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Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present, edited by Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy

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Keywords

Orlando, digital database, electronic textbase, women writers, women's literary history, biography, lives, Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, Isobel Grundy, Virginia Woolf

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Susan Brown, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, ed. *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2006. 12 Nov. 2012 <<http://orlando.cambridge.org/>>.

Reviewed by Melanie Bigold, Cardiff University

Like most scholars today, I make frequent use of digital databases for both reference purposes (for example, *The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*) and primary texts (for example, EEBO and ECCO). I have also attended my fair share of workshops and research meetings touting the brave new world of digitisation. Most of these sessions have left me jaded about the motivations (grant capture before research questions) and limitations (potential obsolescence) of such initiatives. *Orlando: Women's Writing in the British Isles from the Beginnings to the Present* is, and hopefully will remain, one of the exceptions in this landscape. The impressive range of its content, the collaborative rigour of its entries, and the adaptable nature of its interface all point to its promise as a resource that can develop and expand with the scholarship around it.

The *Orlando Project*, as the “Scholarly Introduction” explains, grew out of the limitations of a print-based publication: *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English*.¹ The *Companion*, all “1,231 pages in double-column format”, presented copious new research on women writers but, with only a “minimal index”, “[m]uch of its information . . . was locked away from all but those readers who were prepared to chase it in a reading from A to Z” (“Scholarly Introduction”). For the *Orlando Project* team—made up of Susan Brown (Project Director), Patricia Clements (Founding Director and Co-Investigator), and Isobel Grundy (chief editor of materials)—digital media offered a fluid format in which to explore and disseminate a comprehensive history of the lives and writings of British women writers. Of course, Virginia Woolf also looms large over the project. Her fictional, *Orlando, a Biography*, “inspires this work in literary history”, while her seminal description of the search for a history of women’s literary history in *A Room of One’s Own* underlines the editors’ insistence on the need for such a narrative history despite the acknowledged problems of the form (“Scholarly Introduction”).

Launched in 2006, the *Orlando Project* initially featured 1,077 entries (including 844 British women writers, 164 male writers, and 113 other women): “the equivalent of more than fifty volumes of readable text” (“Writers with Entries” and “Scholarly Introduction”). A regular schedule of updates means that entries have continued to increase. As of July 2012, *Orlando* contains an additional 218 entries for a total of 1295 writers (including 1017 British women writers, 174 male writers, and 161 other women writers) and many existing entries have also been updated (“Writers with Entries”). While it is still easy to find omissions and errors, the project has the capacity to continue expanding and actively encourages users to engage with the process (click on the link to “Help Improve *Orlando*’s Interface”). More importantly, as its editors claim, it is “a new kind of electronic textbase for research and discovery” (“Scholarly Introduction”): the term “textbase” rather than database signalling the myriad ways the text and electronic structure can provide qualitative responses to complex research questions. This is not digitisation with extras, but literary scholarship and history that is searchable and adaptable to the needs of individual researchers. From undergraduates through to lecturers and researchers,

Orlando offers information and tools to help direct and inspire new ways of working on the lives and writings of women writers.

Orlando is aimed at institutional subscribers and offers free trials. My institution, Cardiff University, ran a trial in 2010 and, after very favourable feedback from lecturers and graduate students, we now maintain an annual subscription. Despite the large proportion of our students engaged in courses on women's writing, however, our yearly usage data has not been high. Most students only access a few pages, which may suggest they are only undertaking single author searches. I think this highlights our own lack of guidance to students, but also the complexity of the information that can be retrieved from *Orlando*. I strongly recommend taking the time to click on the 'Help' link. The contents not only explain the various 'entry points' into the textbase, but also offer tutorials, tag diagrams, case studies, and even a Guided Tour via a PowerPoint download (a handy teaching resource).

I started with some simple searches; while they were not perfect, they were always interesting. For example, a "Tag Search" limited to "in writings", with the chronological range "Restoration"(1660-1700), and "Manuscript History" yielded a chronological list of 103 separate references, including three timeline appearances for Aphra Behn. Though I was happily distracted by a number of the entries, I was somewhat bemused that an identical search with the added query of "letters" under the tag "Manuscript History" yielded only 12 (with no mention of Behn). However, a separate search "in writings", "Restoration", "Genre," and "letters", returned 200 entries, many of which discuss manuscript writings in addition to "letters." For example, the two timeline entries for Behn from this search included a reference to *Love-Letters*, as well as an account of Behn's intelligence reports in the Public Record Office and Janet Todd's claim that eight letters printed in *The Histories and Novels* are actual letters Behn sent to John Hoyle. Why aren't the intelligence reports tagged as "Manuscript History"? In contrast, why is a mention of Behn's posthumous play, *The Younger Brother; or, The Amorous Jilt*, tagged as "manuscript history"? Idiosyncrasies aside, many of the relevant entries usefully pointed me to repositories for the manuscript holdings or offered detailed bibliographic citations.

A less successful search focused on gardens. A combined tag search on the "theme or topic (treated in text)" of "garden" with a chronology of 1660-1800 yielded a paltry 16 results. A few more variations only seemed to add references to Dorset or Covent Garden. I can only assume that I have not yet mastered the search tools (quite possible), or there is a serious lapse in the tagging. However, there is a much broader omission throughout the textbase that I find more problematic. The *Orlando Project* is focused on "women's production" and the feminist literary history they aim to construct is meant to respond to and reflect the complex particularities of women's literary engagement—this is important and, understandably, takes precedence ("Scholarly Introduction"). Nevertheless, a crucial component of the history of women's literary history is the afterlife of their lives. Recent research from Anne Coldiron, Jennifer Summit, Alison Booth, and Chantal Lavoie, among others, on the editorial paratexts, encyclopaedic biographies, and anthologies of women writers has yielded important insights into the contingent nature of the life writing and historiography on women writers. *Orlando* risks repeating such contingencies if it does not give adequate coverage to those, often male, editors, biographers, and anthologizers. Significant male writers do have individual entries, but the likes of John Bale, George Ballard, George Colman and Bonnell Thornton, etc. only make fleeting appearances in

individual entries. I make this point not because it is a fundamental fault but because I think this is where *Orlando* can develop in the future. If it is still “a surprise to students of women's writing” that “women have been writing in English for almost as long as there has been writing in English” (“Scholarly Introduction”) then *Orlando* needs to establish links with work like Alison Booth’s *Collective Biographies of Women* database² (not to mention *Perdita Manuscripts*, *The Brown University Women Writers Project*, etc.) to offer that truly comprehensive but multi-voiced history we would all like to see.

Notes

1. Blain, Virginia, Patricia Clements, and Isobel Grundy, ed. *The Feminist Companion to Literature in English: Women Writers from the Middle Ages to the Present*. New Haven, CT: Yale UP. 1990. Print.

2. Booth, Alison. *Collective Biographies of Women*. Scholars' Lab, University of Virginia Library 8 Mar. 2013 <womensbios.lib.virginia.edu>.