

Table of Contents

1. Introduction.....	2
2. “She let her hair down” – Identity and heritage in <i>Pepita</i>	4
3. “He was a woman” – Identity and sex in <i>Orlando</i>	14
4. Conclusion	25
5. Reference List	26

1. Introduction

The relationship of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West has always fascinated cultural imagination. As Vanessa Curtis puts it in her newly published study, entitled *Virginia Woolf's Women*¹, one can hardly find any monography on Woolf or a critical analysis on *Orlando*, which have not dealt with the astounding bond between these two prominent figures of the British literary and social world.

The reason for the public interest can be traced back to that significant point that both of these remarkable women managed to raise their correspondence with each other to the level of their gender-based work of art. Woolf and Sackville-West, regarded as two of the most well-known feminists in the literary world, were the greatest influences for each other. On the one hand, Woolf might have been an enormous encouragement for Sackville-West to extend her poetic vision on femininity in the world of prose. On the other hand, Sackville-West became a muse for Woolf in one of the greatest accounts on gender, *Orlando*.

Their correspondence is more explicitly recognizable from their biographical writings. As Kathryn Z. Sproles recalls in her study *Desiring Women – The Partnership of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West*², it would be required to consider the genre of biography in the discourse on Woolf and Sackville-West as their way of extending their ideas on gender identity.

“The history of England is the history of the male line, not the female”, states Woolf in her essay, “Women and Fiction”, published in 1929, a year after *Orlando* was completed. She goes further by saying that although we know almost everything about our male predecessors, all we can unearth on “our mothers”³ is confined to how they looked on a particular ceremony, how they were received by the Royal Family, the date of their marriage, and the number of the children they bore. All other facts and data fall silent. Consequently, if one strives to track down how women were treated in history, one should turn history

¹ Vanessa Curtis: *Virginia Woolf's Women*, Sutton Publishing Ltd., 2003, pp. 145-167.

² Sproles, Karyn Z.: *Desiring Women – The Partnership of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf*, University of Toronto Press, 2006.

³ Woolf, Virginia: “Women and Fiction”; in.: Woolf, Leonard (ed.): *Collected Essays*, Chatto & Windus, London, 1967. p. 141.

upside down, and construct or at least try to construct a faithful picture of the average woman's living conditions.

Therefore, suggests Woolf, a new perspective of history should be required that emphasizes the role of women, or is told from a woman's point of view. In this respect, both Vita's major historical and biographical accounts, especially *Knole and the Sackvilles* and *Pepita*, as well as Woolf's *Orlando* can be seen as the attempts to reconstruct history from a feminist standpoint. For Woolf and Sackville-West, femininity and history appears to have a crucial connection point with each other. Both *Pepita*, Vita Sackville-West's highly neglected biographical account on her female heritage, and *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf's biographically inspired fiction on Vita's life and the history of the Sackvilles designate the allegory of female identity as their central topic. It is essential to mention that, as *Orlando*'s narrator also verifies, the concept of history and biography in Woolf's mind share an explicit connection with each other as they both seek to represent the truth of the past. Therefore, my aim in this paper is to throw a new light on these volumes as the primary sources of the concept of female identity in the face of past and present.

2. “She let her hair down” – Identity and heritage in *Pepita*

If we wish to give an accurate description on Vita Sackville-West's character, “a complicated modern woman” would be the most relevant term. Being one of the most successful bestseller-writers of her time, she was the offspring of a noble family. Her family estates included Knole House, Long Barn, and Sissinghurst Castle with three of the most beautifully crafted gardens in England. However, she was the descendant of Spanish gipsies from her mother's side as well; her grandmother was a well-known dancer and the mistress of the English diplomat Lionel Sackville-West, 2nd Baron Sackville. At the age of 21, Vita married the writer and politician Harold Nicolson, with whom she had an open marriage.

She was described by her son, Nigel Nicolson in *Portrait of a Marriage*⁴, his biography on the unusual relationship of his parents, as a snob upper-class woman, who equally had tender feelings for her own sex and her reserved homosexual husband. To the ties of social conventions of marriage and motherhood, she preferred independence. In Victoria Glendinning's prize-winning biography, simply entitled as *Vita*,⁵ she is depicted as an eccentric and sophisticated individual, who all through her life struggled between the role society pressed upon her both as an aristocrat and as a woman, as well as “the “masculine” aspects of the rebellious and daring alter-ego.”⁶ These two aspects of Vita's personality – often being erroneously categorized by some of her literary analysts as the symptoms of “multiple personality-disorder”⁷ – provided her an androgynous character which figuratively can be regarded as the basic theme of Woolf's *Orlando*. In his biography, Nicolson cites from her mother's journal the recollection of her autumn trips in 1920 with her then-lover, Violet Trefusis: “I have never told a soul what I did. I hesitate to write it here, but I must; shirking the truth here would be like cheating oneself playing patience. I dressed as a boy. It was easy, because I could put a khaki bandage round my head, which in those days was so common that it attracted no attention at all. I browned my face and hands... I looked like a rather untidy young man, a sort of undergraduate, of about

⁴ Nicolson, Nigel: *Portrait of a Marriage*, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, London, 1990.

⁵ Glendinning, Victoria: *Vita – The Life of Vita Sackville-West*, Phoenix Orion, 2005.

⁶ Sproles, p. 41.

⁷ Ibid.

nineteen... I had done it once already in England; that was one of the boldest things I ever did.” (Nicolson, p. 105.)

According to Karyn Z. Sproles, the writing on general served for Vita as a necessity to reckon with her personal duality, a difficulty that Sproles attributes to the “lack of social recognition of the instability of gender identity.”⁸ In this respect both her novels and her biographies should be read as *biofictions*⁹, her definite attempt to build her “autobiographical skin”¹⁰ into the world of literature. She throws the spotlight on female characters, those who both can be understood as her literary shadows, as well as the products of her aim to acquire “the contextual surround of the world”¹¹ as her self-reflection. This acquirement may supply two purposes for her. First of all, as long as we read her fiction and biographies as self-portraits, we may reveal her general desire to get free from the conventional patterns of society, and live her life as a woman attracted to her own sex. In *Portrait of a Marriage*, Nigel Nicolson verifies this view by saying: “[Her husband] realized that she needed a “safety-valve for young gipsy instincts”, the chance to escape occasionally from the “yoke” of marriage. This was true. Vita had Wanderlust. The desire to be free from interruption, free from being available, was as real and painful to her as love and jealousy. She longed to be in new places

⁸ As Sproles puts it: “For Sackville-West gender was the main issue. Her own gender instability left her unsure of her ability – indeed her desire – to perform the roles she was expected to play as wife and mother. Whether she should leave her husband and children and assist her lover to do likewise was the question raised by her dual masculine and feminine identity. The happiness of all the people she loved was rocked by the unstable sense of herself. Through her journal, Sackville-West makes this instability, this duality, the central tenet of her identity. Asserting that the difficulties she faces are not in herself but in a lack of social recognition of the instability of gender identity, she forges a sense of self that accepts her oscillating sense of her own gender identity.” (Sproles, p. 40.)

