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Orlando: The Quest of the Artist through the Ages

Buket Akgün*

As the subtitle implies Woolf's novel, *Orlando: A Biography* is supposed to be a biography of Orlando and gives us a historical outline of English literature in three centuries, from the Elizabethan age to the modern periods, within the framework of the experiences and adventures of Orlando as an artist. The relation between art and reality, art and nature, art and lies/immorality, art and religion, art and gender, art and immortality, art and death come to the foreground in the everlasting quest of Orlando as an artist.

As Hermoine Lee states, like her biographer Orlando is "struggling to find a new way of expressing life (or truth, or reality: the terms are frequently interchangeable) in art"¹ which reminds us of the mimetic theory of art – art as imitation or representation of nature. Although Plato claims that "imitative art ... is ...completely divorced from truth, and [that] apparently it is enabled to effect so much because it only seizes upon an object in a small part of its extent, and that small part is unsubstantial",² we are given several examples, such as the long list of furniture Orlando bought, depicting how disastrous and tedious the results of imitating or representing every aspect of life would be. As opposed to Plato, Aristotle associates imitation with learning and asserts that "the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and the animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons".³ Orlando, accordingly, contemplates whether Nature is "beautiful or cruel" and eventually goes "on to the nature of reality, which led her to truth, which in its turn led her to Love, Friendship, Poetry".⁴

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¹ Hermoine Lee, *The Novels of Virginia Woolf* (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1977) 153.

² Plato, *Republic*, trans. John Llewelyn Davies & David James Vaughan (Kent: Wordsworth, 1997) 327.

³ Aristotle, *Poetics*, trans. S. H. Butcher (Devon: Courier Dover Publications, 1951) 15.

⁴ Woolf, *Orlando: A Biography* (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth, 2003) 71.

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Orlando asserts that "the very stuff of life" is "the only possible subject for fiction." Therefore, she continues with her observations of nature while staying with the gypsies. "She likened the hills to ramparts, to the breasts of doves, and the flanks of kine. She compared the flowers to enamel and the turf to Turkey rugs worn within. Trees were withered hags, and sheep were grey boulders. Everything in fact was something else."⁵ As a matter of fact, the artist, as Orlando's comparisons delineate, makes something brand new out of what he/she observes in nature. Her attitude towards nature is quite Romantic because she looks at objects in nature and sees them as different things. As Romanticism claims, here too, nature plays the role of a springboard, an inspiration, for the artist.

Orlando calls herself "nature's bride",⁶ referring to the unity of the artist with nature, which is yet another Romantic notion. Likewise, the Romantics believed that the spirit in nature permeated human beings. Yet, the gypsies regard nature as destructive and Orlando's love of nature as a "disease".⁷ Rustum el Sadi, a gypsy, whose left-hand fingers were withered by the frost and whose right foot was crushed by a falling rock, is a solid proof to the cruelty and destructivity of nature. Additionally, while Orlando is trying to compose poetry indoors, nature calls and hinders her from writing, which points to the antipathy between art and nature. Orlando arrives at the same conclusion and states that "Nature and letters seem to have a natural antipathy; bring them together they tear each other to pieces." As a boy, he strives to "match the shade of green" while describing nature in his poetry but then realises that "[g]reen in nature is one thing, green in literature another."⁸ It is quite challenging to capture nature/life as it is in art even though art is inevitably a representation of nature/life. The Great Frost reflects how the artist freezes time to capture the moment in his work of art. Actually, the snow, the frozen lake and ice, all being translucent and resembling a mirror, suggest the mimetic theory of art. Just as art stops the time, freezes real life and immortalises it, so the frost stops the social codes and conventions with the carnival and immortalises an old woman by ironically freezing her to death. This suggests the relation between art and death on the one hand and art and immortality on the other.

⁵ Ibid. 133, 70.

⁶ Ibid. 122.

⁷ Ibid. 70.

⁸ Ibid. 7.

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What is even more ironical is that everyone admires the life-likeness of the frozen old woman.

