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Subverting Genre and Gender in *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando*

A Room of One's Own is noted as one of Woolf's strongest feminist texts, based on a series of lectures she delivered at Newnham College and Girton College titled "Women and Fiction." *Orlando*, written at the same time as *A Room of One's Own*, is something altogether different. It is a work that Woolf herself dubbed a "joke" and "freak." She wrote in her diary that *Orlando* was "not, I think, important among my works" (Diary 124-5), though it was one of the best-selling books she wrote. While *Orlando* may seem to stand apart from the rest of Woolf's work, its place is better understood when read alongside *A Room of One's Own.* Both works use rhetorical devices to cleverly deconstruct and merge genres in order to placate the audience and radically subvert gender binaries.

A Room of One's Own and *Orlando* have vastly different styles, however they share similar themes. Both are "explicitly concerned with gender and writing, especially with the relation between gender, the novel, and the masculine literary establishment" (Thompson 306). While *A Room of One's Own* is a "theoretical investigation," *Orlando* "functions as a practical example that parodies the patriarchal literary establishment's attempts at coming up with a precise and definitive theory of the novel" (Thompson 306). *A Room of One's Own* works to illuminate and deconstruct male attempts to theorize the novel. She writes, "Thus a

novel starts in us all sorts of antagonistic and opposed emotions… Hence the difficulty of coming to any agreement about novels" (*A Room of One's* Own 71). Orlando, on the other hand, uses its structure and elements of fantasy to resist any attempts to categorize. The works are each an attempt to subvert established ideas about what constitutes language, genre, and gender.

Woolf was called a "both/and" thinker (Hole 1). As the wide stylistic variation in her works shows, she was not comfortable with fixing her identity, or her writing. In *A Room of One's Own,* she reflects on this immovability: "I thought how unpleasant it is to be locked out; and I thought how it is worse perhaps to be locked in" (*A Room of One's Own* 24). Both conditions are toxic to the mind of the writer. Instead, she allowed her works to be multiple genres at once, and thus advocated for multiplicity and androgyny in the very structure of her work.

Both *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* are difficult to place within one specific genre, though critics have tried. *A Room of One's Own* is often classified as essay, however it also features elements of fiction, poetry, autobiography, and nonfiction. Additionally, it was adapted from what was originally a series of lectures. The academic lecture system was dominated by patriarchal structure, yet through blending and dissolving the boundaries between genres, Woolf was able to turn the masculine lecture on its head. Hole says, "this little book, which is not a novel, is not pure criticism either" (1). Narrative storyline and aspects of fiction keep this "little book" from being easily definable as an essay and scholarly work of fact. The contradiction between fact and fiction is clearly present within the text: "Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction" (*A Room of One's*

Own 16). If fiction is fact and fact is fiction, then clearly the work cannot be accepted as one or the other, but must indeed be both.

Critics have even more trouble trying to pin down *Orlando*. It has been classified as mock biography, fiction, mock epic tale, extended love letter, fairy tale, magical realism, and has even been called an anti-novel. Woolf borrows from and parodies all of these genres in order to "reinvent, twist, and challenge common and conventional conceptions of textual notions" (Hole 1), as well as common notions about gender and masculinity as well. This is accomplished through a variety of rhetorical devices that contradict their own function or their expected use within the assumed genre. Woolf uses rhetorical devices in both *A Room of One's Own* and *Orlando* in surprising ways to achieve acceptance of the controversial message behind the text, namely, that androgyny is not only acceptable, but is in fact ideal.

Hyperbole is a device that is particularly present throughout *Orlando* and one that helps the audience to digest difficult ideas. Woolf is serious about her use of exaggeration and playful elements, as they serve a critical function in the text. For example, the "virtues" Modesty, Chastity, and Purity appear to Orlando in white dresses, accessorized by lightning and with their words marked with the sounds of trumpets (*Orlando* 135-7). Woolf caricatures these virtues and presents these heavily mythicized figures along with the narrative action, "making the distinction between what is happening and what is hyperbolic all the more unclear" (Wilson 24).