⁹ Gérard Genette raises in his thought-provoking essay, ‘Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative’, the problem of whether the author, the narrator, and the character bear any relations at all, and if they have any, in which cases should they interconnect, or stay away from each other. Relying on the former case, where the author, narrator and character are all tempered together into one tight unity, the novel slips into the area of the concept of *autofiction*. Although a structuralist view may lead us to dispute the relevance or even the existence of any connections between author, narrator and character, the fact that the good writer, consciously or not, builds his own power of self-reflection into the world of fiction, still seems to be inevitable. (cf.: Genette, pp. 755-774.) In my view, both novel and biography should be read as the types of biofiction altogether, as long as they recount the lives and times of characters and events (fictional or not) through the eyes of their author.

¹⁰ In “Identity’s Body”, an essay on autobiographical body, Sidonie Smith puts that although our body appears to be our nearest and best known place to consider, which can serve as a bedrock for our coherent, and constantly permanent identity, this coherence and permanence are only illusory, as “paradoxically, bodies, at once so close to us as to seem indissoluble from any notion of “me” or “I”, can also disrupt the too-easy stability of singular identities (Martin 81). The bodily home can be an illusive terrain, perhaps the home of a stranger. If it is only apparently continuous with our identity or identification as an individual, then the politics of the body can open up a space of contradiction, drift, homelessness, a gap through which a complex heterogeneity destabilizes our sense of any stable identification... The body is our most material site of potential homelessness.”

¹¹ Smith

where nobody would ask her to order luncheon or pay the house-bills or come to her with a grievance against someone else.” (Nicolson, p. 135.) This longing is most clearly mirrored in her first book, *Heritage*¹², where her heroine, a conventional farmer’s daughter, who is also a gipsy by her origins, suffers from the trap of the social obligations she has to fulfil for her family. Secondly, this myth-making appears theoretically in her prose. Although she herself always denied the fact that she was a feminist, in her books she supports the idea of women’s equality. In her sharply criticized biography on *Saint Joan*, she characterizes the virgin of Orléans as an early agent of feminism, who completely outraged her milieu as she “adopted men’s clothes and fashions,”¹³ and despite her background as a peasant girl, achieved a typically “masculine career.”¹⁴

In *Knole and the Sackvilles* and *Pepita*, Vita’s purpose was to write her own family history possibly for the reason to set the record straight on “both the conflict in and the heritage of both sides of her past and her identity.”¹⁵ *Pepita* recounts two generations of women in the Sackville family, Vita’s grandmother and mother, “who are associated with rebellion and daring, even as their femininity is also asserted.”¹⁶ In the character of the grandmother Pepita, Vita represents the “ideal” woman, who becomes a central figure of her intergenerational myth-making, as well as a self-identification. In this sense, Vita’s Pepita is more than just a truthful representation of the real woman. She turns into a legendary woman, reckless, daring, flirtatious, and desirable, who was only prevented from being the model of the “perfect woman” by her way of submitting herself to social conventions, “since the perfect woman would never make herself publicly available as a performer, agree to be kept as a mistress, or run her own household, raising her illegitimate children essentially on her own in a foreign country.”¹⁷ If Pepita stands for the wild and exotic outcast, who in the end accepts to comfort herself to the social patterns of the late Victorian era, then the character of Lady Sackville, Vita’s mother and Pepita’s daughter, is the embodiment of the independent woman, who never fit into the picture of the obedient and still Victorian female.

¹² cf.: Sackville-West, V.: *Heritage*, Futura, 1975

¹³ Sackville-West, V.: *Saint Joan of Arc*, Grove Press, New York, 2001. p. 6.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sproles, p. 7.

¹⁶ Sproles, p. 40.

¹⁷ Sproles, p. 41.

As for the title of the book, it suggests the author's undying devotion to her gipsy origins, and its two parts ("Pepita, 1830-1872", "Pepita's Daughter, 1862-1936") and six chapters testify her will to bring back the memory of the events and the places of the past with an odd "sense of the continuity of time."¹⁸ The large family estate of Knole with its garden, its sitting and dining rooms, "where Dryden, Congreve, Pope Swift, Addison and Dr Johnson gazed down on family meals"¹⁹, and its galleries furnished with "chairs, stools, sofas, love-seats, their original coverings untouched by man, but merely softened into greater loveliness by time"²⁰, represented for Vita the ever living present of history²¹ at the same time. In this respect, *Pepita*, like *Orlando*, is "an integration of the various times in one's consciousness"²² on the one hand, as we see its author's hands pulling together present and past, and a remarkable honour of her matrilineal heritage on the other.

Present, past, and matrilineal heritage, as well as the question of femininity Vita describes with an extraordinary display in one of the most famous poems *The Land*.²³ In this lengthy poem, the symbol of flower appears to me as a direct allusion to both heritage and femininity (a flower, the eternal emblem of femininity is rooted deep in the ground, where all the flowers grow, a not very random reference to matrilineal heritage), whereas the circularity of time shows up in the alternation of the four seasons. This circularity must undoubtedly have been a major inspiration for the time management technique of Woolf in *Orlando*. As Jane Brown notes, "Vita's inheritance was from those who spent time at Knole, Edward and Duke John Frederick. They had bequeathed her that rare affinity with the soil that England used to breed. She had had the endless the endless hours of childhood and adolescence haunting the workshops, yards and park at Knole... When she came to write *The Land* she used an agricultural encyclopedia (a present from Harold) for her facts, but her ability to understand

¹⁸ Baldanza, Frank: 'Orlando and the Sackvilles', in: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Vol. 70, No. 1, March, 1955. p.274.

¹⁹ Brown, Jane: *Vita's Other World*, Penguin Books, 1987, p.23.

²⁰ Baldanza, Frank, p. 274.

²¹ As we will see it later, in *Orlando*, Woolf gives an authentic representation of Knole peopled by Dryden, Pope, and Addison. As the novel testifies it in particularly the last chapter, Knole as the property of the Sackvilles determined the family's identity throughout history.

²² Ibid. p. 275.

²³ Cf. Sackville-West, V.: *The Land*, Frances Lincoln, 2004.

these facts was inbred.”²⁴ Brown goes further with stating that the popularity of the poem would lie in its “sheer beauty”²⁵, and Vita’s commitment to dedicate a large part of it for wild flowers. As it would be clearer from *Pepita*, the desire for identification with the uncommon and the outcast being for Vita is a literary pursuit, as well as an opportunity to provide a place for female creativity. Therefore *The Land* seems to be more than a poem about countryside estates and villages, blossoms and beehives, the melancholy of time. It is a poem that implicitly stands up against society, as Victoria Glendinning puts, a poem “of rebellion”²⁶, that emphasizes the beauty of nature dispossessed of social impact.

