The space between: sexual ambiguity and magical realism in Virginia Woolf's Orlando and Jeanette Winterson's The Passion

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The space between: Sexual ambiguity and magical realism
in Virginia Woolf's Orlando and Jeanette Winterson's The Passion

by

Megan Rebekah Campbell

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Megan Rebekah Campbell

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CHAPTER I: SEXUAL AMBIGUITY

Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) and Jeanette Winterson’s *The Passion* (1987), though separated by both fifty-nine years and the critical gulf of modernism and postmodernism, share many traits, not the least of which is a tendency to be taken less than seriously by readers and critics. An aura of lovely frivolity surrounds both novels, in some ways quite literally, as Nigel Nicolson’s flattering yet reductive assessment of *Orlando* as “the longest and most charming love letter in literature” appears on the cover of many editions. *The Passion* bears its own scarlet letter-like summation, as its cover, courtesy of Edmund White, proclaims it to be a “fairy tale about passion, gambling, madness, and androgynous ecstasy.” Despite these limiting labels, the literary tides have turned, slowly for *Orlando*, and more quickly for *The Passion*. Whereas Elizabeth Bowen once “regarded [Orlando] as a setback” (216) for Woolf, she came around enough to write an Afterword for the 1960 edition. Likewise, Winterson’s further novels and critical essays have encouraged readers to dig more deeply into *The Passion* as both a postmodern and a feminist text. One of Winterson’s essays argues explicitly on behalf of *Orlando*, suggesting potent links between these two writers, as well as a need to look a bit more closely at their love letters and fairy tales.

The plot of *Orlando* clearly embodies the novel’s revolutionary take on gender and history. Woolf has written the ostensible biography of an English nobleman who lives for nearly four hundred years and changes sex midway through. Orlando hobnobs with Queen
Elizabeth I and King James I before falling in love with Sasha, a Russian princess who ultimately rejects him. He eventually flees to Constantinople, where he serves as an ambassador and inexplicably morphs into a woman. After spending a few weeks among a tribe of gypsies, Orlando returns to England, all the while noting the differences and limitations of being a woman. She spends the 18th century cross-dressing and socializing, only to marry and bear a son during the more restrictive 19th century. The novel ends in “the present moment” (298), October 11, 1928. Likewise, the plot of The Passion reveals its complexities of gender and magical realism. The Passion tells the story of Henri, a French peasant, and Villanelle, a Venetian boatman’s daughter born with webbed feet. Henri’s obsession with Napoleon leads him to join the army and eventually become Napoleon’s personal cook. Villanelle resides in French-occupied Venice, and works at the Casino dressed as a boy. After falling in love with a married woman, Villanelle marries a man she hates, only to abandon him during their travels and return to Venice. Her husband sells her to the French army, where she meets Henri, who falls in love with her. They flee Moscow during the war and return to Venice. After a confrontation with an old enemy, Henri is imprisoned. Villanelle bears his child but is unable to return his love. As a result, Henri goes mad and remains in an asylum despite Villanelle’s efforts to return him to France.

Along with being inventively plotted, Orlando and The Passion are beautifully written, filled with love and magic, suitors and carnivals. Both novels engage in a heady mixture of sexual ambiguity and magical realism, which combine to form a provocative and often neglected critique of binary constructs in human culture. Woolf and Winterson use
sexual ambiguity and magical realism to attack the dualistic and limiting categories of male and female, just as they use magical realism to challenge critical notions of fact and fiction, fantasy and reality. While, in the words of Nancy Cervetti, “critical response has tended to quell the rebellion” (165) of these texts, they are a fertile source of controversial ideas and images. The following pages discuss the various ways sexual ambiguity evinces itself in Orlando and The Passion, including an exploration of how Winterson more boldly addresses issues such as androgyny, bisexuality, and homosexuality as challenges to binary gender. Chapter II addresses magical realism and the many similarities between the novels’ more fantastic elements and the ways the similarities embody many of Woolf’s and Winterson’s provocative ideas on the limits of fictional space. Chapter III looks at the ties between sexual ambiguity and magical realism, and the ways they, separately and together, form a critique of binary constructs by exploring the space between them.

The notion of sexual ambiguity encompasses many different ideas. Chief among them is gender, a term used to signal a variety of meanings. When discussing Orlando and The Passion the most appropriate meaning for gender is the definition developed by Judith Butler in her 1990 book Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity. Butler, like Woolf and Winterson, asserts that gender is not rooted in biological sex, which is represented by physical sexual characteristics, but is instead a performance and a construction created by culture. Likewise, gender roles are culturally rather than biologically based, and rigidly assigned to men and women as a means of maintaining a hierarchical society by keeping everyone in an artificially constructed “proper place.” The term
androgyny is also slippery; however, contemporary critics of Woolf and Winterson, such as Christy Burns, often rely upon the definition proposed by Carolyn Heilbrun in her 1973 book *Toward a Recognition of Androgyny*. Heilbrun argued that androgyny “defines a condition under which the characteristics of the sexes, and the human impulses expressed by men and women, are not rigidly assigned” (x). Androgyny is, therefore, different from bisexuality and homosexuality, which represent sexual desire for both sexes and sexual desire for one’s own sex, respectively. While the meaning of these terms is certainly debatable, the above definitions are both representative and applicable to Woolf’s and Winterson’s treatment of sexuality.

