

# queer classics: virginia woolf's "orlando: a biography"

By Ernie McLeod

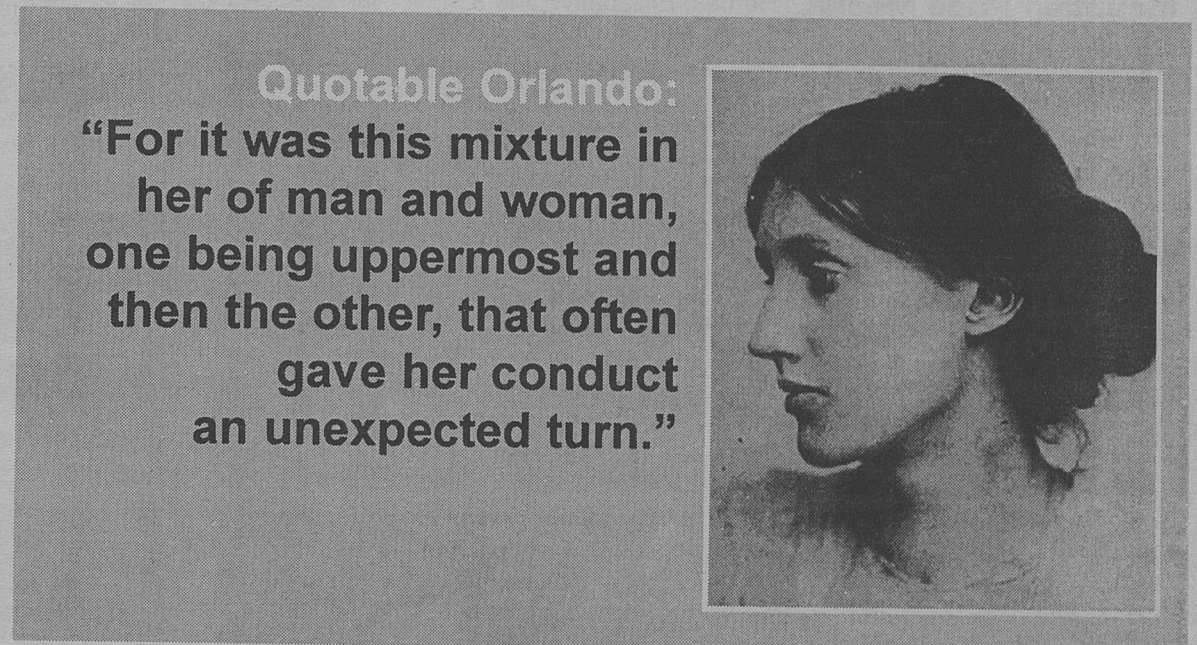
Not far into Virginia Woolf's witty, gender-bending classic, *Orlando*, I came across a scene in which the time and day are given as "about six in the evening of the seventh of January." Realizing it was the seventh of January, I glanced down at my watch: precisely six in the evening. Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf? I am! I told my boyfriend if he saw me heading riverwards with rocks in my pockets, he'd know Virginia's ghost was hovering a tad too close.

Fortunately, the spookiness ended there, but in the past few years it does seem Woolf's ghost has been popping up everywhere. There have been film adaptations of *Orlando* (with Quentin Crisp as Queen Liz the First – how queer is that!) and *Mrs. Dalloway*, a play based on letters between Virginia and Vita Sackville-West (the woman who inspired *Orlando*), an acclaimed biography of Woolf by Hermione Lee, and two novels which pay homage to Woolf, one being Michael Cunningham's 1999 Pulitzer Prize winning (and

queer-themed) *The Hours*. Add this to the heaps already written about Woolf and her milieu, and she rivals Jane Austen for posthumous overexposure.

As I noted in a previous Queer Classics, *Orlando* was published in 1928, the same year as Radclyffe Hall's *The Well of Loneliness*. Though both books were milestone explorations of the meaning of gender, *Orlando* faced little of the venom or censorship that greeted Hall's work. (Woolf was among those who took the stand to defend *The Well* politically during the obscenity trial against it.) Unlike Hall's fierce – and notably humorless – polemic, Woolf's fictional fantasy was viewed, rightly, as a literary lark, its more subversive notions playfully wrapped in layers of linguistic levity, making it an easier pill for the reading public to swallow. They did; it was an immediate success.

Oddly enough, though *Orlando* is Woolf's queerest book, it's more straight-forward and accessible than some of her introspective, stream-of-consciousness styled novels. Conceived as a mock biography, Woolf realized that for the satire



**Quotable Orlando:**  
"For it was this mixture in her of man and woman, one being uppermost and then the other, that often gave her conduct an unexpected turn."

to work, the prose needed to be clear and relatively simple. Not that the result is simple: Spanning some 400 years, with a main character who abruptly changes sexes midway through, *Orlando* muses not only on the ambiguous nature of masculinity and femininity throughout time but on time itself, and art, and society, and love.

Elizabeth Bowen, in an afterword to one of the editions, described *Orlando* not as a novel

but as a "novelist's holiday," fantastic but psychologically sound.

Woolf's general biography is well-known. She was born in 1882, home-schooled as a child, likely sexually abused by a half-brother, greatly affected by her mother's death when she was in her teens, and then, later, by the deaths of her step-sister, father, and favorite brother. With her sister Vanessa she was at the center of an artistic circle (which had several gay members, includ-

ing E.M. Forster) known as the Bloomsbury Group. In 1912 she married Leonard Woolf and in 1917 they formed Hogarth Press, which published writers such as T.S. Eliot and Katherine Mansfield along with Woolf's own works. She attempted suicide in 1913 and was plagued by depressions and debilitating headaches throughout her life until, in 1941 at age 59, distressed by world events, fearful  
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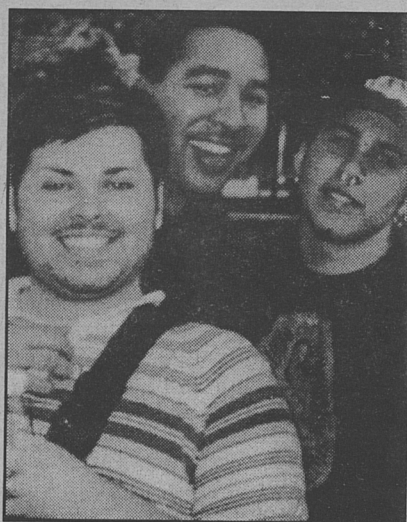
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Faisal Alam, founder of the gay Muslim organization Al-Fatiha, featured in the new edition of *In The Life*, airing in February.

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