

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

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# Orlanda

Jacqueline Harpman

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## About the Book

**How would it be to jump into the skin of another? To be both a man and a woman at once? And what would happen if you found yourself attracted to yourself?**

Beneath a mousy exterior, 35-year-old college lecturer Aline seethes with frustration. Sick of being bullied by her mother and treated like a piece of furniture by Albert, her live-in lover, one day Aline leaps from her own skin into the far more attractive body of Lucien, whom she spots in a café at the Gare du Nord. From here this brilliantly imaginative story runs on parallel lines. While Aline sensibly catches the train back to her orderly life, Aline-Lucien - or Orlanda, as her bold new composite self is called in homage to Virginia Woolf - follows, dragging chaos in his wake.

Jacqueline Harpman, herself once a psychoanalyst, revels in the confusion, as ego falls for alter ego and mothers, sisters and lovers begin to ask awkward questions in this unusual perceptive comedy of double selves and bisexuality.

Winner of the Prix Médicis.

## About the Author

JACQUELINE HARPMAN was born in Etterbeek, Belgium, in 1929. Being half Jewish, the family moved to Casablanca when the Nazis invaded, and returned home after the war. After studying French literature she started training to be a doctor, but could not complete her medical studies when she contracted tuberculosis. She turned to writing in 1954 and her first work was published in 1958. In 1980 she qualified as a psychoanalyst. She had given up writing after her fourth book was published, and resumed her career as a novelist only some twenty years later. She has now written twelve novels and won several literary prizes, most recently the Médicis for the present novel. She is married to an architect and has two children.

Reviewing her previous novel, *The Mistress of Silence*, a haunting, Kafkaesque story, Pierre Maury in *Le Soir* called it “the product of a fertile imagination that succeeds in setting before us a world totally alien from the one to which we have been accustomed”.

ROS SCHWARTZ, who has translated fiction by such authors as Ousmane Sembene, Andrée Chedid and Sébastien Japrisot as well as many works of non-fiction, has been a full-time translator since 1982. She ran translation workshops at Goldsmith's College, London University, and teaches on the part-time MA course in translation studies at Middlesex University.

*Also by Jacqueline Harpman in English translation*

THE MISTRESS OF SILENCE

*To Dédée and Toury  
with many thanks for the apartment*

# Orlanda

Jacqueline Harpman

Translated from the French  
by Ros Schwartz



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*Novel: An extended work in prose, either fictitious or partly so, dealing with character, action, thought etc., especially in the form of a story.*

*Collins English Dictionary, 1994*

# THE FIRST PERIOD

## FIRST DAY FRIDAY

THE OPENING SCENE takes place in Paris, opposite the Gare du Nord, in the café ambitiously named *Brasserie de l'Europe*. Its chrome, plastic and imitation-leather décor is enough to induce depression in anybody so foolish as to look at it. The time is just after 1 pm. Some customers are eating eggs mayonnaise, others sandwiches. Thirty-five-year-old Aline Berger is reading, and taking regular sips from the mineral water in front of her. Her platform will not be announced until twenty minutes before departure, and Aline does not like waiting on the vast, noisy station concourse where she can never be certain of finding a seat.

Madame Berger does not look to me as though she is concentrating all that well on her book. From time to time her eyes rove around the room and then she glances at her watch. Time is dragging. She should not have left so early, but she is of an anxious disposition and is always worried about being late. Besides, her research completed, what would she have done in Paris? She spent an hour at the Orangerie, half an hour at Smith's bookshop, there was nothing else to do but dive into the Métro. She sighs. She tries to concentrate on her book, which does not really grab her. It is the tenth time at least that she is rereading the crucial passage of *Orlando* when the transformation takes place, trying to grasp the underlying meaning. She always feels as though she only understands it superficially, and cannot bring herself to entertain the thought that maybe there is nothing underneath it. She applies herself:

*First, comes Our Lady of Purity; whose brows are bound with fillets of the whitest lamb's wool; whose hair is an avalanche of the driven snow . . . etc.*

She yawns. Behind the words whose deeper meaning evades her, weaves another train of thought like the hidden meanders of intermittent rivers – so called because they flow in the open for a while and then disappear underground, and people think that is where they end, but they reappear a few miles further on. From my privileged vantage point of the novelist – and I have never made a secret of believing that it is mine by right – that is what I am listening to, and soon I hear something that leaves me dumbfounded:

“How about changing sex? Suppose I abandoned you, O bashful creature, suppose I freed myself from this female body and went and made my home in a boy’s body? Look! the one with fair hair sitting over there, opposite me. He’s slightly unkempt and has a sly look, but his wide, firm mouth indicates stubborn determination. If I were inside his head, how would you look to me? I think I would soon lose interest; without my energy, my anger and vigour which so alarm you at times, because you call them violence, you would be dull, easily put to flight, and leading a stunted life as you stumbled from one failure to the next. I have always troubled you, and you cover me up as best you can, with lipstick, long hair and silk skirts that swirl at the slightest movement. People find you charming and feminine, but I inhabit your fear and I’m stifled. If I were a man, I wouldn’t chase after women, I know them too well. I would blithely confront other men, I’d do what, as a girl, I’ve never dared do, I’d challenge them! Perhaps I have only ever loved men in a homosexual way, but, of course, I was ashamed. I didn’t dare face up to my penchant and I disguised myself – disguised? – I clothed myself in this strange body in which I have never felt at home. Sometimes they desired me, but as I didn’t desire myself, I had no idea. Oh! To be a boy! All I have to do is give rein to my thoughts, which you always keep so resolutely in check, and I can imagine that other firmer body with its broad, flat chest and its pectorals

moving freely. My hips have become narrow and I sense, in the nether regions of my belly, the swelling that evokes the banners of victory that are waved slowly over the fields strewn with corpses when the battle is over. You are afraid, you tense up, how boring you are! I would walk with a relaxed step, I'd look men in the face, which would horrify you, they'd be a little startled but some would turn round to gaze after me and perhaps I'd choose one of them and lead him, enthralled, into undreamed of places. Men. I know them well, I know what they like. I know I'd be more skilful as a lover than as a mistress, because I would be fearless. Girls are taught modesty and restraint, but as a boy I learned nothing because nobody had an inkling of my existence. I would set out in all innocence for unknown lands. Goodness! What a journey! They make me laugh with America, Christopher Columbus, the Amazon basin and the Poles, even the moon and Mars! The unknown is actually the opposite sex. I've snuggled up to him any number of times but never crossed the threshold. The opposite sex is further away than Vega from Centaurus. I bang my head against closed skulls and I'm unable to get through. 'A penny for your thoughts,' I say. They smile and I remain outside, frustrated, solitary, immured in this woman's body which has always succumbed to petty fears, and which you dare not leave. But I don't hold it against them, for it isn't their fault, any more than mine. We are equally enslaved to this intractable identity that sets us as far apart as the galaxies and makes us rush towards each other, trying to assuage curiosity with pleasure. Never has a woman been a man, and never has a man been a woman. Each sex possesses a knowledge which it is unable to share, and the stupid operations I know they indulge in are only an illusion, a disguise which does not affect the mind, they clothe the body and kill desire. But to inhabit a complete body! Take three steps and change worlds! *I is another? I is a thousand*

others, and, since I am weary of this *I*, why shouldn't I take leave of it?"

The blond youth has just ordered another coffee. He looks a little tired, why is he drinking so much coffee when what he most needs is sleep? I can see an overnight bag at his feet, perhaps he's taking the train too? Honestly, I'm tempted! He has long fingers with rather neglected nails, but his features are clean, well chiselled, there's something determined about him. As I observe him sitting there on an uncomfortable chair, I can see there's something graceful about him, we should be able to do something with him. He is wearing an imitation-leather jacket, the kind that was in fashion a few years ago, with zips everywhere, over jeans that are faded but not torn. I don't suppose he earns very much. Even if I weren't imprisoned in the persona of the sensible woman you have decided to be for such a long time that you find it natural, I would not pay any attention to him because he is boringly ordinary. The only thing of interest about him is that he's a boy, young, robust and not too plain. Should I go for it? If I moved in, I would make him handsome, because for me, being a young man is already such a wonderful state that no worries could spoil it. Under my influence, he would blossom, I would put a sparkle in those lifeless eyes, I would spice up his attitude. He is not a girl, he can do anything, so what makes him look so washed out? Is this the way to be wasting one's treasures? Supposing I slipped inside him? Maybe all I have to do is will it, nobody knows, because nobody has ever tried such a crazy thing. You always allow common sense to pull you up short, even when you are merely fantasizing, that's what makes you so boring. Right: I'm making a change.

A change?