Space, time, and heritage clearly located in *Pepita*, seem to be significant elements of Vita’s own identification as a woman, what’s more, a woman being attracted to her own sex. In this context, the role of Knole and the role of her gipsy origins become more than to symbolize the pure existence of past and present, as well as her devotion to her female ancestors. In fact, as she unfolds it to Virginia Woolf in one of her letters, while the “all too familiar and entrapping” inner spaces of Knole, Bloomsbury, Richmond, and Long Barn are the motifs of a limits to liberally explore herself as a bisexual woman, the homeless escapade among the gipsy troupe “who are themselves both estranged from the lovers and identified with them”²⁷ make it all possible to express her identity.

As Kirstie Blair maintains in her essay, at the very beginning of the twentieth century the term of “gipsy” was something equal to “a potential of unregulated sexual behavior”²⁸. Indeed, suggests Blair, gipsy costumes in the 1920s were associated with “extravagance, orientalism, and exoticism”²⁹ that subsequently opened a door to “an emerging homoerotic discourse”³⁰. As for especially the 1920s bohemian Berlin, of which cabarets both Harold Nicolson and Vita, and even Virginia Woolf visited regularly, gipsy costumes were highly popular among cross-dressers. To take on the gipsy clothing meant to take on the androgynous

²⁴ Brown, Jane, p.90.

²⁵ Ibid., p.93.

²⁶ Glendinning, Victoria, p. 122.

²⁷ Blair, Kirstie: ‘Gypsies and Lesbian Desire: Vita Sackville-West, Violet Trefusis, and Virginia Woolf’, in.: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 50, No. 2, Summer, 2004. p. 141.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 144.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 144.

³⁰ Ibid.

gipsy persona itself.³¹ Consequently, the gipsy lifestyle with all its wildness, strangeness, and nomadic expression, was for some the synonym of sexual duality, and the antithesis of the “familiar and entrapping”³². Vita recollects in *Pepita* one of her own experiences during a research trip of her origins to Spain this way:

“I saw then that they were all gypsies, for by their lineaments and their garments they could have been nothing else. They were without exception the most beautiful human beings I ever wish to see. Some of them, of course, were old and wrinkled, but even those, still bore the traces of their youthful looks in the bony architecture of their features and in the tragic dignity of their sunken eyes. Others were in their prime, adult and arrogant; but others were divinely young, elusively adolescent, like wild things that never ought to have submitted to the coaxing of even the kindest hand.”³³

As it is clear from her way of describing them as ‘divinely young’ and “elusively adolescent” “wild things” that have never comforted themselves to social rules of any sort, Vita’s interest in gipsy culture and tradition was not only for her insatiable desire to explore the history of her origins, but for she identified herself with what we may call “gipsiness”. According to Blair, this identification, as long as it can serve as a metaphor of same-sex desire, might have served Vita as a good reason for her own “unconventional behavior”³⁴.

This statement points to another aspect of *Pepita*, which I see as an allegory for the enthrallment by the exotic, as well as for the process of breaking out of social conventions. In the first section of the book, Vita gives a long depiction on her grandmother’s beautiful long and dark hair, and how it caused such applause both in her early childhood, and later during her stage career. She says:

“Manuel Guerrero, who, as a ballet-master, was well accustomed to dealing with decorative women, later saw her combing it at an hotel window, and thought it worth while to record his impression: “Long, thick, luxuriant, it reached down below the knee.” But that was much

³¹ In this respect, as Christy L. Burns suggests in “Re-Dressing Feminist Identities: Tensions between Essential and Constructed Selves in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*” (p. 351.), it would be more fortunate to use the term of “androgyny” as a gender transformation as a definition to the ambiguous sex.

³² Blair, p. 141.

³³ Sackville-West, p.28.

³⁴ Blair, p. 142.

later; that was after delirious audiences in Germany had forced her to let it down upon the stage as they refused to believe it was not false.”³⁵

Later in the book, she recounts the same phenomenon in her mother’s point of view, adding that despite her obvious freedom as an artist, Pepita’s character as an obedient and dutiful housewife, the loving and caring mother of her six children made her unsuitable for the role of a feminist. Still, she was to some extent the model of the outcast woman, whose hair, and especially the procedure of ‘letting it down’ might have been for Vita the emblem of female liberation and the affection to the strange. Moreover, the letting of the hair could be a representation of sexual awakening, as it is clear from the words of Vita’s mother:

“She had very long and abundant black hair; she sometimes wore it in two long plaits, which hung down her back and reached down below her knees.”³⁶

The image of the female body with all its pieces such as skin, breasts, lips, shoulders, and especially hair, have always been associated with female sexuality. With her depiction of Pepita, Vita seems to follow the steps of the Western literary tradition of the Victorian period, where “combing and displaying of hair”³⁷ was associated with female sexual power. Moreover, adds Elisabeth G. Gitter, “the more abundant the hair, the more potent the sexual invitation implied by its display, for folk, literary, and psychoanalytic traditions agree that the luxuriance of the hair is an index of vigorous sexuality, even of wantonness.”³⁸ Therefore, hair as such seems to represent the divine and enigmatic force of sexual power, which is, in its own way, the essential part of female identity as well. In the pre-Raphaelites’ paintings, for instance Dante Rossetti’s *Lady Lilith*, the picture of a woman combing her hair in front of a mirror, looking deep into her own reflection, can be considered as “a variety of rich and complex meanings,”³⁹ the bearer of the “magical and symbolic”⁴⁰ power of female sexuality.

³⁵ Sackville-West, V., p. 24.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 138.

³⁷ Gitter, Elisabeth G.: “The Power of Women’s Hair in the Victorian Imagination”, in.: *Modern Language Association*, 1984, p. 938.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid., p.936.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

Relying on Nigel Nicolson commentary on Vita's identification with her gipsy inheritance in *Portrait of a Marriage*, we can declare that this identification must have been a result of her creating a myth of untamed femininity. Nicolson says: "Vita believed that the Spanish blood ran even strongly in herself than in her mother. She felt it to be the more vehement strain, the source of her creative talent; but she also acknowledged that it was wild and irresponsible, and conflicted with the stability which she also coveted."⁴¹ In this respect, the character of Pepita for her may represent the exotic, mysterious and powerful female, who, despite the fact that she may not have been a feminist herself, still carried some of its characteristics.

The relationship between Vita and her gipsy ancestry may get a higher complexity, if we take a look at her somewhat ambivalent approach to her mother. As Nigel Nicolson puts it, although Vita "emphasized her mother's eccentricity to the detriment of her truly remarkable personality and gifts,"⁴² Lady Sackville meant to be for her the personification of parental tyranny and heartlessness. Moreover, adds Nicolson, spiritually Vita always associated Lady Sackville's wild temper, her "affection and selfishness, determination and incompetence"⁴³ with her maternal inheritance. Subsequently, as she wrote *Pepita*, Vita 'was anxious to link the two halves of her story by arguing that the gipsy strain in her grandmother persisted in her mother.'⁴⁴ Lady Sackville's peculiarities as being one time overly caring and devoted to her daughter, and totally ignorant and cruel the other time, very much confused Vita. As she puts it:

'How my mother puzzled me, and how I loved her! She wounded and dazzled and fascinated and charmed me by turns. Sometimes she was downright unjust, and accused me of things I had never done, lies I had never told (not that I was by any means an exemplary child, only she always seemed to get my offences wrong, blaming me for those I hadn't committed, and ignoring those I had), but how she could always win me round, however unjust she had been, just by looking at me and saying: "Perhaps we have had a little misunderstanding."⁴⁵

⁴¹ Nicolson, p. 136.

