



Education Guide

Virginia Woolf's  
Orlando♂  
♀

Villanova Theatre, 2019-2020 Season  
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Press Shots courtesy of Kimberly Riley, Villanova Theatre Marketing

Welcome to the **Villanova Educational Theatre Guide** for our production of *Orlando*. This resource is intended to help individuals, students, and educators gain additional insight to the production. It includes discussion questions to consider before and after the show, as well as suggested activities to help you engage with the show on a more intimate level.

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# SYNOPSIS

## **Act I: The Elizabethan Age**

Orlando, as a young man of sixteen, longs for the adventures of war and decides to write a poem about an oak tree. He meets with The Poet to figure out how to write, but The Poet gives Orlando an ambiguous response. Orlando rushes to a meeting with Queen Elizabeth, who becomes enamored by him. He becomes part of the Queen's court as her lover until one day when she catches him with another woman. Orlando had grown tired of the Queen and decided to pursue three other women instead, ultimately becoming engaged. Orlando goes ice-skating and is struck by the beauty of another androgynous-looking woman, who happens to be Sasha—the princess of Russia. They become intimate, despite Orlando's engagement, and the couple decides to run away together. Orlando sees Sasha flirting with a sailor but brushes off the incident, hoping to rendezvous with the princess that evening. Sasha never arrives at their meeting spot, having run away with the sailor.

## **Act II: The Late 17<sup>th</sup> Century**

Orlando sees the winter thaw in the 17<sup>th</sup> century and falls asleep at his home in grief from losing Sasha. An eccentric Archduchess comes to visit him and becomes smitten by Orlando's beauty. Orlando, desperate to get away from the woman, flees to Constantinople. There, he lives a lavish and lonely life with the company of a gypsy. He falls asleep and remains unconscious through a Turkish sacking of the town, and when he wakes up, Orlando has become a woman.

## **Act III: The 18<sup>th</sup> Century**

Orlando—now a woman—sails back home to England, noticing how differently she must act because of her new sex. She notes her inability to spar with men and swim easily, but also discovers a new ability to freely show emotion. Upon returning home, Orlando tries again to write her poem, but is interrupted by the Archduchess from whom she had fled. The Archduchess reveals that she has always been a man and had dressed up as woman to court Orlando. He proclaims love for Orlando day after day until Orlando cheats at a game to make him leave.

## **Act IV: The 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

It is now the Victorian Era, and Orlando begins to feel society's pull for her to be married. She laments her singleness and the loss of the freedom she once had as an Elizabethan man; she dramatically runs into the moors and collapses. She is saved by the sailor Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, and the two fall in love and

become engaged. The couple marvels at the ability each other have to embody characteristics of the opposite gender, despite their respective sexes, and they get married.

### **Act V: The 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Orlando marvels at the invention of electricity and modern technology. She then drives her car to the department store to buy some bedsheets. When she arrives, Orlando thinks she sees Sasha in the crowd and rushes back home to try to discover her true self. Orlando realizes that all her past selves are, indeed, part of her. She speaks to the long-dead Queen Elizabeth about the past and finally finishes the poem she has been crafting for the past four centuries.

## **INTRODUCTION TO CHARACTER**

### Main Characters (played by singular actors)

**Orlando (played by a woman):** A man who wakes up one day as a woman and who does not age through the centuries. Orlando finds many loves in his/her life and struggles to finish the poem she started as a young man.

**Sasha (played by a woman):** The sultry princess of Russia who has an affair with Orlando and leaves him for a sailor. She haunts Orlando again in the final act.

### Chorus (played by double-cast actors without regard to gender)

**Queen Elizabeth:** The Queen of England who becomes smitten with Orlando and keeps him in court as her lover. She reappears in the final act to remind Orlando of her past and their time together.

**The Archduke/Archduchess:** Eccentric and smitten with Orlando across time periods

**Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire:** A Victorian sailor who embodies many feminine qualities, despite his gender. He marries Orlando.