It can't be done, it's incredible, and I'm doing it. I leave you without a backward glance and I achieve the impossible. I don't feel anything, I only know that I'm crossing over, I'm

floating in that indefinable space between the before and the after, at a point which has, naturally, neither duration nor space, it is the absolute zero of time and it stretches to infinity. I exist for an eternity in a nowhere which I can't remember even while I'm there because *while* no longer means anything. I have no other reality than this indissoluble / whose being I cannot fathom but its prodigious evidence lights me up. It is at the heart of the nameless, the core of certainty, the guarantee, the immaterial foundation that permits this impossible course I'm steering with such assurance, although there is neither up nor down, neither back nor front. I know where I'm going, I have already arrived although I have barely left. I have travelled across eternity, no time has gone by, nothing has been crossed. I become embodied, I succeed, the universe falls back into place around me, I have eyes, I hear, I feel, I am!

I've done it!

Aline is over there but I'm over here. The separation has taken place. I watch in astonishment *me*, who *is* reading, yes, the verb is now in the third person singular, absorbed, in front of the nearly empty half-bottle of Badoit. Regular cleansing of the kidneys is essential for good health, my father always used to say. *Me* is sitting opposite, slightly to one side, and I am inside the fair-haired youth. I have effortlessly entered his head. He hasn't noticed a thing. Can a person be so easily evicted? He couldn't have been particularly attached to himself, he's disappeared without a murmur. I have the house to myself. I'm trembling with excitement. I feel like getting up, dancing and shouting for joy. I control myself, I must stay calm. I have just accomplished the impossible and if I were to make a song and dance about it, I would soon find myself in a straitjacket with three male nurses holding me down. Let's explore our new kingdom. Neglected nails? Worse! He bites them! He must be a fool, ruining such beautiful hands! I feel my shoulder: it is firm and muscular, and my chest, mmm! how

nice not to encounter the perpetual roundness of breasts. My stomach is quite flat and my thighs perfectly hard. How I love this body, it makes me all excited. It's plain that I've always liked men a lot more than I dared admit, and I quiver at the thought of having this one at my disposal, but I must get a grip on myself for I'm sitting in a public place and I'm not going to begin my new life by doing something stupid. So I place my hands back on the table, and turn my attention towards my inner sensations. At once I realize I have a slight headache. So that's why he was looking so out of sorts! I don't like this, I didn't change bodies to feel worse than before, what has he been up to? He must have had too much to drink last night, I only feel that kind of discomfort if I've drunk cheap wine, he probably doesn't tolerate alcohol all that well. Hey! Am I weak-willed? Might I be spineless? No, let's not panic, whatever this young man is like, I am not him, I am occupying him, I can do as I please with him, but I am well and truly me, and I have never been the sort of woman who drinks or eats too much. I need an aspirin. Ah! There must be a trace of him left, for I immediately discover that my host isn't a great one for medicines, he never takes them because he thinks they *pollute*! Pollute! How ludicrous, he's afraid of acetylsalicylic acid but he gets drunk! I had some in my handbag, because I always do, I'm going to go over and ask me for some.

I get up. Something so strange happens that I nearly stop in my tracks. Now I'm a whole lot taller than Aline, my legs are longer, and I nearly knocked over the table. I have just grown ten centimetres! The view is completely different, I've risen, or objects have become lower, and it's extremely disconcerting. I feel giddy for a second. Only a second, for I don't intend to let anything mar the pleasure of my transformation.

I make my way over towards me, who is absorbed in a book.

"Excuse me."



She looks up. She seems a little puzzled. My earlier thoughts must have disturbed her. If I know her, she's been trying very hard to concentrate on her book and put them out of her mind. That makes me laugh, for she has no idea how well she's succeeded!

"Yes?"

"Would you have any aspirin? I've got a headache."

She doesn't seem as taken aback as I'd expect, but is anxious to help. I recognize myself there, all right. They say that I'm an obliging, considerate person, but it's only an appearance, the truth is that she'd do anything – within reason! – to feel loved. With her, it's a reflex, against which she battles as best she can, rarely with any success.

She opens her bag and doesn't need to rummage around because she knows exactly where everything is. She cannot stand the notorious mess that women are supposed to keep in their handbags. I wonder, now that I've left her, will she still be as methodical? She takes out the blister-pack of pills:

"You'll need two, they're a fairly low dose."

I take them and thank her with a radiant smile. She is delighted, returns my smile and buries herself in her book again.