⁴² Nicolson, p. 55.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Sackville-West, p. 222.

Lady Sackville really could have been an autonomous individual in her own way. She is represented in both *Pepita* and Nicolson's biography as a wayward, strong-willed, and free-spirited, a central figure of her household, and a colourful and sentimental lady to her visitors. She had a very exceptional taste in clothing, she loved shopping and decorating the house with the most luxurious furniture. Furthermore, she had a very profound way to spend money for jewels she never wore, and ornaments she later sold "for a most repaying sum."⁴⁶ She never cared too much for gardening, and she preferred fake flowers to the ones having been blossoming in Knole garden. Her most unusual quirk to paint stair treads taking after bookshelves and a half-crown on one stepping-stone, as well as her adoration toward artificial flowers, Suzanne Raitt associates in her feminist essay to her desperate rivalry with Vita, more precisely an unconscious "struggle for possession of authentic femininity."⁴⁷ This struggle is manifested through the importance of books, flowers, and money in Vita's existence as a gardener, an artist and an aristocrat, leading us to the conclusion that Lady Sackville's goal could have been to enter to a competition with her daughter's skills.

"Throughout their long and passionate intimacy there was a series of rows with a common theme: which of them was, as Virginia Woolf said of Vita, "(what I have been) a real woman"? The intensity of their rows demonstrates the high stakes for which they were playing (and Vita, when in Monte Carlo with her lesbian lover, loved to gamble). It is as though there is only a single possible position for femininity. Each woman is continually trying to drive the other out of it through a fear that, if both occupy it simultaneously, they will somehow become indistinguishable. The prize over which they fight is undisputed possession of authentic womanhood."⁴⁸

In a psychoanalytical view, the term of femininity was perceived as a "state of psychical and sexual impasse,"⁴⁹ a single position that requires from one to struggle over it, defend it, fight for it, steal it, and finally, unveil it as a counterpoint of the oppressive male power. This part of defence mechanism comes from the fact that women's way of producing and defining themselves as

⁴⁶ Sackville-West, p. 285.

⁴⁷ Raitt, Suzanne: "Fakes and Femininity: Vita Sackville-West and her mother", in.: Armstrong, Isobel (ed.): *New Feminist Discourses*, Routledge, London, 1992. p. 103.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 104.

females, as well as putting themselves into a large contest against other women, are all the consequences of their one-time limited possibility to do so.

The breakdown of her marriage can also be attributed to Lady Sackville's surpassing the confine of her femininity, as she was more independent, more decisive, and more conflicting than it was something to be tolerable from a wife of a man of a high rank – and, according to Nigel Nicolson, Lionel Sackville *was* such a man. He was, without doubt, a calm and quiet gentleman, but indifferent with his duties going with his rank, “a snob,”⁵⁰ and a Victorian. Thus, he “preferred an uncritical, undemanding society woman to the wife who was always asking necessary but uncomfortable questions about the estate, and who was growing stout with middle age.”⁵¹ As Victoria was a woman, who did not fit into this picture, their once wild and passionate love began to fade. Vita writes in *Pepita*:

“I have done my work ill, I say, if I have not made it clear that sooner or later these two natures were bound to come to an open breach. They had once been wildly in love, and then after the first rapture had passed that love had modified itself for many years into a tolerable marriage; but it now seems quite obvious, as the years went on, bringing the hardening of personality with them, that the accordance of that marriage could not last.”⁵²

Definitely, as Raitts points it out, the fact that Lady Sackville's affright and refusal to have another child, as well as her rejection of her husband in bed may have had a great cause for the collapse of their marriage. But, contrary to Raitts, I see these only as effects coming from their opposite personalities. Accordingly, by the time Lord Sackville began to have his own love affairs, his wife was widely regarded as a “commander of men,”⁵³ who “loved power, but it must be given to her; she would not impose it,”⁵⁴ and who surrounded and entertained herself with a bunch of lovers and admirers, from Kipling and Henry Ford to Rodin.

As I have mentioned before, Vita's own identification with her female inheritance may have originated from the fact that their own ways, both of these

⁵⁰ Nicolson, p. 56.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Sackville-West, p. 277.

⁵³ Raitts, p. 111.

⁵⁴ Nicolson, p. 57.

women were to some extent the antitypes of the Victorian notion of the “perfect lady.” As we read in Martha Vicinus’ introduction to *Silent and Be Still*, a volume of studies on Victorian women, the ideal type of woman was a sexually innocent, virtuous and always

“active participant of the family, fulfilling a number of vital tasks, the first of which was childbearing...Once married, the perfect lady did not work; she had servants. She was mother only at set times of the day, even of the year; she left the heirs in the hands of nannies and governesses. Her social and intellectual growth was confined to the family and close friends. Her status was totally dependent upon the economic position of her father and then her husband. In her most perfect form, the lady combined total sexual innocence, conspicuous consumption and the worship of family hearth.”⁵⁵

As we have previously seen it, the characters of Pepita and Lady Sackville carried a rather opposing quality against the Victorian “perfect woman.” In Pepita’s case, her past as a dancer, as well as her outsider nature could have been the main reasons, while in Lady Sackville’s case, her independence within the limits of social rules, her relentlessness to bear another child, and her ignorance toward her duties as a mother and wife simply made for them impossible to fulfil the picture of the Victorian “perfect lady.”

To sum up, in *Pepita* femininity seems to appear with all its colours in these two generations of women: wild, exotic, desirable for its unconventional and unsocial expression on the one hand, and dominant, feared, confusing, capricious, quite unable to fit into the framework of social norms on the other. These characteristics of the two generations seem to be combined in Vita’s own personage, as she had an open marriage with a series of love affairs with women, as a carefree and a careless mother she proved to be, and as a dominant and controlling figure over her estate and forever faithful lover, the castle of Knole, on which Virginia Woolf based her most beautiful declaration of love of womanhood, *Orlando*.

⁵⁵ Vicinus, Martha: “Introduction”; in.: *Suffer and Be Still – Women in the Victorian Age*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington & London, 1973, p. ix.

3. “He was a woman” – Identity and Sex in *Orlando*

In a BBC radio programme aired in 1955, Vita Sackville-West claimed:

“I think it was pretty clear in the recently published extracts from Virginia Woolf’s diary, that the idea of her book *Orlando* was inspired by her strange conception of myself, and my family, and Knole, my family home. Such things as old families and great houses held a sort of Proustian fascination for her. Not only did she romanticise them, she was at heart an old romantic, but they satisfied her very acute sense of the continuity of history, English history in particular.”⁵⁶

Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West met in 1922 at Clive Bell’s dinner party. By the time Vita had finished *Knole and the Sackvilles*, one of her biographical accounts on her family history. *Knole and the Sackvilles* besides being a recollection of childhood memories, is also the book of an enthusiast, “a biography of desire”⁵⁷, in which the estate itself comes to life as a flesh and blood person, a constantly present companion during Vita’s childhood and adolescence.⁵⁸ For Vita, the house may have carried the symbol of past and present all the same, as the shadows of history all filled its halls and galleries. Vita’s effort therefore with both *Knole and the Sackvilles* and later with *Pepita* was in part to rewrite “her history of the house”⁵⁹, with all its rooms, galleries, halls, and gardens, all of which she as a little girl used to be an integral part of – an effort that Virginia Woolf would greatly extend in the field of fiction with *Orlando*.

