

**“Orlando about the year 1840”:  
Woolf’s Rebellion against Victorian Sexual Repression through Image and Text**

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<1> It is commonly acknowledged that Virginia Woolf’s extramarital love affair with Vita Sackville-West provided the inspiration for her modernist, fanciful biography, *Orlando* (1928). Sackville-West was well-known not only for being born into an aristocratic family; enjoying an open marriage with the diplomat, Sir Harold Nicolson, a bi-sexual; having close friendships with several members of the Bloomsbury Group; and authoring award winning books but also for “openly and unashamedly” (Sproles 67) having affairs with women. Woolf capitalized on Vita’s and her family’s notoriety by plundering their history to create *Orlando*’s partially factual, partially fictional narrative in which the eponymous protagonist lives a magical life that spans nearly four-hundred years and portrays events lived by Sackville-West and a variety of her aristocratic ancestors. As Woolf began work on the novel, she wrote to Sackville-West, affirming “its [sic] all about you and lusts of your flesh” (*Letters*, 9 Oct 1927). Four days later, Woolf again wrote to Sackville-West, this time foregrounding her own erotic desires: “I make it up in bed at night . . . I want to see you in the lamplight, in your emeralds”; “Orlando will be a little book, with pictures” (13 Oct 1927). Woolf began the process of incorporating images into the novel by traveling to Sackville-West’s familial home of Knole and selecting from the family’s portrait collection three paintings of Sackville-West’s ancestors (Nicolson and Trautmann footnote 1, 434). These visual images then influenced Woolf’s written text, as she faithfully transcribed sartorial details from the paintings, which were reproduced in the text, in order to dress the male Orlando during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. But after Orlando calmly accepts the extraordinary metamorphosis when he wakes up as a she, the accompanying images meant to (re)create the likeness of Orlando in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth centuries are no longer reproductions of painted portraits. After this point in the book, Orlando’s image is represented by *photographic* portraits of Sackville-West, two of which were carefully orchestrated by Woolf. These photographs tend to be read as paratextual evidence that Sackville-West *was* Orlando. And by including the pictures, Woolf exposed—even as she encoded—her devotion to her lover. Sackville-West’s son, Nigel Nicolson, famously declared that *Orlando* is “the longest and most charming love letter in literature.” But, less famously, Nicolson’s tribute continues: Woolf “explores Vita, weaves her in and out of the

centuries, tosses her from one sex to the other, . . . dresses her in furs, lace and emeralds . . . and ends by photographing her” (225). Nicolson’s analogy—a love letter—appears to emphasize Woolf’s textual writing, but he significantly ends the sentence on Woolf’s visual composition: the photographs.

<2> I am sure by now you are wondering: Why has an article about a twentieth-century text been published in a journal focused on nineteenth-century gender and sexuality? It’s true that I am analyzing a modernist novel here, but I am doing so in order to explore the influence that Victorian technological innovations (mass produced clothing and photographic imagery) had on Woolf’s representation of Victorian sexuality in the text. To that end, I first provide an overview of how paratextual images influence readers’ reception of biographies (even quasi-fictional ones) in general and *Orlando* in particular. Next, I illustrate how Woolf faithfully transcribed contemporary details of masculine fashion from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century portraits into *Orlando*; therefore, the *paintings* reproduced within the novel reflect the common understanding that images in biographies are meant to be read as factual, corroborating the text and providing visual verification of the era and the person being profiled. Then I scrutinize how the stable relationship between textual and visual modes of writing breaks down in the chapter focusing on the now female Orlando’s life in the nineteenth century, when Woolf includes an original photograph entitled “Orlando about the year 1840,” in which Sackville-West is captured as Orlando. In the written text, Woolf dresses the female Orlando in clothing appropriate for the Victorian era; however, in the photograph, Sackville-West is costumed anachronistically. The twentieth-century clothing items in this alleged nineteenth-century photograph make visual Woolf’s modernist parody of biography, revealing how photographs and text are all plays on fact-making, and I argue that this abrupt shift from factual transcription to artistic license underscores how Woolf positions women’s sartorial disguises as a response to the nineteenth-century’s alleged emphasis on sexual repression. Lastly, I discuss how “Orlando about the year 1840” illustrates this modernist novel’s debt to and rebellion against Victorian modes of photography, fashion, and heteronormative discourse.

<3> The French structuralist critic Gerard Genette notes that “A literary work consists, entirely or essentially, of a text, defined (very minimally) as a more or less long sequence of verbal statements” (1), before reminding us that paratext, such as the author’s name, chapter titles, illustrations, etc., “is at the service of a better reception for the text and a more pertinent reading of it” (2). For example, readers who pick up *Orlando* anticipate engaging with a certain type of novel—one marked by experimentation, stream of consciousness, introspection, an emphasis on writing and artistic expression—because Woolf’s name adorns the cover. And since the complete title is *Orlando: A Biography*, readers likely expect illustrations by which to evaluate whether the visual representations of the characters match the corporal and material traits laid out in the text. Images are an integral component of the biography genre, so it