Art has also been associated with immorality, falsehood and lies. In the masque scene the allegorical Ladies of Purity, Chastity and Modesty rally against the biographer who insists on having and narrating nothing but the truth. The three Sisters also act as censors, trying to cover Orlando's naked body with drapes. If the biographer needs Orlando for the existence of his text and if Orlando is the embodiment of English literature, then the Sisters are trying to censor not only the biography in question but also literature in general. However, they cannot hide the naked truth that Orlando is a woman and are scared away by the trumpets demanding truth. As if to emphasise this relationship between art and lies, the biographer claims that "the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole things is a miasma – a mirage."⁹ Orlando goes as far as relating art with sin. For instance, once she complains that there are too many "s" letters in the first stanzas of her poem as she associates the letter "s" with "the serpent in the poet's Eden." Orlando argues that since "ear is the antechamber to the soul, poetry can adulterate and destroy more surely than lust or gunpowder."¹⁰ In the story of the Fall the serpent seduces Eve and makes her eat the fruit of the forbidden tree, the tree of knowledge, simply by pouring poisonous words into her ears. Hence, the danger of words. Echoing Shelley's suggestion that poets are legislators and the Romantic notion of the poet-prophet, Orlando concludes that the poet's office is "the highest office of all"¹¹ because he has the power to influence anyone either to do good or evil.

Contrary to the relation between art and immorality and lies, art is related to religion in the novel, too. For instance, when a man in Constantinople sees Orlando reciting a poem on a mountain top, he mistakenly thinks that Orlando is praying to his God. Moreover, Orlando has the Bible of Queen Mary with a blood-stain. The Bible also has a lock of hair, a crumb of pastry within its leaves to which Orlando adds some tobacco. The blood obviously refers to life, the ultimate source of inspiration and imitation for art as discussed above. When the crumb of pastry and the blood-stain come together, they suggest the Eucharist, that is, the nourishment and

⁹ Ibid. 94.

¹⁰ Ibid. 85.

¹¹ Ibid.

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enlightenment of the soul. Hair is yet another feature indicating artistic creativity. Dishevelled hair indicated uncontrollable passion and/or a breakdown of social and psychic order.¹² Lastly, tobacco has both intoxicating and curing effects, which seems to be reflecting the relation of art to both immorality and religion.

Orlando's art does not only represent nature but also reflects the artist who produces it. On that note, the artist is also defined by the very work of art s/he creates. As the biographer puts it, "every secret of a writer's soul, every experience of his life, every quality of his mind is written large in his works".¹³ In like manner, starting with Wordsworth, the poet himself/herself became the focus of attention in Romantic poetry. Wordsworth celebrates the lively sensibility, enthusiasm and passions of the poet.¹⁴ Orlando, is "clumsy and a little absent-minded"¹⁵ because as an artist he is either lost in his observation or in deep contemplation and does not pay much heed to anything else. He even acquires the habit of talking to himself while absorbed in his artistic contemplations. Towards the end of the novel she sings to herself the words of a telegram making the park keepers doubt her sanity. This representation of Orlando as a mad artist is strengthened further when he is depicted having his meals with his dogs and conversing with them, tearing his jewellery and throwing them into fountains. Although Plato's arguments overlap with those of the Romantic poets in terms of nature, Plato regards this ever-changing nature of the artist as a threat. He condemns the imitative poet because he does not have a "calm temper of the soul" and "he excites and feeds and strengthens this worthless part of the soul [that is the peevish and changeful temper], and thus destroys the rational part."¹⁶ Orlando, like the poet Wordsworth describes, has "a passion in his movements which deserves the word" and he feels "as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven weblike around his body" when he ties "his floating heart to"¹⁷ the oak tree.

The biographer also notes that Orlando had many selves, which stand for the ever-changing moods of the artists. This is also hinted at the beginning of the novel

¹² See Alf Hildebeitel, Barbara D. Miller, eds., *Hair: Its Power and Meaning in Asian Cultures* (New York: SUNY Press, 1998) 95.

¹³ Woolf, *Orlando* 103.

¹⁴ William Wordsworth, Preface to the *Lyrical Ballads*, 2nd ed. [1800], *Poetical Works*, ed. Thomas Hutchinson (London: Henry Frowde, Oxford University Press, 1912) 935.

¹⁵ Woolf, *Orlando* 16.

¹⁶ Plato, op. cit. 336.

¹⁷ Woolf, *Orlando* 8.