Before addressing sexual ambiguity, the notion of *unambiguous* sexuality, as it is represented in these novels, must be explored. In *Orlando*, Woolf adopts a tongue-in-cheek stance on heterosexuality, depicting it as an unavoidable default. As Jean Kennard puts it, “this insistence on the necessity for desire to be heterosexual is repeated to the point of mockery” (162). Woolf’s coy insistence on this is both comical, as when the male Orlando mistakes his beloved Sasha for a boy and wishes to “tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question” (38), and meditative, as when the female Orlando sadly reflects that “though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved” (161). *Orlando*’s sly insistence on heterosexuality is merely a mask, as the novel’s characters’ desires never conform to such a limitation. They are, in the current idiom, in the closet. Winterson, on the other hand, presents all sexuality as acceptable; indeed, prurient types could choose to read *The Passion* as a catalogue of sexual
behaviors. Bisexuals, homosexuals, peeping Toms, and even rapists abound, and Winterson, through her dual narrators Henri and Villanelle, reserves judgment, emphasizing only that passion is its own law. Though Winterson, like Woolf, explores cross-dressing, androgyny, and homosexuality, her characters are fully outed, a reflection, perhaps, on changing attitudes toward alternative lifestyles more than anything else.

While the cross-dressing in *Orlando* often pales in comparison to the literal sex change the title character undergoes, it is a revealing feature of the novel. The male Orlando is seemingly happy to live life solely as a man, complete with money, status, and privilege, while the female Orlando quickly realizes the limitations placed upon her as a woman and chooses to revel in endless costume change. Her first days as a woman are spent among the gipsies, where women, “except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gipsy men” (153). In fact, before donning the clothes of an Englishwoman for her journey home, Orlando “had scarcely given her sex a thought” (153). While residing in London, Orlando, missing the freedom of being a man, wears both male and female clothing, causing her biographer to lament, “what makes the task of identification still more difficult is that she found it convenient at this time to change frequently from one set of clothes to another. Thus she often occurs in contemporary memoirs as ‘Lord’ So-and-so” (220). While dressed as a man, Orlando picks up a prostitute, but, unable to maintain the charade, “[flings] off all disguise and [admits] herself a woman” (217). Unconcerned, the prostitute, Nell, “[drops] her plaiative, appealing ways” (218) and befriends Orlando. Orlando is not the novel’s only, or even first, cross-dresser. While a man, Orlando is approached in his
ancestral home by the Archduchess Harriet, whom he flees when he finds himself falling in love with her. When Orlando returns as a woman to her (now legally contested) estate, she is again approached by the Archduchess, who reveals herself to be, rather, an Archduke hoping for Orlando's hand in marriage. While the Archduke had initially fallen for the male Orlando, "he had heard of her change and hastened to offer his services (here he teed and heed intolerably)" (179). Woolf's depiction of the Archduchess/duke both highlights and lampoons the notion of heterosexual relations being the only possible sort.

Woolf's treatment of cross-dressing has many implications. Cervetti points out that Orlando "never feels or suggests 'a woman trapped in a man's body' or 'a man trapped in the body of a woman.' Orlando codes her dress according to practicality" (166) and that "different types of clothing signal masculinity or femininity and set in motion personal relations of control and submission" (168). Nell's abrupt change in behavior upon learning Orlando's true sex is the clear example of this phenomenon. Marjorie Garber, in Vested Interests: Cross-Dressing and Cultural Anxiety suggests that "whatever Orlando is, her clothing reflects it; the crossing between male and female may be mixture, but it is not a confusion" (135), indicating that the female Orlando could somehow become a man again through the medium of clothing, a notion which seems rather simplistic, given the gender complexities of the novel. Kari Weil also posits a link between sex and dress (156), suggested by the novel's first line: "He - for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it" (13), which immediately emphasizes the importance of sex and gender in Orlando. Cross-dressing is, as always, fruitful ground for
interpretation, and Woolf’s utilization of it plays into her critique of gender. Orlando’s perceived sex influences the behavior of those around him/her, whatever the actuality of it. Here, Woolf is revealing the artificial and binary nature of gender roles, long before the advent of gender studies. Cross-dressing also serves to highlight the rigidity of the heterosexual norm, particularly through the character of the Archduke, who pursues the male Orlando dressed as a woman as if the addition of a few petticoats could somehow “heterosexualize” his desire. Cross-dressing in Orlando is a way around the limitations created by binary gender and an enforced heterosexual norm.

The Passion’s main female character, Villanelle, also cross-dresses within a variety of contexts. Employed by the Casino, Villanelle “dressed as a boy because that’s what the visitors liked to see” (54). However, it’s not boys per se that “the visitors” like, it’s “trying to decide which sex was hidden behind tight breeches and extravagant face-paste” (54). Villanelle’s sexuality is highly ambiguous even without the codpiece, as she possesses the webbed feet generally only characteristic of boatmen and finds “pleasure with both men and women” (59-60). Villanelle falls in love with a married woman and visits her dressed first as a Casino boy, and later as a soldier. When she finally reveals herself as a woman, her lover, known only as The Queen of Spades, simply replies “‘I know’” (71), indicating that her interest in Villanelle was homosexual from the beginning rather, than by default. Villanelle’s pragmatism underscores even her delight in these costumes, as she reflects “if I went to confession, what would I confess? That I cross-dress? So did our Lord, so do the priests” (72). After leaving her lover, Villanelle marries a man she despises, reasoning “he liked me to
dress as a boy. I like to dress as a boy now and then. We had that in common” (96). Here, cross-dressing works to conflate heterosexual coupling with homosexual urges, a step away from Woolf, whose characters often cross-dress as a way of masking the homosexual nature of their urges.

