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GENDER IDENTITY AND ANDROGYNY IN
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I. INTRODUCTION

SEPARATED by nearly four hundred years, two literary works by Ludovico Ariosto and Virginia Woolf follow the story of the same chivalrous knight. In Ariosto's epic poem, *Orlando Furioso* he continues the story of Orlando, a warrior of Charlemagne who has returned from the Orient and is madly in love with Angelica, the daughter of the King of Cathay. The origins of Ariosto's poem are first seen in the French *chansons de geste* and later in Matteo Maria Boiardo's *Orlando Innamorato*. Ariosto begins his narrative where Boiardo left off and though he subscribes to the established conventions of the *chansons de geste* as well as those of Boiardo, he also brings to the forefront the issue of gender identity and female representation in Renaissance literature. Along with magical creatures, mystical woods and a cast of numerous characters, the poet reintroduces two of Boiardo's characters, Marfisa and Bradamante: both androgynous in nature, who will become role models for future generations of female writers, including Virginia Woolf. It is in 1928 that Woolf will publish her own version or rather her reimagining of Ariosto's master work in *Orlando: A Biography*.

In her early twentieth-century novel about a nobleman named Orlando, Woolf reexamines Ariosto's literary innovations and in doing so creates an Orlando capable of being both male and female, literally and figuratively. Woolf's tale is full of mystical and somewhat fantastic events. Perhaps the most obvious example of fantasy within the novel is the title character's sudden change of gender. After living as a 30-year-old male

for several decades, Orlando wakes up in Constantinople (considered by some to be an exotic and mystical place) only to discover that he has become a woman. The reasons for his lack of aging and his gender change are never fully explained within the text of the novel. The meaning of these two curious occurrences has only been tentatively hypothesized through recent scholarship, with particular attention being paid to the question of gender roles, identity and androgyny in the novel.

This essay will explore the ways in which these issues weave in and out of both works, through the use of specific characters: Orlando (in both stories and in both genders) as well as Marfisa and Bradamante in Ariosto's poem. In each case the writer calls attention to the gender identification of their own characters in an original way. Woolf herself was writing at a time when female writers were not taken seriously and many critics feel that *Orlando: A Biography* was a literary response to the fickle society in which she lived and worked (Miracky 2). This particular novel was a way for her to reconcile being a woman in what was arguably a man's profession (Scott 84). Ariosto, for his part, was careful to present characters not only in new and modern ways, but also in traditional roles that would not upset the perceived societal norms within the poem or within the reader. No matter how progressive both authors were for their times, they were also confined to working within the constraints of their culture and the limitations of the age in which they lived.

Before moving on to the argument, it is important to note that while Ariosto relies on a cast of hundreds in his poem, Woolf's novel focuses only on Orlando and his/her interactions with others. This essay will also explore the hypothesis that Woolf's Orlando is an obvious amalgam or reinterpretation not only of several of Ariosto's characters, but of very specific qualities and virtues embodied by those characters, which will undergo several evolutions throughout the novel's more than three centuries of narrative.

II. ORLANDO / ANGELICA / MEDORO AND ORLANDO / SASHA / SEAMAN

In Pauline Scott's essay entitled, "*The Modernist Orlando: Virginia Woolf's Refashioning of Ariosto's Orlando Furioso*," she discusses the love and subsequent madness that overcome the title characters of both works (92). A good starting point for this discussion of gender identity

and androgyny is the comparison proposed by Scott, between the two love triangles made up of Orlando, Angelica and Medoro in Ariosto's poem and Orlando (in his male incarnation), Sasha and the sailor in Woolf's novel. Though none of these characters ever cross-dress or wish to be recognized as the other gender, both interpretations of Orlando exhibit effeminate characteristics and emotions that tend to blur the lines between male and female, especially when concerned with unrequited love.

In the case of Ariosto's Orlando, the reader first meets a very traditional chivalric hero, who is torn between being a warrior and pursuing his love interest. He finally does decide to pursue Angelica, only to discover her now married to a man of a lesser status than himself. The idea of Angelica marrying someone from a lower class, no doubt fuels the rage already burning inside of him. Also contributing to Orlando's madness is his obsession with the idea that someone else is going to make love to Angelica before him. Virginia Woolf's Orlando follows a similar path. He too, finds himself enamored with a girl from the East: Sasha, the daughter of the King of Russia. This modern Orlando though, who appears chivalrous in his breeding actually lives a life of luxury instead of one on the battlefield; however he too endures great struggles in order to pursue Sasha and win her for himself. In the end, he does not succeed and is ultimately, betrayed by her.

