



# Analysis of Androgyny View in *Orlando* and Its Significance

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**Abstract:** *Orlando* is a romantic and imaginative work written by Virginia Woolf in which the protagonist *Orlando* has lived for 400 years and experienced the change of gender from male to female. He is a representative of androgyny in literature by whom Woolf wants to stress the importance of the balance between men's thinking and women's thinking. From this point of view, this paper will analyze the concept of androgyny in *Orlando* and its practical significance.

**Keywords:** Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, androgyny, feminism

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## 1. Origination and development of androgyny

Androgyny in biology refers to an individual has both mature male genitals and female ones, acting as a mixture of male and female in frame and physiology. In term of psychology, it describes those people with obvious characteristics of male and female; they are tender and exquisite like women, simultaneously, decisive and strong like men. It was Plato who came up with this concept according to Greek mythology. In *Symposium*, he attested that in the beginning human being was spherical with four legs, four arms and two faces. To whittle down the power of humans, Zeus split them in half. With the separation of genders, human beings entered the age of degenerate and sin.

In other fields such as religions, tales and some literature works, we can also see the embodiment of androgyny. In Chinese Buddhism we see the goddess Guanyin as an androgynous Bodhisattva; there was girl called Hua Mulan (maybe it's a fiction) in Chinese tales who disguised as a boy taking the place of her father to join the army without seen through. Even in the plays of Shakespeare, such as Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* who appeared in court dressed, acted and talked like a man in order to help her husband's friend. She knew Venetian law well, not only punished the greedy Shylock, but also saved Antonio from the pain of cutting flesh. The masculinity of Portia is not originated from someone else, but from the male self in her mind.

Virginia Woolf is the first to introduce the concept of androgyny into literature. She thinks there are two kinds of power in our mind, one belongs to male, the other female. Only when these two power exist and cooperate harmoniously can we reach the best state. This is especially true for great writers.

## 2. Androgyny view in *Orlando*

In *Orlando* Woolf expressed directly her view of androgyny which was inspired by her intimate friend Vita Sackville-West. *Orlando* is a nobility who has lived for 400 years and experienced the change of gender from male to female. Finally, she reached the state of androgyny, accepted herself and became a brilliant writer.

### 2.1 *Orlando* as a male

When *Orlando* was a pure male, he was fervent to write poems. Elegant and beautiful, he was favored by the queen Elizabeth I. When he met his lover the princess Sasha, he even thought she was a boy because she wore "the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex" and she skated "with such speed and vigor". We can say that Sasha's androgyny attracted *Orlando*. When they fell in love, *Orlando* thought his engagement, fame and future were "a straw in the balance compared with Sasha herself". However, after Sasha betrayed him, he called her "devil, adulteress, deceiver". Here, *Orlando*'s reaction suggested that the comment that men gives women is male-oriented. Abandoned by Sasha and ridiculed by Nick Greene, *Orlando* was disappointed to the world. In order to escape from the Archduchess Harriet, he went to Constantinople working as an ambassador.

### 2.2 *Orlando* as a female

To our surprise, he became a female totally after a fire hazard in Constantinople. She wasn't astonished at her gender transition, but thought it was normal. She put on women's clothes and adorned herself with jewelries. As a pure female, she began to think about her duty from a woman's perspective. "As a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented and exquisitely apparelled." She thought it was ridiculous for women to hide their beauty, lest a sailor might

be captivated. She realized that she "never be able to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth... or wear seventy-two different medals on my breast." Due to meeting men's conceit, women didn't allow to be educated. As she thought about it more deeply, she put the two genders in opposition and found their terrible defaults. She found the truth in details about women that was neglected when she was a man. She would hide her manuscript when interrupted; she was modest about her poems instead of showing them to others like what she did before (when she was a man). Later, she became a great lady of London society where she tasted personally the status of women in men's mind. "Women are but children of a larger growth... A man of sense only trifles with them, played with them, humors and flatters them."

What made her know profoundly the performance of women when facing men was her experience with Nell. At the beginning, *Orlando* didn't indicate her identity. She found what Nell did, such as timidity, hesitating answer and the fold of her cloak, was to cater her "manliness". Nell prattled and primed as women do to please her lover. Nevertheless, when *Orlando* told her that she was also a woman, Nell dropped her plaintive ways as before. In *Orlando*, there was a Mr. S. W. who said "when they lack the stimulus of the other sex, women can find nothing to say to each other... they scratch." All of this proved that in the 18th century, women couldn't have their own property, get inherent rights and gain respect who were just appendants of men.