In *The Passion*, cross-dressing is both a challenge to binary gender and a sexually-charged form of masquerade. Garber mentions the cross-dressing courtesans and prostitutes that color Venice’s history, indicating that their purpose was merely to titillate their clients (86-87). Judith Seaboyer points out that “it is while [Villanelle] is dressed as a boy that she falls in love with a woman” (498), suggesting that Villanelle is more comfortable, sexually, in the male role, an observation that meshes with Villanelle’s other masculine characteristics, including her troublesome feet. Like Orlando, Villanelle meditates on the importance of clothing, wondering “was this breeches and boots self any less real than my garters?” (66). Paulina Palmer writes that “[Villanelle’s] supposition that the girl’s role . . . is no more real than the boy’s . . . draws attention to the inauthenticity of all gender roles” (112).

Winterson’s use of cross-dressing, like Woolf’s, underscores the ways in which binary gender distinctions are useless. However, *The Passion* also depicts cross-dressing as a highly sexualized pastime, something done for the pleasure of others as well as an expression of self, a change from *Orlando*, in which a male costume is always assumed to house a male body. In *The Passion*, the ambiguity itself is sexually stimulating.

*Orlando* and *The Passion* treat the perception of cross-dressers very differently. Orlando, when dressed as a man, is believed to be a man unless she deliberately reveals
herself as otherwise. Conversely, Villanelle is always perceived as quite possibly being a woman dressed as a man. Both The Queen of Spades and her hated husband see through her disguise before she chooses to reveal herself. Winterson’s greater acceptance of ambiguity is clearly evinced here, as cross-dressing continually serves to open up sexual possibilities, as women dressed as men interact sexually with both men and women, and the costume itself is simply part of the fun. Woolf’s characters, on the other hand, rely upon their clothing to give them a set sexual identity, and pursue each other only in heterosexual configurations. Ambiguity, however, is not absent from these ostensibly heterosexual pairings. Cervetti writes of Orlando that “the text marks seductiveness as independent of gender; it seems to be the very uncertainty that characters find so seductive” (168). Orlando certainly bears this out, as Orlando falls for Sasha before determining her sex, and the poor besotted Archduke desires Orlando in both male and female form. Still, romantic pursuit in Orlando, unlike in The Passion, is limited by the appearance, if not the actuality, of heterosexuality. The idea that love transcends our notions of orientation is a central motif in much of Winterson’s work (her novel Written on the Body features a nameless and genderless narrator chronicling his/her love for a woman named Louise), and The Passion is no exception. Henri loves a man, then a woman, while Villanelle dresses explicitly to promote Cervetti’s seductive uncertainty.

While it can easily be stated that Orlando and The Passion promote an androgynous vision, the concept of androgyny is fraught with complications. The androgynous mind, one that embraces both masculine and feminine perspectives, was forwarded by Samuel Taylor
Coleridge and Woolf herself as a prerequisite for great artists. However, feminist theorists like Adrienne Rich later rejected the concept as being overtly rooted in notions of gendered difference. Finally, the wolves of popular culture fell upon androgyny, applying the term to everything from women in suits to men in make-up. Despite this checkered past, androgyny is very much at work in these texts. Christy Burns writes that “if both Woolf and Winterson favor a feminist art that rolls back the supremacy of masculine perspective, then both . . . call for an androgynous art, a concept not unproblematic in its present-day interpretation” (“Powerful” 384). The androgyny at work in *Orlando* and *The Passion* is perhaps best represented by Weil, whose 1992 book *Androgyny and the Denial of Difference* states that androgyny “suggests a spiritual or psychological state of wholeness and balance arrived at through the joining of masculine and feminine conceived of as complementary and symmetrically opposed” (63). This definition encompasses both Orlando’s meshing of the male and female, and Winterson’s defiant mixture of the masculine and feminine in many of her characters. Both Woolf and Winterson employ this combination as a challenge to binary gender roles.

The androgyny in *Orlando* is, of course, best represented by Orlando’s miraculous sex change and the fact that, though physically a woman, “in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been” (138). Though Woolf emphasizes the sameness of Orlando’s inner self, he/she is clearly driven by societal pressure to behave in a gendered way. When approached by a ship’s captain on her return to England, Orlando wonders, “which is the greater ecstasy? The man’s or the woman’s?” (155). Once in England,
Orlando relies upon her clothing to signal whether she is playing the female coquette or ardent male suitor, indicating that Orlando is all of these things at once. Sasha, Orlando's first love, is also something of an androgyne. Orlando's first vision of her is one of frustration, as he laments, "alas, a boy it must be - no woman could skate with such speed and vigour" (38), and compares her to "a melon, an emerald, a fox in the snow" (37), all curiously genderless metaphors. When Sasha leaves him, Orlando comes to view her as a heartless femme fatale, a turn of events hinted at by her very name: "Sasha, as he called her for short, and because it was the name of a white Russian fox he had had as a boy - a creature soft as snow, but with teeth of steel, which had bit him so savagely that his father had it killed" (44). However, Orlando, once a woman, reflects that "at last . . . she knew Sasha as she was" (161), suggesting that only the female incarnation of Orlando is the true androgyne, able to comprehend both male and female frames of mind. Orlando's biographer continues by explaining that "the obscurity, which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed" (161), making Orlando's androgyny contingent upon her experiences as both sexes.

