Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* and the Feminist Reader

- Feminist Reader Response Theory in *Orlando: a Biography.*

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Abstract

This essay is a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: a Biography* that focuses on representation of gender in the novel and the possible response it elicits in the reader.

The essay argues that the implied reader of *Orlando* - as manifested in the novel - is a feminist one, as well as it explores the possibility of this implied feminist reader being a female. The reasons as to why this could be are extensively examined by analyzing the main character Orlando as he metamorphoses from an English nobleman into a grown woman. To support the thesis, the essay looks both into reader response criticism and feminist criticism to clarify what an implied reader actually is. The similarities between *Orlando* and “A Room of One’s Own” are also touched upon as these suggest that the implied reader is a feminist. The essay then takes a closer look at the narrator of the novel and what this narrator suggests about the identity of the implied reader of the novel. In addition to this it is also concluded that s/he controls the reader’s perception of Orlando’s gender in the novel, and that this also echoes the ideals presented in “A Room of One’s Own”.

The essay concludes that the implied reader of Orlando indeed is a feminist, but not necessarily a female one.
Table of Contents

1. Introduction .................................................................................................................................................. 1
2. Feminist Reader Response Theory. ............................................................................................................. 4
3. The Implied Reader .................................................................................................................................... 5
4. The Biographer ........................................................................................................................................... 12
5. From Male to Female or Something in Between ....................................................................................... 17
6. Conclusion .................................................................................................................................................. 23
7. Works Cited ................................................................................................................................................. 25
1. Introduction

Virginia Woolf’s Orlando: A Biography is undoubtedly one of Woolf’s most popular works - even though it has not been as critically acclaimed as some of her other novels (González, Esther Sánchez-Pardo 75) - and it has among many things been called a mock biography or perhaps most frequently the greatest love letter in history. However, love is not the sole theme that dominates the novel; it is also an in-depth exploration of what it means to be a man and a woman. It is an exploration that might threaten to challenge and alter the reader’s preconceived notions of what qualifies as being male or female characteristics by highlighting the differences between socially constructed gender and biological sex.

In the novel the reader is introduced to the character Orlando, a young nobleman who lives in seventeenth-century England acting as steward and treasurer for the Queen of England. Halfway through the novel, however - when Orlando has worked as the English ambassador in Turkey for some time - he is suddenly transformed into a woman. From this point and onwards the novel will surpass all natural boundaries, spanning across both centuries and lifetimes, following Orlando as he metamorphoses from a young man into a fully realized woman of thirty-four. The storyline might baffle its potential reader in a myriad of different ways, as it rapidly becomes apparent that the thirty-year old Orlando, now turned into a woman, has actually lived for quite a few years more than thirty. Furthermore, upon her return to England from Turkey, at least a hundred years later, no one is surprised at her sudden change of sex. Her servants (who have aged, but slowly) welcome her with open arms as the now Lady Orlando without any suspicion or any questions. It seems that those whom

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1 Both Peter Ackroyd (ix) and Margaret Reynolds (xiii) refer to it as thus in their respective introductions in my edition of the novel.
2 It is supposedly a tribute to Woolf’s close friend and lover, Vita Sackville-West and the novel is even dedicated to her, for more information look at Karin Elise Lokke in the works cited.
Orlando comes into contact with age slowly as to keep up with her, all moving around the center of the novel, which is of course Orlando.

Hence, this essay will be a close reading of Virginia Woolf’s novel Orlando: a Biography which will analyze the main character Orlando as well as the reader of Orlando. I argue that the implied reader of Orlando is a feminist one, and in addition to this I will also explore the possibility of this reader being a female. To explore and argue my thesis, I will be using a feminist perspective coupled with reader response criticism to derive who the implied reader is. When arguing that the implied reader is feminist, I believe that the theory that would be most apt to use is the theory that deals directly with the feminist reader which would make feminist reader response criticism a fitting choice.

Both Woolf herself and the novel are well-known names both amongst queer critics and amongst feminists, this because of her rumored relationship with Vita Sackville-West and because of the issues concerning gender that are raised in the novel. However, neither this relationship nor this book ended up being things that ruled her career, or her legacy. Rather the things that she is most remembered for are her efforts to highlight the inner lives of women and her fascination with gender (Marcus, Laura 209), and she is often referred to as a feminist. In her essay “Constructing Literary Feminist Studies” Mary Eagleton says this about feminist history “First there was Virginia Woolf” (1), seemingly suggesting that the whole feminist movement was spurred on by her and her work, which for me strengthens the importance of a feminist analysis of this novel. Orlando has been analyzed from both a queer criticism angle and a feminist angle as these theories lend themselves easily to Orlando, both because of its nature (dealing with perception of gender) and because Woolf was one of the most prominent feminists of her time. Pamela L Caughie says that “Orlando would seem to be the quintessential feminist text” as it was written by a feminist “for a bisexual (Vita Sackville-West), about an androgyne [sic] (Orlando)” (41).
With this in mind, I believe that looking at the novel with a higher level of focus on the feminist reader and the implied reader, without extensively mixing in sexuality - Woolf’s own sexuality or Orlando’s - and focusing more on the description of Orlando as a character, combined with feminist reader response theory might be an original contribution to the vast amount of texts that has been written about Woolf’s work.

