ORLANDO
by Sarah Ruhl
adapted from Orlando: A Biography by Virginia Woolf

study guide assembled by Percival Hornak and Crow Traphagen
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A Note on Adaptation:

Sarah Ruhl’s *Orlando* is adapted from Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*, a novel that takes real-life people from history (Vita Sackville-West and Violet Trefusis) and fictionalizes them, telling their story across five centuries. Ruhl’s play takes much of its text directly from the novel, but streamlines its story into a whirlwind journey that sweeps Orlando, an English nobleman, through history.

The various layers are:

*Orlando*, the play, by Sarah Ruhl

↔ adapted from Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando: A Biography*

↔ which is a fictional account of the real life Vita Sackville-West
About the Writers

Sarah Ruhl

Sarah Ruhl is an award-winning American playwright, author, essayist, and professor. Her plays include *The Oldest Boy*, *Dear Elizabeth*, *Stage Kiss*, *In the Next Room, or the vibrator play* (Pulitzer Prize finalist, 2010); *The Clean House* (Pulitzer Prize finalist, 2005; Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, 2004); *Passion Play* (Pen American Award, Fourth Freedom Forum Playwriting Award from the Kennedy Center); *Dead Man’s Cell Phone* (Helen Hayes Award for Best New Play); *Melancholy Play*; *Demeter in the City* (nine NAACP Image Award nominations); *Scenes From Court Life*; *How to Transcend a Happy Marriage*; *For Peter Pan on Her 70th Birthday*; *Eurydice*; *Orlando*; and *Late: a cowboy song*. Her plays have been produced on Broadway and across the country as well as internationally, and translated into fourteen languages. Originally from Chicago, Ms. Ruhl received her M.F.A. from Brown University, where she studied with Paula Vogel. She is the recipient of a Helen Merrill Emerging Playwrights Award, a Whiting Writers’ Award, a PEN Center Award for mid-career playwrights, a Steinberg Distinguished Playwright Award, and a Lilly award. She is a member of 13P and New Dramatists and won the MacArthur Fellowship in 2006. She teaches at Yale School of Drama and lives in Brooklyn with her family.

(from Sarah Ruhl’s website)

Virginia Woolf

Virginia Woolf, original name in full Adeline Virginia Stephen, (born January 25, 1882, London, England—died March 28, 1941, near Rodmell, Sussex), English writer whose novels, through their nonlinear approaches to narrative, exerted a major influence on the genre. While she is best known for her novels, especially *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), Woolf also wrote pioneering essays on artistic theory, literary history, women’s writing, and the politics of power. A fine stylist, she experimented with several forms of biographical writing, composed painterly short fictions, and sent to her friends and family a lifetime of brilliant letters.

(from Encyclopedia Britannica)
Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando: A Biography* was published in 1928 by Hogarth Press, a publishing company run by Woolf and her husband Leonard. The novel was a fictionalized account of Virginia Woolf’s lover, Vita Sackville-West, paying tribute to her ancestral home, her penchant for traveling dressed as a wounded male soldier named Julian, and Virginia’s deep love for her. The novel is frequently referred to as the longest love letter in the English language.

Synopsis (from Encyclopedia Britannica):

“The novel opens in 1588. Young Orlando, a 16-year-old boy, writes a poem called “The Oak Tree.” He finds favour at the Elizabethan court and love in the arms of a Russian princess. A garrulous poet, Sir Nicholas Greene (said to be modeled on Sir Edmund Gosse), discusses literature with him. During the reign of Charles II (1660–85), Orlando is named ambassador to Constantinople and is rewarded with a dukedom. One night he stays with a dancer and cannot be awakened. Seven days later Orlando rises, now a beautiful woman. She returns to England and savours intellectual London society in the age of Addison, Dryden, and Pope but turns to bawdy street life for relief from this cerebral life. She marries to achieve respectability during the Victorian years, and by 1928 she has returned to London, where she is reunited with her friend Greene, who offers to find a publisher for “The Oak Tree.” Back at her country estate, she stands under the great oak and remembers her centuries of adventure.”