Most critics argue that the androgyny in *Orlando* is meant to reflect "that sex has no more essence than the mark or written sign" (Jones 155). Burns agrees, and also states that "in *Orlando*, the 'male' and 'female' strands of character combine in various ways, leaving Orlando more androgynous than essentially one sex or the other" ("Re-Dressing" 347). Orlando, then, is simply Orlando, whether man or woman. Cervetti goes a step further, writing that "gender trouble is contagious in Orlando, a playful trouble that questions the
possibility, the need, or the advantage of any stable notion of identity” (169). Here Orlando isn’t even “Orlando.” The text in some ways supports this, as Woolf writes, “for [Orlando] 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, whereas a person may well have as many thousand” (309). Androgyny in Orlando is an abstract which opens up all possible modes of being, releasing Woolf’s characters from the confines of binary gender.

*The Passion’s* use of androgyny is textually rather different from *Orlando*. Instead of a single main character who is both male and female, we have dual characters, one of each sex. Henri and Villanelle, however, do not conform to anyone’s notions of men and women. Henri is consistently depicted as more feminine that masculine. He joins the army due to his passion for Napoleon, but becomes a cook rather than a soldier. Villanelle tells the reader that in “eight years of battle [the worst] he’d done was to kill more chickens than he could count” (147). During a visit to a whorehouse, Henri, disturbed by the brutality of his companions, refuses to participate: “I told her I had a headache and went to sit outside” (15). It is Henri who pushes for marriage with Villanelle, lamenting “I want to marry her and I’m not having her child” (152). In each case Henri fulfills a feminine stereotype, as the rejection of loveless sexual encounters and the desire for marriage and family are attributes generally ascribed to women. Villanelle, however, rejects marriage in favor of her pursuit of passion. In many ways, Villanelle is as androgynous as Orlando, an idea noted by Seaboyer, who writes, “there is much of Orlando in Villanelle” (497). While Villanelle is physically
female, she possesses the webbed feet particular only to the male heirs of boatmen. She crosses-dresses, sleeps with both men and women, and, “skillful with the compass and maps” (101), leads Henri from Moscow to Venice. Henri’s first sexual encounter occurs along the way, when “one night she turned over suddenly and told me to make love to her” (103), a request worthy of her usual sexual fearlessness. Unlike Henri, Villanelle doesn’t balk at the idea of prostitution, and before being sold to the French army accepts a soldier’s challenge in the Casino, telling the reader “and if I lost? I was to make him a present of my purse. There was no mistaking his meaning” (69). Villanelle loses, steals his uniform after he falls asleep, and visits the Queen of Spades dressed in it. For all of this, Villanelle is still attractively feminine, sailing the boats of her (male) suitors and bearing Henri’s child. Like Henri (and Orlando before them), Villanelle is an intriguing mixture of the masculine and feminine.

The gender complexities evident in the characters of Henri and Villanelle have been interpreted in a number of ways. Seaboyer emphasizes Henri’s identification “with domesticity and the feminine, with heart and hearth” (501), also pointing out that “Henri is further feminized in that he is confined to the kitchen” (505) while serving Napoleon. However, despite these feminine attributes, Henri fathers a child and eventually pursues a heterosexual marriage relationship with Villanelle. This desire is not unproblematic either, given Villanelle’s masculine nature. In Gender Trouble, Judith Butler poses the question: “To what extent does the body come into being in and through the marks of gender?” (8). For Villanelle, a cross-dresser possessed of a female body with male feet, this question is even more complex. Seaboyer states that “Villanelle apparently identifies with both
feminine and masculine subject positions . . . this double identification is written on the
body” (497). Though Henri and Villanelle function as androgynes independently, they could
also be said to combine to form an androgynous ideal. In this case, however, it would not
always be Henri who provided the male perspective and Villanelle the female. Both
characters express individual impulses rather than rigidly masculine or feminine actions and
ideas. For Winterson, the notion of gender as a binary system could never suffice. The
complexities of her characters place them beyond such labels.

Both Orlando and The Passion address androgyny as desirable, a freeing of society’s
bonds. Orlando’s sex change opens her mind and allows her to live, often through costume,
as a man or woman, and explore all aspects of herself. Henri and Villanelle exist in a brutal
and fantastic world where their masculine and feminine attributes work as complements to
one another. Both novels, however, feature a childbirth which functions as a subtle comment
on gender and androgyny. Orlando has a son, and ends her biography hunting for,
specifically, “boy’s boots” (301) in a London department store. Villanelle has a daughter
“with a mass of hair like the early sun and feet like [Henri’s]” (150). Both children, it seems,
take a step back from the androgyny of their mothers. This slight retreat on the part of
Woolf and Winterson is interesting, especially given the lengths each writer goes to to
support the notion of androgyny.

Kennard writes that though “Woolf herself carefully distinguishes between
androgyny and bisexuality . . . her fiction demonstrates an increasing willingness to deal with
bisexual desire” (149). In much of Orlando, bisexuality and homosexuality are most often
relegated to this realm of desire, as impulses not to be acted upon. Orlando is attracted to Sasha even when he believes her to be a boy, but considers “all embraces . . . out of the question” (38). Likewise, the Archduke desires Orlando, but approaches him only in the guise of woman, and is later thrilled when Orlando becomes a woman and therefore an appropriate love object. While a woman, Orlando “enjoyed the love of both sexes equally” (221), a statement suggesting bisexual relations. However, as Orlando pursued women only when dressed as a man, it can be assumed that these encounters were not predominately physical. Orlando’s rather odd marriage to Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire results in a Winterson-like conflation of homosexual and heterosexual desire:

“Oh! Shel, don’t leave me!” she cried. “I’m passionately in love with you,” she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously.

