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***Crisis in Gender Identification:
An Experience in the Fluidity of Being –
Virginia Woolf's Orlando***

Crise de l'identification du genre : expérimenter le protéisme l'être – Orlando par Virginia Woolf

Mots clés: crise, genre, identification, liminalité, Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*

Résumé: Dans son *Orlando* (1928), Virginia Woolf explore la crise de l'identification marquée par l'instabilité du genre, qui a caractérisé la période moderniste. En tant qu'écrivain à orientation homosexuelle, elle essaye de déconstruire la vision masculine des modernistes, en s'attaquant aux normes sociales et sexuelles établies. Perçue par beaucoup de critiques comme soutenue par une dynamique lesbienne, Woolf tente de transcender les restrictions et les règles sociales. Comme la plupart des modernistes femmes de son époque, elle considère le genre comme la catégorie la plus déstabilisante. Contrairement aux écrivains modernistes hommes qui célèbrent la sexualité comme un procédé viable de régénération, suite au chaos cataclysmique qu'est la guerre, Woolf reconstruit cette histoire des hommes en imaginant un futur plus prometteur dans lequel un homme peut devenir une femme et expérimenter la maternité.

“This was an era characterized by a crisis in and of gender, a crisis in which the emergence of modernist aesthetics is inevitably and problematically caught up. This crisis was fuelled in particular by the anxiety around the emergence of the homosexual as a specific identity in the late nineteenth century and by the continuing feminist debate and challenges to the established social and political order.”

Kathryn Simpson

Introduction

Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel, *Orlando*¹ (*O*), whose characters live for about four centuries, has been labelled “unrealistic”, considered “a trifle” or “a joke” by many critics. Underlining this widely shared opinion about the novel, Stephen Schroeder contends that as “a fictional biography, *Orlando* is a political statement that derives from Woolf's attempt to reveal how the female world and self are constituted in history” (1996:109). The idea that the novel is “a trifle” contradicts the self-conscious and self-reflexive modernist textual devices, which capture the inner experiences of individuals through the stream of consciousness technique. In this regard, D.A. Boxwell offers a new reading of the novel wherein he makes significant what other critics have brushed away. As a “fascinating object of inquiry,” and an expression of “extravagant insouciance,” Boxwell argues that the

¹ Virginia Woolf. *Orlando: A Biography*. San Diego/New York/London: Harcourt, Inc., [1928], 1956.

“novel as a satire cannot help but has some serious claim of articulating a critique” (1998:2). Building upon this reversal whereby the insignificant joke becomes meaningful, Boxwell situates *Orlando* in the tradition of female modernist texts which struggle against the restrictive and derogatory ideas about women. In this paper I will argue that, by using crisis in gender identification as a paradigm, Virginia Woolf re-imagines female subjectivity, sexuality and identity. In her deconstruction of the crisis in gender identification, she posits the body as the theater of social contestation. In so doing, she helps us hew out meaning behind this crisis in gender identification by enabling the permutability and fluidity of genders, through the androgynous character,¹ cross-dressing, and the blending of literary genres.

I. The Structure of the Novel

Woolf’s *Orlando* is an illustrated novel composed of six chapters and an index. It also includes eight pictures which capture the dress codes of different eras and the physical aspects of the protagonists are presented on: 1. Orlando as a boy (title page); 2. The Russian princess as a Child (p. 54); 3. The Archduchess Harriet (p. 114); 4. Orlando as Ambassador (p. 126); 5. Orlando on her return to England (p. 158); 6. Orlando about the year 1840 (p. 246); 7. Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire (p. 262); 8. Orlando at the present time (p. 318)

These pictures show Victoria Sackville-West/Orlando and they chronicle not only Orlando’s growth through time, but they also present the people hero-heroine encounters in his / her life. As visual representations, these photographs allow the reader to visualize the androgynous nature of Woolf’s protagonists. The photographs are also evidence of Orlando’s existence. In her argument about Woolf’s incorporation of photographs in her novel, Helen Wesson writes that they “also serve to call into question their factuality and the overall stability of the photographic subject/object.”² Woolf introduces visual arts to re-examine some aspects of everyday life and she tries to redefine various art forms (biography, poetry, theater, photography...) in a radical manner. In other terms, she moves beyond the limitations of the biography to dissolve forms and offer multiple angles through which the character can be comprehended.