follows that they would be crucial to an analysis of a novel that portends to be a biography. It is surprising, therefore, that many editions of the text exclude reproductions of the paintings and the photographs. In the introduction to *Orlando: The Original Holograph Draft by Virginia Woolf* (1993), Stuart Clarke posits that “We might expect the first draft of *Orlando* . . . to be imbued with sapphism, feminism, and indiscretions about Vita’s personal life. That it is not, shows Woolf’s judgment as to what would be acceptable to Vita, to the reading public, and the authorities” (9). Oddly, Woolf, who had her first draft specially bound for Sackville-West, included neither the reproductions of Sackville-West’s family’s portraits nor the photographs of Sackville-West herself.<sup>(1)</sup> Similar elision is frequent in commercial publications. *A Bibliography of Virginia Woolf* lists eighteen American and British editions that were published between 1928 and 1995. Of these editions, only nine of them, including the Woolf’s Hogarth Press edition, reproduced between four and eight of the plates (Kirkpatrick and Clarke 60-70). By 1970, if not earlier, the plates were no longer included in Hogarth’s reprints. Apparently, this diminution of the photographic paratext is not simply due to cost consciousness; the images have experienced a comparable treatment in digital reproductions. *Orlando*’s free, online presence seems to originate almost solely from Australia, where eBooks@Adelaide (which is maintained by The University of Adelaide Library) and Project Gutenberg of Australia eBooks each have digitized a copy of the text.<sup>(2)</sup> Neither of these *Orlandos*, though, includes the paratextual images nor mentions that the images existed in the original analog version. Similarly, of the digitized *Orlandos* available for purchase, again only about half include the images. This frequent omission is perplexing, because these images—and especially the photographs—were composed by Woolf (or at least by her photographer-cum-amanuensis) specifically for inclusion in the novel. How much of the paratextual elements is essential to the reader’s reception of a text? How much is optional? Wouldn’t publishers respect Woolf’s authorship of the images? These questions become especially significant in *Orlando*, because without the images, Sackville-West’s infamous face is no longer clearly associated with the protagonist—the crossdressing, transsexual wife with lovers of both sexes.

<4> Yet contemporary reviewers of *Orlando* generated relatively little commentary on the impact of *Orlando*’s photographic paratext to their reception or reading of the novel. In a *Sunday Times* review published three days after the book’s release, Desmond MacCarthy—an intimate of Bloomsbury whom Woolf describes as an “inspiring critic” in *Orlando*’s preface (5)—noted simply that Woolf “combines images and historic facts, possibilities and impossibilities, reflections upon history and manners with scenes from a dream-world” (225). By the next Sunday in the *Observer*, J.C. Squire revealed the identity of the model, noting “Orlando, though he never goes so far as to be more than one person at one time, is a successive selection from the ancestors of a lady of our own day, for whose portrait Miss V. Sackville-West, to whom the book is dedicated, has posed” (228). A few weeks later, in the *Evening Standard*, English novelist and critic Arnold Bennett opined, “the novel, which is a

play of fancy, a wild fantasia, a romance, a high-brow lark, is illustrated with ordinary realistic photographs, including several of Vita Sackville-West (a Hawthornden prize-winner), to whom the book is dedicated. The portraits of Miss Sackville-West are labelled 'Orlando.' . . . This is the oddest of all the book's oddities" (232). While what Bennett believed to be odd was left ambiguous, what is clear is that this author with mainstream sensibilities found something to be amiss in Woolf's photographic paratext. By February of 1929, Raymond Mortimer—a friend of Sackville-West's as well as her husband's lover—noted that "The book is listed as biography. And it is no secret that *Orlando* is a portrait of Mrs. Harold Nicolson, who writes under her unmarried name, V. Sackville-West. The book includes . . . photographs of her as well as the ancestors from which she shows herself so evidently descended" (241). By 1930 French Professor of English Jean-Jacques Mayoux made the first overt connection between real life and the fictionalized biography, hinting that perhaps the idea of heterosexuality is the truest fiction: "It is the fantastic biography (with Victoria Sackville-West, the poetess, as its very real basis) of a hero who lives three hundred and fifty years, and who becomes a heroine halfway through (and we know for certain that we are all more or less bi-sexual)" (249). As the above quotations reveal, critics primarily focused on how the photographs verified that Sackville-West—an aristocrat, a prize-winning novelist, a wife, and a mother—was the basis for Orlando, a transsexual woman who cross-dresses and "enjoyed the love of both sexes equally" (Woolf, *Orlando* 161). The fact that Sackville-West allowed her face to be produced within the text fomented interest in and was surely perceived as corroboration of illicit gender identity and sexual pleasures.

<5> In the late twentieth century, literary critics focused more directly on Woolf's use of photography, honing in on how *Orlando* subverts the typical reader's assumption that images verify textual facts by visually concretizing a character. In her introduction to *Orlando*, Maria DiBattista argues the opposite is closer to the truth: "The photographs of Vita . . . are a measure of how thoroughly her identity had been assimilated into Woolf's imaginary creation and subordinated to Woolf's determination to reinvent the novel in the guise of a realistically fanciful biography" (xlv). Indeed, Talia Schaffer argues that "The Bloomsbury circle was fascinated with the relationship between photography and history. They recognized how photographs disrupt our sense of the past by preserving that past not wisely but too well. [. . .] To the Bloomsbury reader, then, the mere presence of photographs signaled the novel's desire to upset normative cultural expectations about history and art" (50), primarily, "our sense that the novel tells the truth" (50). To help articulate this paradox, Woolf, as Helen Wussow notes, creates an experience for the reader that "undermines the supposed faithfulness of a biography toward its subject by presenting false photographic evidence" (2), making visual Woolf's experimentation with the overlap between nonfictional and fictional elements of biography. In "Her Kodak Pointed at His Head: Virginia Woolf and Photography," Diane F. Gillespie similarly maintains that Woolf did not consider photographs representations of truth (114), pointing to

how Woolf fretted that photographs “tyrannize over the living” because of the “human tendency to distort the past, whether for self-indulgent, sentimental reasons or for prescriptive ones” (146). Nevertheless, Gillespie concedes that Woolf relied on photographs “to explore the difficulty of knowing people, as well as to communicate the self-images of some of her characters” (146). In a similar vein, Dennis Denisoff asserts that