Following this outline of my theoretical framework I will continue by briefly looking at Woolf’s essay “A Room of One’s Own”, an essay that is often mentioned in connection with Orlando. I will look at the possible parallels between the essay and Orlando, and see if and how they affect the reader of Orlando or rather what they say about the implied reader of Orlando.

Moving forward I will not only examine Orlando, but also the narrator or biographer as an entity in the novel will be given certain attention. Thus, this essay will be looking closer at how and if the language, style or structure for example differs in the narration from when Orlando is a man to when she becomes a woman and it will explore the possibility that the narrator to some extent determines how the reader will view Orlando. Finally I will be looking at how Woolf portrays Orlando as man and later a woman, and if these portrayals diverge from one another, and how this affects the position of the implied reader. This means that I will be looking more closely at how Orlando is portrayed - in a rather chronological order - by the narrator, who is the only one who provides information about Orlando. This will be achieved by firstly looking into the description and portrayal of Orlando as a man, and secondly by looking at the description and portrayal of Orlando as she has just transformed into a woman, and finally I will examine Orlando as the complete woman she becomes. I will also compare both the male and female Orlando to the androgynous model presented in “A Room of One’s Own”.
2. Feminist Reader Response Theory

That *Orlando* is a novel unlike others is hard to deny. According to Aimee A. Wilson it might even be “An uncomfortable experience”, possibly owing to the fact that it is a novel that toys with the reader’s prejudices and expectations in a way that is highly original - even to this day – which leaves it open for countless different readings. This is highly compatible with the extensively argued fact that a text, as soon as it leaves the minds of its author, will lend itself endlessly to new interpretations. Wolfgang Iser, according to David W. Wilson claimed that “The author as the determiner of the work's meaning shrinks almost to the point of extinction. Instead, the reader creates the work's meaning” (850), this claim seem to suggest that it is the reader who has the most authority when in contact with a text, and also that every reader is unique, which means that he/she can interpret a text or a novel in a myriad of different ways, and this might end up being a vastly different interpretation than the one that the author had in mind.

What can be determined then is that readers provide some of their own values when reading a text, thus interpreting the text in different ways. Iser even says that “A literary text can only produce response when read” (The Act of Reading ix), in other words the reader’s response to a text creates new meaning. Moreover, most readers will carry with them a certain set of preconceived expectations when in contact with a text, and when these expectations are not met, the reading experience can become altered thus creating a new response to the text. These preconceived expectations might have an especially hard time being met when in contact with *Orlando*.

One might then begin by briefly looking at what feminist reader response criticism actually is. Reader response criticism was established late in the twentieth century (Flynn, Elizabeth A. and Schweickart, Patrocinio P. 3), but many thought the theory too narrow as it, for example, offered no insight into if and how men and female readings differed
from one another, or if ethnicity played into the reading, and according to Schweickart reader response criticism needed feminist criticism (36). The first occurrences of feminist reader response criticism started out with women reading the literary canon, i.e. reading works that had been written by men, which created the resisting reader. The feminist had to be aware of and resist the androcentric gender roles that were presented in the novel they were reading. As Rita Felski puts it, the feminist reader does not lose herself to the book because she keeps her guard up all the time (34-5). However, whilst feminist readings of texts written by males were marked by increasing resistance, readings of texts written by females were dominated by a sense of recognition and connection, and a sense of being able to “let down their guard” (Felski 38), which reflects the role that the implied reader of Orlando takes on.

3. The Implied Reader

In this essay I explore who the implied reader of Orlando is, it is therefore vital to first establish what the term implied reader actually means. Now, the expressions such as implied reader, intended reader, fictional reader and so forth are expressions that have been used by several critics before and in many different ways. In this essay, however, I will only use one of these many different kinds of readers and that is the implied reader. The implied reader is not a real person; it is simply a reader that is implied in the text itself, D. Wilson especially points out that one should not confuse these two as being one and the same (849). This would mean that as a “real reader” one should be able to discern the implications hidden within the text, namely those who suggests who the implied reader is. Iser suggests that there are two categories of readers:

The real reader is the flesh-and-blood person whose individuality and situatedness [sic] affect the way in which he or she attends to, understands, and responds to the text. The hypothetical reader is the authorial audience, the implied author’s ideal
addressee who is fully attentive to, fully comprehending of, and thus fully responsive to the authorial communication (Iser, The Act of Reading 27).

