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The Gendered Experience in *Orlando*

What is it to be a woman? Is it a topic solely defined by what is between a person’s legs? Or is it even further marginalized by stereotypes, hormones, psychology, and a monthly cycle? The single standard to which a powerful and complex group of people have been condensed to is maddening. The question should no longer be what it is to be a woman, but rather what is it like to grow up, to live, and experience society as a woman?

Going beyond the characteristics and the superficial breakdowns of the performance of gender and what is socially acceptable of a women according to the specific time period, there is something much deeper. Facing extreme hardships, societal oppressions, and only a faint glimmer of opportunities, women have held strong through each new and each passing era. This of which can be seen even in an under looked experience – the one in which readers observe a male to female conversion through fictional literature.

In *Orlando*, written by Virginia Woolf, readers are taken through the ages by the first-hand experience a patriarchal male life and then to counterpart insights of the differing female life. Spanning three-hundred-years, from the Elizabethan court to the streets of modern times, Orlando, in detail, lives unlike any other encountered in literature. Through specific tales that Orlando experiences and exaggerated fiction narrative, I would like to analyze the core concepts of Time, Plot, and Progression by Robin Warhol that allow Woolf to utilize aspects of feminist narratology in order to convey expected gendered norms of women and contest these ideologies to some degree in the novel.

Warhol defines the story-time in Jane Austen’s novels to cover a single period in the protagonist’s life, from the age she is eligible for marriage to the event of her marriage (66). Before a feminist theory can be divulged, and a novel thoroughly explored, one must understand the time context from which it is being portrayed. In this case, the first example drawn from *Orlando*, takes place in the 1600s or better known as the era of Elizabethan era. The history of female oppression is long and wide and there is no doubt it pertains to each and every part of Orlando’s developing character as it does to the entirety of the novel. Just as Warhol expounds in her definition of a women’s timeline in Austen novels, the role of women in the sixteenth century was incredibly limiting, considerably the only titles any of them would receive were solely defined to that of a wife and a mother. Unless women were born into the upper class and were warranted private tutoring by their parents or through their husband, then they would face a lack of education, limiting their skills and making it impossible to ever even dream of aspirations to doing something other than motherly obligations and branch outside of the kitchen. Men were the head of the household, the only one worth a title, an estate, and a career to be recognized. However, in *Orlando*, the audience is conveyed a storyline outside of Warhol’s simple and short timeline definition. Instead, readers are taken through the male perspective and then through the challenges and hardships Orlando faces in navigating time periods and social spheres as a female.

In Orlando, we encounter something remarkably different to the typical marriage plot. The storyline we navigate through our heroine, Orlando, does not even remotely resemble the pattern Warhol notes of a “boy meets girl” romance plot (66). To begin, I would like to highlight where Orlando awakens from a mysteriously weeklong sleep, and invites the poet Nick Greene over for a visit. After a lengthy literary conversation, Greene exposes the men Orlando consider to be literary God’s as nothing more than ordinary, everyday men.

“By this time Orlando had abandoned all hope of discussing his own work with the poet; but this mattered the less as the talk now got upon the lives and characters of Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and the rest, all of whom Greene had known intimately and about whom he had a thousand anecdotes of the most amusing kind to tell.”

(2.24 Woolf)

In an instant, Greene tears Orlando’s idols to shreds, regarding they were nothing more than drunkards. I would like to highlight this particular passage to focus on the aspect that what society perceives as popular is often what one perceives as their own thoughts, just as Orlando has done in this particular scenario. Woolf here is already breaking conventions in order for characters to contest societal expectations and ideologies of the time. To connect Orlando with a key theme presented in Cixous’ “The Laugh of the Medusa”, is the theme that women must take control of their own speech, and of the symbolic. Medusa is not one simple-sided figure as portrayed in classical Greek and Roman mythology, but rather a multitude of character represented in Cixous’ theory. Instead of quivering in fear, hoping to not meet the gaze of Medusa or the poisonous bite of the snakes upon her head, a new side of Medusa is seen. A Medusa that does not have to be seen through a straightforward stare, nor a Medusa that is deadly, but instead beautiful and laughing (Cixous).

Connecting Orlando’s new revelation from Greene, the feminist theory of Cixous’ point, and the idea of using plot structure to resist cultural and social expectations, Woolf is eliciting the point that individuals should take from their own lives, to learn to experience, or rather perceive, things in a new light. Not the first impression they have, which is more often than not, imposed upon at a young age and a means socially constructed. Leaving much of society to become partial and one-sided, unwilling to discover truth or further knowledge outside of what they were taught. Especially in regards to the women and how they are commonly perceived. Not because there is not more to the individual or that they are less when compared to the means of men, but because what society dictates to be seen and experienced is a hard habit to change.

The next period to be observed as it pertains to illuminating gendered expectations of the time and the tightrope Woolf must make Orlando balance behaviorally is during the reign of King Charles I. More specifically the 1600’s, between the short time of 1625 and 1649. While the reign of King Charles I is limited to these short years, there was no limit to the oppression of the era. Not straying far from the limitations impressed in the 1500’s, women were still very much regarded as second-class citizens. Forced to continuously rely on their husband or their fathers for everything, even stretching so far as to what they thought of themselves because of how lowly they were regarded. One point of example to which women would regard themselves is through sexuality, or in this case, the lack of sexuality. Coming under a new era and rising Puritan beliefs, women became even more so constrained. Women have always thought ill and in the wrong for pursuing sexual freedom and flirtations with anyone other than one man – their husband, and even piousness managed to stifle women in that aspect as well. Too much attention to the body, or too much lust for sexual contact, would have a women regarded in the most negative light – a whore.

In *Orlando*, this same ideal of sexual freedom will come to light, but not before Orlando makes the realization of what it now means for her, rather than what it meant when he was regarded as a “he”. Soon after Orlando makes the awakening as a woman, she runs off to have some fun with the gypsies and it is here where she begins to see herself as a woman, or at least the body of one. Coming into her own and experiencing the physical and the emotional, the pleasures and the penalties, associated with the performative role she must now play as a female.

“'Lord,' she thought, when she had recovered from her start, stretching herself out at length under her awning, 'this is a pleasant, lazy way of life, to be sure. But,' she thought, giving her legs a kick, 'these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels.”

(4.2. Woolf)

Now of course this is only one outlook drawn from how Orlando feels in a skirt, but it has so much to say about the contrast in experiencing male clothing compared to what she feels in female clothing. While the feeling of cloth and the openness of the clothes is but one component to Orlando’s experience, it is still one worthy of note in regards to what is expected by society and the small differences that impact men and women to further recognize and draw the line between their differences. A small and subtle change, but it means the most to the freedom she now experiences and the freedom that will be ripped away soon enough.

The plot structure of *Orlando* allows Woolf to illustrate the key theme in the difference of being a women and the social conventions she is now subject to. Wearing different clothes, wearing makeup, and the measures to which she begins to experience oppression and societal shaming, are all differences to be accepted in being a woman of that particular time period. Especially, if she is not accustomed to abiding by the cultural and social restrictions. Orlando is quick to notice these differences compared to that of when she was a man and this is largely important to the progression of the plot and how her character will attempt to balance these expectations. Navigating the needs and desires of both genders, especially when coming from an instance and an education set at a binary of gendered experience, is crucial to highlighting the norms of an era and the very limiting circumstance to which an individual could break them.

Works Cited

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