An excerpt, in which Orlando looks for something to attach his floating heart to:

“He sighed profoundly, and flung himself--there was a passion in his movements which deserves the word--on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him; for such he took the hard root of the oak tree to be; or, for image followed image, it was the back of a great horse that he was riding, or the deck of a tumbling ship--it was anything indeed, so long as it was hard, for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to; the heart that tugged at his side; the heart that seemed filled with spiced and amorous gales every evening about this time when he walked out. To the oak tree he tied it and as he lay there, gradually the flutter in and about him stilled itself; the little leaves hung, the deer stopped; the pale summer clouds stayed; his limbs grew heavy on the ground; and he lay so still that by degrees the deer stepped nearer and the rooks wheeled round him and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragonflies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer's evening were woven web-like about his body.”
Interview with Director Iris Sowlat

What initially drew you to this play? What's most exciting to you about it?

So much! I was drawn to this play because I think it's the ultimate story of self-discovery. The play is Orlando’s journey to figure out exactly who they are, set against extraordinary changes in given circumstances that most of us don’t experience. But the things Orlando wants - “a life and a lover” - are so universal, and this script brings this universal longing to life in a fantastical and fun way!

The play is such a thoughtful, poetic kaleidoscope of subject matters that I’m passionate about, such as queerness, gender, feminism, romance, and history. I also loved how Orlando, the character, embraces life and love so passionately, with an inherent sense of wonder and delight. The overall sense of joy and optimism in the play and the character is something that we don’t often see in mainstream queer and trans stories. Even when Orlando is deeply sad or angry, it is because they gave too much of their heart to someone they shouldn’t have. But also that’s another thing I love about the play - this story shows so many different types of love, and how Orlando experiences many different types of relationships, and how they are all meaningful in making Orlando who they are.

The stylistic genre of the play Orlando is a form called “storytheater,” which I grew up studying and performing at Piven Theater in Illinois, which is also where Sarah Ruhl studied. So, it’s a great full-circle moment for me to revisit this style many years later, and to direct my first “storytheater” production, using games and techniques that I learned many years ago.

What parts of Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf's story resonate with you?

When I read a book of their letters just before starting rehearsals, I was so blown away by how much they really felt for each other, and all of the nuances of how their relationship developed over twenty years. There were points when reading the letters when I could identify specifically with feelings they felt with each other, with their joys in their relationship, and with how they felt as it was ending. The letters showcase the earliest warm fuzzy feelings they had for each other, how they each approached the other with a bit of trepidation about sharing their initial feelings, how their romance blossomed, how at the height of their relationship, they had such a deep, intimate, safe, sensual familiarity with each other, and then the deep, deep heartache they both felt as the relationship started to fizzle out, and how they both navigated a deeply loving, but more platonic relationship. There have been points in my own life and relationships where I have felt similarly.
How do gender, queerness, time, and history relate to each other in the story of this play?

Orlando discovers truths about their own gender and sexuality, and therefore more about who they are as a person, through experiences with their world, against the backdrop of surreal giant leaps in time and history. Throughout the play, Orlando examines how their sense of self, their gender, their presentation, how they are perceived by others, the social norms of their world, and the ideas of love and romance in their world, are all constantly in conversation with each other. I think this intersection of time, queerness, and finding oneself is common in contemporary experiences of queerness. When working on the play, I looked into the concept of “queer time,” a theory of how queer people can experience time differently than cis-het people, often due to having certain life milestones unfold differently or later than their straight counterparts or relationships that develop differently than “typical” heteronormative ones.

What have you discovered through the rehearsal process that you didn't know at the beginning?

So much! As a director, this is the largest show that I’ve worked on. So, I have welcomed the challenges that come with directing a play that has such a rich and multi-faceted story and world - I’ve learned about directing a large ensemble cast in a piece that breaks the mold of straight-up naturalism, with the use of the Chorus and third-person “storytheater” narration. I’ve learned about how to collaborate with designers on a play that, conceptually, can feel very open and fluid, but also calls for specificity and decisiveness.

How does this play speak to students? What do you hope students will take away from it?