First and foremost it is vital to note that these two categories of “real reader” and “hypothetical reader” encompass subcategories, and the implied reader is simply one of the many categories that belong to the hypothetical reader family, yet it is the one I choose to focus on. If one were to try to discern who the “real reader” of Orlando would be today, one could for example speculate that s/he would be a feminist because of the status the novel has gained amongst feminists, however, no numbers exist to prove these speculations as true or false. Furthermore, the reader that reads Orlando today could just as easily be a male or a female with no affiliation with feminism whatsoever. On the other hand it would be more reasonable to speculate that the hypothetical reader, i.e. the reader implied in the text could be a feminist - this would be the reader who is most compatible with the text as s/he is both fully attentive and comprehending to the authorial communication. Flynn and Schweickart claim that every reader reads in his/her own way, but that “the implied reader takes us through the process of apprehending the textual structure serves as a reference point for all interpretations” (5), which would mean that the reader is offered to let the implied reader guide them through their reading to a more fruitful interpretation.

In addition to this I will also be using D. Wilson’s definition of the implied reader (inspired by Wolfgang Iser), as I think this quote clearly establishes what the implied reader actually is, he says that:

I call this structure the "implied reader," and I define it as the behavior, attitudes, and background-presupposed or defined, usually indirectly, in the text itself-necessary for a proper understanding of the text. This idealized reader may be con-sciously [sic] or unconsciously conceived by the au-thor [sic], but he or she
exists in every work, since almost every "message" presupposes a certain kind of recipient and implicitly defines him or her to some extent (848).

This implied reader then could have been consciously created by Woolf herself, but also unconsciously and as Woolf wrote “A Room of One’s Own” at the same time, this might indeed have affected who the implied reader is and this will be expanded upon below.

Moving back again towards Iser’s ideas of the implied reader, he claims in *The Act of Reading* that the real reader of the text can choose to take on the role of the implied reader in the text, which again means that the implied reader is not an actual human being made of flesh and blood, it is simply a structure that exists in the text that the reader can choose to identify and play the role of (35). Iser says that “Generally, the role prescribed by the text will be stronger, but the reader’s own disposition will never disappear totally; it will tend instead to form the background to and a frame of reference for the act of grasping and comprehending” (Iser, *The Act of Reading* 37), Which means that the real reader and the implied reader work together. Furthermore, Flynn and Schweickart suggest that; “Readers actualize the text into a meaningful work that in turn stimulates response. Meaning, therefore, should be attributed not to the text or the reader but to the dynamic transaction between the two” (4). This would suggest that interpretation takes place between the reader and the text, the author has no part in this transaction, and the implied reader could then be seen as a part of the text.

It is now vital before moving forward to clarify some of the expressions that are used frequently in this essay, such as female and feminism. I will be using Toril Moi’s definitions of feminism, femaleness and femininity in this essay, as a sort of handhold as it is important not to confuse these with one another; she suggests that “We distinguish between ‘feminism’ as a political position, ‘femaleness’ as a matter of biology and ‘femininity’ as a set of culturally defined characteristics” (117, My emphasis). If then feminism is a political position,
this means that the possibility of being a feminist does not have to be preordained because of one’s sex. This would mean that if the implied reader is a feminist s/he would not necessarily have to be a male or female, it would simply echo the political position and not a specific gender.

With that being said one might then look at what reasons there could be for assuming that the implied reader of Orlando could be a female. The most prominent one being that the novel was written for and about Vita Sackville-West as Woolf dedicated Orlando to her, as a sort of love letter (Reynolds, Margaret xiii), something that the “knowing” reader would recognize according to A. Wilson (5). Sackville-West of course was a woman and as it is quite possible that as Woolf wrote it for her, she especially intended for her to read it. Furthermore, Orlando was not only written to Vita, but it is believed that Woolf based the character Orlando on Vita herself (Carvalho, Cristina 60), meaning that the main character who starts out as a man was ultimately meant to be female. Vita, however, was not a known feminist like Woolf; rather she was known for her countless affairs with women, which is one of the reasons as to why Orlando has attracted so much attention from queer theorists. However, the fact that Sackville-West was a woman does not offer substantial enough proof of the implied reader being a female as this puts too much emphasis on the authorial dimension, something that does not strictly apply to the to the implied reader, as this often is a structure that the author unconsciously created.

Moving forward I will look at the things that possibly suggest that the implied reader of Orlando is a feminist. Firstly, it is important to note that even though Woolf is known as one of the most prominent feminists of her time, the theories that are used in this essay (such as “Reading Like as/like a Feminist”, “Reading Ourselves” and “The Implied Reader”) were not yet drafted at the time of Orlando’s release. Yet Kate Flint argues that reader response critics such as Iser could have been affected by Woolf and her work as
according to her “Woolf’s views are proleptic of later readings” (Flint 192, which in a way makes it seem as if she is saying to that both the birth of reader response criticism and feminist reader response criticism were spurred on by the likes of Orlando and later on by Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own”. Flint even suggests that Woolf came to “Greatly to complicate the issue of what it meant to read as a woman, to give birth to meaning” (193), which goes hand in hand with the aims of feminist reader response criticism. However, it is not possible to determine simply from these quotes if this is the truth or not, but it is definitely worthy to keep in mind.