(Miss Penelope Hartopp, A Washerwoman, Orlando's mistresses [Favilla, Clorinda, Euphrosyne], A Russian Sea-Man, Othello, Desdemona, A Sea Captain, Maids, A Salesperson)

# TOPICS AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## Author and Playwright

Virginia Woolf wrote the original novel *Orlando* in the 1920s. Woolf was a modernist writer who often used a stream-of-consciousness style, a form characterized by bringing direct thought process to paper and involving long winding sentences and ideas. Woolf's personal life was full of scandal for her time. She suffered from a mental disorder, took a female lover, and committed suicide in 1941. Woolf was part of the literary Bloomsbury Group and inspired 1970s feminist criticism, becoming a modern feminist icon. Her other works include *Mrs. Dalloway*, *To the Lighthouse*, and *A Room of One's Own*.

Sarah Ruhl is the playwright who adapted Woolf's novel. She is an award-winning contemporary playwright whose work often shows a non-linear magical-realism style. She graduated from Brown University where she studied under Paula Vogel and currently serves in the faculty of the Yale School of Drama. Ruhl adapted *Orlando* in 2010 and the play has been performed nation-wide. Her other works include *The Clean House*, *Eurydice*, and *In the Next Room, or the Vibrator Play*.



Virginia Woolf



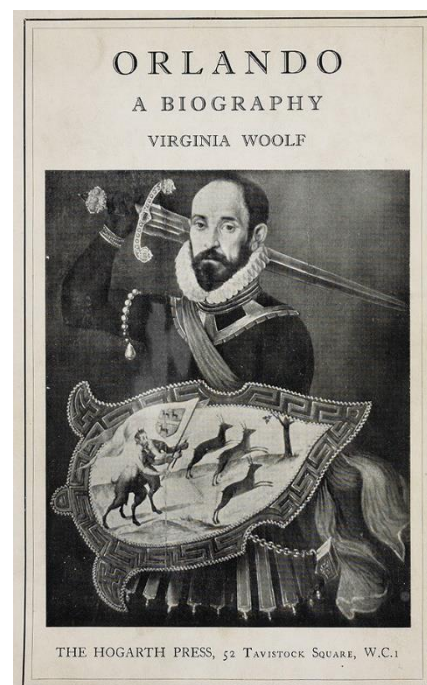
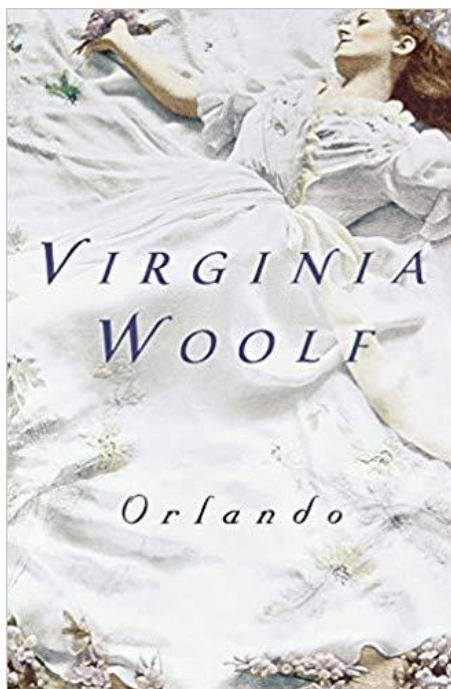
Sarah Ruhl

## Adaptation

*Orlando* was adapted from the 1928 Virginia Woolf novel of the same name. The novel, considered to be a feminist masterpiece, leans heavily on third person narrative and vivid description to tell the story of a man who travels through time and changes into a woman. The largest changes from Woolf's original to Sarah Ruhl's play would be an increase in comedic tone and the deletion of Orlando's literary adventures with a critic and with 18<sup>th</sup> century authors. Putting an entire novel into a five-act play is no easy task, but Ruhl still maintains the same message about the struggle of writing and gender stereotypes in her new theatrical medium.