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when Orlando, opening the window, realises that his hand is "instantly coloured blue, and yellow like a butterfly's wing."¹⁸ Human beings are not made up of one colour but many colours signifying their many selves. The biographer cannot catch this kind of shifting personality in Orlando let alone gender. Furthermore, the wings of the butterfly point to its capacity to fly, which might as well be interpreted as Orlando's artistic creativity and mastery. That the butterflies were caught and pinned down for display in the Victorian period also runs parallel with the idea that art aims at capturing life. The seven-day, trance-like sleep, after the Russian Princess Sasha deserts him, and another seven-day sleep during the Turkish rebellion in Constantinople, preceding the sex change, resemble the cocoon phase of the butterfly. Although sleep is regarded as "Death's second self"¹⁹ and although these two extremely long sleeps are reminiscent of death, they serve as remedies against death. The first one cures Orlando's heartbreak while the second one saves him from imminent death at the hands of the rebels. The association of art and death can also be traced in Orlando's obsession with death as a young artist looking at the frost and thinking about death and descending into the family crypt. Ironically, art is associated with immortality as well since it endures the effects of time and immortalises not only its author but also its subject. Orlando's waking up as a woman from the second long sleep, recalls the caterpillar's emerging out of the cocoon as a butterfly after the metamorphosis.

The novel abounds with changes: everything changes including the seasons; London; Orlando's physiognomy, gender, and artistic mastery; the art itself; literature. The biographer whose plight is to capture the ever-changing Orlando in his biography. Orlando, especially after becoming a woman, is constantly depicted staring out of the window trying to capture the changes in nature. Similarly, in the last chapter, Orlando tries to read street signs as she drives her motorcar but she cannot catch the full signs. She reads only parts of them: "Amor Vin-", which is obviously the beginning of the Latin saying, "amor vincit omnia" (love conquers all) written on the brooch worn by the prioress in *The Canterbury Tales*, and "Applejohn and Applebed Undert-", which is most probably a sign of undertakers, morticians. As far as the street signs are concerned, Esther

¹⁸ Ibid. 5.

¹⁹ See William Shakespeare, Sonnet LXXIII, l. 8.

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Sánchez-Pardo González says that they are "[t]he two clear references to love and death respectively, ... [and that they] ... reciprocally need each other to complete the full sense of Woolf's pun. The love 'takers' will conquer all."²⁰ It is indicative of the relationship between art and love, and art and death. As mentioned above, it is claimed that nature leads Orlando to love and poetry and Orlando was obsessed with death in his childhood not to mention that the artist challenges death by immortalisation through his art.

Orlando's "The Oak Tree" poem, likewise, is written and rewritten in the course of three centuries and thus reflects or rather canopies a wide range of English literature from the Elizabethan age to the modern periods. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, accordingly, claim in *The Madwoman in the Attic* that "the female writer's battle for self-creation involves her in a revisionary process."²¹ The composition process of the poem "The Oak Tree," then, stands for Orlando's self-creation as a female artist; Orlando is a man when she starts writing the poem and then becomes a woman. As the Queen refers to Orlando as her oak tree that she can lean on, so does Orlando seek refuge "under the oak tree, the hardness of whose roots, exposed above the ground, seemed to him rather comfortable than otherwise."²² The oak tree with its roots above the earth is a symbol of endurance and strength as much as a symbol of one's ancestors or rather the literary ancestors in this particular case. Like the oak tree itself, the poem titled "The Oak Tree" serves as means of protection. Orlando keeps the draft of her poem in her bosom like "a talisman".²³

However, Orlando is very flexible as an artist as opposed to the oak tree; his gender, his identity as an artist and his artistic creativity change as he/she grows up. As Orlando herself puts it, she grows up as an artist, loses some illusions "perhaps to acquire others".²⁴ "She had been a gloomy boy, in love with death, as boys are; and then she had been amorous and florid; and then she had been sprightly and satirical; and sometimes

²⁰ Esther Sánchez-Pardo González, "'What Phantasmagoria the Mind Is': Reading Virginia Woolf's Parody of Gender", *Atlantis* 26.2 (Dec 2004): 83.

²¹ Sandra M. Gilbert, Susan Gubar, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale UP, 2000) 49.

²² Woolf, *Orlando* 50. See also 47.

²³ *Ibid.* 80.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 85.

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she had tried prose and sometimes she had tried drama."²⁵ In her quest as an artist, Orlando's nature and moods change as well as her literary tastes or preferences as she grows up and she gradually evolves into a much better poet. She even wins a prize with her poem "The Oak Tree" and leaves her poem "unburied and dishevelled" under the oak tree "as a tribute ... a return to the land of what the land has given"²⁶ her. That the oak tree has given Orlando the inspiration for the poem depicts once again that art reflects nature.