Gonzáles argues in her essay “What Phantasmagoria the Mind Is: Reading Virginia Woolf’s Parody of Gender” - which deals with gender issues in Orlando - that “Woolf would without any doubt attract a feminine audience who would be able to read between the lines. If Woolf wanted nevertheless to attract also a masculine audience she might have to make some concessions.” (83). Gonzáles seems to suggest that the novel has been written in such a way that it in a higher degree will appeal to a female audience, or rather that only a female reader will be able to “read between the lines” (83), suggesting that there is some hidden meaning within the text that will only be discernable to the female reader. However, this would apply to the female audience of the 21st –century and not strictly to the female reader today. It is possible then to speculate that the feminist reader, who strives to disentangle herself/himself from the text by default, would be able to read between the lines and discern the things that Woolf wrote between the lines for her female audience.

Yet there is one problem that remains when one is referring to the implied reader of Orlando as a feminist and that has to do with the definition of feminism. As mentioned earlier Woolf is seen as one of the first true feminists, but during her lifetime feminism was still evolving rapidly and it had not yet become the well-established theory or political position which modern feminists will be acquainted with today. If it is true that feminism had
not been truly established at the time of *Orlando* being written, it becomes hard to determine whether the implied reader of *Orlando* truly could be a feminist one. However, D. Wilson argues that the implied reader in a text exists eternally, that s/he is not confined only to the time of the novel being written, and he claims that this is because s/he is only a construction in a text created by the author, and therefore “He or she exists as long as the book exists and his or her role may be filled in future ages if the work truly outlasts its time” (851). If this were true, it would mean that the implied reader of *Orlando* could exist today, and as the definitions of what it means to be a feminist has expanded, the implied reader in *Orlando* might have been able to adapt to these new standards, as the issues that are raised in *Orlando* are still relevant today, it has outlasted its time. Therefore, as the implied reader simply is a role that the reader is offered to take on it is possible that this role will be available to the real reader to this day. Iser has similar ideas and he claims that that the reader role can be filled in different ways, for example “according to historical or individual circumstances” and that this “is an indication that the structure of the text allows for different ways of fulfillment” (Iser, The Act of Reading 37), which would mean that just because feminism as it is today was not established at the time of Orlando’s release, the role of the implied reader could allow itself to be fulfilled even today.

To explore the feminist as the implied reader I will now focus briefly on Woolf’s essay, ”A Room of One’s Own”. It is an essay that for many seem to have become to feminist handbook, as according to Marte Rognstad it is “Woolf’s perhaps most discussed contribution to the field of feminist theory”, which according to many marks Woolf as a feminist (26). “A Room of One’s Own” was released one year after *Orlando*, but they were written somewhat simultaneously and many have spotted a certain likeness between the two (A. Wilson 4). Marte Rognstad as an example believes that “A Room of One’s Own” theorizes with the

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3 In my edition of “A Room of One’s Own” it says that it was released in 1928 just like Orlando.
things that Woolf plays with in her fiction *Orlando*, such as the role that clothes have when one determines gender (26).

If it indeed is true that *Orlando* was a way for Woolf to play with the ideas that she presents in “A Room of One’s Own” this might be an indication of who the implied reader might be, as the essay is known as feminist work and the ideas that are presented in Orlando correlate with that which seems to suggest an underlying feminist message. Christy L. Burns even claims in her essay “Re-dressing [sic] feminist identities: Tensions between essential and constructed selves in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando” that *Orlando* carries within itself the “The initial map of concerns that extend into A Room of One's Own” (343). This could mean that the implied feminist reader role would be compatible with the messages of the text; s/he would be able to uncover the map that Woolf has hidden within *Orlando*. This is compatible with Iser’s ideas about the reader, he claims that “By reading we uncover the unformulated part of the text” (Iser, The Implied Reader 287), which would mean that the unformulated part of *Orlando* could be the ideals that Woolf expresses in “A Room of One’s Own”. If the real reader then is willing to let the implied reader guide them through their reading of *Orlando*, s/he might have an easier time uncovering the unformulated parts of *Orlando*.

Rognstad also claims that “The ideas of thinking and, more importantly writing, androgynously is explored by Virginia Woolf in *A Room of One’s Own*” (27) and she is especially referring to this excerpt from chapter 6 in the essay “It is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman – manly or man – womanly” (Woolf 120). This excerpt also mimics something that the narrator expresses in passage that will be discussed below, in which s/he means to say that all biographers enjoy the immunity from sex (Woolf 141), which would make them more androgynous than anything else. However, the androgyny Woolf is referring to, is according to Rognstad not the sort of androgyny one might expect, because it does not concern the
visual aspects of a person, rather this androgyny refers to an androgynous brain or even an androgynous way of thinking (27), A. Wilson claims that “Orlando also functions as a practical example of the androgynous mind Woolf describes in A Room of One’s Own “(4), both Orlando and her narrator might then work as practical examples of androgynous minds.