I think this play can speak to students because it’s a story about the universal journey of coming-of-age and self-discovery, but set against the heightened, macro-level circumstances of the changing given circumstances of time and gender, and Orlando’s adventurous, extraordinary life. But at its core, this is a story about discovering who you are, what you want, how you relate to others, and how you move through the world. At the climax of the play, Orlando has a moment of reckoning where they ask, “Who am I?”, which is what the whole play has been building up to. I think that’s something that students, and all young people, can relate to.
The Women Behind Orlando – Vita, Virginia, Violet

*Orlando: A Biography* features several characters who are based on real-life figures, including Vita Sackville-West as Orlando, Violet Trefusis as Sasha, Harold Nicolson (Vita’s husband) as Marmaduke, and an early suitor of Vita’s named Lord Lascelles as the Archduke. The dynamic between Orlando and Sasha that helps to launch Orlando’s journey in the play is rooted in the real-life relationship between Vita and Violet, which ended in disaster long before Vita met Virginia.

See below for some biographical information about the three women at the heart of this story.

**Virginia Woolf (1882–1941)**

A prominent modernist writer best known for her novels, essays, diaries, and letters, and for her use of the stream-of-consciousness technique to weave the memories and interior thoughts of her characters into the narrative. As a result, her work is characterized by vibrant portraits of its main characters, and in particular for its nuanced and deep portrayals of the inner lives of women. Woolf wrote about the rapidly shifting technologies and gender roles of the time in which she lived. She also emphasized moving beyond framing experience in terms of binary oppositions, advocating instead for a “perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow” (“The New Biography”) and bringing a more imaginative approach to fiction.

In particular, Virginia Woolf was interested in the idea of biography, and of exploring “an ordinary mind on an ordinary day” (from “Modern Fiction”) rather than people deemed “great” by society. In her essay “The Art of Biography”, Woolf wrote:

> “The question now inevitably asks itself, whether the lives of great men only should be recorded. Is not anyone who has lived a life, and left a record of that life, worthy of biography – the failures as well as the successes, the humble as well as the illustrious.”

She ran Hogarth Press, a publishing house (logo pictured right), with her husband Leonard Woolf, publishing writers like T S Eliot, Sigmund Freud, Katherine Mansfield, E M Forster, and of course the Woolfs themselves. The couple’s house was a hub for lots of intellectual activity, namely by the Bloomsbury Group, a group of artists, writers, and intellectuals who were massively influential in the early 20th century.
In 1922, after the publication of her novel *Jacob’s Room*, the first of her more nontraditional works, she wrote in her diary: “There’s no doubt in my mind that I have found out how to begin (at forty) to say something in my own voice, and that interests me so that I feel I can go ahead without praise.” Later that year, she notes further, “At forty I am beginning to learn the mechanism of my own brain – how to get the greatest amount of pleasure and work out of it.” Virginia’s most well-known novels are *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To The Lighthouse* (1927), and one of her best-known essays is “A Room of One’s Own” (1929), a key work of feminist literary criticism that imagines a sister for William Shakespeare and examines the limitations placed on women who make art in comparison to men. She also originated the concept of the “Angel of the House” in her essay “Professions for Women”, a confined figure who must stay at home, perpetuate womanly virtues, and sacrifice for the men of the household; it is thought that this relates to her difficult upbringing, with a father who was both a famous writer and also abusive to Virginia and her siblings.

In terms of Virginia’s personal life, she struggled with depression throughout her life, experiencing multiple nervous breakdowns and periods of deep grief related to the death of her parents and brother. Virginia experienced romantic attachments to several women in her late teens and early twenties, including Madge Vaughan and Violet Dickinson (about whom Virginia wrote in her diary in 1922: “is love the word for these strange deep ancient affections, which began in youth and have got mixed up with so many important things?”). She met and began an affair with Vita Sackville-West around 1924, which eventually culminated in *Orlando, a Biography* (1928), frequently referred to as “the longest love letter in the English language.”

Ultimately, as World War II’s threat to life in England grew, Woolf found herself unable to write any longer and took her own life in March, 1941. She left her husband, Leonard, this message: “I owe all my happiness in life to you. You have been so perfectly good.”

**Vita Sackville-West (1892-1962)**

Vita Sackville-West (full name Victoria Mary Sackville-West) is the inspiration for the character Orlando in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando, a Biography*. She was a novelist and poet as well as an aristocrat, best known for her poem *The Land* (1926).