Early in 1927, Woolf received and accepted an invitation by Vita to Knole House. Upon arriving, she immediately fell under the spell of the spirit of the

⁵⁶ „Vita Sackville-West on Virginia Woolf and the Origins of 'Orlando'”, from the BBC program 'Talk on Virginia Woolf and 'Orlando'', which aired on 6 January 1955.

URL: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aRjT7PnBsKY>

⁵⁷ cf. Sproles, pp.70-87.

⁵⁸ As we read in Jane Brown’s biography: “In those turn-of-the-century summers when Vita was eight or nine, Knole must have been a dazzling companion... It looked more like a small village than a house, and its immediate domain stretched over 1,000 acres of commons and woods, with names like Squire’s Shaw, Lord’s Spring Wood and Anquetil Crown Point...The ‘village’ was full of life and the sounds of work. Imagine those great rooms and galleries, the blinds half down to protect the tapestries from the sun, but the windows open and the brocaded curtains lifting in their breeze. The breeze brings the house to life, the sun makes the coloured glass in the windows pattern the polished floor, birdsong comes into the house, everywhere is full of light and colour.” (p. 23.)

⁵⁹ Sproles, p. 71.

whole estate, as if all the centuries appeared together at the same time, “the past expressive, articulate.”⁶⁰ In 1928, on the death of Lionel Sackville, for the family custom followed the Salic rules of agnatic male primogeniture, the inheritance of Knole House was donated to Vita’s uncle Charles Sackville-West, and her cousin Edward. For that reason, the writing of *Orlando* became an increasingly important activity for both Woolf and Vita. The novel, portraying Vita at her manor surrounded by her elkhounds, draws her never-ending devotion to her family heritage, and bonds her with fictional ties to Knole forever. In this sense, *Orlando* can be read as a novel of desire compensating for the physical loss of the estate, but also as a psalm of Sapphic love⁶¹ - with Nigel Nicolson’s words “the longest and most charming love-letter in literature”⁶² - and as a Proustian understanding of past and present appearing in one moment. In the novel Woolf treats Vita like a living puppet, dressing her in glittering diamonds and pearls, tossing her from one sex to another, making fun of her, sliding into her stream of consciousness, bringing back to page her passionate affair with Violet Trefusis in the character of Sasha, her marriage, and her fondness of her family heritage.

Orlando is often regarded as Woolf’s most experimental novel, a black sheep in her way of embedding the stream of consciousness technique into a more serious content, as well as a mockery on the genre of biography, especially historical biography.⁶³ She herself wrote in her diary at the time she started to give form to her vision of the novel:

“I want to kick up my heels and be off. I want to embody all those innumerable little ideas and tiny stories which flash into my mind at all seasons. I think this will be great fun to write; and it will rest my

⁶⁰ Woolf, Virginia: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf III. 1925-1930*; Mariner Books, 1981, p. 125.

⁶¹ As she writes in her letter to Vita on 9 October 1927: “I couldn’t screw a word from me; and at last dropped my head in my hands: dipped my pen in the ink, and wrote these words, as if automatically, on a clean sheet: Orlando: A Biography. No sooner had I done this than my body was flooded with rapture and my brain with ideas. . . . But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and it’s all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your heart . . . ---suppose there’s the kind of shimmer of reality which sometimes attaches to my people. . . . I admit, I should like to untwine and twist again some very odd incongruous strands in you.” (Woolf, Virginia – Nicolson, Nigel – Trautmann, Joanne (eds.): *The Letters of Virginia Woolf III. 1923-1928*, Mariner Books, 1980, p. 436.)

⁶² Nicolson: p. 186.

⁶³ “It may seem odd”, claims Bowlby “that both detractors and advocates agree with the author herself and with the book’s dedicatee about the kind of thing *Orlando* is. We might then wonder whether this disagreement of value over a matter where there is apparent consensus does not suggest some further questions about fantasy and parody, kicking heels and pulling legs: about whether the very playfulness of fantasy may not, sometimes, be a way of saying the most serious things.” (Bowlby, xvi)

head before starting the very serious, mystical poetical work which I want to come next.”⁶⁴

Orlando is a parody, a satire, a charade on reality and history, or as most critics describe it, a “lark”⁶⁵. However, the author’s intention to reflect on the self as it “travels through” the history of England from the time of Shakespeare to the early twentieth century, gives a surprising authenticity to the novel.

A day after she began to work on *Orlando*, Virginia Woolf would write a letter to Vita exploring her intention to ‘revolutionize biography in a night.’⁶⁶ In her early essays and particularly in *Jacob’s Room*, she had already asked the poetic question of whether history should be a composition of the male biography⁶⁷, or it should support a higher poetic demand, constructing “a faithful picture of the daily life of the ordinary woman in Shakespeare’s time, in Milton’s time, in Johnson’s time.”⁶⁸ As Hermione Lee puts in her biography, for Woolf “a revolution of biography is also a sexual revolution.”⁶⁹ In this sense Woolf seems to be more interested in “the lives of the obscure”, the lives of those – particularly women - whose names were to some extent omitted from the pages of history.⁷⁰ In Vita, Woolf found her muse to deride the ideals of the Victorian masculine biographical identity.

Consciously or not, Woolf also gives way to the concept of autofiction. In *Orlando* – of which original title was *Vita* – her aim seems to be dual. On the one hand it expresses her desire to capture the shape of her muse, Vita Sackville-West, in the context of literature. On the other hand, the novel shines as a remarkable experiment to evoke the inability of reconstructing biography itself.

In the novel, Vita as Orlando travels through time in history, first as a nobleman and an English ambassador, then as an English lady. With this method,

⁶⁴ Woolf – Bell: *The Diary of Virginia Woolf III. 1925-1930*, p. 131.

⁶⁵ With the words of Raymond Mortimer: “The first thing to say about the book is that it is a lark. The preface is a parody of prefaces and the whole book is written in tearing high spirits.” (Bowlby, xv)

⁶⁶ Nicolson, Nigel – Trautmann, Joanne (eds.): *The Letters of Virginia Woolf, III, 1923-1928*, London, 1977, p. 429.

⁶⁷ “Does history consists of the biographies of Great Men?”, asks the hero of *Jacob’s Room* in Chapter Three. (Woolf, Virginia: *Jacob’s Room*, Arc Manor, Rockville, Maryland, 2008, p. 30.)

⁶⁸ Woolf: “Women and Fiction.”, p. 142.