4. The Biographer
Orlando’s biographer is yet another unusual aspect of the novel, because the fact is that the novel is not narrated in a traditional manner, it is narrated by one who claims to be a “Biographer”. The fact that Orlando has a biographer is something that is visible in the name of the novel as well, as it is called Orlando: a Biography which might have caused some confusion, Susan Dick explains that in the beginning Orlando was often placed among other biographies (62). 4 Orlando is also the only novel out of Woolf’s eight that is not written in the style of interior monologue or stream of consciousness.

A biographer per se is not that unusual, it is, however, unusual to come across biographers in works of fiction, because the aim of biographers is of course to relate true events and Orlando is in almost all respects pure fiction. Susan Dick claims that when Woolf makes the narrator into a biographer “Woolf restricts the narrative perspective of Orlando to ‘the firm’, if rather narrow, ground of ascertained truth.” (63). 5 The narrator takes great liberties with his/her role as biographer in terms of narration as s/he tries to map out the span of Orlando’s four hundred years long life. Christy L. Burns stresses the fact that “One need always remember that Orlando is a parodic biography, and several strands of biographical beliefs prevalent in the Victorian era are being parodied throughout the novel (344), something that is visible in the way that the narrator gains his/her information in the novel, claiming that s/he is gaining all information from others descriptions of Orlando that s/he

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4 My edition of the novel simply displays the title “Orlando” without the tagline “- A Biography”, this might be an effort to not confuse the modern reader into thinking that this actually is a biography.
5 For convenience sake I will refer to the Biographer as the narrator in this essay.
claims can be found in diaries, at the same time as s/he provides thoughts seemingly straight from Orlando’s own mind – which is information that would only be available to an omniscient narrator and not a biographer. Yet the fact that the narrator calls himself/herself a biographer might lull the reader into a false sense of security, because the reader expects that a biographer will be truthful and is therefore willing to accept certain deviations because as A. Wilson says “We believe we are in the capable hands of the biographer” (14).

In a way, the narrator stands out prominently as an almost character in the novel, as s/he is so visible. Sherron E. Knopp argues that “the central relationship is between Orlando and the Bi-ographer [sic]”, and that this relationship in some ways resemble the relationship between Sackville-West and Woolf, though not in an erotic or romantic way (29). This indeed could explain the narrators close proximity to Orlando’s mind and also his/her importance in the analysis, as this statement almost makes him/her seem as one of the characters in the novel. It might also say something about the sex of the narrator, which remains unexplained throughout the novel. At a certain point, the narrator even seems to claim that s/he is sexless, as visible in this passage “Let us, who enjoy the immunity of all biographers and historians from any sex whatsoever” (Woolf 141). This does not completely add up to the narrator that has been introduced previously in the novel, as the narrator often refers to himself/herself as “he”. However, according to Susan Dick “Once Orlando becomes a woman, the distance between her and the narrator narrows and the narrator sees things more from a woman’s point of view” (Dick 65), which is obvious both in the way that the narrator interferes more frequently after Orlando has become a woman, and in the way that the narrator actually defends some of her actions “In justice to her, it must be said” (Woolf 118), something that the narrator did not offer the male Orlando. If it is true that the biographer starts to see things from a female perspective, it might be possible to speculate that s/he is a woman. However, in one of the later chapters of the novel, the narrator seems to express both
male and female characteristics, which is especially visible in this passage “We must whisper lest the women may overhear us” (Woolf 137), which seems to suggest that s/he is sharing a secret between two men. S/he then goes on by explaining that though men might pretend at courtesy and admiration they do not really respect women, as they according to them are just “overgrown children” and s/he states that this is something that a woman is actually well aware of (137). It is obvious then that the narrator seems to have equal access to the inner workings of both males and females which further contradicts his/her previous claim of enjoying immunity from the two sexes, rather the narrator seems to be inhabited by both which hints at androgyny.

In the chapters leading up to Orlando’s transformation and indeed in the chapters afterwards, the narrator starts to become more and more visible in the text, and his/her interruptions to address the reader or to elaborate on the nature of the biographer, become more frequent. In fact, the first time the narrator addresses himself/herself within the text as the biographer is at the beginning of chapter two, when Orlando (left devastated by Sasha’s betrayal) has fallen into a slumber that will last for seven days - the first of two such slumbers in this novel - which indeed indicates that something significant has happened to Orlando (Woolf 38). This significance is also visible in the text, as the very structure and style seems to change along with him, and the novel now moves on from simply being a retelling of events, as the narrator starts to mention himself/herself more frequently and perhaps most significantly, the reader.