Dedicated to Victoria Sackville-West³, a contemporary poet and writer, *Orlando* is considered by many critics as a lesbian novel because it is motivated by homoerotic desire. In her analysis of the novel, Teresa De Lauretis writes:

¹ The feminist critics have relied on the androgynous character to resolve the male / female binary opposition and express the fluidity of gender. Theoretically, fluidity refers to the dissolution of fixity, polarities, age-old thoughts that are being eroded by new trends. As a consequence, the critical semiosis of Virginia Woolf liquefies the frontiers of an Eleatic ontology that dies hard in Great Britain. The temporal setting = Great Britain is profoundly upset by the Cromwellian revolution, it looks at itself from a variety of perspectives not knowing how to stand = the Shakespearian utterance is therefore still worth putting forth: “To be or not to be, that is the question”. Being is building a gender-informed ontology, revisiting the rules of being is liquefying the solidity of that fixed, permanent frontier and promoting change.

² Helen Wesson. “Virginia Woolf and the Problematic Nature of the Photographic Image.” *Twentieth Century Literature*, Vol. 40, no 1. p. .

³ Victoria Sackville-West (1892-1962), lesbian poet and writer of the modernist period.

“Woolf’s novel dramatizes the lesbian projectThe desire to escape and transcend gender as it is constructed in binary terms (masculine/ feminine)” (1996: 4). Whether *Orlando* is a lesbian, a fantasy novel or not, Woolf is clearly preoccupied with renewing the form of the modern novel while defending issues dear to her heart.

II. Modernist Novel and the Form Crisis

A prolific writer, Woolf was a central figure in the modernist movement and an outspoken voice for women’s condition. Breaking away from the male modernist’s view of the female principle as the cause for disorder and chaos in the world, D. H. Lawrence and T. S. Eliot¹ among others, posited the male principle as the source for the rejuvenation and salvation of humanity. In their “his-tory” making, the woman is just a vessel for the fulfillment of the male grand project for humanity as a whole. *Orlando* reverses this logic by allowing its title character to turn from man into woman. Halfway through the novel, Orlando, the main character, magically undergoes a sex change from man into woman, following a trance-like state in Constantinople, where he is serving as an ambassador for King Charles II. Upon her return back to England, Orlando marries Shel at the age of thirty six and she even gives birth to a baby. In her explanation of the irrationality in *Feminism and Art*, for instance, Herbert Marder writes that *Orlando* is a “fantasy...a means of emphasizing the inner life of her hero-heroine; liberated from the demands of strict rationality [...]” (1968:24).

Spanning around four hundred years, Orlando’s longevity gives Virginia Woolf the possibility to look at the condition of women, the cultural construction of their nature and their sexuality over time. Running from the sixteenth (1588) to the twentieth century (1928) during which Orlando matures, the novel marks, on the one hand, new ages, social customs, and dressing fashions Orlando has to conform to, and on the other hand, the succession of kings and queens, as a sign of the passing of time. Commenting on Woolf’s teleological presentation of the history of Great Britain and her use of time, Steven Schroeder points out:

As a history of Europe that focuses on England and the Elizabethan age to the early twentieth century, Orlando “places” people “in time,” but its uniqueness as a contribution to the philosophy of time lies in the extent to which it consciously places ‘time’ in people. Orlando himself/herself is the best example of this. S/he retains an “identity” across a remarkable variety of times and places (111).