⁶⁹ Lee, Hermione: “Virginia Woolf - Chapter One” in: *The New York Times*, June 8, 1997, URL: <http://www.nytimes.com/books/first/l/lee-woolf.html>

⁷⁰ As Lee claims: „Virginia Woolf has a passion for “lives of the obscure,” and for marginal, unvalued literary forms like memoirs, letters, and journals. These lives are, mostly, women’s. When she writes about biography, she is also writing about feminism.” (“Virginia Woolf – Chapter One”)

Woolf seems to emphasize, that history after all, is experienced in its complexity by more an androgynous self. This notion not only turns the Victorian conception on – essentially masculine – biography inside out; it also supports Woolf's philosophical idea that all people are the final constructions of the unity of several different selves, feminine and masculine likewise, "blended together under the control of one stable self."⁷¹ This idea of the unity of selves she later extends in the interior monologues of *The Waves*⁷², and in the character of Percival, whose self is in fact constructed by Rhoda, Susan, Neville, Bernard, and Louis. In *Orlando*, it is the conscious self, which appears to have a dominant power above the other selves. Near the end of *Orlando*, Woolf's conclusion is that although the hero is the ultimate combination of 2,052 selves⁷³, it is still the conscious self that seeks to gain an absolute *raison d'être*.⁷⁴ She says:

"... the conscious self, which is the uppermost, and has *the power to desire*, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what some people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all."⁷⁵

In this metaphysical context, time appears to be compressed into the series of moments which the conscious self may perceive. These moments of time are intertwined in the endless stream of consciousness, they "beat simultaneously in every normal human system so that when eleven strikes, all the rest chime in unison, and the present is neither a violent disruption nor completely forgotten in the past."⁷⁶ Present and past embrace each other in this strange "optical illusion"⁷⁷ of the time system of one's life versus History. History appears through the mirror of one's consciousness; its latitude in time becomes rather narrowed comparing to that of the individual, whose "weekdays leisurely slow down, extend."⁷⁸ This bizarre combination engenders the congenial unity between present and past. This unity is symbolised by Orlando's manor, with its "chairs, stools, sofas, love-seats,

⁷¹ Baldanza, Frank: „Orlando and the Sackvilles”, PMLA, Vol. 70, No. 1, March, 1955, p. 274.

⁷² Woolf: *The Waves*, Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁷³ Woolf: *Orlando*, p. 294.

⁷⁴ reason for existence

⁷⁵ Woolf: *Orlando*, p. 296.

⁷⁶ Ibid., p. 291.

⁷⁷ Bécsy, Ágnes: *Virginia Woolf világa*, Európa Könyvkiadó, Budapest, p. 183.

⁷⁸ Bécsy, p. 183.

their original coverings untouched by man, but merely softened into greater loveliness by time”⁷⁹, as well as with its 365 rooms; by the number of days in a year, as well as Orlando’s years (s/he turns 36 years-old by the end of the novel)⁸⁰.

Relying on this statement, we can state that for Woolf, just as for Vita, the problem of the identity seems to be the main subject. In her explanation, as we, human beings are all the compositions of different selves, the sexes in all of us mingle, and only the clothes distinguish one sex from another. We all have an originally androgynous personality that is present in our vision of life, in our human relationships, and in our sexual desires. This interpretation also leads us to another point, as long as we look at *Orlando* as a fictionalised biography. We have already seen in *Pepita* how the correlation arises for Vita Sackville-West between identity and family heritage. Vita’s double identity, the masculine and the feminine combination of her personality, as well as the duality of her family background (true-born aristocratic on the one hand, nomadic on the other), may have been a rich breeding ground for Woolf, when she created the character of Orlando, and put her into the timeline of the continuously flowing history. This concept is proved by the photographic illustrations of Vita and the generations of Sackvilles included in the book. Four of these photographs show Vita posing for the novel, whereas two of them are historical portraits of the Sackville ancestors.⁸¹ Consequently, Vita symbolized for Virginia the Sackville identity’s noble ancestry;⁸² and still, there was a romantic, wild, and mysterious aspect to her character they attributed to her gipsy heritage.

At this point, it seems to me to be inevitable to take a look at the novel in comparison with Vita’s own effort to express her identification with her matrilineal heritage in *Pepita*. Woolf turns this form of identification inside out in *Orlando*, in a scene that can be read as the symbolic transfer from real life events on the one hand, and as a question of feminine identity in relation with matrilineal heritage on the other. Vita’s own struggle to identify herself with her female heritage Woolf connects with her struggle to identify herself as a woman. This

⁷⁹ This is an extract from Vita’s article on Knole. This article is now a government property.

⁸⁰ Vita was also 36 years-old in 1928.

⁸¹ As Frank Baldanza gives it, the two photographs entitled as “Orlando as a Boy” and “The Archduchess Harriet” are in fact the portraits of Edward Sackville 4th Earl of Dorset and Mary, the 4th Countess of Dorset.

⁸² As Woolf claims in her letter to Vita: “Your excellence as a subject arises largely from your noble birth (but what’s 400 years of nobility, all the same?), and the opportunity this gives for florid descriptive passages in great abundance.” (Nicolson – Trautmann, p. 429.)

struggle appears in *Orlando* in the following way: after her return to England, Orlando is faced to determine her sexual identity in a lawsuit to keep her estate – referring to two of the most scandalous lawsuits in Vita's family history, the infamous Murchison incident⁸³ and her uncle's unsuccessful attempt to prove his own legitimacy in order to inherit Knole House. In the novel, *Orlando* has to confront with three charges, and the last two of them cover exactly Vita's difficulties of identification:

“The chief charges against her were (1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing; (3) that she was an English Duke who had married one *Rosina Pepita*, a dancer; and had by her three sons...”⁸⁴

In here, it seems to be essential to mention that Vita's own questions on gender, as well as the gender fluidity that characterized both her and her literary alterego, appears in *Orlando* the following way: a day after his/her marriage to the gipsy dancer Rosina Pepita in Turkey, Orlando falls into a deep trance of metamorphosis. Both this marriage and the metamorphosis seem to be in direct proportion to each other. They appear to mirror Vita's ideas on femininity freed from the constraints of society, as well as her desire to reach that freedom. In this respect, metamorphosis itself seems to be a representation of an outbreak, a rebellion against social norms, as well as the birth of the new female independent from social roles. Consequently, for Woolf gender fluidity seems to be an excellent proof to lead us to the recognition: in *History and Time*, social and gender roles are blurred together, and the basis for our existence lies in our own identities as human beings.

What determines us human beings as individual identities? How can be our somewhat androgynous identity itself separate from our sexual orientation and desires? Although Woolf claimed that she had never read Freud until 1939, there is obvious psychoanalytic inspiration in the book on the specifically feminine

⁸³ The Murchison letter was a political scandal in 1888 during the United States Presidential election, when in an open letter to the Republicans, Lionel Sackville-West, Vita's grandfather as a British ambassador of the U.S. under the name of „Charles F. Murchison” expressed his hope that President Cleveland would be elected. The Republicans published his letter two weeks before the election, and Lionel Sackville-West was required to return to England shortly afterwards.

