The 'Politics' of Gender and the Manipulation of Meaning in Sarah Ruhl's *Orlando*

Mihaela-Alina IFRIM*

Abstract

Sarah Ruhl's adaptation of the Woolfian text inscribes itself, as well as its predecessor (Sally Potter's screen adaptation of the same novel, Orlando: A Biography*), in a very important historical context for the modern woman, i.e. the Women's Liberation Movement and the empowerment of women characteristic to the 1990s. Woolf, herself a feminist, provides the perfect text for the manipulation of her feminist views into even more powerful feminist messages widely displayed, in this particular case, by means of cinema and theatre. Thus, in an attempt to identify the hidden politics involved in the process of transformation, the present paper sets forth to investigate how and to what extent the manipulation of meaning takes place.*

Key words*: gender politics, meaning manipulation, intertext, feminist views, theatre*

From page to stage: Ruhl's *Orlando*

The world premiere of *Orlando*, the adaptation of Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando: A Biography*, took place at Piven Theatre Workshop in Evanston, Illinois, in 1998. It was then followed by representations at The Actors' Gang in Los Angeles in March 2003, it received a developmental reading at New Dramatists in New York on July 1, 2010 and its New York premiere at Classic Stage Company on September 23, 2010 and finally it opened at the Court Theatre in Chicago on March 10, 2011. Right from the beginning in the list of characters is mentioned *The Chorus* with the following note: "may be cast without regard to gender; may be double-cast; may be played by as few as three actors and as many as eight, but the author suggests a chorus of three gifted men to play all the roles" (Ruhl 2013: 120). In the case of Sarah Ruhl's stage adaptation the role of Orlando is envisioned to be played by a woman as in the case of Sally Potter's screen adaptation[1]. In order to emphasize the main theme of the source text, that is androgyny and gender shifting, Sarah Ruhl presents some strategies via which they can be easily suggested:

> […] my favourite way to do this play is to have two women (one playing Orlando and one playing Sasha), surrounded by a chorus of three very

* Dr, "Dunarea de Jos" University of Galati, mihaela.ifrim@ugal.ro

> gifted men, who play all the other roles. […] However I can imagine all sorts of other configurations, and all sorts of large ensembles creating new structures for the play. I have always wanted to do the play on alternating nights; on Mondays, have a man play Orlando (and a woman play Marmaduke), on Tuesdays, have a woman play Orlando (and a man Marmaduke) (122).

With a hint of irony, Virginia Woolf entitled her novel *Orlando: A Biography*. When it comes to the written text, this type of title provides the reader with the false feeling of trust in the narrator's stating of the facts. However when it comes to screenings and theatrical productions the trust of the viewer/ audience must be gained by other means. It is perhaps for this reason why Sally Potter and Sarah Ruhl choose to introduce Orlando in the same manner, i.e., by creating the impression of a conspiracy between the character(s) and the viewer/ audience which undoubtedly can also be translated as a cunning plan to give the public the impression of involvement in the events unfolding before their eyes. Thus, conspiracy is established from the very first line of the play:

> ORLANDO: He –
>
> CHORUS: He!
>
> ORLANDO: (To the audience – a conspiracy) He – For there could be no doubt of his sex… (125).

The difference between the two adaptations of the Woolfian text resides in the manner they use to substitute the witty biographer/ narrator in the novel. Thus, in order to remind of the narrator who changes tone in the original, Sally Potter very inventively and extremely subtly chooses to reflect throughout the film various stances in the life of the hero/ heroine by providing him/ her with different colours of the eyes. But the advantage of the close caption in the film does not represent an option for the stage. Therefore, Sarah Ruhl manages to find a solution as inventive as Potter's when she decides to have a chorus able to fill in pieces of narration. The chorus only fills in pieces of narration because Orlando seems to have a double function, that of character and narrator and so does the Queen. The same goes with Sasha and Orlando. They also seem to have a dialogue in the third person which might determine one to think about what a telepathic conversation between two persons would sound like. In fact, what Sarah Ruhl does by having the characters narrate about themselves in the third person is to emphasize a characteristic of Woolf's novel where

frequently the voice/ thoughts of the characters overlap with the voice of the biographer:

ORLANDO: I am alone.

CHORUS: He sighed profoundly.

Orlando sighs profoundly.

CHORUS: And flung himself on the earth at the foot of the oak tree

Orlando flings himself down in front of an oak tree.