Vita’s grandfather Lionel, 2nd Baron Sackville, fell in love with an Andalusian ballerina named Pepita and fathered five illegitimate children with her. Vita took after her mother, Victoria, in that she was a prolific artist at a young age (she started writing at age 12), and that when she entered society she
had many admirers. Perhaps the first love of Vita’s life was her family’s estate at Knole, in Kent; it was perhaps the greatest tragedy of her life that the property left her family’s possession because Vita had not been born a man, and thus could not inherit it.

Vita rejected the advances of many men at this stage in her life, choosing instead to strike up an affair with Rosamund Grosvenor, a childhood friend with whom she was smitten. The other significant romantic figure in Vita’s life at this point was Violet Trefusis, a childhood friend with whom Vita had a deep and almost obsessive relationship. Vita married Harold Nicolson in October 1913; Rosamund and Violet served as bridesmaids. Vita loved Harold, although their marriage is frequently characterized as “sexless” and lacking in passion. In particular, they shared a love for gardening, specifically the Sissinghurst Castle Garden (pictured right), which they created together, with Vita taking charge of the garden’s roses, of which she was incredibly fond. About their relationship, Vita wrote in a letter to Harold in 1960: “I think that is really the basis of our marriage, apart from our great love for each other, for we have never interfered with each other and, strangely enough, never even been jealous of each other.” Shortly after their marriage, they lived together in Constantinople, because Harold was serving at the British embassy there.

In April 1918, Violet visited Vita at her home, and Vita began to experiment with dressing in men’s clothing. When Harold went away to write and sign the Treaty of Versailles, Vita and Violet went to Monte Carlo and Vita spent the entire trip dressed as a wounded war soldier named Julian, something explored further in Vita’s novel *Challenge*. When the women’s husbands flew to retrieve their wives, Vita, who had been prepared to leave her life behind to elope with Violet, grew furious with her when she revealed that she had had sex with her husband Denys before the trip, causing significant conflict and prompting the four to revert to “normal” life, with Violet returning home with Denys and Vita with Harold.

When Vita met Virginia, she admired Virginia’s brilliance and Virginia in turn admired Vita’s sophistication. Vita worried for Virginia’s mental health, but they loved each other deeply, much to Violet Trefusis’ chagrin.

In 1942, Harold wrote her a letter in which he spoke of her relationship with him and their children: “I remember your saying (years ago) that you had never established a complete relationship with anyone. I don’t think you ever could – since yours is a vertical and not a
Violet Trefusis (1894–1972)

In *Orlando, a Biography*, Violet is represented by Princess Sasha, who charms Orlando and swiftly leaves him. Violet Trefusis was an aristocrat and novelist who grudgingly married Denys Trefusis in June 1915, despite desiring only the love of Vita Sackville-West and gaining notoriety as a writer. In a letter to Vita, she wrote: “I love in you what I know is also in me, that is, imagination, a gift for languages, taste, intuition, and a mass of other things. I love you, Vita, because I have seen your soul.” Violet called Vita “Mitya”, short for “My Dmitri”, after a character from Borodin’s opera *Prince Igor*. They are pictured together below.

After the episode with Vita in France in 1918, Violet’s reputation was ruined and society no longer took her seriously as a writer and artist, only as a figure of scandal.

Her book *Broderie Anglaise* (1935) is in conversation with *Orlando* and *Challenge*, with all three disguising Virginia, Vita, and Violet as characters; Violet and Virginia’s books both present Vita as a dashing young man (for at least part of it), with other characters representing the jealousy and desire between the Vita stand-in and characters representing both Woolf and Trefusis. In 1932, Violet visited Virginia, hoping that the Woolfs’ Hogarth Press would publish Trefusis’ novel *Tandem*; Virginia was charmed by Violet, but the press ultimately did not opt to publish *Tandem*. Violet’s husband had died in 1929, and she lived the rest of her life in France, in exile from polite English society.