A satire of the biography as a literary genre which tries to represent the truth about an individual and his “heroic” deeds, *Orlando* uncovers its ideology and subjectivity by opposing the narrator/biographer’s stream of consciousness to Orlando’s actions. Through this act of individuation of the biographer, Woolf tries to unsettle what has stood so far as the “truth” about human nature and character. To underline the complexity of human beings, Woolf’s biographer gradually fades

¹ *Lady Chatterley’s Lover* and *The Waste Land* promote what Kate Millet has called asexual politics in which the phallus is celebrated.

away and is replaced by Orlando's voice and actions. This shift shows that identity, when constructed from the outside, is marred with stereotypes. As a result, Woolf gets rid of the mediation of the godlike biographer and allows other literary forms as well as the reader to participate in meaning production processes.

By blending multiple literary genres such as fiction, poetry and drama, *Orlando* suggests the impossibility of one single genre to circumscribe the complexity of the character. As a journey through time, space, social and gender transformations, *Orlando* is an attack on the male modernists' appropriation of the birth metaphor to express male literary and artistic creativity. Underlining Woolf's uses of different genres, Boxwell shows how "unashamedly thieving from a multitude of genres, *Orlando* functions subversively and comically as mock biography, burlesque, and chic roman à clef" (1996: 1). Because of their gender, women in Great Britain have historically suffered all kinds of discriminations and social injustices for centuries. By the novel's end, Orlando undergoes a magical sex change. On the one hand, his transformation from male into female directly challenges the social construction of gender and the patriarchal system, which sustain male power as well as the modernists' literary aesthetics. In dealing with the problematics of gender, sexuality as being shaped by the social mold, Woolf rejects the social constructions of gender roles and proclaims "performativity", a term promoted by Judith Butler (1990; 1993). Although Woolf flirts with dress code and performativity, she embraces the indeterminacy of gender embodied by the androgynous character, which is a denial of the gendered construction of society.

III. A Gendered Society

"Despite the near-obsessive preoccupation with femininity in all modernist writing, [and] the reactive misogyny so apparent in much male-authored Modernism¹," crisis in gender identification marred much of modernist literary production. Unlike any other text, Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* expands the boundaries of male/female binary opposition by making sex/gender the new shifting ground of social struggles. Because of the patriarchal and phallogocentric Victorian social values and cultural construction, female modernists consider gender as the most destabilizing category that can subvert the patriarchal social order. While male modernist texts set the female principle as the sign of decadence of modern life resulting in the fragmented monologue in the human psyche, Woolf presents the complexity of human life in short.

In *Orlando*, she presents gender roles which are not biological or natural dispositions, but rather societal constructions. Complaining about the social condition of women in Great Britain who are "clothed with poverty and ignorance," Orlando depicts the poor condition of women in these terms:

"Ignorant and poor as we are compared with the other sex," [...] "armoured with every weapon as they are, while they debar us even from the knowledge of the alphabet... Better is it, she thought, "to be clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark

¹ Marianne Dekoven. "Modernism and Gender." in Levenson, Michael (Ed). *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism*. Cambridge University Press, 1999: 176

garments of the female sex; better to leave the rule of discipline of the world to others; better to be quit martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires if so one can more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit, which are,"[...] "contemplation, solitude, love" (*O*, 159-160).

Orlando's sex change midway through the novel is pivotal in the character's development. Through Orlando's provisional and unstable gender, Woolf defies Darwin's biological determinism. To paraphrase Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949), which is a critique of the socialization process of young girl into womanhood, one is not born a woman, but one becomes a woman. Going beyond the symbolic process of becoming an adult who behaves as society expects her to do, Orlando challenges all societal expectations. As Woolf's hero/ heroine experiences multiple selves, s/he discovers the similarities between man and woman despite the differences in clothing as well as the social roles they play. Orlando's transformation from a man into a woman indicates not only the permutability of gender, but it also sets gender as the shifting ground for women's struggle for representation in a phallographic world.