“You’re a woman, Shel!” she cried.

“You’re a man, Orlando!” he cried (251-252).

Here Woolf eschews binary gender even in the confines of heterosexual relationship, as both Orlando and Shel wonder if their desire for each other isn’t somehow homosexual.

Woolf’s reticence in depicting homosexuality head-on in Orlando has been only partially addressed by critics. Burns comments that “Woolf writes in some ambivalence around [the issue of homosexual relations]” (“Re-Dressing” 352), but offers little by way of explanation, despite Orlando’s lesbian pedigree. The novel itself was written as a fantastic biography of Vita Sackville-West, Woolf’s female lover, and early editions featured photos of Sackville-West dressed as Orlando. Fantastic as the novel may be, it is also a commentary
on binary gender. All of Orlando's arbitrarily heterosexual characters are merely highlighting the rigidity of a society which allows only one sort of love to be publicly pursued. This is also demonstrated by the sexual ambiguity at work in Orlando’s marriage; both question the sex of the other, indicating that their attraction is not as simple as it seems.

*The Passion*, unlike *Orlando*, treats bisexuality and homosexuality as perfectly acceptable modes of conduct. Henri, inflamed by Napoleon, leaves home to follow him blindly across the continent. When confronted by a gay officer, Henri merely comments, “I heard of his reputation soon enough but he never bothered me” (6). Villanelle is openly bisexual and her great love in the novel is a woman. Describing her as “bisexual” may even a be a stretch, as she never makes any real statement about her orientation, describing herself only as “pragmatic about love” (59). When Villanelle realizes that her married lover also loves her husband, she leaves her, wanting to avoid “the silent space that is the pain of never having enough” (96), but drawing no distinctions between homosexual and heterosexual relationships. After the death of her husband, Villanelle is blandly told that he “loved to watch the choirboys in their red clothes” (138), as if this enthusiasm were in no way at odds with his marriage to her. Indeed, *The Passion* presents nothing as “other,” suggesting only gradations of pure feeling in love and sexual desire.

Winterson’s straightforward treatment of homosexuality in *The Passion* has been interpreted in various ways. Scott Wilson argues that “Both Napoleon and Villanelle combine desire and expertise, passion and analytics,” suggesting that “Napoleon is a schizoid possibility for Villanelle and vice versa” (71). The idea that Henri’s feelings for both
Napoleon (in whom he never expresses a sexual interest) and Villanelle are homosexual by nature is a provocative one. Palmer argues similarly on behalf of Villanelle, claiming her a true lesbian whose “sexual relations with men . . . [are] motivated by social and economic pressures” (104) rather than heterosexual desires. The label of lesbian, however, is misleading, as Villanelle does maintain an ongoing sexual relationship with Henri, telling the reader, “he gave me pleasure” (148). The androgyny of both Henri and Villanelle invites such speculation; however, both characters are marked by a disinterest in sexual labels and societal expectations. Interested only in passion, they never question their feelings in gendered terms. For Winterson, even the label “bisexual” is limiting, a reduction of desire into a categorical space.

The different approaches of Woolf and Winterson to bisexuality and homosexuality can be accounted for in a number of ways. Burns argues that “[Woolf’s] approach . . . was in many ways more appropriate to a period in which suffrage had just emerged, while the feminisms Winterson has available to her have more secure histories” (“Powerful” 369). Winterson, in her essay “A Gift of Wings (with reference to Orlando),” defends Woolf, writing that “the Orlando who holds Sasha in his arms is still the Orlando who holds Shelmerdine in hers. Woman to woman, man to man, is the sub-sexuality of Orlando” (67). The notion of a “sub-sexuality” is a useful one, suggesting that homosexuality is not absent from Orlando, but merely buried in the subtext. Winterson’s essay teases it out, just as her novel more explicitly reveals the issues at work in Orlando.
Overall, these texts do represent the rather abstract concept of sexual ambiguity in a similar, often radical way. *Orlando*’s comical depiction of all romantic pursuit as being cloaked in a heterosexual disguise may differ on the surface from Winterson’s more accepting treatment of all desires and sexual orientations, but they are sisters under the skin. Both suggest that desire is not rooted in sex or gender; it is instead a process that fails to conform to our notions of orientation. *Orlando* and *The Passion* both treat androgyny similarly as well, depicting it as a quality of the mind rather than the body, and as a useful and freeing way of looking at the world. Orlando’s androgynous mind allows him/her to discover the thousands of selves residing within, while Henri and Villanelle’s mingling of masculine and feminine characteristics serves as a catalyst for their remarkable lives and experiences. The novels’ greatest divergence may well be found in their depiction of the acceptability of bisexual and homosexual relationships, yet there is a trajectory at work, and the issues Woolf raises in *Orlando* find fruition in *The Passion*. Sexual ambiguity is central to these novels, as both a plot device and a mechanism of gender criticism.