From this point onwards the narrator becomes quite visible within the story itself in many different ways, often referring to herself/himself in the text and even addressing the reader, “Our simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may” (Woolf 38, My emphasis). It is also the narrator that determines how the reader will view certain aspects of the novel, and this is certainly true when it comes
to the description of the character’s sex. Maggie Humm claims that “We could describe Orlando as a deliberately uncommitted narrative, whose biographer ‘slips away’ textually revealing the impossibility of fixed gender identities” (Humm 83), which is true because even though the narrator might claim the s/he is privy to the information of Orlando’s actual gender, not even s/he can keep track as Orlando alternates between the two sexes.

Furthermore, the narrator refers to himself/herself on several occasions as “we”, “we know”, “we have” (74), which might make the reader suspect that there actually is more than one narrator of Orlando. It is also plausible that sometimes when the narrator says “we”, s/he is actually referring to himself/herself and the reader at once, which seems to suggest that both must work together to understand Orlando’s nature. This is also visible in the following section of the novel, when the narrator feels s/he is unable to penetrate Orlando’s mind and therefore must find other ways to amuse the reader, s/he exclaims that “If then, the subject of one’s biography will neither love nor kill, but will only think and imagine we may conclude that he or she is no better than a corpse and leave her. The only resource now left us is to look out the window” (Woolf 176). In other words the narrator now finds Orlando so lackluster that s/he must venture outside of her mind to entertain the reader, which s/he does by leading the reader out for a walk into the gardens (Woolf 177). It is also obvious in this particular context that “we” actually refers to the narrator and the reader together. Both in this passage and others, the reader is offered to walk alongside the narrator as an almost friend, which complicates any reading of Orlando as it becomes harder to disentangle oneself from a text if one is invited to live in it. A. Wilson is also theorizing along the same lines:

The biographer’s performances of the roles of biographer and of friend to the reader are simultaneously comforting and challenging in the way they foster a kinship between the reader and the text, a closeness that then makes the text’s challenges all the more powerful because the reader is hooked (30).
In other words the narrator acts as a performer in the text who takes on different roles that ultimately befuddle the reader. Because when the narrator claims both the title of biographer and friend it becomes even harder for the reader to resist his/her words.

The narrator also acts as a sort of determiner of the characters genders in the novel, because it is the narrator that determines that Orlando – after her transformation - now should be referred to as a woman, after briefly referring to Orlando as they; “The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained … the same.” (Woolf 87, My emphasis), which means that the narrator seems to suggest that she is actually inhabited by two sexes at once, yet shortly after this the narrator claims that Orlando should be called she, as visible in this passage “In future we must, for convention’s sake, say ’her’ for ‘his’ and ‘she’ for ‘he’” (87), as if this was simply done for conventional purposes. It is highly interesting to analyze what this determination does to the reader, as it might be reasonable to argue that the reader’s reception and perception of Orlando’s sex change could have been seriously altered if the narrator had continued calling him a ‘he’, the view of Orlando as a man trapped inside a female body might then have been decidedly more prominent in the novel.

Moreover, Sara Mills argues that readers might shift the way they view the text when they encounter certain evidence of something else, “In this process of adjusting their original hypothesis, readers may change their focus on language items which they have coded as particularly important to the overall text (29). If this is true, the decision that the biographer makes, determining whether to address Orlando as a man or a woman, might indeed alter the reader’s perception of Orlando as a character, and so their perception of Orlando’s gender might change when the narrator calls her “she”. A. Wilson explains that people always try to categorize one another, and that one of the most important of the different categories we try to fit one another into, is gender (11). However, Orlando remains difficult to categorize both in
terms of which genre it belongs to, and certainly in which gender Orlando belongs to, which according to A. Wilson would make the reading experience uncomfortable “Because readers are challenged in their urge to categorize and asked to drop the dichotomous baggage those categories necessarily entail” (11). So then because the narrator will not offer the reader any guidance towards Orlando’s actual sex or gender, the reader might turn to Orlando himself/herself to look for answers but Orlando does not react in the way one might expect.

5. From Male to Female or Something in Between

At the beginning of the novel the reader is introduced to the male Orlando in a rather abrupt way, as the narrator states: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex” (Woolf 1). Yet as soon as this has been said the narrator follows up by expressing that there is something slightly off with Orlando’s gender, or rather how his gender might be perceived by onlookers, as s/he claims that the fashions of that time made him appear woman-like (1). The narrator describes Orlando as having “Eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples” (Woolf 4). Orlando is undoubtedly described as being highly attractive, however, the features that mark him thus are those that are often used to describe females, which might make him attractive in a rather feminine way, as Gonzales says, he is man-womanly (77). Karin Elise Lokke suggests that “Woolf mocks the masculinist sublime” but also that through Orlando “she also celebrates an alternative aesthetic, an alternative model of self in Orlando” (Lokke 242) something that according to her is echoed in Woolf’s “A Room of One’s Own” where she continuously calls in to question “The gendered categories of masculine and feminine” (242). This would explain the stereotypical portrayal of the male Orlando and also go along with the overall theme of the novel, which is to mock preconceived conceptions of gender. It is also through
this mocking that Woolf is able to highlight “the alternative aesthetic” which is of course, the female Orlando, who is far from stereotypical, as she showcases both male and female traits both in terms of her looks and her personality, which in terms resembles the androgynous model in “A Room of One’s Own”.

