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MAGICAL REALISM AND GENDER VARIABILITY IN *ORLANDO*

Gabriel Garcia Márquez has pointed to Virginia Woolf's work, especially *Orlando*, as an integral influence on his own work within the genre of magical realism (Coleman 544). However, few scholars have examined *Orlando* as a magical realist work.¹ Woolf would probably not have known of the term "magical realism"; however, like all magical realist

novels, *Orlando* disrupts modern realist narrative expectations, destabilizes normative oppositions, blurs and transgresses boundaries, is an act of subversion, and most importantly, I believe, creates a space for diversity.² In *Orlando*, not only is Woolf writing a prototype of a magical realist text that is subversive and creates a space for diversity, sexual diversity specifically, she is also using this genre to critique British cultural views of sexuality.

Critics, for the most part, have resisted applying the term magical realism to *Orlando*; instead, they tend to view and describe the novel in terms of the comedic or mythic. Kari Lokke describes the novel as "comic sublime" and "fantastical 'biography'" (236). Judy Little argues that in *Orlando* "the disguised, or depoliticized, myth is powerful and needs to be named" (180); yet she does not call this magical realism but posits that *Orlando* is "radical comedy" or "contraband comedy" (181). However, *Orlando* seems like the quintessential magical realist novel when one applies the commonly accepted definition of magical realism provided by Wendy Faris in *Ordinary Enchantments: Magical Realism and the Remystification of the Narrative*, which will be discussed below.

As a magical realist work, *Orlando* disrupts early twentieth-century notions of gender and sexuality and the conventions of modern realist fiction as well as those of other popular genres, which is exactly what Woolf sought to do. Holly Henry asserts: Woolf "argued that writers needed to rework literary genres to forge a more appropriate means of articulating human existence" (107). Woolf reworks/rewrites several genres: the biography, the novel, the poem, and historical work. In rewriting these genres, Woolf amalgamates them, creating a multigenre approach to the novel that transcends and mocks the literary conventions for these various genres. Woolf's use of the multigenre form is directly related to the creation of space for magic. In writing a multigenre novel, Woolf frees herself from the constraints of the realist novel's conventions and creates a character, Orlando, whose sexuality cannot be described in traditional terms because s/he is "multisexual more [than] androgynous or even bisexual" (Lokke 236). While a man, Orlando has homoerotic desires for Sasha even when he thinks she may be a man and is even attracted to the Archduchess who is really a man. While a woman, Orlando seems predominately attracted to women although she eventually marries Shelmerdine to quiet the spirit of the age. Therefore, paradoxically and magically, Orlando is able to embody a plethora of sexualities.

While *Orlando* is subversive in form and content, Woolf would not have been able to overtly express her ideas about gender and sexuality except through her experimental use of magical realism. After seeing works of authors such as James Joyce and D. H. Lawrence being tried for obscenity and consequently being censored, Woolf probably anticipated that she should disguise her representations of the fluidity of sexuality in order to protect her work from censorship. These obscenity trials sent a message to writers who sought to write freely about matters of sexuality—they should censor themselves or else be censored by the government.

The touchstone of magical realist work is the "irreducible element," which, according to Faris, "is something we cannot explain according to the laws of the universe as they have been formulated in Western empirically based discourse" (*Ordinary* 7). The irreducible element also must be surrounded by the world as it is commonly known. In the Introduction to their edited collection, Zamora and Faris assert that "the

supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it is an ordinary matter, an everyday occurrence—admitted, accepted, and integrated into the rationality and materiality of realism” (3). The central magical event in *Orlando*—although not the only magical irreducible event—is Orlando’s changing from a man into a woman. There is no explanation offered for the sex change, and Orlando does not appear to be concerned by the event. The biographer reports, “Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (Woolf 138). The magic is integrated in such a way that it becomes ordinary; Orlando takes a look at her new self and goes on with her daily activities. The sudden sex change does not surprise Orlando, and it is not difficult for her to accept that he is now a she.

Orlando’s smooth transition between male and female epitomizes the fluidity of sexuality that Woolf wishes to present. The sex change in itself does not reflect the fluidity of sexuality as much as Orlando’s reaction to it does. According to Karen Lawrence, “*Orlando* comically deflates the symbolic power and horror of the sight of castration upon which psychoanalysis builds its theory of sexual difference” (268). Here Orlando not only rebuffs psychoanalytical ideas about the significance of the phallus to both male and female psyches; s/he also gives the proper response, as a character in a magical realist text, by barely responding to the sex change at all. Because Orlando does not react in a way that readers expect, Woolf seems playful here, disguising the representation of the fluidity of sexuality and confusing potential censors.

