Chaste to be Chased: Orlando Across the Divide

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Abstract
Chaste to be Chased: Orlando Across the Divide explores the title character's choice of performed gender as decided by the nation he or she is in. Orlando's travels between Turkey and England represent his or her search for the correct balance between male and female, and between Turkey's total ambiguity and England's strictly designated gender roles. The elements of nation - weather, nature and diet - predetermine Orlando's decision in sexuality in accordance with dress, mannerism and sexual desire. Different scholarly works on androgyny and Orlando are interwoven to explore a line of thought not considered in previous studies.

In Virginia Woolf's Orlando, the androgynies of both gender and nation are explored through the title character. As Orlando begins life as a male, and awakens one day as a female, her transcendence of gender becomes the main focal point of her biography, and has been extensively explored by critics. Her reversal of gender brings under examination her past requirements that a woman be "obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled." While this exposes her hypocrisy toward the genders and she realizes she will have to be chaste in order to be chased; her choice of performed gender lingers under question as she ponders the benefits and faults of both sexes.

Throughout the search for her own identity, Orlando's surroundings greatly shape her performed gender. Orlando's androgynous behaviour across gender as well as across nation suggests that nation predetermines gender performance. Karen Kaivola's "Revisiting Woolf's Representations of Androgyny: Gender, Race, Sexuality, and Nation" rallies for an expansion of the concept of androgyny to include transcendence across "race, ethnicity, and sexuality, [and] must envision

a meeting rather than a joining across gulfs of difference.”

2 Kaivola points to the work of Kari Weil, and summarizes it as a proposal that “future discussions of androgyny... not be limited to gender.”

3 Through studying Orlando’s dual nationality of England and Turkey in relation to the indicated changes in weather, nature, and diet which symbolize each country, this essay argues that such changes predetermine her changes in dress, mannerism, as well as sexual desire (to some degree), all of which suggest a duality of gender. The Orlando that emerges is one of a multivalent androgyny, such that her nationality signifies the level of male or female gender depicted in her behavior. The correct balance in her performance of male and female characteristics is sought in her travels. The goal of her biography is to find a perfectly androgynous state - the area in between black and white, between total ambiguity in Turkey and strictly applied gender roles in England. Her return voyage is, after all, where she first considers the ramifications of gender; suggesting that gender identification only becomes an issue upon re-entering England.

Orlando’s trip to Turkey symbolizes the androgyny of gender; on her return to England, she thinks of the ambiguity of the “gipsies’” dress. She reflects that “the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ[ed] very little from the gipsy men.” Their genders are therefore very ambiguous and only on her return to British society, while on the ship the Enamoured Lady, does she realize the differentiated gender in her home country, which influences the purchase of a proper Englishwoman’s dress. The chain of thought therefore starts from nation, moves into gender, and then into the contemplation of the “penalties and privileges” of each. In Esther Sánchez-Pardo González’s “What Phantasmagoria The Mind Is,” Orlando’s change in dress is explored as she reflects how “[c]lothes play...a very important role in Orlando’s portrait as a woman....both clothing and the male figure provoke Orlando’s awareness of her femininity.”

In England, the androgyny and freedom that she loved in Turkey is squelched. She wishes, upon anchoring on the English shore, that she could become a “gipsy” again, returning to undifferentiated clothing. With the proper dress after all, she must deal with “these skirts [that] are plaguey things to have about one’s heels”; she wonders if she could

3 Kaivola, 238.
4 Orlando considers the “penalties and privileges of her position” (113) for the first time as she returns to England, suggesting that this country is where her behavior will begin to matter.
5 Woolf, 113.
6 Woolf, 113.
8 Woolf, 114.
swim in such masses of clothing and whether she would trust her life to a blue-jacket. Here, her self-questioning dilemma of gender is evident as something that could be prevented easily by her choice of the Turkish nationhood.

Orlando’s mannerisms indicate the third gender change. As a British woman, she realizes her future in the rigidly structured gender designations of her country will relegate her to the role of hostess. “All I can do, once I set foot on English soil, is to pour out tea, and ask my lords how they like it. D’you take sugar? D’you take cream?” are her regrettable postulations of the female gender’s responsibilities. Another mannerism that becomes problematic on the ship towards England is the impatient tossing of her foot, which reveals a glimpse of her hidden skin. This, in turn, causes the near death of a sailor on the mast-head “who happened to look down at the moment, [and he] started so violently that he missed his footing and only saved himself by the skin of his teeth.”

Orlando’s dress, as influenced by the British nation, therefore brings into question her willingness to change her temperament and to change her mannerisms because of the gender role forced on her in the British nation.