I go back to my seat, moving gingerly, for I shan't sit down in the same way as before! I raise my cup and once again, I'm caught unawares. I think it's level with my lips, which I push out to meet the rim, but I'm three centimetres off. What a hoot! I wash down my tablets with the remains of the coffee: it has no sugar, worse luck. In fact, I notice that the headache is already getting better – that's because I hold my liquor well, even though I'm a modest drinker because I don't like the taste. Clearly the young man and I don't have much in common! But while I'm thinking of it, what's his name? Or rather, what's my name? I must have a wallet somewhere? If he's right-handed, it'll be in the left pocket of his jacket. My name is Lucien Lefrène and I live at 19 rue Malibran, Brussels. Amazing! I choose at random and

chance on someone who also lives in Brussels. Of course, we're in a café opposite the Gare du Nord, with half an hour to go until the next train, which I should have taken with her, and which I shall still take. I'm delighted, I shan't lose my old habits. Have I got my ticket? It's not in my wallet, let's try the other pockets. Huh! I'm travelling second class.

She's reading. *Orlando* by Virginia Woolf, I remember it very well, because of the class she's got to teach soon. She'd have preferred the Barbey d'Aurevilly that's in her bag, he's a writer she adores and he tells the most gruesome tales – she's so genteel, it must give her a thrill – but her professional conscience won't allow her to. She doesn't seem to be missing me. Hasn't she noticed anything at all? Half of herself has skipped off and she doesn't notice? Goodness, what a sad woman I was! I did well to leave her. The fact is, and I know this, she hated me, I was forever causing her problems by wanting things that made her blush. She'll be very relieved to be rid of me and will consider it an improvement to have lost her more mischievous half. *Orlando* irritates her, but obviously that's what gave me the idea of changing, I'll never say anything horrid about Virginia Woolf again! Oh look, she's gathering her things! She's right, it's 1.20 by Lucien Lefrène's nasty cheap watch. By the time I've crossed the street, the indicator board should be showing what platform my train leaves from. In *my* right pocket, I find a little purse full of coins, this boy's clearly meticulous! I leave twenty francs on the table and follow her. I watch her walk. She has a jaunty step and she really is a bit of all right! Her pale leather boots, silk skirt and Laura Ashley jacket are all in shades of beige with subtly contrasting materials, people ought to find her attractive but I know they hardly notice her. She walks purposefully, without looking at people so she doesn't see those she knows, and some people think she's snooty. So she doesn't notice this elegant man walking towards her, a well-preserved forty-five, cashmere overcoat slightly too

warm for the time of year and a little suitcase made of pure pigskin. He devours her with a rapid glance of appraisal, tries for a moment to catch her eye, then walks past, forgetting her at once. What a waste! I on the other hand stop, intrigued by his fine allure, and smile at him. He sees me, doesn't frown, but an imperceptible cloud passes over his magnificent tanned forehead and he looks away. I don't move, I let him walk past me, admiring him openly. I'm enjoying myself. Will he turn round? I'm sure he will, I know what men are like, they love being provoked. I wait. He walks ten yards, reaches the pavement, he can't resist any longer and glances back where he can see me receive this tiny, involuntary avowal; I'm still smiling at him. He looks away quickly and sets off again. I am jubilant. He has the springy step of an expensively shod man, which draws my attention to Lucien Lefrène's shoes. They are shabby and worn like a life that someone has grown weary of. This boy was not happy, but he's young and, handsome though the passer-by may have been, lodging inside a forty-year-old can't be as much fun, with rheumatism only ten years away. Then I run to catch up with my other half. She's almost at the station, I don't want to lose sight of her. Well, what an interesting experience I've just had! Why wasn't I ever able to do that when I was Aline? Sustain a gaze, hold it, arouse desire – ooh! I tremble with pleasure at the thought of it! She takes care over her appearance, but she doesn't seem to know how to make the most of her looks. Come to think of it, I didn't really get a good look at Lucien Lefrène before going to live in him, where can I find a mirror? The toilets on the train will be locked until it leaves, there must be one somewhere in the station.

But she's got more appeal than I thought! Two boys walk past her and turn round to look at her – without breaking off their conversation, it's purely out of habit. She hasn't even noticed them. Another man who has just met his wife and is taking her suitcase from her notices Aline, forgets the

woman who is entitled to his full attention for a moment and gives her a lopsided kiss. My former self walks past all that without faltering, looks up at the indicator board, 13.41, platform 16, very good, off we go. I watch her climb into her favourite first-class compartment, but I don't follow her. I know where to find her.