It is in some ways easy to understand why *Orlando* and *The Passion* were initially received as fairy tales rather than contenders in the realm of social and gender critique. The beauty and originality of their plots and language, and the romantic nature of their subject matter evokes fantasy more than scholarship. Yet both novels pose a clear challenge to binary notions of gender. The use of magical realism by Woolf and Winterson, explored in chapter II, serves to further involve these novels in a critique of binaries, problematizing distinctions between fact and fantasy. It is within the elements of sexual ambiguity,
romance, and magic that the critical aspects of these novels can be found, and chapter III will explore the ways in which sexual ambiguity and magical realism work to offer such a critique.
CHAPTER II: MAGICAL REALISM

Once upon a time, magical realism referred not to Latin American literature, but to European art. Coined by German art critic Franz Roh in 1925, magical realism described Post-Expressionist painting, which often featured literal representations of fantastic or impossible scenes and people. Popular in post-World War I Eastern Europe, magical realist painting was eventually quashed by Hitler, who felt it (among many other art forms) lacked “true Germanic spirit” (Guenther 53). By the 1950s, however, the term had made its way across the Atlantic and found a home in Latin America. Angel Flores was the first critic to describe literature as magical realism, and his 1955 essay “Magical Realism in Spanish American Fiction” traced the tradition back to the 1880s. Until the 1980s, magical realism remained linked to Latin American writers, most notably Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Jorge Luis Borges, and Isabel Allende. The term then began to be spotted everywhere, in criticism and on book jackets, in popular essays and magazines. Soon, writers as disparate as Salman Rushdie, Angela Carter, Derek Walcott, and Toni Morrison were being described as magical realists. By the end of the twentieth century the literary world was engulfed by the not-quite-real but not-really-fantastic.

1 For a fuller representation of the origins and practice of magical realism in Latin American literature see Eric S. Rabkin’s The Fantastic in Literature, James Irish’s “Magical Realism: A Search for Caribbean and Latin American Roots” and Alejo Carpentier’s “On the Marvelous Real in America.”
As magical realism grew to describe dozens of works in several languages, the need for a proper definition was felt. Flores vaguely defined it as “the amalgamation of realism and fantasy” (112), and acknowledged Franz Kafka as a prime influence on many Latin American writers. Little was published on the subject until 1967, when Luis Leal challenged Flores with his similarly titled essay, “Magical Realism in Spanish American Literature.” Leal rejected Kafka as an influence and focused solely on Latin American writing, claiming that “the magical realist does not try to copy the surrounding reality... but to seize the mystery that breathes behind things” (123). In 1975, Floyd Merrell expanded upon Leal’s ideas, writing that “magical realism portrays not a world as is but a world of becoming, a dynamic, open system incessantly striving to synthesize the stubborn dualisms created by human culture” (13). Despite Leal and Merrell’s claims, which Latin American authors continued to discuss and refine,2 magical realism was generally considered by British and American critics to be loosely defined at best, and soon it was being argued that everything from The White Hotel to The Satanic Verses was an example of magical realism. In a 1986 essay on post-colonialism, Stephen Slemon complained of magical realism’s “lack of theoretical specificity” (409), then took advantage of the same supposed lack to make his argument. Since then, many critics, particularly those concerned with literature published in English, have taken the same route, further enlarging the implications of magical realism.3

2 The definition of magical realism in Latin American literature is discussed further in Scott Simpkins’ “Sources of Magic Realism/Supplements to Realism in Contemporary Latin American Literature” and Michael Boccia’s “Magical Realism: The Multicultural Literature.”

3 The broader implications of magical realism are addressed in Wendy B. Faris’s “Scheherazade’s Children: Magical Realism and Postmodern Fiction,” Theo L. D’haen’s
Despite this, some British and American writers, Winterson chief among them, have remained closer to the tradition of magical realism as established by Latin American writers and critics.

Which brings us, handily enough, to *Orlando* and *The Passion*. The magical elements in Woolf's *Orlando* are most often described not as magical realist, but more vaguely as fantastic. Kennard calls it “a fantasy version . . . of Vita’s life” (161), and Cervetti echoes this by stating that “while fantastic [Orlando] is, critics usually read the novel as biography” (165). Winterson, on the other hand, is widely acknowledged as one of the new breed of magical realists. The cover of *The Passion* bears a comparison to Garcia Marquez, and several of her novels, among them *Sexing the Cherry* and *Art and Lies*, have been praised for their skillful integration of history and magic. Burns claims that her “frequent preference for magical realism, as a form of fantasy that is inscribed into a realistic narrative, works to bind her source of the imaginary to the real” (“Fantastic” 288), a description that links Winterson’s use of magical realism to Merrell’s synthesis of dualisms. Describing Woolf as a magical realist is more problematic, as *Orlando* was written before the genre emerged in literature. However, Burns’ description of Winterson’s magical realism is also applicable to Woolf, who similarly constructs a realistic narrative, based on documented history and peopled with actual historical personages, that also features moments of fantasy and magic.

“Magic Realism and Postmodernism: Decentering Privileged Centers,” and Jeanne Delbaere-Garant’s “Psychic Realism, Mythic Realism, Grotesque Realism: Variations on Magic Realism in Contemporary Literature in English.”
The novels are indeed similar enough, in language, imagery, and ideas, that the labels applied to one can easily be transferred to the other.

By returning to magical realism’s roots and reading *Orlando* and *The Passion* through Merrell’s neglected 1975 definition, it can be seen that Woolf and Winterson both depict, in Merrell’s words, “dynamic” worlds struggling to “synthesize the stubborn dualisms created by human culture” (13). Woolf’s and Winterson’s depiction of one such dualism, that of masculinity and femininity, was explored in chapter I. Chapter II will explore their utilization of magical realism, as defined by Merrell, in their use of history, imagery, and language, all of which are used to explore binary ideas of fact and fiction, fantasy and reality. Chapter III will establish links between sexual ambiguity and magical realism in *Orlando* and *The Passion*, and look at the ways these issues form a critique of binary constructs in gender and society.