Orlando realizes that she will have to keep her “chiefest beauties,” her legs, discretely covered. As she exclaims, “A pox on them!” indicating irritation at her forced mode of dress in England, she realizes that swearing is another of those behaviours subject to change as a woman. Once she steps off the boat and onto English terrain, her rigidly defined gender role as a female will never allow her “to crack a man over the head, or tell him he lies in his teeth, or draw [her] sword and run him through the body, or sit among [her] peers, or wear a coronet, or walk in procession, or sentence a man to death, or lead an army” plus other advantages to being an ambassador; a title she could no longer hold as a woman. This is in opposition to her life as a “gipsy” in Turkey where she lived autonomously, begetting her own food, drink, and merriment.

Bilge Nihal Zileli’s “A Study of the Concept of the Androgyny in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando,” supports the argument of nation influencing gender performance; he posits that “[i]t seems then that not one’s sex but ‘cultural endorsement’ influences one’s behavior, and this can be illustrated by several examples from the novel.” He goes on to list the instance of Orlando’s urge to cry on the ship as an assigned gender role that is “becoming in a woman.” Zileli further supports the assigned

9 Woolf, 116.
10 Woolf, 116.
11 Woolf, 116.
12 Woolf, 116.
14 Woolf, 122.
gender performances of a nation or culture as he discusses Orlando’s obsession with marriage later in the novel. Orlando questions herself, “[w]hom...can I lean upon?” and the narration shows that “[i]t was not Orlando who spoke, but the spirit of the age,”15 showing the effect that nation has on Orlando’s gender performance once again. For, as a man, Orlando was reported to have had “[t]he names of three [women] at least [who] were freely coupled with his in marriage,”16 while his past promiscuity suggests that he possibly had no interest in marriage. Zileli further develops this argument when he quotes Woolf’s scholar Christy Burns saying that to “regain control of her writing, Orlando must give up her preferred social position of the single, sexually ambivalent [i.e. androgynous] subject.”17 Orlando goes on to consider “[e]veryone is mated except myself... [I] am single, am mateless, am alone.”18 Here the forced gender constructs of her nation once again beckon her to compare herself to the behavior of others, as she had only considered her dress once on the homebound voyage from Turkey to England.

Another indicator of a change in nation results from Orlando’s confusion over gender roles, as she “pitted one sex against the other, and found each alternately full of the most deplorable infirmities, and was not sure to which she belonged.”19 It is, after all, only after her embarkment for England that she takes her transformation under serious consideration. It is not until the night she spends with the captain that she experiences a change in physical desire though. The narrator shows that “something had happened during the night to give her a push towards the female sex, for she was speaking more as a woman speaks than as a man.”20 She lists the weaknesses of women but still prefers her new gender, as shown in her earlier confession that nothing “is more heavenly than to resist and to yield; to yield and to resist. Surely it throws the spirit into such a rapture that nothing else can.”21 Although later in the book Orlando appears still drawn to women, her sexual desire here is affected toward the male. She prefers womanhood for the mere pleasure it can bestow her in the captain’s attention, and in turn, she feels magnetism toward him. On her voyage to the British nation, her clothes only begin to play an important role, and this is “where she first becomes aware of her own feminine sexuality.”22 Her gender performance is once again brought into consideration only on contemplation of the nation she is in.

Finally, Louise Poresky’s The Elusive Self: Psyche and Spirit in Virginia Woolf’s Novels underlines Orlando’s search for an identity as one seeking

15 Woolf, 179.
16 Zileli, 211.
17 Zileli, 211.
18 Woolf, 180.
19 Woolf, 117.
20 Woolf, 117.
21 Woolf, 115.
22 Gonzalez, 80.
the "Elusive Self." Orlando's journey is on voyeuristic display as her "composite personality consistently moves toward Selfhood, until it reaches it and understands it." Orlando remains an ever-changing character, however, as shown in the conclusion of Woolf's novel when "she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves." Her reflections leading to the close of her story emanate selves, as she tries to understand herself throughout her journeys. How nation predetermines Orlando's gender performance is conclusively seen when she reviews her different characters throughout history. She confesses to being a snob, but so what if she is? She is proud of her ancestors, and notes her greediness, prefers luxuriousness and viciousness as a performed male in England. Next, she is truthful, a "facile, glib, romantic," recounting the loves of her life, reminiscent of her performed female role and life in Turkey. Orlando's journey between the two nations of Turkey and England brings issues of gender into question, as she is at the midpoint of a journey between genders as well. Ultimately, Orlando's choice in nation pre-ordains the gender he or she will perform.

24 Poresky, 16.
25 Woolf, 226.
26 Woolf, 227.
Works Cited