The incorporation of visual portraits into *Orlando* offered Woolf not simply a second medium for constructing positive depictions of nonheterosexual emotions and desires but also a new signifiatory system arising from the dynamics between the sister arts. The portraits incite an ekphrastic discord that accentuates differences between the life stories that are culturally prescribed for women and broader range of narratives from which Woolf felt that they had a right to choose. (259-60)

The consensus appears to be that Woolf’s visual sleight of hand flies in the face of accepted practice with paratextual images, underscoring that the project itself borders on satirical, as the objective of reconstructing a life—and perhaps especially one’s lover’s life—in either image or in text is itself a farce.

<6> When Woolf traveled to Knole to select the portraits to represent Orlando in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, she was probably ushered into the ballroom, where “the Elizabethan paneling . . . is so covered up as to be unnoticeable behind the Sackville portraits of ten generations” (Sackville-West 25).<sup>(3)</sup> We do not know exactly why Woolf selected from amongst this abundance the two “Orlando portraits” that she did, but perhaps she was influenced by Sackville-West’s confession that she was drawn to [Cornelius Nuie’s 1637 portrait of the Honourable Edward Sackville](#), as she felt his father “the embodiment of Cavalier romance” (89) in no small part because of this portrait of his sons throwing dice. In the first chapter of *Orlando*, Woolf leverages the portrait to remediate appropriate ornamental male dress into her writing. The narrator recounts Orlando’s dressing ritual as he “tossed his stockings to one side of the room, his jerkin to the other. [. . .] . . . he . . . thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias” (20). Orlando hastens to don the stockings and lace, not to mention taffeta and rosettes, that were appropriate for the aristocratic men in Queen Elizabeth’s court during the sixteenth century. Sackville-West seemed similarly enamored of her ancestor, Lionel Sackville, seventh Earl & first Duke of Dorset, who was the subject of the last reproduced portrait, [“Orlando as Ambassador,” originally painted by Rosalba Carriera](#). Sackville-West recalls the “shock of [the Duke’s portrait] being precisely what we [Woolf and herself] were waiting for” after the two women discovered that the Duke’s contemporaries believed that “in spite of the greatest dignity in his appearance,” he was “in private the greatest lover of low humour and buffoonery” (151).<sup>(4)</sup> The image of the Duke is meant to correspond with the time in the novel

when Orlando asks King Charles to send him as Ambassador Extraordinary to Constantinople, and it is during this period, in the seventeenth century, when Orlando accepts a magical transition from a he to a she “without showing any signs of discomposure” (102), before she immediately “wound about her person several strings of . . . pearls of the finest orient” (103-04). Although the narrator recounts that these pearls “had formed part of her Ambassadorial wardrobe” (104)—and we do see a pearl brooch at Lord Dorset’s throat in the portrait—this sartorial detail was not mentioned in the text until after she becomes a woman. Earlier, when Orlando was a man, the pearls symbolized his diplomatic and patriarchal authority, but now as a woman, the pearls represent her tenuous economic position, and she is forced to exchange some of them as both monetary and social currency, using a portion of the proceeds from one pearl to buy “herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, . . . it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank” (113). And while the “signature ropes of pearls” featured in *Orlando* have been traced back to Sackville-West as being one of her standard accessories, it is significant that the novel closes by zeroing in on Orlando using the glow of the pearls to guide her husband to her side. *Orlando* thusly illustrates that fixed relationships amongst gender, sex, and sexual desire are fabrications; the novel instead tailors the image of fluid bisexuality within an open marriage, such as Sackville-West enjoyed with her husband, Harold Nicolson.

<7> After Orlando becomes a woman, her physical image is represented by photographs of Sackville-West’s face and body. Woolf wrote to her, stating “Nessa wants to photograph you at 2, that is if she thinks the Lenare too bad” (*Letters* 435). The photograph to which she referred was to be captured the next week on November 2nd at Lenare studios for the commemoration of Sackville-West being awarded the Hawthornden Prize. But Woolf loved the Lenare shot (and in the novel, the image was entitled, [“Orlando on Her Return to England”](#)), crowing to Sackville-West on December 5th, “The photographs are perfect, and the two Orlando’s [sic] fit like a glove” (*Letters* 442). Nevertheless, Denisoff derides the Lenare photo, for

we find an excellent example of the conventional feminine pose, with soft lines in the body, exposed flesh, awkward clothing, and a gentle gaze. The confident stance of the young boy in the frontispiece has been replaced by a passivity that looks almost dysfunctional in comparison. The full-length portrait of the young heir is supplanted by the severed image of Sackville-West, the disinherited female. (265)