Orlando takes pride in the fact that he had been referred to a scholar because of his fondness for reading and his isolating himself. Although he feels out of place in his childhood, he gradually comes to the conclusion that artists belong to a "sacred race". Later, he thinks that artists "who had written a book and had it printed ... must have aureoles for hair, incense for breath, and roses must grow between their lips."²⁷ This idealisation of the artist parallels the Romantic belief regarding the poets superior as prophets or "the unacknowledged legislators of the world."²⁸ Having been both a man and a woman, Orlando has an even greater advantage than the poet prophet. She knows the secrets of both genders, which renders her a better artist in terms of the mimetic theory of art discussed above. Since she experienced at first hand what it is like to be both a man and a woman, she has been able to observe nature and contemplate on everyday events through the eyes of both.

Towards the end of the novel, the keen observations of Orlando, as a female artist, are depicted: "She noticed the separate grains of earth in the flower beds as if she had a microscope stuck to her eye. She saw the intricacy of the twigs of every tree. Each blade of grass was distinct and the marking of veins and petals."²⁹ Orlando's feminine characteristics endow him with poetic sensibility and sensitivity. Anne K. Mellor also avers that "Keats identifies the poet above all with his capacity for *empathy* or sympathy, a quality everywhere associated with women in his day."³⁰ Orlando, likewise, believes the female sex is more advantageous because being barred from all "manly desires" the female have more time for "contemplation, solitude, [and] love".³¹

²⁵ Ibid. 117.

²⁶ Ibid. 161, 160.

²⁷ Ibid. 40, 39.

²⁸ Percy Bysshe Shelley, *A Defence of Poetry* [1821], *The Prose Works*, ed. R. H. Shepherd, 2 vols. (London: Chatto & Windus, 1888) 35.

²⁹ Woolf, *Orlando* 158.

³⁰ Anne K. Mellor, "Keats and the complexities of gender," *Cambridge Companion to Keats*, ed. Susan Wolfson (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2001) 216.

³¹ Woolf, *Orlando* 78.

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Woolf maintains that "Coleridge certainly did not mean, when he said that a great mind is androgynous, that it is a mind that has any special sympathy with women ... He meant perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided."³² That, is to say, Coleridge does not really attribute a greatness of mind to the female. Instead, he emphasises that the advantages of an androgynous mind. As Orlando suggests at one point, her being gendered as female equals her being declared dead, confining her into an inferior position to the male in a strictly patriarchal society. Nevertheless, it should be kept in mind that Orlando finishes her poem "The Oak Tree" whose composition takes three centuries only after she becomes a woman. She grows as an artist or rather Orlando becomes a real artist in her own right after the sex change. Orlando is the embodiment of literature or rather literary canon changing in the course of three centuries.

That Woolf does not refer to or quote from any female authors, except for quoting Sackville-West's poem "The Land" as "The Oak Tree" poem, delineates that women were excluded from literature until the modern period. The reason why the novel starts with Orlando as a male artist is because it was impossible for a female artist to produce any work in the Elizabethan age. Firstly, women were not given the proper education to become artists. Thus, Orlando complains that "they debar us even from a knowledge of the alphabet".³³ Orlando is not allowed to compose poetry but is reminded of her "feminine" duties such "the towels wanting mending and the curtains in the chaplain's parlour being moth-eaten round the fringes".³⁴ The female fear of giving birth to some kind of monstrosity can be observed in Orlando's secretly writing poetry. Even as a small boy Orlando used to lock away his writing material in a cabinet and beg for paper and pen because it was considered unacceptable for the nobility to produce art and disgraceful to have their works published. During her stay with the gypsies, she uses berries instead of ink, which links art with nourishment – needless to say that it is the nourishment for the soul of the artist. Orlando hides away her manuscript when she realises that she is not alone but the Archduchess is spying on her. Also the biographer stresses that Orlando becomes more modest concerning her writings after she becomes a woman.

Woolf uses not only the works but also family portraits of Vita Sackville-West as the starting point for her fiction. The portraits are significant as historical records but the portraits of ancestors

³² Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own and Three Guineas* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998) 128.

³³ Woolf, *Orlando* 78.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 83.