IV. The Collapse of the Family Structure

The novel opens with Orlando, a young nobleman whose physical and social dispositions announce a great future for him. Too young to follow his father and forefathers in the manly enterprise of war and conquest, Orlando engages in mock battles in the family backyard. As he performs male activities such as war and killing imaginary enemies, he practices his skills and symbolically follows in his ancestors' footsteps. A romantic poet and solitary being, he strays from this heroic past. A prolific poet and a dreamer, Orlando feels in total communion with nature with which he seems to merge (*O*, 19). The trumpets announcing the arrival of Queen Elizabeth also sound off profound changes in Orlando's life.

Called to the court by the Queen who admires his innocence and beauty, Orlando experiences a quick evolution, by becoming Steward and Treasurer. In the royal court, his life is shaped by love stories and the bourgeois anxiety for the purity of social class. In his quest for love, he courts a number of women of the upper class. The recurrent pattern in Orlando's relationships with women is that they end sadly: see the death of the angel-like figure "Clorinda"; see also the break-up of his engagement to "Favilla" – because she had "crooked teeth [...] sign of a perverse and cruel disposition in woman" (*O*, 33).

Orlando abandons the idea of marrying "Euphrosyne" when he meets Sasha, a Russian princess, during the apocalyptic moment known as the Great Frost. Following the same pattern, his relationship with Sasha ends in "grief" (*O*, 33), when she leaves off instead of eloping with Orlando, as planned. Heartbroken, the hero secludes himself in his huge mansion, with writing as his unique satisfaction. While his love life seems to be a total disaster, his literary production is an uninterrupted flow, the sign of true creativity. Orlando's creative ability as a man transpiring only in his literary production transforms his "penis [into] a metaphorical pen", to borrow Sandra Gilbert's and Susan Gubar's critique of the connection of maleness with

literary creativity in *The Madwoman in the Attic*. Orlando's failure to build a family by passing on his genes (biological perpetuation) is substituted by his mental, artistic creativity and his experiences with male and female clothes.

V. Subverting Gender by Cross-Dressing

In *Orlando*, the social construction of gender through clothes is constantly subverted. Clothes are disguise; they "change our view of the world and the world's view on us" (*O*, 187). In fact, the people who have a great impact on Orlando – Sasha, Archduchess Harriet (who is actually Archduke Harry who puts on women's clothes to seduce Orlando) and Shel (the sailor who eventually marries Orlando) – have ambiguous physiques. When Orlando met Sasha for the first time, during the coronation, he was unable to tell whether she was a man or a woman, "for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex" (*O*, 37). Similarly, when he encounters the Archduke Harry passing for Archduchess Harriet, Orlando is appalled. Archduchess Harriet's strategic gender change is a disguise that makes him a buffoon. Despite all his effort to court her, Orlando feels bored to death by him. As soon as Orlando and Shel meet, on the other hand, they connect, because to Orlando, Shel embodies both the boldness and courage of a man and the delicate nature of a woman.

In Great Britain, as elsewhere, behavior, social norms, and the socialization process are encoded through clothes. Of course, clothes and gender do not have the same social meanings in Constantinople and in London. In other words, the cultural construction of gender varies from one culture to another. Unlike the English woman's prison-like garment, composed of many petticoats, the pants worn by the women of Constantinople allow for more movements, as Orlando observed on her way back to London. For Virginia Woolf, clothes are visible signifiers of the arbitrariness of the social construction of gender.

VI. The Threshold Drama or the Violence of Transition

Constantinople is the place where Orlando undergoes a sex change following a second trance:

And still Orlando slept. Morning and evening they watched him, but save that his breathing was regular and his cheeks still flushed their habitual deep rose, he gave no sign of life. Whatever science or ingenuity could do to waken him they did. But still he slept.

On the seventh day of his trance (Thursday, may the 10th) the first shot was fired of the terrible and bloody insurrection of which Lieutenant Brigge had detected the first symptoms. The Turks rose against the Sultan, set fire to the town, and put every foreigner they could find, either to the sword or to the bastinado....The rioters broke into Orlando's room, but seeing him stretched to all appearance dead the Garter (*O*, 133).