ORLANDO: And in his mind, image followed image:

CHORUS: The oak tree was the back of a great horse that he was riding or the deck of a tumbling ship it was anything indeed so long as it was hard

ORLANDO: for he felt the need of something which he could attach his floating heart to (127).

ORLANDO: Tomorrow. I will write a great poem about the oak tree tomorrow.

More trumpets. Orlando leaps to his feet.

ORLANDO: Orlando saw that his great house – in the valley – was pierced with lights

[…]

THE QUEEN: A thin hand with long fingers always as if 'round orb or sceptre;

ORLANDO: a nervous, crabbed, sickly hand;

THE QUEEN: a commanding hand, a hand that had only to raise itself for a head to fall; yes, the Queen had a hand – (128-131).

ORLANDO: Hot with skating…

SASHA: And with love…

ORLANDO: They would take her in his arms and know…

SASHA: For the first time…

ORLANDO: The delights of love.

They Kiss, wrapped in a great fur cloak (149).

Unlike Sally Potter, who finds herself constrained by the cinematographic environment up to the point she feels the need to make the story believable, Sarah Ruhl remains extremely faithful to Woolf's novel as she herself declares: "[t]he reason I used a great deal of narration in this piece is that Woolf's language is so much better than any of her imitators could ever be; and all the narration in the piece is hers and hers alone" (123). Therefore she preserves the same story: the story of Orlando, a man, who falls in love with a Russian princess, Sasha, who is then pursued by an Archduchess

(who in reality is an Archduke), who becomes a woman who finally marries Marmaduke.

However, Sarah Ruhl's faithfulness to Virginia Woolf is not identifiable only at the level of the text (in terms of its alteration) but she also remains true to the idea of extending Orlando's adventurous life to the present day and to the use of the mystical number seven. Much like Sally Potter, Ruhl provides us with a contemporary Orlando and indicates in a subtle manner the mystical number[2]. If the cinematographic environment provided Sally Potter with the possibility of partitioning the filmic text into seven chapters, thus remaining true to the Woolfian number, for Sarah Ruhl this was not an option. Perhaps this is why she made use of the present context where she envisioned Orlando using an elevator which takes her to the seven floor:

> CHORUS: Orlando jumped out of her car, rushed into a large department store, and got into the lift.
>
> *Everyone crowds into the lift. The sound of an elevator ding.*
>
> ORLANDO: This must be middle-age.
>
> ELEVATOR MAN: Four…
>
> ORLANDO: Time has passed over me.
>
> ELEVATOR MAN: Six –
>
> ORLANDO: how strange it is! Nothing is anylonger one thing. I take up a handbag and think of a porpoise frozen beneath the sea. Someone lights a pink candle and I see a girl in Russian trousers.
>
> ELEVATOR MAN: Seven – (Ruhl 2013).

Albeit the text recommends itself in terms of fidelity to the original, Sarah Ruhl opted for the omission of the element of motherhood. Virginia Woolf provided her Orlando with an heir perhaps in an attempt to truly convince the public that Orlando is indeed a metaphor for her beloved Vita Sackville-West who in real life was the mother of a boy. Sally Potter keeps the element of motherhood but she uses it to emphasise different ideas. In an attempt to restore to Vita Sackville-West the estates which she longed for, Virginia Woolf provides Orlando with all her titles and possessions. Sally Potter's Orlando loses everything unless she has a son which she fails having; therefore she returns to the great house not like its mistress, as Woolf envisioned, but like a tourist. Sarah Ruhl loses this element completely substituting it with the act of writing:

ORLANDO: She looked at the ring. She looked at the inkpot –

CHORUS: Did she dare?

ORLANDO: Hang it all! Here goes!

CHORUS: And she plunged her pen neck deep in ink. To her enormous surprise, she wrote. The words were a little long in coming, but come they did.

She writes

CHORUS: And all the time she was writing, the world continued… through wars… and other calamities…

ORLANDO: She listened for the sound of gunfire at sea –

CHORUS: No, only the wind blew.

ORLANDO: There is no war today.

CHORUS: And so – she wrote.

She looks up.

ORLANDO: What's life? She asked a bird!

CHORUS: Life, life, life, cried the bird!

Orlando keeps writing. The chorus looks on.

CHORUS: Finally, Orlando dropped her pen and stretched her arms.

ORLANDO: Done! Done! It's done! (219 - 220).