Another significant characteristic of magical realism, according to Faris, is “historical anchoring” often expressed by “a character [who] experiences historical forces bodily” (*Ordinary* 16). The spirit of the age, an irreducible element itself, has power over Orlando that she sometimes resists but never can completely ignore. During the Victorian Age, Orlando is possessed by the spirit of the age; it controls her writing (Woolf 239). She has sensations throughout her body and determines that “all this agitation seemed at length to concentrate in her hands; and then in one hand, and then in one finger of that hand, and then finally to contract itself so that it made a ring of quivering sensibility about the second finger of the left hand” (240). Since this is the Victorian age and Orlando is biologically a woman, the spirit of the age compels Orlando to fulfill the role of wife and mother:

Though the seat of her trouble seemed to be the left finger, she could feel herself poisoned through and through, and was forced at length to consider the most desperate of remedies, which was yield completely and submissively to the spirit of the age, and take a husband. (243)

In Woolf’s rewritten history the compulsory natures of the traditions—in this case heterosexuality—of the time act on Orlando magically and forcibly until she bends to the will of the spirit of the age.

The spirit of the age grounds Orlando in the social realities of the times in which she lives while also providing an alternate view of history. Orlando is coerced by the spirit of the age to marry a man even though:

all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable laggardry of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had

any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man. (161)

Presenting societal forces as “the spirit of the age” allows Woolf to critique compulsory heterosexuality by presenting it as a magical force that gives Orlando no choice. Similarly, women often did not have a choice in these matters during the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century. Just as Orlando is anchored in the histories of the times in which she has lived, Woolf is anchored to the time in which she writes. Societal conventions were and are powerful forces. Woolf’s presentation of these forces as spirits suggests that although societal forces are unseen, they exist and strongly compel one to conform to societal norms of the time despite one’s contrary inclinations.

The third element of magical realism outlined by Faris is the presence of unsettling doubts. Faris explains it thus: “Before categorizing the irreducible element as irreducible, the reader may hesitate between two contradictory understandings of events, and hence experience some unsettling doubts” (17). Most of these unsettling doubts are caused by the reader’s confrontation with magic, and the biographer provides no definite explanations for these magical occurrences. However, the narrator offers some possibilities when s/he cannot explain something that has happened. For example, since the biographer can offer no explanation for Orlando’s sleeping for a whole week, s/he asks a series of questions: “But if sleep it was, of what nature, we can scarcely refrain from asking, are such sleeps as these? [. . .] Has the finger of death to be laid on the tumult of life from time to time lest it rend us asunder?” (67-8). In addition to readers hesitating because of the biographer’s own hesitations, “the contemporary Western reader’s primary doubt is most often between understanding an event as a character’s dream or hallucination” (*Ordinary* 17). Doubting whether Orlando is dreaming is likely to be a common hesitation for readers because Orlando has a tendency to sleep for long periods of time.

These hesitations in readers’ minds, especially in the minds of potential censors, keep readers uncertain; therefore, until the end of the novel, it is difficult to ascertain if *Orlando* is a joke, a serious piece of fiction, a fantastical novel, or an experiment in the realm of the uncanny. The biographer is writing for a specific reader—one who can read between the lines and make sense of who Orlando is without the biographer’s having to specifically describe “the whole boundary of” Orlando (Woolf 73). Consequently, it is not only the “comic,” as many critics have claimed, that allowed Woolf to disguise her meditation on the fluidity of gender and sexuality, the hints, gaps, and ambiguities prevent the censors from pointing out anything that could precisely be described by as “obscene” as they did during Radclyffe Hall’s obscenity trial for *The Well of Loneliness*. It is up to the reader to decide the nature of the “strangely compounded . . . humors” that make up Orlando (73).