When Orlando turns into a woman, the male Orlando still remains somewhat on the inside, something that is reflected in Sharron E. Knopp’s essay “If You Saw Me Would You Kiss Me?” in which she claims that “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’” (Knopp 30). When Orlando is transformed, she simply arises in her new form, stark naked and proceeds by taking a bath. She does not seemed to have suffered during this drastic change and neither is she shocked or appalled by it, which echoes Knopp’s words, there does not seem to be anything unnatural about it, she accepts her new body directly. The reader on the other hand might not accept this change as easily, but is basically forced to as the narrator concludes that Orlando is a woman by choosing to address her as “she” from here on, and if the narrator’s word is not enough, pictures are provided as to prove the transformation, furthering the impression of the novel being an actual biography. The implied feminist reader might also have an easier time accepting that Orlando seems to be both a man and a woman at once.

Orlando’s acceptance of her new gender shows that it is not only the narrator who guides the reader’s into accepting Orlando’s sex change, A. Wilson claims that Orlando acts as a model for the reader, that determines how the reader will react and as Orlando does not react to her sex change, the reader follows her example and accepts it. She also theorizes that Orlando taking a bath directly after her transformation, seem to symbolize a certain rebirth, or baptizing, which gives something normal and understandable to hold on to in the midst of a
highly unusual scene (A. Wilson 25). In a way then Orlando is performing the role of the androgynous ideal presented in “A Room of One’s Own”, and as she makes the reader accept her dual personality, the reader in turn accepts the role of the implied feminist reader, without even thinking about it.

After the change, neither Orlando herself nor the people in her close vicinity seem to react in the slightest to her sex change (except her soon to be husband, Marmaduke) even though a reaction or a response might be fairly expected. The narrator even says that “No one showed an instant’s suspicion that Orlando was the Orlando they had known” (109). Yet even though none of the characters in the novel seem to question her gender this is not necessarily true for the reader of Orlando, who might indeed still question her actual sex. The question is then what sort of message this sense of Orlando resisting being defined by her new gender sends to the reader, because even to the modern reader a sex change such as this might seem quite drastic, and the lack of information that is provided makes Orlando even harder to define. A. Wilson claims that “Orlando’s glossed-over, heavily veiled sex change is thus ‘normalized’ in the logic of this surreal context”, this because of the fact that the effects of her transformation are told in very simplistic terms (or not at all), forcing the reader to except that though she once was a he, this is no longer true (23), yet no anatomical or physical descriptions are offered to prove the change.

As mentioned earlier the reader is offered quite extensive descriptions of Orlando’s looks as a man, yet when he has turned into a woman little to no information is provided about his new female appearance, instead the descriptions that are provided seem to focus more on Orlando’s evolving female characteristics. This is clearly visible in this quote “All seems to hint that what was said a short time ago about their [sic] being no change in Orlando the man and Orlando the woman, was ceasing to be altogether true. She was becoming a little more modest, as women are, of her brains, and little more vain as women are” (Woolf 120
My italics). This description of the female Orlando stands out as a particularly stereotypical one, which seems to mock and even slander certain women.

When Orlando after her transformation travels back to England she seems to adapt to her new role as female, or rather the role she believes females should play. It is also at this point that the biographer takes back his/her previous claims about Orlando remaining as one and the same after her metamorphoses, as s/he now explains that this is no longer completely true (120), which seems to suggest that the woman within Orlando has moved to the forefront. S/he also seems to suggest something about the difference between biological sex and socially constructed gender as s/he claims that the perception of ones gender simply can be altered based on how one looks or dresses, this is a sentiment that is highly echoed in “A Room of One’s Own”. 6 The narrator continues in a similar manner as s/he claims that both the male and female photos of Orlando depict the same person, saying that if they had worn the same clothes “Their outlook might have been the same” (Woolf 120-1, My emphasis). The narrator suggests that Orlando still could have been mistaken for a man if she decided to wear men’s clothing, and this is of course something that Orlando will take advantage of later on in the novel (142), and it of course especially significant that the narrator at this point again chooses to refer to Orlando as they, it seems as if the narrator cannot help but to stress the nature of androgyny.

However, at the time of her voyage Orlando has decided to appear as a woman and the biographer confirms this by saying, “it was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex” (121). This inner change in Orlando could also be viewed as a turning point for the reader, because as A. Wilson suggests “the reader’s expectations of Orlando as male are negated by the feminine characteristics with which we

6 This is a perspective that in many ways remains at the very forefront of feminist theory to this day and certainly at the forefront of queer theory.
are later presented” (7), which could mean that even though the reader has been told by the narrator that Orlando now is a woman the reader might still question the truth of it at this point. The reader has been guided time and time again to view Orlando as androgynous, but Orlando’s new female characteristics might force the reader to rethink their perception of her.