### Discussion Questions:

1. In what ways does the play attempt to translate the third person narrative onto stage? What effect does it have on the story as a whole?
2. In the novel, Orlando suffers literary rejection and ridicule from a fellow poet after he is left by Sasha. Does this omission help the play? Why or why not?
3. The action in the novel ends on the day it was published, October 11, 1928. If you end the play *Orlando* in our present moment in 2019, what modern struggles would Orlando experience comparative to the other time periods?
4. In what ways does seeing a theatrical adaptation enhance the story of *Orlando* that a reading of the novel would not provide? What might a reading of a novel offer that a play lacks?



## Poetic Satire



*Orlando* mocks the popular forms of British literature in each century. In the Elizabethan era, the Queen asks Orlando to romance her with Petrarchan and Shakespearean sonnets—making fun of how stereotypical each form has become as love poetry. Though in the novel and not the play, Orlando experiences harsh literary criticism common in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and the dry writing of Alexander Pope and John Dryden. In the Victorian Era, the play satires the romance of *Wuthering Heights* and similar novels by having Orlando throw herself onto the moors in grief and a wantonly, yet sensitive, sailor scoop her up and rescue her (a common Victorian trope). When Orlando reaches the 1900s, she struggles finding her “true self”, which is archetypal for the contemporary modernist search for truth. Sarah Ruhl even adds a nod to our current literary forms by writing the entire play in a post-modern changeable verse structure, with words placed strategically on the page and wide variance of form.

### Discussion Questions:

1. English poetic structures often repeat refrains or couplets. What words or phrases repeat throughout the play? Why are they important?
2. *Orlando* is written as one long poem, with words not appearing on the page as traditional sentences. At what points does the play seem poetic? At what points do the actors choose to speak the words like a normal conversation? What effect does this have on the story?
3. Can you recognize any other literary references or nods throughout the play?

## Gender

*Orlando*'s most prominent theme surrounds questions of gender. What makes a man? What makes a woman? What does society expect of each? And what happens if someone does not fit into a category or flows between the two? Adding to this gender confusion is the casting requirements of the play. Orlando is a man played by a woman, and many of the ensemble are women played by men. This gender-swapping not only gives a nod to Shakespearean staging conventions when men would play women, but also hints at how gender can be a performative act— a put-on display of feminine or masculine attributes that society requires in order to exist as a certain gender. The play takes Woolf's original novel and furthers its feminist thrust through casting and editing to include questions of gender identity common in our contemporary society.

1. What are the expectations of a man and woman in through each time period Orlando travels? How do they change?
2. What does Orlando find freeing about each gender expectation? What do they find confining?
3. How does the play speak to contemporary gender identity movements?
4. In what ways does society require us to perform appropriately to our gender?





## SEEING THE SHOW

Villanova Theatre is excited to have you join us for *Orlando*. We want to offer a few reminders concerning theatre etiquette so that you will experience the best from the actors and production team who have worked hard to create the show for you.

1. Remember to silence or turn off your phone. Please do not place phones on vibrate because this, too, often makes a noise that can be distracting to those around you as well as the performers.

2. Do not send or receive texts during the production. Taking out your phone during the performance to check a text or to send one is distracting to those in the surrounding seats due to the light coming from your phone.

3. Do not take photographs during the performance. This is for the safety of our performers as well as laws surrounding intellectual property. Best to sit back and enjoy the show, taking a mental image for your memory.

4. Refrain from opening candy wrappers or anything that is going to make a noise. This is distracting for those around you who are trying to listen to the performance as well as the actors who are working to create a world on the stage. Please open any candy wrappers or tissue containers or other items that could potentially make a noise before the show begins.

5. Refrain from talking. Again, this is distracting to those around you as well as the actors on stage. When on stage, it is often thought the actors are too far from the audience to hear what is happening. This is far from the truth. More often, actors can hear every movement, laugh, and spoken word.

6. Finally, please refrain from touching actors during the performance. Because Vasey Theatre is a thrust stage, actors often cross in front of audience members. Unless you are invited to do so, you should not touch them.

Thank you so much for making your Villanova Theatre experience the best for all involved.