In Lisa Rado's essay on androgyny in Woolf's writing, she notes that late twentieth-century critics define the term as "a mixture of so-called masculine and feminine personality characteristics" (139). This definition of androgyny is certainly applicable to both interpretations of Orlando in regard to their obsession with and eventual betrayal by the women that they cannot possess. In the case of Ariosto, an unquestionably masculine Orlando often worries about whether or not he will be able to find Angelica before someone else takes her and consequently, her virginity.

A woman's virginity or chastity in the time period of the *Orlando Furioso* and for a greater part of *Orlando: A Biography* was considered a precious commodity and to lose it, if one was not married, could plunge a woman and her whole family into the lowest depths of the social strata. As Ita MacCarthy notes in *Women and the Making of Poetry in Ariosto's Furioso*, "Nubile daughters, especially, were to be detained at home and under close surveillance, since the guarding of a daughter's chastity was the primary business of the Renaissance matri-

arch". She goes on to note that a failure to protect the daughter's virginity would result in "terrible consequences" not only for the daughter, but also for her family (79).

In Woolf's novel, Orlando becomes enraged when he believes that he has seen Sasha, his *donna irraggiungibile*, locked in an embrace with one of the sailors on her ship, for a sailor, in the eyes of society, is a commoner. Orlando immediately erupts and passes out fearing the betrayal of his beloved:

He blazed into such a howl of anguish that the whole ship echoed. Sasha threw herself between them, or the sailor would have been stifled before he could draw his cutlass. Then a deadly sickness came over Orlando and they had to lay him on the floor and give him brandy to drink before he revived. (37-38)

In this brief moment of madness, the Orlando of Virginia Woolf echoes that of Ariosto in the moment that he first discovers the marriage of Angelica and Medoro. This passage also hints at a change of Orlando into an inhuman and irrational creature, with the words "howl of anguish". From the quotation above, it is easy to derive a sense of instinctual and uncontrollable rage found in an animal, rather than a human being.

Both men too, are filled with insecurity and self-doubt about the women they love. And though they assert themselves violently after the initial recognition of loss, the behavior that follows is very much indicative of traditional, even stereotypical, female behavior and portrayal of women in literature of the time. According to Scott, the men even go so far as to switch places with their female counterparts, as a direct result of not being able to obtain them. She notes that Woolf's Orlando, who is left standing in a frigid rain while the ship carrying Sasha back to Russia sails away, has become the "archetypal abandoned woman" (97). The same can be said for Ariosto's Orlando in Canto XXIII, as he stands in the grotto where Angelica and Medoro had previously been. He too, is reduced from a man to the "archetypal abandoned woman." Scott strengthens her argument of gender role reversal by noting that not only have the women abandoned the men, but they have brandished their active sexuality in front of them and have become a subject instead of an object in relationship to men (97).

The idea of the gender reversal of the title character as a result of unrequited love is a strong statement to make since chivalric literature

usually views this type of protagonist in a traditionally heroic manner, but in the cases of both Ariosto and Woolf, the authors have succeeded in stripping their own Orlando of his manliness and forcing him into a situation of abandonment by a woman. There is no doubt that both will recover: Woolf's Orlando by way of a permanent and unsolicited change of gender and Ariosto's by the eventual restoration of his wits.

III. MARFISA

While the title character of Ariosto only borders on androgyny that of Marfisa embraces it. She is, in the opinion of many theorists, the true *woman warrior* or *guerriera* of the epic narrative. Though she is biologically female, Marfisa dresses and acts as a knight, and wants only to be treated as such. Her androgynous nature actually strengthens her ability to perform her chivalric duties and the reader never once questions Marfisa's commitment to the knighthood. She is, in the words of MacCarthy, "an unequivocally positive portrayal of the empowered female" (73-74) who did not exist prior to Ariosto's writing. MacCarthy writes:

Before the Furioso, woman warriors of the Italian Chivalric Romance tradition tended to become knights for a specific purpose. Their aim was usually to escape danger, to aid or follow a lover, to save personal honour or, simply, to provide comic relief for the reader. Invariably they made acclaimed fighters, overcoming skilled adversaries and holding their own alongside male counterparts – until, that is, they were, in one way or another, subjugated to male dominance. Most frequently they were married off to men, killed by men or magically transformed into men. (73-74)

The last suggestion by MacCarthy is extremely noteworthy if one takes into consideration Virginia Woolf's decision to transform her male Orlando into a female during roughly the same time period as the setting of Ariosto's epic poem. In concurrence with MacCarthy, Margaret Tomalin believes that women warriors had only two possible outcomes at this time in the history of Italian literature: become the *donna gentile* or die (540). Marfisa defies all such possibilities and when the novel comes to a close, she has determined her own path in life, while never having been dominated by a man. Marfisa remains confidently "undefeated, uncompromising and unmarried" (MacCarthy 74).

