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SIR THOMAS BROWNE AND ORLANDO

Now for my life, it is a miracle of thirty years, which to relate, were not a History, but a piece of Poetry, and would sound to common ears like a fable; . . . (*Religio Medici*, II, 11)¹

These words from near the end of Sir Thomas Browne's greatest personal work could well serve as an epigraph to *Orlando*. For Orlando is in her thirties at the end of this work, which is less a history or biography than a fable of Orlando's life that spans more than three centuries, "a miracle of thirty years" indeed. And her life is a piece of poetry, that palimpsest "The Oak Tree" written over centuries. While many readers have commented in general on the evocation of Browne in *Orlando*, no one has pointed out specific borrowings from Browne's subjects and themes or has commented on Woolf's and Browne's shared sensibility concerning the relation of the writer to his times. My purpose is not just to flush out the references to Browne's works in this novel, but to suggest the implication an understanding of Browne as a personality and as a writer can have for a reading of *Orlando*.

Perhaps the most apparent evocation of Browne in *Orlando* is Woolf's use of the word *diuturnity*, which recurs in *Urn-Burial* (O, 99–100). Not only is that word Browne's, but these reflections on the difficulty of measuring a life span are his as well:

How many pulses made up the life of Methuselah, were work for Archimedes: common counters sum up the life of Moses his man. Our days become considerable, like petty sums, by minute accumulations; where numerous fractions make up but small round numbers; and our days of a span long make not one little finger. (UB, V)

Such thoughts on the different times, as well as selves, in one person recur in *Orlando* (305–308) as they do in Browne's writings (RM).

Of course, *Urn-Burial* is the work Woolf most obviously had in mind in Chapter Two of *Orlando*. Like Browne musing on those ancient urns, Orlando "took a strange delight in thoughts of death and decay" and often visited the crypt of his ancestors (70–1). As he wonders just whose bones these are, as Browne wonders about the remains in the urns (UB, III), Orlando contemplates the theme of Browne's famous conclusion—the futility of earthly monuments and the insubstantiality of one's physical existence:

Vain ashes, which in the oblivion of names, persons, times, and sexes, have found unto themselves a fruitless continuation, . . . (UB, V)

"Nothing remains of all these Princes" Orlando would say, indulging in some pardonable exaggeration of their rank, "except one digit." (O, 71)

Here Woolf brings up the name of Sir Thomas Browne for the first time, though his writings have been suggested in earlier passages. For example, early in Chapter Two when Orlando's biographer reflects on the nature of Orlando's mysterious seven-day sleep, he touches on many of Browne's speculations on sleep and death (UB, V; RM, II, 11–12). Later when Orlando, pacing his gallery, forgets "the bones of his ancestors and how life is founded on a grave" (O, 72), his thoughts recall Browne's metaphor of the urn as womb (UB, III) and his observation that "death must be the Lucina of life" (UB, V), that is, the birth or deliverance.

After his unfortunate relationship with Nick Greene, Orlando reconsiders her status as a writer and rejects the superfluity of fame for "the value of obscurity" (O, 104). This is the theme of Browne's conclusion to *Urn-Burial*—"diuturnity is a dream and folly of expectation"—as well as one motif in *Religio Medici*—"And therefore at my death I mean to take a total adieu of the world, not caring for a monument, history, or epitaph" (RM, I, 41). Orlando comes to admire not just the anonymous writers who have built the house of literature, but those who wrote with no purpose in mind, only for the love of writing. Describing the desirable effects of obscurity, Orlando could be thinking of Browne:

. . . thinking how obscurity rids the mind of the irk of envy and spite; how it sets running in the veins the free waters of generosity and magnanimity; and allows giving and taking without thanks offered or praise given; . . . (O, 105)

The issues of anonymity and androgyny in *Orlando* link Woolf's two main concerns in this novel, history and identity. History and identity, like Orlando's poem, are palimpsests. They are plural and open, not dialectical and closed. Woolf shares Browne's view that standard histories, like standard biographies, are "an Authentic kind of falsehood" (RM, II, 3) because the individual, like the world, is made up of "contrarities":

I find there are many pieces in this one fabric of man; [and that] this frame is

raised upon a mass of Antipathies: I am one, methinks, but as the world; wherein notwithstanding there are a swarm of distinct essences, and in them another world of contrarities; . . . (RM, II, 7)

Admitting that history, identity, life itself are constructions or fictions, "an Authentic kind of falsehood", Woolf in *Orlando* offers support for different interpretations of life without arguing for any one. "Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever" (O, 194). "Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath", and "clothes wear us," changing "our view of the world and the world's view of us" (O, 187–8). There is no difference between the sexes, for Orlando remains "fundamentally the same" throughout, and the difference is "one of great profundity". In the midst of all these "contrarities", Woolf offers her androgynous view not so much as a metaphysical theory as a way to remain suspended between opposing beliefs:

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 and female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (O, 189)

Like Browne, the narrator of *Orlando* often omits or downplays conclusions (O, 271; 291).² The ironic, slightly mocking tone and the vacillating narrator of Woolf's novel check our efforts to read for a personal argument, just as Browne's humor and detachment keep us from taking him too seriously. The very first words of Woolf's novel shake our certainty about anything in this text: "He—for there could be no doubt of his sex." Similarly, the opening words of *Religio Medici* raise doubts and set the tone: "For my Religion, though there be several circumstances that might persuade the world I have none at all, . . ." A reading of Browne induces us to approach a novel which recaptures Browne's attitude, themes, and style in so many ways with a willingness to remain suspended between beliefs. *Orlando*, to the extent that it resembles Browne's writings, combats a literal-minded, end-seeking, purposeful reading.

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NOTES

1. *Sir Thomas Brown, Selected Writings*, ed. Sir Geoffrey Keynes (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1968). Subsequent citations are from this edition; I have modernized the spelling. For quotations from *Orlando* I am using the Harvest/HBJ paperback edition.
2. As Browne does in *Vulgar Errors*, the narrator of *Orlando* often leads us up to a conclusion, and then omits it, teasing the readers and leaving any final conclusion to them.

By way of information for Roger Fry fans, Panthea Reid Broughton sent VWM her lively unpublished article on Fry's connection with a Cambridge literary magazine, *Granta*. She has rediscovered an essay he wrote in 1889 on the subject of becoming an artist in "today's world." He ends by describing (tongue-in-cheek) the ideal art school which he plans to start, to be called on the principle of Hegelian dialectic, the "Impressionist-Pre-Raphaelite School," and assures his readers blithely that though it had not done much yet, "time will show." Panthea kindly says that she could send a photostat of this early essay to any interested readers. Her address: Dept. of English, Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, LA 70803.

VIRGINIA WOOLF'S AMERICAN PUBLISHER

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Harcourt, Brace was a small publisher founded by Alfred Harcourt and Donald Brace, salesmen for Holt & Co., a well-known trade and textbook publisher. Like many book salesmen, they dreamed of some day owning their own company and in 1920 succeeded in finding the capital to do so. The original name was Harcourt, Brace and Howe, but Howe soon dropped out. They were very lucky be-