Hesitations could also be caused by the fourth characteristic Faris uses to define magical realism, which is the “near-merging of two realms” (*Ordinary* 21). *Orlando* blurs the world as experienced by men and women. These two realms come close to merging since although Orlando changes sexes, s/he remained “fundamentally the same” (237). Orlando experiences the world of women as a woman and the world of men as a man, and s/he also experiences the world of men as a woman because she has a fondness for cross-dressing and going into public as a man. Orlando’s faux pas, as a woman, of letting “the sugar fall with a great plop . . . into Mr. Pope’s tea” incites Pope to give her a draft of an

insulting poem he wrote about women (214). After Pope leaves, Orlando immediately goes and changes gender appearance through the use of clothing. Dressed and perceived as a man, Orlando sees a prostitute to whom she sweeps off her hat “in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public place” (216). Orlando walks with the woman to her room; all the while Orlando “looked, she felt, she talked like one [a man]” (217). However, unlike when she was a man, Orlando notices the woman’s behavior is “all put on to gratify her masculinity” (217). Being in a sense at once both a man and a woman makes Orlando experience an “oddest assortment of feeling, so that she did not know whether to laugh or to cry” (217). This “oddest assortment of feeling” causes Orlando to quit her masquerade and confess to Nell, the prostitute, that she, too, is a woman. After Orlando’s confession, Nell and other women socialize with her. Their company leads Orlando to decide “that there was something in the sneer of Mr. Pope, in the condescension of Mr. Addison, and in the secret of Lord Chesterfield which took away her relish for the society of wits, deeply though she must continue to respect their works” (218). Her merging and re-emerging from the worlds as experienced by men and women allows Orlando to critique especially how men stereotypically view women. Orlando finds that women have desires just as men and that they, contrary to what men think, are capable of feeling for their own sex.

Orlando realizes toward the end of the novel, “Nothing is any longer one thing” (305). Although this statement comes toward the end of the novel in which the twentieth century is depicted, multiplicity is evoked throughout. Experimentation in the form we call magical realism today allowed Woolf to revel in multiplicities of identity and genres. Magical realism allows Woolf to transcend absolutes, binary oppositions, and genre-defined boundaries of literature as well as socially-defined boundaries of sexuality to create a character who is not simply a bisexual and dynamic character, Orlando, but to create a character who is multisexual. To view Orlando as a bisexual or lesbian character is tempting; however, Orlando’s sexuality and gender is more complex. Woolf creates this multisexual character to come closer to “the thing itself,” or in other words, the truth about sexuality, which is that it is constructed by various cultural, historical, and societal factors. Most importantly, however, she also shows the possibility of being more than one thing, more than one half of a traditional binary opposition. Through subverting the novel, she experiments with a more malleable, multigenre form of it and shows that “nothing is any longer one thing,” especially in terms of sexuality and gender (Woolf 305).

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Notes

¹ See Daneet Steffens’s *Virginia Woolf, Salman Rushdie, Tom Robins: Magical Realism in English Language Literature*. Steffens focuses on magical realism and the paradoxical nature of much of Woolf’s writing.

² See, for example, Greer Watson, “Assumptions of Reality: Low Fantasy, Magical Realism, and the Fantastic,” and Wendy Faris, “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction.” These authors discuss the role diversity plays in magical realism but focuses on works by Latin American writers.

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ORLANDO: THE MIND AS A PHANTASMAGORIA

In the fourth chapter of Woolf’s novel, when Orlando comes back to her house in Blackfriars after the fantastic change of sex and travels through exotic lands, the reader is made aware of the transformations that the character has undergone during the long span of time. In fact, the passage from the male to the female sex, though being the most striking episode of the book, is only one of the many changes which have taken place in Orlando’s personality. The feeling of distance from the previous self culminates in the exclamation: “What a phantasmagoria the mind is and meeting-place of dissemblables” (113), which reveals the character’s new awareness of the complexity of thoughts, memories and images coexisting in the mind. The inner glance at the “dissemblables” leads Orlando to the impossibility of imparting a “meaning” to the “multitude of things” which “imprint their message” (113) on the consciousness, arising also from the writer’s point of view the question of how to express, in terms of literary devices, the “streaked” and “variegated” nature of human mind (“Street Haunting” 76).

Woolf anticipates the problem at the beginning of the novel, when the narrator (the imaginary biographer of Orlando) has difficulty with moving from an external description of the character to a portrayal of his interior life, when, “mounting up the spiral stairway into his brain” he/she has to confront “a thousand disagreeables” composing Orlando’s