There are two qualities that strengthen Marfisa's androgynous nature and help her claim to manliness: her chastity or rather, her commitment

to God and her demand to be taken seriously as a knight. In scene after scene in the *Orlando Furioso*, Marfisa defeats her male counterparts and forces them to see her as she wishes to be seen, controlling not only the situation, but her own destiny.¹ Marfisa has switched gender roles and identified with the male aspects of being human, because it was in her nature to do so (Tomalin 541). The reasons for her identification with the masculine side of her psyche, according to MacCarthy, can be traced back to Marfisa's childhood when she was raised by a lioness. Having been raised *in the wild* so to speak, she does not identify with the traditional female roles and therefore has an "adult ambition to prove herself among men and not women" (88). This sentiment is very clearly echoed in Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography*, who even when assigned a gender by the author, tends to oscillate between the characteristics of both sexes. His formative years were clearly affected by a disconnection from his parents so that "unable to identify with either man or woman, Orlando [...] finds an alternative in the androgyne" (Rado 161).

In addition to her ability to demand respect as a knight, Marfisa possesses the virtue of chastity, a virtue which is reinforced when she is baptized and then swears allegiance to Carlomagno. As noted before, for a single woman² to remain a virgin was considered to be of the utmost importance to society at this time. The importance of chastity in relationship to gender roles and androgyny cannot be understated, as MacCarthy notes: some Renaissance texts promoted "virgins as

¹ Several critics cite many different examples of Marfisa's defeat/control over her male adversaries, but the two most examined are her interactions on behalf of Gabrina, in which she forces "both Zerbino and Pinabello to admit that Gabrina is, in fact, young and beautiful" (MacCarthy 82-83) and the scene when Marfisa, dressed as a woman, is confronted by Mandricardo, who assumes he can possess/own her (MacCarthy 80). Also noteworthy is this idea of possession or ownership of a woman, which also arises in Woolf's *Orlando*. Early on, Orlando wishes to possess Sasha, but he cannot. Later, after Orlando has become a woman (mirroring Marfisa's very temporary change from knight to *donna gentile*) a man tries to possess her but he cannot. In all cases, the women: Marfisa, Sasha, and the female Orlando are in control of the situations at hand.

² For further reading on the subject of single women in Ariosto's poem, see Tracey Sedinger's article, *Working Girls: Status, Sexual Difference, and Disguise in Ariosto, Spenser, and Shakespeare*. In the article she discusses at length, the social discrimination and cultural constraints put on single women at the time of Ariosto's writing. She also notes that "unmarried women were often perceived as a threat by the authorities" (172). Both Marfisa, as well as Woolf's female incarnation of Orlando, face similar battles regarding the notions of a single woman in early modern society.

'improved' women, more like men" and even St. Jerome proclaimed that when a woman takes the vow of chastity and devotes herself to Christ, "she ceases to be a woman and will be called a man" (77-78). Through her baptism and self-dedication to Carlomagno, Marfisa can be considered a man, despite her physical female form. It is because of this moment that Marfisa becomes the strongest representation of androgyny within the *Orlando Furioso* and a model for Woolf's two different incarnations of Orlando.

IV. BRADAMANTE

If Marfisa can be considered as a strong representative of an androgynous character within Ariosto's poem, then one must be resigned to consider Bradamante slightly less so. In Marfisa, there is a total and complete self-assurance of who and what she is, but with Bradamante there is doubt and fluctuation between being a female warrior and becoming the *donna gentile*: wife, mother and eventual matriarch. Bradamante seems committed to the second option, as she pursues Ruggiero. According to Tomalin, as pre-Ariostian literary works allowed, "There are only two types of warrior woman: the *bona fide guerriera* and the transvestite lady who, in special circumstances, usually to rescue or to seek a lover, dons armor and succeeds in passing herself off as a man" (540). Bradamante can be the warrior as long as she is on the quest for a man, but once she finds him she will be constrained to the traditional role of *donna gentile*.

This is the great difference between Bradamante and Marfisa. While Marfisa, by the end of the *Orlando Furioso*, proves herself to be the true *guerriera*, capable of being biologically female, but socially male, Bradamante instead, walks the line between the two and has trouble identifying completely with either gender. Her transvestitism is only temporary and does not provide her with the strength she needs to truly become a warrior. Unlike Marfisa, she does not kill but once in the poem and she even frees those whom she was ordered to kill. Woolf's male Orlando, in his underlying androgyny does in fact echo Bradamante, as he lacks a commitment to war and chooses instead, the pursuit of love as his objective. This modern Orlando has an aversion to killing, which mirrors that of Bradamante.