Let us watch our strange character who is scrutinizing the many indicator boards adorning the station walls – Customs, Métro, Lost Property, Information – and finds the one he is looking for. What should I call him? He is not Lucien Lefrène – he is going to discover some rather awkward sides to this endearing young man – he is no longer Aline, who is settling into her compartment unaware of the manner in which she has just been deserted. He is doubtless right to credit Virginia Woolf with the idea: while Aline was applying herself to an English that seemed beyond her capabilities, nebulous divisions formed in her mind, cracks yawned, *Our Lady of Purity* irritated her, she was falling apart. Such uncertainty can lead to madness, the young man's ploy had saved her. As I am not a nasty person, I am delighted, although I do wonder how she is going to survive such a loss. But I still have to find a name for this character. For lack of inspiration, the simplest would be Alain, from Aline, but that would be a lazy option! And what about the ambiguity? Alain is Alain, it is unequivocally masculine, which is not true of the character whom my mind's eye is following to the toilet. I have often admired Woolf's wisdom in keeping the name Orlando after the gender change, but using the feminine pronoun, thus maintaining the confusion in the reader's mind, and I am going to emulate her. I shall call Aline's escaped half Orlanda, and I hope that Virginia's spirit will not hold it against me and come and haunt my dreams with nightmares, so I am letting her know, if she is listening, that this is the humble tribute of an admirer and not the vulgar plagiarism of somebody devoid of imagination.

Orlanda purchased a token and went through the turnstile to find himself in front of the big mirror he had been seeking and sighed delightedly on contemplating Lucien Lefrène:

"I think he already looks different," he said to himself. "He's lost that jaded look that struck me when I was still Aline, he holds himself well and his eyes are alert. His headache's gone. Ah! I always knew that the face was a reflection of the soul, I am already more handsome than he was because I feel free as I have never been before. Maybe he had a girl incarcerated in his male body who prevented him from living, as Aline did me, and I've sent all those people packing – I don't know where to, but let's hope they stay there! He holds his head higher and he's got more colour in his cheeks. What a good-looking boy I am! Except for my hair. Oh dear! I hadn't noticed, my hair is plastered with one of those horrible gels that make your hair stand on end, like a terrified character in a horror film. I understand why that charming forty-year-old did not look particularly impressed! I must have a wash, I can't stay like this."

The station toilets provided cold water and one of those tilting bottles filled with liquid soap. Vanity can make people heroic: he leaned forward, put his head under the tap and, gritting his teeth to stop himself shivering, he shampooed his hair vigorously, and then opened his travelling bag and was delighted to find a towel. He dried his hair as best he could, combed it and found he was attractive.

I hear groans of "what a dreadful Narcissus your Orlanda is! All he can do is admire himself!" but I protest: it is the corporal frame of another that he is appreciating, like a girl thrilled with a new outfit, for he was a girl fifteen minutes ago, and a girl who was aware of boys. I entreat anyone capable of being moved by the beauty of the opposite sex to imagine for a moment living in that body that thrills them, and they will understand Orlanda. And feel a thrill, perhaps.

After a last, tender smile in the mirror, Orlanda closed his bag and then remembered that he was in the toilet, a place designed not only for self-discovery. At the same time, he realized that he needed to use it in the most conventional way. Having mentioned Virginia Woolf, I am conscious that the modesty which was still *de rigueur* in the first half of this century would have me stop here – *Our Lady of Modesty* is glaring at me. But we are in the Nineties, the millennium is drawing to a close and my hair is turning grey. I no longer have to display the modesty of a young girl, and I shall not put on a show of good manners that would have me avert my eyes, as I was taught to do as a child. I remember watching in astonishment and delight when a little boy took out of his swimming trunks a part of his anatomy so different from mine, held it between his fingertips and indulged in an activity that I thought could only be accomplished sitting down or crouching.

“Stop looking!” said my mother, accompanying these words with a slap which actually forced me to turn my head.

“Dear me, this child’s disgusting!”

And that evening she complained to my father about my unhealthy curiosity. He shrugged disconsolately.

So, Orlanda felt he needed to pee and was immediately excited about the new experience awaiting him. He reluctantly turned away from his reflection in the big mirror, entered one of the cubicles and, with a gesture that was automatic for Aline when she was wearing trousers, raised his hand to his waist to undo the hooks, then remembered his new condition and began to laugh. He unzipped his fly and, when he was about to touch the most significant element of his transformation, felt weak at the knees with emotion. As a little girl, he had been envious of boys, as girls are, but had never dreamed of possessing their appendage. A strange temerity overcame him, and this youth who had just, in the café, explored his shoulders and thighs with a thrill, found his fingers reluctant to slide inside