⁸⁴ Woolf: *Orlando*, p. 161.

sexuality.⁸⁵ Right from the first chapter of the book, where its narrator begins to make out his later extended theory on gender and gender roles, the reader becomes to be aware of the book's many ambiguities on sexuality by being said "there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it."⁸⁶ Throughout the novel, Orlando appears to be a prototype for the androgynous self, both before and after his metamorphosis. As the narrator assures us, the change of sex does not lead directly to the transformation of the identity:

"We may take an advantage of this pause in the narrative to make certain statements. Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory – but in future we must, for convention's sake, say "her" for "his", and "she" for "he" – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering obstacle."⁸⁷

It seems to me that this stability of the identity irrespectively of sex may serve for Woolf as an explanation for the question of one's sexual existence and sexual desire. In *Orlando* Woolf plays with the idea of "gender crossing"⁸⁸ in several places. During the first half of the book, we get to know Orlando as the Freudian "little man."⁸⁹ He is loved by an Archduchess Harriet, who turns later out to be an archduke. He falls in love with the equally androgynous Russian princess, Sasha. After the scene of her metamorphosis and her life as a woman among the gipsy troops, in Chapter IV, Woolf's narrator declares that "as all Orlando's loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved."⁹⁰

⁸⁵ Freud maintains that every human being is born to be bisexual in the sense that they both contain the aspects of both sexes, and are attracted to both sexes. In this view, through a psychological development, our sexual orientation becomes mainly monosexual, while bisexuality in a latent state keeps on existing. However, Freud is far from being called a supporter of feminist ideas, as for him feminine sexuality is about their recognition of being lack of a penis, which directly leads to castration anxiety and penis envy.

⁸⁶ Woolf, Virginia: *Orlando*, Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 13.

⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 133.

⁸⁸ Lawrence, Karen L.: 'Orlando's Voyage Out, in.: *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 38., No. 1, Spring 1992, p. 255.

⁸⁹ Ibid.

⁹⁰ Woolf: *Orlando*, p. 154.

It is nevertheless essential for us to take a look at the background in which the metamorphosis itself takes place. I have already mentioned in the previous chapter that in the early stages of the twentieth century, the freedom of femininity was somewhat symbolically correlated with the gipsy lifestyle. For Woolf, this vividly unconventional outcast form of reality gave the chance to express her vision of the novel as an “escapade”⁹¹, a way out of artistic conventions and value-judgement. As both Rachel Bowlby and Kirstie Blair verify, Orlando’s sexual awakening as a woman is possible only among the gipsy hordes, as they represent a negligent freedom that does not allow them to be seriously concerned with property, rank, two of the most prodigious cornerstones of society, which make an evident difference between the two sexes. Furthermore, Kirstie Blair maintains that this freedom prevents Orlando from having “normatively heterosexual”⁹² desires. She not only lives with the gipsies, she becomes a part of their group, and more essentially, she identifies herself with them.⁹³

As *Orlando* proves, for Woolf, art itself as a form of self-expression may be an androgynous activity. In this approach, Orlando’s sex change may get a new meaning as a metaphorical representation of the re-birth of the artist. In this aesthetic point, Woolf seems to caricature the philosophical problem of searching for the eternal, unveiled form of truth, an essential aim of any artistic endeavour⁹⁴, and originally at the core of classical Greek philosophy.⁹⁵ This struggle to form or reform appears in *Orlando* on several levels. It emerges in the effort to create great art – in this case, the four hundred years of the making of Orlando’s poem *The Oak Tree*, a fictionalised version of Vita’s prize-winning *The Land*, can be seen as the artist’s own struggle to incarnate and reincarnate himself/herself through the contextual reality of literature.⁹⁶ Throughout the novel, Orlando strives to give shape to his/her art by writing and altering it. S/he even thinks on the true “art of poetry synonymous with art itself.

⁹¹ Woolf: *Diary 1925-1930*, p. 168.

⁹² Blair, p. 157.

⁹³ It may carry another reference to Vita’s personality, who reportedly identified herself with her Spanish forebears, as it may become obvious from *Pepita*.

⁹⁴ This philosophical problem is one of the central topics of Iris Murdoch’s works. Jake Donaghue, the hero of her first novel, *Under the Net*, is the truth-seeker artist, who seeks to find the “unveiled” form of the world.

⁹⁵ In this context, *aletheia* („The Way of Truth”), which is in equivalence with the English word „unveiling” by meaning, appears in the second part of Parmenides’ poem *On Nature*. In this second part, the truth-seeker poet, longs for uncovering the simple, bare reality of existence.

⁹⁶ This concept may apply to Vita, whose innermost motive may have been to reflect on herself as an artist and a woman through her work.

Biography and history as art forms, connect with each other in a profound way, as both deals with the concept of truth. *Orlando*'s narrator, a suspiciously androgynous personification, gives voice to his/her difficulties to separate biography and history from the poetic demands of art by trusting in the dry facts of the past. He tells us in one place:

“The biographer is now faced with a difficulty which it is better perhaps to confess than to gloss over. Up to this point in telling the story of Orlando's life, documents, both private and historical, have made it possible to fulfil the first duty of a biographer, which is to plod, without looking to right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth... But now we come to an episode which lies right across our path, so that there is no ignoring it. Yet it is dark, mysterious, and undocumented; so that there is no explaining it... 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.”⁹⁷

Both biography and history seem to serve for Woolf a large aesthetic view. She declares in “The Art of Biography”⁹⁸ that biography blurs toward art as the “dichotomy between fact and fancy”⁹⁹ is mingling with each other. In this progress, the biographer finally ceases to remain in the position of a chronicler, and becomes to be the truth-seeking artist himself, who writes, rethinks and re-edits his/her work.¹⁰⁰ In this respect, *Orlando* is a strange combination of fact and fancy. It takes on the structure of a biographical account, but the moment its narrative voice embarks on storytelling, authenticity immediately begins to dissolve.

Great art in Woolf's interpretation can engender only out of the conventions of Victorian society.¹⁰¹ In this respect, “escapade” may parallel with the artist's determination to unveil the truth, in other words to achieve great art by reincarnation. In *Orlando*, this parallel expands the most obviously in the scene of sex change, where Orlando, freed from the threat of the three virtues of Chastity,

⁹⁷ Woolf, Virginia: *Orlando*, p. 63.

⁹⁸ Woolf, Virginia: „The Narrow Bridge of Art”, in.: *Collected Essays, Vol. 2*, pp. 218-230.

⁹⁹ Moore, Madeline: „Orlando: An Edition of the Manuscript”, in.: *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 25, No. 3/4, Virginia Woolf Issue, Autumn -Winter, 1979, p. 304.

¹⁰⁰ As Vita did with hers.

¹⁰¹ Woolf here seems to attack the social ideology of Victorian capitalism, following the steps of D.H. Lawrence, who in his work strongly opposed to the destructive power of British industrialist and capitalist society, and emphasized the harmony of instinct and reason as the two most fundamental prerequisites of great art.