In fact, the boy in the earlier portrait was not the young heir; Edward was the younger brother, and because he was a royalist, he was kidnapped and then decapitated by Cromwell’s forces. Fascinatingly, when one crops and flips the “Orlando as a young boy” image (as I have done in the past), more similarities than differences between Sackville-West and her ancestor become apparent. In the photograph “Orlando on Her Return to England,” Sackville-West’s eyes, like

her male ancestor's, seem to be confidently directed at the viewer. Her hands do not touch her face, and while her shoulder is exposed, her gaze reveals neither a passive nor cringing victim but an aristocratic woman who is claiming her right to have a woman's body, even if it is sexualized.<sup>(5)</sup> In the photo, Sackville-West's strands of pearls, though typical of upper-class female portraiture,<sup>(6)</sup> substantiate the textual sartorial link to Orlando's past as an Ambassador, implying that the female Orlando—while no longer legally an heir—has schemed to preserve some of her and her ancestor's past privileges. Because this first image of Sackville-West is anachronistic—the setting predating the early nineteenth-century invention of photographic technology—this is the first hint that something is amiss in the paratext, suggesting that the photographs amount to a critique of the factualness of biography in general. This critique becomes fully apparent when one compares the textual sartorial details in *Orlando's* chapter on the Victorian obsession with marriage and fecund female (re)production—ironically, the shortest chapter in the novel—to those sartorial details in the allegedly Victorian photograph of Sackville-West as Orlando.

<8> Although Woolf's oft-referenced quotation cites 1910 as the year when "human character changed," in *Orlando* the mid-nineteenth century marks a time when fashion symbolism drastically shifted. Suddenly, the text notes the nineteenth-century trend of adopting wedding bands and crinolines, focusing on the cultural capital women gained by sartorially expressing themselves as heteronormative mothers. Although petticoats and crinolines had been fashionable in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, technological advancements of the mid nineteenth century enabled a more universal adoption of the garments. Rubber and steel replaced whalebone, driving down the cost of crinolines and putting them within the economic reach of middle-class women. This trend is reflected within the novel's written text, when petticoats and crinolines abruptly become a metonymy for Victorian female sexuality as realized by near perpetual (yet disguised) parturientcy. Consequently, Orlando is dismayed that suddenly—in keeping with the spirit of the Victorian age—she must alter her quest from "Life! A Lover!" to "Life! A Husband!" (178) in order to avoid social disapprobation not if but once she conceives a child. Woolf has Joseph Addison enter the text to establish the connection between the "seductiveness of petticoats" and the significance of marriage by reading the following passage from the *Spectator*: "I consider woman as a beautiful, romantic animal, that may be adorned with furs and feathers, pearls and diamonds, ores and silks. . . . All this, I shall indulge them in, but as for the petticoat . . . I neither can, nor will allow it" (153-54). In the actual article, which was published not in the *Spectator* but in *The Tatler*, Addison continues and explains that his dislike of the petticoat arises from, "the great temptation it might give to virgins, of acting in security like married women, and by that means give a check to matrimony, an institution always encouraged by wise societies" (5). Because petticoats and crinolines were used to disguise women's expanding wombs, Addison's condemnation of the garments reveals the patriarchal desire to enforce social jurisdiction over women's pre-conjugal sexuality. But in

the chapter focused on the nineteenth century, *Orlando's* narrator points out that crinolines were deployed to cover all pregnancies—legitimate or otherwise—exposing the catholic Victorian discomfort with female sexuality:

Were they not all of them weak women? wearing crinolines the better to conceal the fact; the great fact; the only fact; but, nevertheless, the deplorable fact; which every modest woman did her best to deny until denial was impossible; the fact that she was about to bear a child? to bear fifteen or twenty children indeed, so that most of a modest woman's life was spent, after all, in denying what, on one day at least of every year, was made obvious. (171)

The Widow Bartholomew, Orlando's housekeeper, is unable even to utter the euphemism for female conjugal sexuality: "the Queen [Victoria, mother of nine children], bless her, is wearing a what d'you call it, a—,' the good woman hesitated and blushed" (171). Orlando immediately begins to reflect and worry, "And then (here she blushed), she would have to buy a crinoline, and then (here she blushed) a bassinette, and then another crinoline, and so on" (172). This passage reveals that Orlando, the as yet unmarried, nineteenth-century woman, has had, as some critics try to deny, heterosexual intercourse in the recent past—and plans to have more in the future—so that the purchasing of multiple crinolines must become part of her sartorial inventory.

<9> The narrator accounts for the irregularity of "the crinoline being blushed for before the husband" with the justification that "her ambiguous position must excuse her (even her sex was still in dispute) and the irregular life she had lived before" (172). And since she's not yet married, Orlando is additionally distressed that, for the first time, it seems "Wedding rings were everywhere. [. . .] Gold, or pinchbeck, thin, thick, plain, smooth, they glowed dully on every hand" (176). Although upper-class female Britons may have been gifted engraved or bejeweled posie rings (dually a promise or engagement ring and wedding ring) since the fifteenth century, it wasn't until the eighteenth century when plain bands began trending. And it probably was not until the nineteenth century when many British subjects were moving from rural to urban areas, from subsistence to waged employ, from expensive homemade to cheaper, mass-produced clothing and accessories, that middle- and lower-class women would have seen the need or had the means to invest in wedding rings. Illustrating the influence of this sartorial trend, Orlando concludes, "There was nothing for it but to buy one of those ugly bands and wear it like the rest" (177). Although Orlando is neither pregnant nor married, once she adopts both the gold wedding band and the crinoline-supported dress that is supposed to signify lawful heterosexual activity, the dress's weight—signifying the burden of feminine sexual virtue in the Victorian era—sends her into a deep depression, and she deplores "that each man and each woman has another allotted to it for life, whom it supports, by whom it is supported, till death

them do part. It would be a comfort, she felt, to lean; to sit down; yes, to lie down; never, never, never to get up again" (179). Orlando's decision to appear married seems not to mark a desire to pursue illicit sexual encounters but the end of her will to pursue anything at all, much less a lover, a husband, or even a life. In despair, she removes the sham wedding ring.