The elements of fantasy in the work also contribute to this ambiguity between fact and fiction. "In this dreamlike atmosphere, where the rules are already

broken and the unusual has become the everyday, a depiction of an ambiguously gendered figure does not seem terribly disconcerting" (Wilson 23). This suggests that the absurdity and fantasy in *Orlando* serves a very real purpose to the meaning of the novel, and allows Woolf to create a space in which "androgyny, sex changes, and four-hundred year lives are not automatically dismissed" (Wilson 6). The fantastic elements of *Orlando* must be present in order for the audience to accept the more contentious aspects of Orlando's life. This is also why the novel is not adequate alone to convey these themes. In the novel, "Life conflicts with something that is not life" (*A Room of One's Own* 71) or, in other words, reality conflicts with fantasy. By merging genres of fact (biography, history) with those of falsehood (fiction, fairy tale), *Orlando* can encompass both traditional and new ideas in a way that the reader accepts.

Though *Orlando* was written before the magical realism genre emerged in literature, it is sometimes characterized as such. "Magical realism portrays not a world as is but a world of becoming, a dynamic, open system incessantly striving to synthesize the stubborn dualisms created by human culture" (Floyd Merrel 13, as cited in Campbell 20). The dualism of masculinity and femininity is emphasized in both *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own.* In *Orlando*, it is through the mix of fantasy and reality, but in *A Room of One's Own*, this is done through subtle comparison and observation. For example, when Woolf describes the meals and accommodations of men and women's colleges, without ever directly stating the injustices, she illuminates the inequality between the sexes and dichotomy of gender. "Not a penny could be spared for "amenities"; for partridges and wine, beadles and turf, books

and cigars, libraries and leisure" (*A Room of One's* Own 23). By letting the readers analyze the comparison rather than stating her point explicitly, Woolf makes them responsible for the conclusion that women do not have the same privileges as men.

Irony, jokes, and parody are similar devices that Woolf uses to disarm the audience. Irony is used in *A Room of One's* Own in order to point out patriarchal contradictions and absurdities. For instance, the narrator exclaims, "Cats do not go to heaven. Women cannot write the plays of Shakespeare" (*A Room of One's Own* 46). By juxtaposing a nonsensical statement about cats with women writers, she makes these statements equivalent in their foolishness. Freud suggested, "jokes are often a way of allowing expression of what would otherwise be objectionable (repressed) material" (Wilson 22). In *Orlando*, Woolf relies heavily on jokes and absurdities. The gaps in time and space, intentional lack of answers to questions posed, and the parody of the biographer all work to make readers question the patriarchal values present in this and other narratives.

The narrator in *A Room of One's Own* and the biographer in *Orlando* serve opposite but key functions within each text. The narrator in *A Room of One's Own* makes the audience question the apparent nonfiction genre of the text. She presents facts alongside a stream of consciousness with countless digressions. She tells us that she will employ the "liberties and licenses of a novelist" to tell the story (*A Room of One's Own* 4). The biographer, in contrast, lends *Orlando* a "false veracity" in order to "persuade the reader of the truth of elements in the novel that are manifestly false" (Wilson 2). Because of her father, Woolf was very familiar with the Victorian biography and its suggestion of truth and objectivity. Through her parody

of the biography, Woolf was able to both utilize the tools of the genre and critique it simultaneously. The biographer refers continuously to himself and his process, unaware that he is ridiculous. He talks of his duty to "plod without looking to the right or left, in the indelible footprints of truth" and acknowledges his limitations: "It is, indeed, highly unfortunate, and much to be regretted that at this stage of Orlando's career… we have the least information to go upon" (*Orlando* 119). The biographer establishes a false sense of veracity, while also alerting the reader to the problems inherent in the genre.

The other shortfall of the biographer is his lack of ability to think outside the "preconceptions of his own age" (Boehm 200). The biographer cannot see the world without assuming a patriarchal role, much like Professor von X in *A Room of One's Own*, who is concerned "not with their [women's] inferiority, but with his own superiority" (*A Room of One's Own* 34). Nonetheless, the biographer elicits trust in the reader, as do the false photos and footnotes throughout the novel. Wilson points out, "because these images of Orlando, Sasha, and Harriet seem to be solid ground amidst an earthquake of instability, photographs provide the reader a mental grip as they simultaneously challenge the reader's ability to classify and categorize" (16). The narrator's allusions to real people and places in *A Room of One's Own* work in a similar way, suggesting truth and familiarity within the narrative.