The riot preceding Orlando's awakening symbolizes the return to the dawn of mankind; chaos creates a new viable species capable of perpetuating itself through reproduction. By portraying Orlando at first as a man and then as a woman, the sex change taking place while the world is turned upside down, Woolf delineates the mode of transformation centered on the body. She also parallels Orlando's

transformation with a moment of social and political turmoil in order to suggest the political implications of gender. Thus chaos is conceived as an anomic principle which can infuse creative and dynamic transformations.

As a transitional moment which destabilizes the old social order, chaos does lay the stage for Orlando's gender transformation. The riot shares the same dynamics with the carnival, in the sense that they both mark time intervals during which social institutions are suspended, leading to the collapse of race and gender boundaries. The violence of the carnival is symbolic and metaphorical in its ephemeral and theatrical reversal of the norms and laws regulating society, as Michael Bakhtin points out.

Woolf couples Orlando's transformation with theatrical references to the procession and battles led by "lady purity," "lady modesty," "and lady chastity." In Christopher Marlowe's play, *Doctor Faustus* (1588) the same virtues are personified and they are engaged in a similar battle to redeem the "seven deadly sins." In Woolf's novel, Orlando's sleeping body becomes the center around which this epic battle between good and evil takes place. While the riot is politically driven, its ultimate goal is to transform the political and social ramifications of power. Orlando wakes up to the "Truth" that body and gender are fluid. The triumph of "Truth" echoed by the "one terrific blast" of trumpets (*O*, 137) marks Orlando's awakening to his new identity. In using the theatrical mode, Woolf displays in excess the performative mode which characterizes gender construction.

By choosing Constantinople, a liminal place, as the site of Orlando's metamorphosis, Woolf reverses the "orientalistic" view by zooming on the detailed realities of life. She subverts the orientalist trend in British literature by giving her reader a panoramic view of the exotic Orient and by focusing on the details of everyday life. As she spends some time in the mountains with the gypsies, Orlando feels one with nature, but her valuing of material things makes the gypsies suspicious of her.

The function of Orlando's journey to Turkey is twofold. She crosses, on the one hand, geographical and cultural boundaries, and on the other hand, she journeys through the human body by experiencing both sexes. In so doing, she inhabits multiple selves. As an androgynous character, Woolf allows Orlando to play with the duality of the human body and the social significance ascribed to gender roles. Inhabiting the threshold, the in-between space wherein transformation and changes are possible, Orlando is a liminal being.

Conclusion

Many critics have argued that Virginia Woolf's inspiration for *Orlando* comes in part from her fascination for Vita Sackville-West. Nevertheless, Orlando's biography is also (or more than that) a metonymy for the history/ myth of England as a nation where gendered subjects are constituted. By offering an exaggerated representation of the past, the novelist gives volume and visibility to the historical truth; she ultimately denaturalizes gender constructions by mocking the social, historical and cultural frames that have defined gender to the present day. The modernists' break with the past and their re-imaginings of the future endow

Woolf with the literary freedom to reconfigure history and gender boundaries in ways that fit her feminist political project.

Woolf's unrealistic "historical novel" is a subversive strategy and discursive deployment that echoes her feminist ideology. As Marianne Dekoven accurately points out in *Modernism and Gender*:

Woolf revised the association of Modernism with masculinity by associating it with femininity instead. Her arguments for the subversiveness of modernist form, its ability to penetrate, and represent the underlying, multiplicituous truths of consciousness and psyche beneath the outward, unitary, coherent appearances of social, and realist fictional, convention most notably in "Modern Fiction"(Levenson 1999:187).

The feminist perspective embedded in *Orlando* involves the use of the politics of irony: the text unveils a large historical framework that transcends, but also encompasses the individuals. Orlando's close ties with the political establishment indicate how his life merges with that of the nation. In other words, Virginia Woolf seems to acknowledge that "the personal is political."

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