<10> This chapter on the ill-effects of Victorian repression, though, also features an overtly consensual and mutually pleasurable sex scene with her future husband. Immediately after meeting Marmaduke, Orlando exclaims, "You're a woman" (184), which creates "a scene of protestation" (184). Marmaduke's verbal assurances are insufficient, so in response to Orlando's repeated query, "Can it be possible you are not a woman?" (189), "they . . . put the matter to the proof at once" (189). And the couple's subsequent sexual activity is both hidden and revealed in the language of seafaring, of motion and release: "heaving this way, heaving that way, nobly, indolently and rides over the crest of this wave and sinks into the hollow of that one, and so, suddenly stands over you . . . with all her sails quivering and then behold, they drop all of a heap on deck—as Orlando dropped now into the grass beside him" (190-91).<sup>(7)</sup> Whether or not Marmaduke has male or female genitalia under his clothes is never clarified, nor is whether or not the couple engages in sexual acts that may result in pregnancy. What is clear, though, is that Orlando does not submit sexually to her future husband. She positions herself as the one who controls their sexual pleasure—she is on top. And their encounter ends when *she* drops to his side after she brings herself to orgasm in a manner which defies Victorian tropes of proper female sexuality. Additionally, the as-yet-unmarried couple both appear to leisurely yet energetically enjoy their lovemaking session, which complicates Karyn Z. Sproles argument that, "Orlando marries not because she feels heterosexual desire but because she feels coerced by Victorian society's suspicions of single women" (83) and that "there is no evidence of sexual desire for him [her husband, that is]" (83). Similarly, Denisoff quotes Orlando's query, "if one liked other people, . . . was it marriage?" before positing, "Heterosexual ritual does little for Orlando but stop an irritating itch" (265). And while it is apparent that Orlando does feel scorn for heterosexual rituals and does feel coerced into marriage *before* she falls in love with Marmaduke, at their wedding "no one heard the word Obey spoken or saw, except as a golden flash, the ring pass from hand to hand" (Woolf, *Orlando* 193). By specifically omitting the word "obey" from their vows, Orlando and Marmaduke privately affirm their rejection of the wedding ring's public symbolism: patriarchal ownership of the wife's body, thoughts, and behavior. While Orlando does eventually succumb to "the spirit of the age" by donning a crinoline and accepting a wedding ring, it is implied that her public sartorial performance of Victorian female chastity cloaks but does not negate private pleasures with both her husband and others.

<11> According to Audrey Linkman, author of *The Victorians: Photographic Portraits*, "The first commercial photographic studio in the British Isles opened its doors . . . on 23 March 1841"

(22), so the photograph of Sackville-West as “Orlando about the year 1840” would have perfectly corresponded with the introduction of photography in Great Britain. Woolf’s great-aunt, Julia Margaret Cameron, was one of the most famous Victorian female portrait photographers, eschewing the contemporary vogue of retouching photographs, stating that “my whole soul has endeavoured to do its duty toward them [her sitters] in recording faithfully the greatness of the inner as well as the features of the outer man [sic]” (qtd in Linkman 36). Cameron’s philosophy challenged more mainstream tropes of Victorian photographic portraiture, mainly the objective that it was the portrait photographer’s “professional responsibility to highlight natural advantages and to conceal or obscure in shadow any mediocrity, imperfection or blemish” (Linkman 33). Although Woolf did not shoot any of the photographs for the novel, she was an avid amateur photographer. In *Modernist Women and Visual Cultures: Virginia Woolf, Vanessa Bell, Photography and Cinema*, Maggie Humm argues that “modernist women’s private obsession with photography might represent an attempt to explore forms of representation outside the objectifications of masculine modernism” (5). Perhaps these women were attracted by what Roger Fry seem to recognize negatively, that “The position of photography is uncertain and uncomfortable. . . . its status as an independent art has always been disputed” (23), which also means that it was a medium in which women could participate artistically with less pressure to follow established male artistic conventions. Two years before publishing *Orlando*, Woolf wrote an introduction to a collection of Cameron’s work, entitled *Victorian Photographs of Famous Men and Fair Women*, sharing that her celebrated relation’s objective, much like Woolf’s own, was “to overcome realism by diminishing just in the least degree the precision of the focus” (18). Denisoff connects Cameron’s unconventional approach to Woolf’s literary style, arguing that by “invoking a central tenet of Cameron’s portrait theory, Woolf experimented with styles of writing that might capture the character of her subject rather than simply offer a recognizable physical blazon” (259). Although Woolf’s sister and Duncan Grant were the ones credited with taking the “Orlando about the year 1840” shot on November 14, 1927, this was the only photograph at which Woolf was present and this is the only photograph for which Woolf orchestrated parts of Sackville-West’s ensemble; therefore, the photograph’s caption makes the fact that Sackville-West’s costume for “about the year 1840” is anachronistic seem especially significant.

<12> In [“Orlando about the year 1840,”](#) we do see the influence of Cameron’s famous folds of cloth and symbolic use of clothing, but instead of the mythical past for which Cameron was known, Sackville-West’s attire is firmly rooted in the synthetic present of the 1920s. Indeed, Sackville-West appears to be dressed in clothing from her own modernist period: a crinoline-less plaid skirt, a loose fitting, asymmetrical silk top, and a floppy, broad-brimmed velvet hat, none of which are tailored correctly or composed of materials appropriate for an English aristocratic woman of the mid-Victorian Era. Admittedly, these anachronistic clothing items often pass unrecognized or at least unremarked upon by modern critics, such as Sandra M.