The most magical element of *Orlando*, excepting, perhaps, the miraculous sex change, is the novel’s historical time frame. Orlando lives for approximately four hundred years, from the reign of Elizabeth I to “the present moment” (298) of October 11, 1928. His/her long life serves many purposes, chief among them an opportunity for Woolf to observe and comment upon English life from the Renaissance through World War I. As a young man, Orlando enjoys money, power, and the affections of several women, among them the aged but infatuated Elizabeth. Orlando at this time is likable but callow. Woolf tells us “he did but as nature bade him” (28), a comment upon both youth and masculinity made more provocative by Orlando’s extraordinarily long youth and eventual sex change. After Orlando
becomes a woman, Woolf is able to indulge more freely in social critique. Charges are leveled against Orlando, claiming, "(1) that she was dead, and therefore could not hold any property whatsoever; (2) that she was a woman, which amounts to much the same thing" (168). The suggestion that being a woman is, legally speaking, about as useful as being dead is the first of Woolf’s attacks on English law. These lawsuits, we eventually learn, carry on for over 100 years (221), another jab at the English court system. Meanwhile, Orlando enjoys the salons and coffeehouses of the eighteenth century, dressed alternately as a man and a woman.

However, history steps in and changes Orlando’s life significantly. One evening, “a turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was dark; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun” (225-226). Orlando is now condemned to a cold, rainy England full of “innumerable little dogs, mats, and antimacassars” (228). Woolf deliberately skewers history by depicting the nineteenth century as a plague of clouds and embroidery, calling into question whether any historical representation of an era can truly be accurate. By making historical change itself fantastic, Woolf challenges binary notions of fact and fiction. Woolf’s sly send-up of the nineteenth century novel continues when Orlando becomes conscious of “an extraordinary tingling and vibration all over her,” which finally settles “about the second finger of the left hand” (239-240). Orlando, like all nineteenth century heroines, must marry, and to that end meets Shelmerdine while stranded on a moor with the usual broken ankle. “A few minutes later,” we are told, “they became engaged” (250). Even though Orlando doesn’t seem to want a
husband (tingling finger aside), the nineteenth century requires that she have one. By having Orlando gain this husband in a cliched and ultimately ridiculous fashion, Woolf challenges our assumptions about nineteenth century marriages and relationships. Again, Woolf tackles history, suggesting that factual representations of it may themselves be another kind of fiction. Orlando, meanwhile, ends the novel with this (generally absent) husband and a young son.

Unlike *Orlando*, the characters of *The Passion* live a typical life-span, but one that is also pregnant with complexities of narrative and history. The setting of *The Passion* is best characterized as Napoleonic, as Napoleon’s endless wars and conquered lands often provide the novel’s backdrop. While Winterson’s history, like Woolf’s, is more or less accurate in the large picture, she bends the details to her will, creating a world where anything is possible. Unlike *Orlando*, *The Passion* is not linear; we hear Henri’s history before Villanelle’s, though they are the same age. Both of their tales pause on New Year’s Day, 1805, and pick up again with Henri, who has spent eight years in Napoleon’s army. At this point we learn that Henri, like Orlando’s biographer, is writing down the past rather than existing in the novel’s present. “I have to stop writing now. I have to take my exercise” (81) he tells us. He meets Villanelle, whose husband has sold her to the French army, in Moscow and together they desert Napoleon. The missing years of Villanelle’s life are embedded in Henri’s tale, as she relates her story to him while they are on the run. The fact that it is Henri who ultimately tells part of Villanelle’s story complicates things, as he is in love with her and, we eventually learn, slightly mad. As a result, part of Villanelle’s life
remains mysterious. The novel’s last section unfolds in Venice, emphasizing matters of the heart rather than those of history. Still, they are not allowed to live happily ever after, as it eventually transpires that Villanelle’s wicked husband is also an old enemy of Henri’s. His murder lands Henri in an asylum, from which he relates his story. Though Henri and Villanelle are linked both past and present (and future, as they eventually have a child), they are as unable as Orlando and Shelmerdine to maintain a traditional heterosexual relationship.

Woolf and Winterson both use history for their own ends, rather than treating it as a sacrosanct, unalterable entity. The worlds they create are realistic but not limited by reality. Herbert Marder argues that it is Woolf’s fantastic use of time that allows her to “glance satirically at the position of women in different ages and poke fun at masculine pedantry” (24). Similarly, Winterson’s take on the Napoleonic era “encodes an interruption of dominant cultural fantasy” (Burns, “Fantastic” 286), suggesting that history itself isn’t fact but another form of fantasy. The nonlinear format of The Passion also enhances the novel’s magical qualities, “challenging the commonplace distinction between fact and the fantastic” (Palmer 108). Both Woolf and Winterson offer a magical realist version of history that not only works to forward their stories, but also calls into question binary distinctions between fact and fiction. Along with reconciling the real and unreal, both novels address the fantastic implications of time. Orlando’s biographer never treats his/her long life as unusual, but does cagily point out that the “extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation” (98). Likewise, Villanelle notes that “without past and future, the present is partial. All time is eternally
present and so all time is ours” (62), also suggesting that our lives are not best represented by the birth and death dates carved on our tombs. For Woolf and Winterson, time exists in the space between fact and fiction, and is itself merely a construct, as our lives are not lived solely in the material world depicted by historical accounts. Both novels end in the present; that is, Orlando’s biographer pointedly informs us that it is the present moment, while Henri slowly reveals that he has been writing his tale while locked in the madhouse on San Servelo, where he ends the novel. The idea of a “present moment” is deliberately complex (the moment of writing? Of reading?) and again blurs the line between historical fact and fiction. Time, like history, is both real and fantastic, rigid and fluid in these novels.