### 2.3 *Orlando* as an ideally androgynous individual

She knew more about men and women because of her bisexuality. Exactly because she treated things in both genders' perspective, she finally had an epiphany about why Sasha did so. *Orlando* liked both the integrity of trousers and the attractiveness of dresses, enjoying the double pleasure of both genders. She switched freely between male and female through wearing the clothes of both genders, such as, a China robe of ambiguous gender, knee breeches, or a flowered taffeta. Yet through all the changes, *Orlando* remained her personalities fundamentally the same. She still liked mediating, animals, poems and nature. Nothing had been changed.

*Orlando*'s husband Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine also had androgynous characteristics. They engaged just after their encounter for several minutes. We can say that, to some degree, it was their common feature of androgyny that contributed to their marriage. They discovered women could be generous and frank like men, and men could be erratic like women so that they even suspected the genuine genders of each other. During her communication with Shel after their engagement, *Orlando* cried "I am a real woman". At that time, *Orlando* got the freedom from her gender. The traits of two genders merged in her body although they might have differences. Letting them equally exist in her mind, *Orlando* accomplished her work "The Oak Tree" through which she realized her value of life and succeeded in the field of literature.

## 3. Virginia Woolf's view about androgyny in *Orlando*

In *Orlando*, Woolf just presents the differences and conflicts between male and female, letting the readers to explore and judge by themselves. She wasn't partisan to any gender. Using the view of androgyny, Woolf wants to awaken the consciousness of female, appeal to them to pursue freedom and get rid of the mental shackles. In the meanwhile, through *Orlando*'s experience and sufferings, Woolf opposes to the supremacy of male and the opposition between two genders. In *Orlando*, she attests that "in every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place". What she advocates is the balanced state of two genders instead of being antagonistic to each other, and only then can a writer create a wonderful work like *Orlando*.

## 4. The view of androgyny in other fields

In other fields, like Chinese poetry, psychology and fashion industry, even among the youth of Z generation, we can also see manifestation of androgyny.

In Chinese history, there was a female poet called Li Qingzhao who belonged to graceful and restrained poetic genre. She wrote a magnificent poem that "be man of men while you are live and soul of souls if you are dead" which shew her boldness of vision. "The dream fluttering far away in the wind roller. Everywhere seeking the lover's trace regular, but it was waked by the yellow warbler." Such sentimental sentences was written by Su Shi, a bold and unconstrained poet. It seems that the traditional presupposition of gender operation is not unbreakable. Those two poets forgot the opposition between two genders and expressed their feelings without hindrance. This is exactly what Woolf calls for.

In the 20th century, Freud put forward the concept of subliminal androgyny and verified the possibility of bisexually psychological traits through sexology and psychology analysis. . Later Jung raised the similar view. He thought there were two primitive models of human, one is Anima who is the female compensation factor in male subconsciousness, the other is Animus that is the male feature and potentially male essence of female. Besides, American psychologist Sandra Bem argues that only those people who have features of both genders can better adapt to this complex society.

In *Orlando*, Woolf said "Vain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us." "Had they both worn the same clothes, it is possible that their outlook might have been the same too." That's why *Orlando* gained double happiness through changing clothes of different genders. In fashion industry, Yves Saint Laurent designed the first "le smoking" for women which originally refers to the smoking suit that men wear when they smoke after the dinner party. At that time, women's wearing trousers was unsuitable. What Yves Saint Laurent challenged the established dress codes and the opposition of genders. Now, more and more young people of Z generation just wear what they like no matter what kind of gender the clothes belong to. They act as what Woolf said: it's much more important to be oneself than anything else.

## 5. Conclusion

*Orlando* is an interesting and thought-provoking novel, through which Woolf published her view of androgyny. It was different from that of militant feminists who were in favor of the opposition of two genders. While Woolf stressed the blend of them, mutual dependence and mutual promotion. She argues only in this way can women realize their own value, enhance themselves and obtain their dignity. Although Woolf's androgyny is kind of Utopian, she shows us a path to make the real equality of men and women come true. More important, her view of androgyny had a great influence on feminist literature.

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