Gilbert, who in her third note within “A Note on the Illustrations” describes Sackville-West’s outfit simply as “fancy-dress” (xlviii). While positing that the image reveals how Woolf’s attitude is “dismissive” toward nineteenth-century fashion (50), R. S. Koppen interprets “Orlando about the year 1840” as “showing a rather demure female figure” (47), failing to unpack fully why Sackville-West’s “fancy-dress outfit of checked wool skirt, an eastern shawl and a garden hat” (53) is inappropriate. Plainly, her “fancy dress” does not correspond to the textual description of Orlando at that time, who should have been corseted and decked out in a precisely tailored dress, draped over a voluminous crinoline. Nor does it correspond to the traditions of Victorians who “arrived at the studio dressed to kill; Sunday best and plenty of jewellery were the order of the day” (Linkman 6). Fascinatingly, just a few years prior to writing *Orlando*, [Virginia Woolf was photographed](#) for the international fashion bible, *Vogue*, wearing her deceased mother’s Victorian dress. Like the Victorian connubial fecundity that Woolf parodies in *Orlando*, the *Vogue* photograph paints a picture of Woolf being engulfed by the trappings associated with performing nineteenth-century female heterosexuality: puffy sleeves overwhelming her slender frame, neckline exposing not décolletage but collarbones. Although Woolf had access to her mother’s voluminous Victorian gowns, she clearly did not loan one to Sackville-West for the Orlando photograph. Instead Woolf’s plans for “Orlando about the year 1840” can be seen in her letter to Sackville-West on October 30, 1927, when she queried, “Should I hire a wig for you? or can you make up? . . . *Bring [the Lenare] photograph of Orlando*” (Nicolson and Trautmann, footnote 3 434, emphasis in original). Two weeks later, still contemplating the photograph of her lover, Woolf sent another letter, telling Sackville-West to “bring[] your curls and clothes” (435). All of this begs the question: Why does Woolf’s careful attention to matching period details between text and image suddenly evaporate here in “Orlando about the year 1840”?

<13> One possibility is that Woolf and Sackville-West chose clothes more closely aligned with reform movements at the end of the Victorian era. Toward the close of the nineteenth century, the Victorian dress reform movement stressed the unhealthiness of women’s crinolines and tightly-laced corsets, arguing instead for breathable woolen fabrics, loose corsets, as well as bifurcated petticoats (to be worn under dresses) in order to promote health and facilitate exercise. In the text, Orlando laments that “the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted . . . was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements” (*Orlando*, 178). Sackville-West’s silk tunic and checkered plaid skirt, oddly draped and ill-fitting as they appear to be, may then allude to the aesthetic dress championed by the reform fashion movement of the late nineteenth century, which was exemplified by the Liberty dress worn by Pre-Raphaelites and other politically subversive women. (8) A member of The Healthy and Artistic Dress Union, Arthur Lasenby Liberty believed in creating fashion which “allowed for freedom of movement” (Kortsch 84). Kortsch explains that Liberty made his name by creating “exquisite, drapable fabrics” that were produced in

England but described as “art fabrics from the Orient” (84). These fabrics defined the Liberty Style, which “was recognizable at a glance” (84) and were used in creating the eponymous dresses favored by women interested in reform whose corset-less waists and naturally dyed English fabrics separated them from Philistine women who preferred tightly laced corsets, aniline dyed fabrics, and French fashion (81-4). A woman who wore a Liberty dress was a woman who not only held revolutionary ideals but also was not afraid to communicate them publicly. Significantly, Sackville-West lacks both a crinoline and a corset yet is draped in “healthy” woolen fabric as well as a tunic that seems to emulate imitation “art fabrics from the Orient.”

<14> Many of the Victorians who were active in the dress reform movement were also sympathetic to or even involved in the marriage reform movement. In the mid-nineteenth century, Victorians witnessed the legal concretization of chastity’s double standard once The Marriage Act of 1857 decreed that for a husband to obtain a divorce, he need only demonstrate his wife had committed adultery, whereas a wife had to prove adultery *plus* incest, bigamy, cruelty, or desertion. Since “no fault” divorces were still illegal, the late-Victorians set about trying to find ways to be both sexually active yet beyond the reach of draconian marriage laws. One strongly liberal approach sought to improve the situation by promoting women’s sexual equality, unabashedly arguing that intercourse need not be delayed for marriage.<sup>(9)</sup> These reformers also tended to be at least open minded about if not outright scandalous in their efforts to support relationships that defied heteronormative dictates over pre-marital chastity, marriage before co-habitation, and monogamy. Perhaps then Woolf’s objective with the photograph of the Victorian Orlando in particular is to illustrate that her goal was never a historically faithful reproduction of Orlando’s external and temporal characteristics but instead to reveal that women in the Victorian era had more in common with their modernist counterparts than we usually concede. Earlier in the eighteenth century, Orlando “stripped the satins from her back, stood erect in the neat black silk knickerbockers” (Woolf, *Orlando* 137). Note how Orlando’s feminine underwear becomes masculine pants, a symbol of virility; she strips and becomes “erect.” But these undergarments were not popular in the eighteenth century, and most modernists would have recognized them as an example of the Victorian dress reform movement’s scandalous bi-furcated petticoats. Like fears about the New Woman, the female Orlando cross-dresses specifically in order to pass as a man and, therefore, evade the social disapprobation of unwedded women engaging in heterosexual intercourse. Ironically, this ploy expands her pool of potential lovers to include both men and women, as Orlando “found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another. [. . .] nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally” (161).<sup>(10)</sup> Woolf’s choice of sartorial items in both image and text is a way to represent both Sackville-