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used to be limited to the male. "Wives and daughters were not preserved in paintings."³⁵ If we take the portraits to represent the literary canon, then the all-male portraits of the ancestors represents the lack of female writers in the canon. The portraits/presence/texts of male ancestors create an anxiety of influence in the male writers whereas they invoke an anxiety of authorship in the female writers. Whereas the authors of the previous ages are celebrated for having managed to imitate the ancients instead of confirming with the literary conventions of their own age, Orlando's contemporaries are condemned. Orlando as a female poet, however, has no such anxieties. She reads a lot but writes how she likes to write. Neither does Woolf because she quotes or refers to many contemporary and ancient authors and thus acknowledges their influence on the style and works of Orlando, thereby on her own works.

Lee also dwells on the significance of inheritance from the past in forming one's personality and asserts that "[t]he historical periods that have created the house have also created Orlando."³⁶ Moreover, she argues that "[e]ach historical period, which in itself illustrates or sets off a part of Orlando's character, is invoked by literary or artistic allusions".³⁷ Orlando's artistic self is, accordingly, formed through her encounters with the artists of the older generation. Greene is the one that initiates Orlando into artistic circles while Pope and Addison enable her to simplify her style and refine her technique. Thanks to Greene's devastating but also fruitful influence, Orlando destroys the tragedies he has written as an immature artist and takes on writing poetry. It should also be noted that she was quite disappointed when she realised that artists did not necessarily look or act like the sacred race she had in mind. She describes Pope as "[d]eformed and weakly ... [with] nothing to venerate in ... [him, but] much to pity, most to despise."³⁸

Since in the nineteenth century women were confined within their households and were bound to perform daily chores, they had almost no possibility of experiencing the world outside. As suggested in *Orlando*, "[t]he man looks the world full in the face, as if it were made for his uses and fashioned to his liking. The woman takes a sidelong glance at it, full of subtlety, even of suspicion."³⁹ Orlando does self-scrutiny after she becomes a woman and comes to the conclusion that her being a woman means more or less being dead, as stated above. Ironically, she is really claimed dead after the sex change. Similar to Woolf's point, Showalter avers that "a woman writer must kill the Angel in

³⁵ Katherine Dalsimer, *Virginia Woolf: Becoming A Writer* (New Haven: Yale UP, 2001) 122.

³⁶ Lee, op. cit. 140.

³⁷ Ibid. 143.

³⁸ Woolf, *Orlando* 101.

³⁹ Ibid. 92.

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the House, that phantom of female perfection who stands in the way of freedom."⁴⁰ Orlando's joining the gipsies poses a similar rebellion.

In the Victorian age the confinement that women suffered from could even be traced in their dresses. Orlando starts to wear skirts instead of the Turkish trousers in the eighteenth century and complains that "these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels." As she cannot swim in those skirts but drown, her outfit renders her incapable of protecting herself and dependent on others. Furthermore, the crinoline "she had submissively adopted" in the nineteenth century:

was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves and straw. The plumed hat tossed on the breeze. The thin shoes were quickly soaked and mudcaked. Her muscles had lost their pliancy.⁴¹

As a matter of fact, the biographer notes that "the spirit of the nineteenth century was antipathetic to her in the extreme, and thus it took her and broke her, and she was aware of her defeat at its hands as she had never been before."⁴² The convention of dressing up takes up so much time of a woman that it leaves her no time for self-reflection. Moreover, it confines her indoors – to her chamber. Gilbert and Gubar, similarly, mention that the nineteenth-century literature abounds with the concepts of imprisonment, confinement, enclosure and escape. They note that claustrophobia "is a disturbance we shall encounter again and again in women's writing throughout the nineteenth century."⁴³

The ending of the novel in 1928, the year of suffrage, shows that women writers' introduction to the literary canon was just a beginning for women's rights, which is further emphasised by Orlando, the award-winning woman writer, in a hurry on her motorcar telling the other drivers to let her through. There is not actually an end; as implied by the wild goose chase in

⁴⁰ Elaine Showalter, *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Brontë to Lessing* (New Jersey: Princeton UP, 1999) 265.

⁴¹ Woolf, *Orlando* 121.

⁴² *Ibid.* 120.

⁴³ Gilbert, Gubar, *op. cit.* 58.

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Chapter 2, the quest continues and there are other adventures that follow. After all, the quest of the artist is the quest of the unattainable – the very stuff of life.

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