In Bradamante's own pursuit of Ruggiero, she is guided by emotion, not the quest for justice. When she finally does succeed in obtaining him, many critics are quick to point out that she is immediately willing to relinquish her knightly duties and slip into the role that has been pre-determined by her biological sex.³ This sacrifice, according to Tomalin, is not without its negative effects, as by the end of the poem there is a "complete hysteria in Bradamante, caused by the implications of the acceptance of the entirely female role. If she accepts conventional marriage then she is forced also to accept the position of obedient daughter and sister" (548).⁴ And like the male Orlando in Woolf's novel, Bradamante becomes the "archetypal abandoned woman" who watches and waits for Ruggiero's return when he goes to battle (Tomalin 552). She has now fully become the *donna gentile* and has abandoned the female warrior within.

V. WOOLF'S ORLANDO: THE ANSWER TO MARFISA AND BRADAMANTE?

Writing almost four centuries after Ariosto, Virginia Woolf was afforded a long-range view of the epic poem. Her novel spanning almost four hundred years, about a cavalier who begins life as man and inexplicably becomes a woman overnight, is inventive and fanciful to say the least, but it can be argued that it is also strongly founded upon the conventions developed by Ariosto and the literary genre that he helped to define. In Woolf's conception of the character of Orlando, there are qualities that evoke literary memories of Ariosto's Orlando, Marfisa and Bradamante.

What is most striking about Woolf's interpretation of Orlando is the way in which she seems to have corrected the personality and gender flaws in Ariosto's characters, most especially in Bradamante. In some ways Woolf's female version of Orlando is everything that Bradamante could not be. By the end of the *Orlando Furioso*, the gender identities of Marfisa and Bradamante are very clearly defined. The androgyny of

³ Observations of this nature are made by several scholars. See Bateman 7 and Tomalin 547.

⁴ Bradamante's hysteria is echoed in the end of Woolf's *Orlando*, when the title character loses her stability, but for very different reasons.

each has practically disappeared and while Marfisa is absolutely identified with a traditional male role, Bradamante is identified with the traditional female role. It is this concession to traditional, stereotypical gender roles that is troubling to some. In *Amazonian Knots: Gender, Genre, and Ariosto's Women Warriors*, J. Chimène Bateman notes that, "contemporary feminist critics have also greeted Bradamante's transformation into epic matriarch with discomfort, albeit for contrasting reasons: it is the criteria for feminist heroine, rather than the criteria for epic heroine, that she is seen as failing to meet" (7).

Unlike Bradamante, Woolf's Orlando is capable of appeasing the desire for a feminist heroine who is also an epic heroine. The title character in *Orlando: A Biography* does what Ariosto's characters are not capable of doing. Through the course of Woolf's novel, the protagonist is allowed to fully and completely experience what it means to live life as both a male and as a female. She does not need to cross-dress or prove her masculinity or femininity, because she truly exists as the other gender. As well, she uses what she learned as a man living in the 16th and 17th centuries to help her become a stronger woman in the centuries that follow. It is an idea that Ariosto could never have conceived of, let alone publish during his lifetime. As a woman, Orlando embodies both male and female characteristics while going on to marry a man and even bear her own child. Woolf's creation is not forced to choose between one gender and the other, as Ariosto's must; instead she is free to embrace the qualities of both genders within herself. In this way, Orlando becomes, after four centuries of existence, the perfect androgyne.⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

In the two literary works that have been discussed in this essay, the notions of gender roles, identity and androgyny each play an important

⁵ Woolf's Orlando lives from the late 1500's until sometime in the twentieth century. When the novel ends, it is 1928 and she is still alive. What is interesting about the time frame is that the *Orlando Furioso* was first published in 1532. The plot of Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* actually begins about 50 years after the publication of Ariosto's poem and continues until the current time period in which Woolf was writing. Therefore, the idea of an evolution from his characters into hers is not impossible given the changes in culture and society that occur in the centuries that separate them.

role. In both works, the author has brought to light certain ideas about the nature of gender and how society defines people and their roles by biological appearances. In the case of Ariosto, the idea of androgyny in women had to be qualified in many ways, while at the end of the poem each character had to choose to live their life as either a male or a female. There could be no in-between or mixed gender during Ariosto's time. Virginia Woolf, on the other hand, as a product of the twentieth century was able to allow androgyny and gender identity to become the focal point of her novel. She made no excuses for it, nor gave any reasoning for the changing of genders within the novel:

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando had remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. [...] The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise in it. Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. (102-03)

It seems that both authors attempted to address this issue of androgyny as being “against nature,” though each in their own way. Ariosto tried to resolve it and Woolf attempted to accept it. As a result of both authors' treatments of the subject, the reader must confront the topic of androgyny and acknowledge its existence, whether or not he/she accepts it. This is perhaps one of the greatest contributions of either author to women's literary history.

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