West *and* Orlando as androgynous cross-dressers, as “both / and” feminine and masculine instead of “either / or” man or woman. And, if we look closely at the “Orlando about the year 1840,” Sackville-West is wearing a plain wedding band *plus* a large ring, which sits prominently on her pinky finger, where men of rank have traditionally worn their family’s signet ring. Men used these signet rings both to impress documents or seal letters as well as to conspicuously display their families’ coats of arms. In this photograph, Sackville-West’s enormous pinky ring overshadows her wedding band, again alluding perhaps to the fact that although she is female and now married, Orlando remains the heir of both her family’s affluence and her former male privileges.

<15> All fashion defines itself by expressly differing from the past, even if only in relatively minor details; therefore, what is unconventional can only be recognizably so in contrast to what has come before. As Koppen observes, “displacement occurred with the translation of nineteenth-century sartorial items or accessories from their original temporal frame to a modernist one” (3). But the above exploration contrasting the clothing written into *Orlando’s* text to those in “Orlando about the year 1840” reveals an equal amount of dissonance when modernist clothing items are placed in a nineteenth-century temporal frame. The twentieth-century clothing items visually contradicting the caption nevertheless appear to force the reader to accept the image as being from the nineteenth century. But in “The Temporality of Modernist Life Writing in the Era of Transsexualism,” Pamela L. Caughie reminds us that

Historicizing cannot itself be a transhistorical act, flattening out different temporalities in reading across historical time. That is not time as a crumpled handkerchief but time as a sequence of discrete eras. A modernist reading of the past reads synchronically, across the folds of the handkerchief [. . .] *Orlando* dramatizes the persistence of the past in the present, making narrative temporality crucial to identity. *Orlando* insists that writing and identity, textuality and sexuality, the grammatical and the gendered, are learned together. (505, 517)

I believe that “Orlando about the year 1840” conversely dramatizes that the *present* is also always in the past, which is underscored by the fact that in the photograph a bisexual woman in an open marriage in the 1920s is masquerading as a married, bisexual, transsexual woman from the 1840s. By capturing Sackville-West draped in modern clothes and then labeling the image with the temporal marker “about the year 1840,” Woolf successfully blurs or defamiliarizes the image of Victorian chaste fecundity, forcing the reader’s focus to remain on the person in spite of the historically inaccurate clothing.<sup>(11)</sup> In the modern era, Sackville-West was a notable public figure, an aristocratic, married, award-winning author who was closely connected to the sexually progressive Bloomsbury Group and who publicly wore not just masculine but *men’s* clothing—notably pants. Her photograph, therefore, would carry the palimpsestic

ghost of her reputation as a scandalous crossdresser, which, of course, fed suspicions of private, non-heterosexual activity.

<16> As I have shown, Woolf's paratextual images only corroborate the written text in the chapters set in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries before switching to historically, sartorially, and technologically anachronistic images for the chapters set in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. These images work to illustrate Woolf's feminist critique of Orlando's apparent textual submission to Victorian sexual and moral etiquette. The significance of Woolf's visual sleight of hand relies on readers' knowledge of a Victorian invention (camera) and Victorian fashions (crinolines, corsets, marriage rings, etc.), illustrating how Woolf's modernist project makes sense primarily by exploiting and rebelling against nineteenth-century technology, artistic and social fashions, and moral codes of silence. In "Pictures and Portraits," when brooding over why it is unacceptable that a portrait of Mrs. John Stuart Mill does not hang in the National Portrait Gallery, Woolf proclaims that "Without a face, [she] was without a soul. [. . .] without eyes or hair, cheeks or lips, her stupendous genius, her consummate virtue, availed her nothing. She is a mist, a wraith, a miasma of anonymous merit. The face is the thing" (164).<sup>(12)</sup> It is significant that here Woolf focuses on John Stuart Mill's wife's face. In 1928—the same year that Woolf published *Orlando*—the Representation of the People Act was passed and women were finally guaranteed suffrage on the same terms as men, bringing to fruition the Victorian-era Women's Suffrage petition, which was presented to Parliament by Mill in 1867. While limited suffrage was granted to unmarried women who were householders in 1869, full suffrage was withheld, and Woolf briefly participated in the suffrage movement in 1910 and again 1918. Nevertheless, Woolf "was embarrassed . . . of being mocked for taking an interest in politics" (Lee 324), perhaps because between 1918 and 1928 there were fears that the political emancipation of women would also lead to their sexual emancipation (Hovey 395) because universal suffrage "extended the English definition of the voting citizen beyond the boundaries of gender and state-sanctioned sexuality" (403). Like Mrs. Mill's face, without the images of Sackville-West's face and clothed body, *Orlando*'s commentary on women's political and sexual rights—and especially Victorian women's—is decidedly mitigated. Ultimately, the treatment of these images reminds us that for better or worse "the paratextual element is always subordinate to 'its' text, and this functionality determines the essence of its appeal and its existence" (Genette 12). This subordination blurs the significance Woolf attached to the Victorian era within *Orlando*. Without the photographs, and especially without the photograph of "Orlando about the year 1840," *Orlando*'s critical commentary on the influence of Victorian photography, ancestors, sexual politics, and clothing on the modernist era is dulled. And in the process, readers lose a sense of just how much knowledge of the nineteenth-century technology, fashions, and politics lived on during the modern era and even into today. For many, the term Victorian connotes sexual repression, and Woolf keenly chafed against that legacy. But Woolf was also born in the Victorian age and would, therefore, have been familiar

with personal stories and cultural artifacts that contradicted the grand narrative of universal Victorian repression.