The act of writing Ruhl chooses to emphasise incorporates deep Woolfian issues such as the war and the fact that its presence interferes with the writing process, the birds as the key element present in all Woolfian writings, and most importantly Orlando's desire, much like Woolf's, to capture life in an attempt to discover its secret.

Although the two adaptations of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* are individual works (i.e. they most certainly were written without reference to one another) it is almost impossible not to read or perceive Sarah Ruhl's without constantly relating it to Sally Potter's prior adaptation. It is for this reason that, despite the fact that the play is an intertextual manifestation of the Woolfian text, many of the points made in the analysis are in reference with the cinematographic adaptation of the text.

Nevertheless, Ruhl's choice to remain faithful to the original proves ingenious. As she suggests in her notes on the play (previously quoted at

the beginning of this paper), the text is flexible enough as to permit the manipulation of its meaning through casting and choreography, or in other words, the queerness of the text can be extended or enhanced by the queerness of the casting[3]. Although it might seem redundant, in this case the extended ambiguity of gender is necessary.

Various stagings of the play have been produced with as many variations in casting choices. One of the most visible and easily accessible stagings is the one produced at the Classic Stage Company which premiered in 2010. The cast was an interesting one. The role of Orlando was casted to Francesca Faridany who much like Tilda Swinton represents an inspired choice for an androgynous character. But the real interesting cast choice of the play is represented by David Greenspan "the quirky Off Broadway regular" who "portrays both Queen Elizabeth, who takes a shine to the melancholy young Orlando when visiting his country home, and a Romanian archduchess who eventually turns out to be an archduke" (Charles Isherwood, *The New York Times*). An account of such a production is given by Meghan Brodie in her article *Casting as Queer Dramaturgy: A case Study of Sarah Ruhl's Adaptation of Virginia Woolf's Orlando*. She points out, in terms of at least the cast of the main characters, that there is a feminist philosophy involved in the process. Thus, Orlando, the character, has a two-fold manifestation: it is both a man and a woman. Hence the struggling rationalization behind the casting process for the role: who should play Orlando, a man or a woman actor? The question being formulated then the pros and cons for each choice begin to emerge up to the point of the obvious outcome (Orlando has always been played by a woman).

While the possibility of casting a male actor in the role exists, one needs to point out the implications of such a cast. Of course it has the additional potential of queering further the delivered text but it certainly brings other serious implications. Symbolically, masculinity indicates the acquisition of power while femininity indicates its absence. As a result, it would be absurd to have a male actor pretend to have lost (through the gender transformation of the character) that which he has never lost. The casting of a woman is not risk free either, but it has to do with the feminist message/ philosophy detaching from the text. Therefore, the role being played by a woman is a clear indication of an attempt of assuming, and why not, of usurping that power which for centuries was not afforded to her sex.

When it comes to the casting for the role of Queen Elizabeth I, it seems that the general tendency is to have a male actor playing it. This is best explained by Meghan Brodie who notes that the "portrayal of the character was not sex-driven […] but position-driven" (2014: 170). Two of the most famous portrayals of Queen Elizabeth in Orlando are attributed to Quentin Crisp (Sally Potter's 1992 *Orlando*) and to David Greenspan (in the Classic Stage Company's 2010 production). Beyond the symbols of such a cast (the power associated with masculinity or the juxtaposition of a male-bodied Queen Elizabeth with the fragility of a female-bodied Orlando) the choice can also be explained through historical facts accessed in relation with the character. History immortalises Queen Elizabeth I as the first woman to have achieved and fully assumed male power[4]. And it is with this idea in mind that Laurence Senelick notes that in the "presentation of her person as sovereign, Queen Elizabeth preferred to be addressed as a man" and "was the only woman licensed by status, in her case God-anointed, to appear in public as a man-at-arms" (in Brodie, 170). In the light of these arguments one might infer that it is no accident that Virginia Woolf chose to begin her debate in *A Room of One's Own*, alluding to writers, male and female, from the Elizabethan age onwards, or, that she began envisioning the fantastic journey of Orlando as marked by his/ her encounter with the Queen. Clearly it has something to do with a fascination of the writer for the meaning and imposing historical figure.

As Charles Isherwood notes in his review of the play in *The New York Times*, Sarah Ruhl's play, as is often the case with adaptations of books to stage, becomes at times awkward and hard to follow. Of course this is the result of Ruhl's attempt to preserve as much as possible from the Woolfian text. It is true that this type of an endeavour might leave the sensation of a brief summary of the novel. However, it compensates in terms of visual aids achieved by means of interesting choices of cast, through setting and choreography.