Interruption also works in both works to undermine the reader's expectations. This is evident from the opening of the texts. *A Room of One's Own* begins with an interruption. "But, you may say, we asked you to talk about women and fiction—what has that got to do with a room of one's own?" (*A Room of One's*

Own 3). Similarly, *Orlando* begins with interruption, "He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it…" (*Orlando* 13). By beginning the novels in this way, Woolf makes the reader question assumptions that "we normally process without notice" (Boehm 200). It also brings the reader into a text and complicates their relationship with the ideas, as they now share authority over them.

Negation is another tool to challenge the reader's assumptions. Wilson points out that "*Orlando* is particularly adept at invoking familiar elements and subsequently toppling them" (Wilson 7). The genders of many of the characters in *Orlando* are indeterminate because they are created and negated so many times. For example, Sasha is first introduced as a woman, then a man, and then a woman again. "When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be—no woman could skate with such speed and vigour" (Orlando 38). Many of the other characters are also introduced in such a way as to defy expectations. Orlando is introduced as a man but described with feminine qualities. Harriet is presented as a woman, but has masculine features and attributes. "This hare, moreover, was six feet high and wore a headdress into the bargain of some antiquated kind which made her look still taller" (Orlando 114). Though the initial gender introduced is then negated by the description, the audience does not forget the earlier association and so both can exist at once (Wilson 17). This allows the audience to accept androgyny and sex changes in the story, as they have accepted the characters both as male and female.

Orlando demonstrates the ideas from *A Room of One's Own* by demonstrating how biological gender is different from an androgynous mind, where "male and

female sides of the brain would be equally recognized and in harmony" (Thompson 309). Though both works are specifically about women and fiction, Woolf asserts that, "it is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex" (*A Room of One's Own* 104). What Woolf illustrates functionally through *Orlando*, she affirms with rational argument in *A Room of One's Own.*

Orlando treats life and reality like a play, making gender a performance. On one evening, she watches strangers for over half an hour and is transfixed: "Never was any play so absorbing. She wanted to cry out, Bravo! Bravo! For, to be sure, what a fine drama it was" (*Orlando* #). This suggests that gender is a performance rather than an imposed reality, and switching for Orlando is as simple as changing her outfit. Campbell notes that, "Orlando codes her dress according to practicality" (6). After experiencing life as a woman, and discovering the limitations imposed on this sex, Orlando decides to choose her gender on a day-to-day basis for her own convenience. The behavior of those around her is also dependent on her performed gender, which is how Woolf reveals the "artificial and binary nature of gender roles" (Campbell 7). This is a revolutionary idea, as Woolf wrote these books long before gender was academically studied.

These rhetorical devices (irony, parody, false veracity, negation, etc.) – the techniques "discovered by writing the joyful, 'unimportant' *Orlando*—allowed Woolf to subvert the masculine conventions of the essay form in *A Room of One's Own"* (Boehm 201). In other words, it is the playful elements of jest in *Orlando* that led not only to the subversive nature of that work, but also to the subversive nature of *A Room of One's Own.* These devices help the audience to accept androgyny and

convey the messages of both works. It is not until Orlando experiences both sexes and embraces an androgynous mind that she is able to "discover the thousands of selves residing within" (Campbell 18). *Orlando* serves to actually perform the ideas theoretically established in *A Room of One's Own*. While Orlando physically experiences both sexes and therefore embraces androgyny, *A Room of One's Own* mimics this experience by trying to relay the realities of a female writer in order to make the reader understand both sides.

These texts break with traditional genres and rhetorical conventions because "the notion of 'the traditional' often entails a masculine view" (Hole 2). These works are therefore profoundly feminist in their rejection of the traditional patriarchal novel genre and customary gender binaries. *Orlando* and *A Room of One's Own* serve radically subversive functions, not in spite of, but because of their contradictory rhetorical devices and elements of irony and jest. Through the pairing of theoretical and functional explorations of gender, writing, and androgyny, these works complement and improve one another.

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