Modesty, and Purity, the “weird descendants of the three witches in *Macbeth*”¹⁰², finally wakes up uncovered in his/her bed as a woman:

“The trumpeters, ranging themselves side by side in order, blow one terrific blast: —

‘THE TRUTH!’

at which Orlando woke.

He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess—he was a woman.”¹⁰³

Through her identification with the gipsies, Orlando implicitly seems to undress those social and proprietorial demands which directly lead to sexual differences.¹⁰⁴ As an artist, s/he might be closer to make his/her work better, because s/he has now the ability to reflect on both sides of his/her sex, and the social attitude to his/her sex. Moreover, s/he might be able to take on the role of the great artist, simply because s/he becomes to be the spiritual embodiment of *yīnyáng*, the cosmic forces of global unity.

Orlando as a poetess seems to be a forerunner of Woolf’s “ideal female artist”, who needs to have her own place, her own room for writing.¹⁰⁵ In this sense, the fictionalised version of Knole may provide an ample space for female creativity. Another passage in *Orlando* seems to confirm this statement, where Woolf gives a complex description of her hero/ine’s incarnation as an artist, and her place in society as a woman:

“But Orlando was a woman—Lord Palmerston had just proved it. And when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is a woman’s whole existence. And if we look for a moment at Orlando writing at her table, we must admit that never was there a woman more fitted for that calling. Surely, since she is a

¹⁰² Bowlby, Rachel: “Explanatory Notes”, in.: Woolf, Virginia: *Orlando*, p. 326.

¹⁰³ Woolf, Virginia: *Orlando*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁴ cf.: Bowlby, xl-xli

¹⁰⁵ In *A Room of One’s Own* published a year after *Orlando*, Woolf explores those female artists of the past - including Jane Austen, or the Bronte Sisters - who were required to stand up from their work, in order to pursue their household chores. As Nóra Séllei notes in her Prologue for the Hungarian Translation of *Moments of Being*: “... the female artists were bound to tradition, according to which they were primarily women, who were demanded to adapt themselves to those codes of behaviour, which society regarded as womanly and “natural”. Their art was accepted only under the condition that they would be able to create without disturbing or breaking those codes.”(Séllei, Nóra: “Bevezetés”, in.: Woolf, Virginia: *Egy jó házból való angol úrilány – Önéletrajzi írások*, Csokonai Kiadó, 1999, p.16.)

woman in the prime of life, she will soon give over this pretence of writing and thinking and begin at least to think of a gamekeeper (as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking). And then she will write him a little note (and as long as she writes little notes nobody objects to a woman writing either) and make an assignation for Sunday dusk and Sunday dusk will come; and the gamekeeper will whistle under the window—all of which is, of course, the very stuff of life and the only possible subject for fiction.”¹⁰⁶

In here, Woolf seems to refer directly to D.H. Lawrence, who sees the awakening of female sexuality as a symbol for the awakening socialism¹⁰⁷, the new era that would defeat the Edwardian capitalist ideology through the final settlement of property, and bring total harmony between spirit and body. However, Woolf presses an attack on Lawrence, since he - despite his obvious effort to turn his ideas in his writing against the stuffy and narrow-minded Victorianism and Edwardianism - seemingly returns to the form of traditional literature by emerging love as a requisite for a woman's existence.¹⁰⁸ Lawrence's idea on humanity has another similarity to Woolf's theory on identity; he defends the Freudian opinion that humankind is a unity of male and female identities. Lawrence agrees that the concept, according to which there is only one clear masculine or feminine identity, is not only out of fashion, it is indeed nonsensical. He believed in equality, although he opposed the view that stressed the importance on woman's intellectual dominance.¹⁰⁹

Taking it all round, Frank Baldanza is right to typify *Orlando* as “a literary triumph of genre”¹¹⁰. The novel manages to break out the conventional observation of literature “set up by male novelists.”¹¹¹ Delivering the mere combination of fact and fancy, it is a playful satire on gender and gender roles in the light of personal and general history on the one hand, and a work of serious ideas on time, identity, and sex on the other. Its main message is probably that all

¹⁰⁶ Woolf, Virginia: *Orlando*, p. 256.

¹⁰⁷ In Lawrence's novel, sexual emancipation is also a social emancipation. Constance Chatterley, after all, chooses the gamekeeper for the luxury of capitalist society.

¹⁰⁸ However, what Woolf fails to recognize is that the term of love in Lawrence's dictionary is not limited to the body. In fact, love gives a strange harmony to the body and the spirit.

¹⁰⁹ What makes Lawrence's texts all the more interesting is that he uses the technique of psychological narrative, when he explores his heroines' inner thoughts and desires. His narrative voice involuntarily steps into the heroines' identities, getting the author this way into the status of the androgynous storyteller as well.

¹¹⁰ Baldanza, p. 279.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

of us are primarily individuals, the unities of thousands of different selves, and just secondarily are we sexual beings. This multiplicity of our personalities makes all of us the somewhat androgynous representatives of one global unity. It is a biography of Vita Sackville-West and her heritage, an avowal of love from Woolf's part, but it is a book of universal themes as well. It addresses the deepest parts of human consciousness, asks time and imagination for a dance, and galvanizes life to past as the ever-flowing present.

4. Conclusion

In her essays on femininity and gender roles, Virginia Woolf stresses that as long as an immense part of society is constituted by the female line, the question of the female identity is not a negligible element of our human history. In *A Room of One's Own*, she declares that although the phenomenon of femininity much appears in the prose of great British writers in history, the social conditions of real women, as real women themselves, had still remained somewhat “absent from history.”¹¹² According to Woolf, this absence may have resulted in the instability of identification, as female identity had been determined just as a comparison to that of men. Therefore, women had been described as heartless seducers, dreamlike figures in the idealistic imagination of men, or as the main supports of famous conquerors, generals, and emperors.

In this context, both *Orlando* and *Pepita* should be regarded as literary attempts to break with the traditional masculine view on history and biography. Their most important questions may be: How can the female identity be determined in the mirror of history? How can history of women be reconstructed? How can one determine herself as a woman? How many selves have we got? And as far as we have several selves in us, to what inward expectations can we or should we measure up in our gender roles? Consequently, *Pepita* as Vita's recount on her female heritage reflecting on her own identity, and *Orlando* as Woolf's effort to put Vita's character, biography and history on the scale of the novel-form, seem to be more than just faint recollections of the past. They rather should be considered as flashlights of the changing attitude towards women in the early twentieth century, and the forerunners of Simone de Beauvoir's existentialist book *The Second Sex*¹¹³, another remarkable piece on identity and history.

These works of Woolf and Sackville-West are not only important, because they recite history as a terrain of gender struggles, but because they throw a positive light on female sexuality and gender identity by that these prominent figures of the modernist era paved the way for the new generations of women.

¹¹² Woolf, Virginia: *A Room of One's Own*, Harcourt Press, 1989, p. 43.

¹¹³ Beauvoir, Simone de: *The Second Sex*, Vintage, 2011.

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