Further Reading: 'As a body hers is perfection': Alison Bechdel on the love letters of Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West – Alison Bechdel, *The Guardian*, February 1 2021

- An excerpt from Bechdel’s introduction to *Love Letters: Vita and Virginia by Virginia Woolf and Vita Sackville-West* that describes Bechdel’s own connection to these letters, and the resonance Woolf and Sackville-West’s relationship has with contemporary queer women.
Finding Queerness in History
by Percival Hornak, Production Dramaturg

from Orlando: A Biography

in which the narrator considers sex, gender, and presentation:

“The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex. And perhaps in this she was only expressing rather more openly than usual—openness indeed was the soul of her nature—something that happens to most people without being thus plainly expressed. For here again, we come to a dilemma. Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above.”

Woolf’s novel is an exploration of gender, and of the way cultural gender roles and expectations are imposed on us, rather than something inherent to how we move in the world. The above paragraph is one example of many where the narrator of the book emphasizes that Orlando, whose gender changes halfway through the story, stays fundamentally the same even though their body, the clothes they’re expected to wear, and the way they’re treated by other people have changed. In this example, the narrator even gestures toward the idea that this is a common experience, that many people feel that there is a difference between the way they are perceived and their internal sense of who they are.

Many interpretations of this story focus on the limiting and sexist gender roles and expectations imposed on women throughout the centuries and the empowering narrative of a woman achieving self-actualization and independence. The creative team of this production, many of whom are members of the LGBTQ+ community, also sees a powerful queer and trans story in Orlando’s journey, and we have focused our work on bringing out the themes of gender fluidity and queer joy that originally drew us toward the play.

This play thinks a lot about history, and a production of it that focuses on the story’s queerness has to grapple with the fact that many queer and trans people have been erased from the history we learn in school – if we appear at all, our stories are told in ways that are disempowering, that
treat us like monsters or threats. In our production of *Orlando*, we have created a world that’s explicitly queer, where queerness appears across many different intersections of race, class, and gender. We want to counter erasure from history by placing Orlando’s story in a world in which their queerness is not what makes them exceptional, and in which changes to one’s gender or the way they present their gender to the world are not painful or unwelcome but rather something to be celebrated.

Part of my approach to this play as its production dramaturg has been to resist the urge to prove that queer people in the present have a history by looking for specific evidence in books like Woolf’s. It is less important to have a list of people to point to in order to prove that our existence is not new than it is to find people or groups or ideas that resonate strongly with us, that give us points in history to build community around. We have no way of knowing for certain whether or not a given historical figure was, for example, trans in the sense we mean it today. But I do know that stories about Vita Sackville-West dressing up as a male soldier named Julian and escorting the woman she loved on a whirlwind trip to France resonates with my experience as a transmasculine person living today, and that’s something I can use to shape my own identity.

The language available to describe gender and sexuality in history is different from ours in ways that are impossible to fully understand, but contemporary queer people can find stories that resonate with their own lived experiences and figures who may occupy a similar position as them, like the figure of Orlando or the real-life women whose stories inspired Orlando’s.

**History & Biography**

*from Orlando: A Biography –* in which the narrator struggles with how to tell Orlando’s story:

“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; unenticed by flowers; regardless of shade; on and on methodically till we fall plump into the grave and write finis on the tombstone above our heads. 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.”
In the above excerpt, the narrator of Orlando struggles with a question Virginia Woolf asked often throughout her literary career: how fictional can a biography be, and how responsible is the person writing it for making sure everything is true? How do we write biographies of people if we don’t have all the facts, or if there are things we can’t explain? How do you fill in the gaps?

For Students: Biography Exercise

Imagine that you have five minutes to tell someone the story of your life.

- What events in your life are most important to help someone understand who you are? Make a list of 6 or 7 important moments from your life story, and try to avoid adding too many details.
- Look at your list and try to notice patterns: are there any common themes, or types of events that show up over and over? Adjust your list until you feel satisfied with it.

Once you’re happy with your list, swap with someone else.

Take a look at the list you got and write a short biography based on the events you see, and the impression you get of the person based on their list.

Read the biographies out loud, then discuss:

- What changed between your list and the biography someone else wrote for you?
- How did you make decisions about how to write your biography of someone else? Did you have to make things up, or was your biography pretty true to that person’s life?