Yet when Orlando returns home, it becomes obvious after a while that s/he once again is then neither completely a man nor a woman, Orlando sometimes feel uneasy when completely dressed in female clothes (Gonzáles 80), while she at other times seem to thoroughly enjoy it. Wilson explains that Orlando and the reader adapt to the change simultaneously “the idea of Orlando as male hangs in the air even as images of a rather feminine Orlando move in. Thus, male and female attributes come to share space in the same character in a rather gentle, gradual way for the reader.” (A.Wilson 7). This again ties in with the ideas presented in “A Room of One’s Own” in which she theorizes that in every soul two powers exist “One male, one female; and in the woman’s brain the woman predominates over the man” (Woolf, A Room of One’s Own 113) she also theorizes that perhaps one cannot function without being androgynous. That a purely male or female mind cannot function creatively, there has to be a fusion between the two, which would mean that it is only when male and female attributes start to share space in Orlando that she can truly function.

However, the idea of male and female attributes sharing space in Orlando might for some signify that Orlando is either bisexual or transsexual, whilst I, on the other hand believe that this has nothing to do with Orlando’s sexuality, it simply reflects the androgynous model that Woolf presented in “A Room of One’s Own”. In addition to this I believe that it is reasonable to presume that this also reflects what was happening in society at the time of Orlando being written, as it was a time in which women were suddenly allowed to partake in activities that had previously been exclusive to men, both in terms of fashion and in their line of work, they were in a way allowed to become more androgynous.
The theme of androgyny is echoed by the narrator as s/he seems to suggest that both men and women harbor a certain level of androgyny: “Different though the sexes are, they intermix” (Woolf 121). This “intermixing” of the two sexes is then reflected in Orlando; as she alternates between dressing as a male or a female according to her own inclinations, which indeed sounds similar to the passage previously quoted from “A Room of One’s Own” above in which Woolf said that the two genders have to mix (113). Yet in the last chapters of the novel Orlando seems to abandon her roleplaying as she comes into a role of her own. The final picture of Orlando (Sackville-West) depicts her standing in her garden dressed in both pants and shirt, clearly showcasing the new fashions which allowed female and male attributes to intermix, attributes that she now could mix them according to her own whims, “She belonged to neither … she was a man: she was a woman: she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each” (Woolf 100), Rognstad further explores this idea in this passage:

Seeing Orlando in light of A Room of One’s Own, it is probable that Woolf wanted to present female Orlando as a personification of the ideal status of androgyny; someone who knows the secrets of both sexes and can access the whole specter of human experience, and thus is able to exploit her intellect and creativity fully (31).

Both Rognstad’s statement and the final depiction of the female Orlando seem to suggest that Orlando has become a new type of woman, one who is able to explore the pleasures of both the sexes equally, similarly to the androgynous model presented in “A Room of One’s Own”.
6. Conclusion

Having looked at all the different aspects that make out the character Orlando, as well as the narrator, it is reasonable to conclude that Orlando indeed is aimed at a feminist audience, and also that the implied reader in the text is a feminist. Moreover, the possibility of this implied feminist reader being a female one has been explored, and it has been noted that Orlando was modelled after and written to Vita Sackville-West who of course was a woman. It has also been concluded that this did not offer enough proof of who the implied reader is, as the implied reader is a structure in text and not a real person. It would therefore be more likely to conclude that a real reader could be a female, however, it is not possible to determine if Orlando has more female or male readers, as such information simply does not exist. Yet it has also been concluded that viewing the implied reader as a feminist is problematic as feminism at Woolf’s time was a far cry from feminist criticism today, yet it has also been shown that the implied reader is a structure that can exist eternally within a text, as textual structures can adapt and be fulfilled in different ways.

The fact that Orlando was written at the same time as “A Room of One’s Own” has been explored, and it has been concluded that Woolf used Orlando as a way to express the feminist ideas presented in “A Room of One’s Own” in fiction. This implies that certain similarities to the androgynous ideal that were presented in “A Room of One’s Own” were unconsciously inscribed in Orlando and that this ideal would be especially visible in the implied feminist reader role.

It has also been shown that both Orlando and her narrator resist being defined by one gender alone. It has also been concluded that this refusal is spurred on by the narrator, who controls the way in which the characters genders are presented in the novel, as it s/he who determines that Orlando should be called a woman and not a man after her transformation. It is also true that s/he resists conforming to one of the two genders as s/he
often refers to him/herself as “he” or “we”, but never “she”, but also that the narrator shares traits with both genders, which makes her/him androgynous.

Finally, it has been concluded that even though there are certain instances in the novel that seem to indicate that the implied reader is female the instances that imply that the implied reader is a feminist out number them by far, which means that it has not been possible to determine that the implied reader is a female.
7. Works Cited