<16> Female sexual pleasure in *Orlando* is communicated verbally and visually via a complex subtext, which corroborates the theory Woolf outlined in “Professions for Women” (1942), describing how difficult it is, “To speak . . . about the body, about the passions which it was unfitting for her as a woman to say. Men . . . would be shocked. [. . .] She could write no more” (2217). Even in *Orlando*, in which Woolf critiques the Victorian tropes of female sexual submission within matrimony, sartorial imagery communicates that she feels coerced into writing the appearance of heteronormativity: “nature . . . has further complicated her task and added to our confusion by providing not only a perfect rag–bag of odds and ends within us—a piece of a policeman’s trousers lying cheek by jowl with Queen Alexandra’s wedding veil—but has contrived that the whole assortment shall be lightly stitched together by a single thread. Memory is the seamstress, and a capricious one at that” (58). Here Woolf reminds us that historical biography is a fabrication, with Memory, the “capricious seamstress,” personified as the author who has sewn together this image of female sexuality. But the featured wedding veil that marks the boundary of approved feminine conjugality lays (and *lies*) not next to her husband’s trousers but a policeman’s, a professional identity that was established and solidified in the nineteenth century. Because Woolf felt pressure not to write sentences of overt female sexual desire, the novel’s images and particularly the supposed Victorian-era photograph are crucial to a nuanced reading of Woolf’s sexualized subtext. Throughout the chapter of *Orlando* that is set in the nineteenth century, the written text focuses on how Orlando the character submits to wearing a crinoline and marrying Marmaduke; conversely, the visual paratext of Sackville-West’s clothing in the alleged nineteenth-century photograph—the woolen skirt and corset-less waist, signet and wedding rings—symbolically reveal the Victorian Orlando’s continued rebellion against the sartorial performance of Victorian morality, connoting chastity, conjugal monogamy, and heterosexual submission.(13)

#### Endnotes

(1)Clarke, however, does provide a beneficial appendix in which he lists and transcribes pertinent portions of Woolf’s letters to Sackville-West regarding the images.(^)

(2)According to the copyright page in the edition of *Orlando* edited by Mark Hussey, Lenard Woolf renewed the novel’s copyright in 1956, which is still in effect today in the United States. In Great Britain, though, Woolf’s works entered the public domain on January 1, 2012.(^)

(3)Linkman notes that “The British tradition of monarchs and members of the court having their portraits painted extends back to 1526, and over the next couple hundreds of years most would have to travel to London in order to have their picture executed” (9).[\(△\)](#)

(4)Lionel was also a man who received “dedications from Prior and Pope, who had been his father’s friends” (Sackville-West 152).[\(△\)](#)

(5)Denisoff posits that the female Orlando “had attained . . . expectation from her family galleries, since portraiture dictated that the main characteristics of women . . . were modesty, chastity, and passivity. Nor were women allowed any boldness of action or gesture. In many works the woman’s neck and shoulders are exposed, but . . . she is virtually never depicted as recognizing her erotic appeal and often does not acknowledge the spectator. From the breasts down, the subject is frequently buried in a mass of folds, frills, and drapes, with this constriction of movement enhanced by the poses deemed appropriate for a woman to take. . . . Her hands, if they hold anything, do so in a feeble manner. More often, they just limply touch her cheek, chin, or cleavage” (264).[\(△\)](#)

(6)Beginning in the Renaissance, fathers would commission marriage portraits of their daughters, in which the bride-to-be would be adorned in pearls in order to symbolize her virginity and wealth.[\(△\)](#)

(7)Vita Sackville-West wrote to Woolf in 1938, “And to think how the ceilings of Long Barn [Sackville-West’s home] once swayed above us!” (qtd. in Sproles 4, bracketed text in original).[\(△\)](#)

(8)See Koppen 14.[\(△\)](#)

(9)The most influential of these reform organizations was the Marxist Social Democratic Federation, which was established in 1881 and promoted a new type of marriage between friends, which they called free unions. Free unions were seen to be women’s solution to a marriage industry that beckoned them with tales of romance yet represented social, legal, and sexual submission.[\(△\)](#)

(10)Orlando’s sexual activity remains decidedly off-stage and lovers remain unnamed, except for the female prostitutes—Nell, Prue, Kitty, and Kitty Rose. So while Orlando enjoys the “love of both sexes equally,” only her female conquests who were also prostitutes are called out by name, implying not only that aristocratic men’s heterosexual privilege includes the right to consort privately with women of all classes yet remain socially untainted, but also that an upper-class woman engaging in extramarital relations with lower-class women is somehow less scandalous—and therefore more mentionable—than an upper-class woman having private relations with any man who is not her husband, regardless of class.[\(△\)](#)

(11)For more on modernist novelists, photography, and realism, see Adams 177-79.(^)

(12)Although irate over the gallery's paternalistic injunction against lone women, Woolf commends their democratic rate of a sixpenny bit so that anyone—poor or rich—could gaze upon the portraits (163).(^)

(13)For more on modernism and costumes as rebellion against mainstream ideologies, see Koppen 19 and 27.(^)

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