Abstract – The essay describes how Virginia Woolf freely adopted the genre of the “imaginary portrait” while writing a relatively neglected short story about a female medievalist, ‘The Journal of Mistress Joan Martyn’ (1906), and Orlando (1928), the renowned novel dedicated to her lover Vita Sackville-West. Usually remembered for her masterpieces such as Mrs Dalloway (1925) and The Waves (1931), conveying through a stylistic virtuosity the dilemmas of modern existence, Orlando is usually seen as one of Woolf’s lightest works. The purpose of this analysis is to reconsider the role of history and literary past in the novel, suggesting that Orlando is not only a tribute to Walter Pater but also a ingenious allegory of English literature and culture.

Keywords: imaginary portrait, Walter Pater, Virginia Woolf, Orlando, Vita Sackville-West