time either"), is much more interesting than her original notion of "the fall of a flower" and much larger than Vita herself. The "event," of course, is Orlando's change of sex, which allows Virginia to place herself and her readers at the very core of Orlando's sapphic "nature"—and to see that it is good. Also funny. As funny in its collisions with conventional thinking and acting as Rosalind's excursion into male privilege is in As You Like It, where the Forest of Arden, like Virginia's fantasy, obliterates the significance of ordinary time and actual events, where the boundaries of sexual identities are blurred beyond conventional sorting out, where a male actor playing a woman playing a man playing a woman tries on and casts off and tries on again all the stereotypical poses and conventional gestures of Petrarchan love, where the prejudices and injustices of a more strictly ordered world are temporarily held at bay, and where laughter is the route to wisdom and compassion. The humor of Orlando, like the humor of Shakespearean comedy, runs the gamut from slapstick to wit, but with one important difference. While Shakespeare's Orlando, like everyone else in the play, is eclipsed by Rosalind's complex passions and nimble wit, Virginia's Orlando and her Biographer exist in complementary balance with each other: Orlando all beauty, passion, action; her Biographer—now Keatsian, now Chaucerian, now Shakespearean—all voice and eloquence.

"If I saw you would you kiss me? If I were in bed would you?—I'm rather excited about Orlando tonight: have been lying by the fire and making up the last chapter." Virginia wrote Orlando as an act of love—identified Vita by name in the dedication—and, "very clear & plain, so that people will understand every word," celebrated her sapphic nature with an insider's knowledge for 329 exuberant pages. "That book is the cleanest thing I know," Harold wrote from Berlin, as he told Vita how the proprietor of a bar there had assaulted him with pornographic photographs and how he had gone off "in a dungeon and read a chapter of Orlando to cleanse [his] mind" (Sackville-West, Letters 298). Its impact on Vita, naturally, was stronger:

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 with jewels. It is like being alone in a dark room with a treasure 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.

(Letters 288)

Vita had attempted, both in Challenge and in her diary, to write about sapphic love honestly and sympathetically, but Challenge had been suppressed despite her concealment of its erotic implications, and the diary remained secret. It is not surprising that she felt "violently" about The Well of Loneliness, even though it was not a great or even very good book, even though in its pitch for tolerance it presented its heroine as an unfortunate and unwilling freak of nature. What Virginia gave Vita in the book that started as a joke and continued seriously until it shoved everything else out of the way is the first positive, and still unsurpassed, sapphic portrait in literature. Vita's response—light-years from Stephen's discovery of herself in the pages of Krafte-Ebing—goes right to the heart of the achievement: "you have invented a new form of Narcissism,—I confess,—I am in love with Orlando—this is a complication I had not foreseen" (Letters 289 [11 Oct. 1928]).

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Notes

1 An important exception to this trend is Cook's spirited essay on the ways lesbian themes and lives are represented and misrepresented in standard literary criticism and biography. Her penetrating remarks on Woolf complement and reinforce some of the arguments I develop in this essay, though they are not part of a sustained thesis about Woolf and they touch on Orlando.
only in passing. DeSalvo acknowledges the nature of the relationship between Virginia and Vita but emphasizes the literary productivity it engendered in both women rather than its explicit significance as a saphic relationship.

Sibyl Colefax was one of the “society women” who “lionized” Woolf (Letters 3: xvii-xix). Ozzie (Oswald Dickinson was the brother of Violet Dickinson, to whom Virginia had been intimately attached since childhood (Letters 1: xviii). Vita used Heinemann as her publisher until she met Virginia and Leonard and began giving her works to their Hogarth Press.

Nigel Nicolson “decodes” the story in his foreword to the Avon paperback.

For Virginia, Vita, and the PEN club, see Sackville-West, Letters 47-49, and Woolf, Letters 3: 24-25, 28. For Virginia and the Fenina prize, see her Letters 3: 337-38. For Radclyffe Hall, see Baker 144, 194.

Newton offers a sympathetic and insightful discussion of Radclyffe Hall and the “sexologists”; Fassler gives a detailed and compelling exploration of the influence of their theories on the “androgyne” of Bloomsbury in general.

A similar distinction lies behind Virginia’s remark about Duncan Grant’s androgynous nature in Letters 3: 381. Cf. also the practices of critics who write about androgyny. Marder calls Orlando a “kind of hymn to androgyny” (111) and notices that it is “the only book by Virginia Woolf that evokes the sensations of physical love” (110), but his discussion has nothing to say about Orlando’s erotic relationships. Heilbrun elaborates the benefits heterosexual relationships stand to gain from less rigid gender expectations, but she carefully distances homosexuality, when she mentions it, from the main issues she discusses. Fassler puts the emphasis back where it belongs (237).

For lengthier discussions of the medical issues in their historical context, see Faderman 314-33; Fassler; and Newton.

My colleague John Limon made this point in stimulating conversations with me over this essay.

Works Cited