Final Remarks

In addition to paying a tribute to a canonical writer such as Virginia Woolf, Sarah Ruhl's *Orlando* brings a new perspective in a fresh intellectual context defined by the need of transformation. Thus, the rewriting of a text is also a personal perception shaped by the cultural pool in which it emerges, and its reading must not be restricted to problems of faithfulness or truthfulness to the original. Ruhl remains faithful to strong feminist

beliefs which are made visible via the (re)working of the meaning through theatrical instruments and particularly through gender-distribution.

Notes

1. Of the two adaptations of the Woolfian text, Sally Potter's is the focus of many scholarly investigations mainly as the result of it being a filmic text and therefore more accessible.

2. *Orlando: A Biography* is a novel full of references to the number seven and derivatives containing it of which the most notable are: the trance Orlando undergoes for "seven whole days" (Woolf 2002: 40) following Sasha's leaving him, the trance followed by the gender transformation which happened "on the seventh day of his trance" (80) and the number of editions of *The Oak Tree* manuscript which translates into "Fame! Seven Editions. A prize" (185). The number can be understood as holding an important significance for the writer since its echoes can be found in other of her works such as *Mrs Dalloway* (Septimus meaning "the seventh") and *The Waves* (Percival being the seventh silent character haunting the novel).

3. This is also valid in Sally Potter's screening of the novel where, as Michael Whitworth notes, "[t]he casting of the film also disrupts its realism. Several members of the cast are better known for work outside theatre and film: Quentin Crisp had achieved notoriety for his book *The Naked Civil Servant* (1968), an autobiographical account of growing up effeminate and homosexual; Jimmy Somerville had come to prominence as pop singer who took sexual identity as a serious political issue; Ned Sherrin was best known as a raconteur and as the presenter of a radio chat show; and Heathcote Williams was in 1993 best known for *Whale Nation* (1988), an illustrated volume of eco-conscious poems. Ideally, the audience recognizes these actors as contemporary public figures, and so the relation of actor to character is not transparent" (2005: 208).

4. Queen Elizabeth I still exerts a powerful magnetism and studies keep emerging around her great achievement: in full awareness of the symbols governing the world she assumed maleness through a clever manipulation of literal facts into metaphorical. Such a case in point is her assuming the suggestive name the "Virgin Queen" (in fact an assuming of her being a woman) which reminds of the religious symbol of the "Virgin Mary" governing and subduing men through her virtue. But despite her assuming completely her femaleness, she states: "I know I have but the body of a weak and feeble woman; but I have the heart and stomach of a king, and of a king of England too" (available at bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html). This is one of Elizabeth's inspired choices to exploit the incapacity of his father (to produce male heirs) and to ensure her domination over the English nation. In support for this come her words which state that she was "already bound unto a Husband, which is the Kingdome of England". Therefore, "reproach no more, that

I have no children; for every one of you, and as many are English, are children" and by this reasoning "I cannot without injury be accounted Barren" (Camden quoted in Susan Bordo, *The Tudor Society*).

References:

Bordo, Susan (2015) Elizabeth I's Challenge to the Masculinity of the Royal Body, The Tudor Society (available at http://www.tudorsociety.com/elizabeth-is-challenge-to-the-masculinity-of-the-royal-body-by-susan-bordo/)

Broadie, Meghan (2014) *Casting as Queer Dramaturgy: A Case Study of Sarah Ruhl's Adaptation of Virginia Woolf's Orlando*, in **Theatre Topics**, Volume 24, Issue 3, pg. 167-174, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press

Isherwood, Charles (2010) *Who's Afraid of Fluid Gender and Time?* in Theatre Reviews, The New York Times (available at nytimes.com/2010/09/24/theater/reviews/24orlando.html?_r=0)

Potter, Sally (director) (1992) *Orlando* (film), released by Sony Pictures Classics

Ruhl, Sarah (2013) *Chekhov's Three Sisters and Woolf's Orlando – Two Renderings for the Stage*, New York: Theatre Communications Group

Whitworth, Michael (2005) *Authors in Context: Virginia Woolf*, New York: Oxford University Press Inc.

Woolf, Virginia (2002) *Orlando: A Biography*, New York: RosettaBooks LLC

http://www.bl.uk/learning/timeline/item102878.html