A more overtly fantastic element of Orlando is Woolf’s use of historical figures as characters. Orlando serves Elizabeth I at Whitehall and the reader learns that “the old woman loved him” (26). Later, Orlando hobnobs with James I and Charles II (having spent the Reformation locked in his estate, sulking over Sasha). He also earns the admiration of Charles’s mistress, Nell Gwyn. Upon her return as a woman, Orlando, a frustrated poet throughout most of the novel, is fascinated by the writers of the eighteenth century, particularly Addison, Dryden, Swift, and Pope, with whom she enjoys tea and conversation. Orlando, however, grows bored with their attentions and soon ventures out in search of less exhausting company. Orlando’s interaction with all of these characters again problematizes the distinction between fact and fiction, as the use of historical personages is made particularly fantastic by the depiction of their relationship with a potentially immortal being
capable of changing sexes. *Orlando* is too fantastic to be factual, yet Woolf treats it as a biography and peoples it with figures culled from history.

*The Passion* also features famous figures, most notably Napoleon Bonaparte. After Henri manages to impress the great (but short) man with his ingenuity, “Bonaparte came towards me and pinched my ear so that it was swollen for days” (18). Henri becomes Napoleon’s personal cook, eventually trusted even to “taste all [Napoleon’s] food before he would touch it” (36). While serving in Paris, Henri comes across Josephine and Tallyrand. Josephine somewhat flirtatiously invites him to work for her instead of her husband, but Henri refuses, reflecting that “she eluded me the way the tarts in Boulogne had eluded me. I decided to write about Napoleon instead” (36). Henri’s reticence and inexperience with women echoes the ways in which women have been historically sheltered from men, and sets the stage for his eventual devotion to the one woman with whom he becomes intimate.

Villanelle, though living in French-occupied Venice, seems to exist outside of the history that nearly swallows Henri. In fact, Henri serves as a link between fact and fiction, living out one life as a soldier in a historically real conflict, and another life in a “city of mazes” (49) with a web-footed woman who walks on water. It is Henri who most explicitly exists in the space between fact and fantasy.

The use of historically real characters serves more than one purpose in *Orlando* and *The Passion*. Like the historical settings both novels employ, the characters help Woolf and Winterson to conflate fact with fiction, real with fantastic, and establish that such binaries are ultimately unreliable distinctions. Palmer, when discussing *The Passion*, poses the
question: “Do the quasi-historical figures differ fundamentally in status from their fictional counterparts?” (109), and, by way of an answer, suggests that “the interplay [Winterson] creates between historical personages and fictional characters has the effect of problematizing the distinction between history and literature and blurring the differences between the two” (109). In Orlando and The Passion, historical figures are most often less respectable than fictional creations. Ultimately, Woolf and Winterson claim, all are characters, subject to the whims of their creators, whether novelists or historians. Both Woolf and Winterson strive to kick the pedestals out from under the personages they’ve appropriated from history, an aspect of magical realism that again refers back to its Latin American roots. Woolf’s Elizabeth is ever-so-slightly ridiculous, mooning after Orlando and “[groaning] much, as her days wore to an end, of man’s treachery” (26). The wits of the eighteenth century are even more comical, parading their tortured bon mots through drawing rooms and salons. Winterson’s Napoleon is pitiful rather than humorous, obsessed by chicken dinners and unable to see that he’s running his own army into the ground. In Orlando and The Passion cultural heroes are brought low, unfavorably compared to fictive beings.

Along with her magical sense of the historic, Woolf also employs other fantastic images. One of Orlando’s most charming episodes is The Great Frost. Here, Woolf depicts the heat of love in a fantastically frozen space. Occurring while Orlando is still a young man

4 The reduction of a cultural hero to human dimensions in a fictional work can be found most famously in Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s The General in His Labyrinth, a magical realist retelling of the life of Simon Bolivar.
residing in England, The Great Frost causes “birds [to freeze] in mid-air and [fall] like stones to the ground” and “the solidification of unfortunate wayfarers” (33-34). Undaunted by the cold, James I “directed that the river, which was frozen to a depth of twenty feet and more for six or seven miles on either side, should be swept, decorated and given all the semblance of a park or pleasure ground, with arbours, mazes, alleys, drinking booths, etc., at his expense” (35). It is upon this frozen, magical realist fairground that Orlando meets Sasha, the Muscovite princess. Orlando and Sasha enjoy an icy romantic interlude: “hot with skating and with love they would throw themselves down in some solitary reach, where the yellow osiers fringed the bank, and wrapped in a great fur cloak Orlando would take her in his arms, and know, for the first time, he murmured, the delights of love” (44-45), a passage explicitly conflating heat with cold. The two plan to run off together, but on the appointed night it begins to rain. Standing in the downpour, “the passionate and feeling heart of Orlando knew the truth” (61). The truth, of course, being that the girl would not show. When the infuriated Orlando gallops away from his failed rendezvous, he is met with perhaps the novel’s most fantastic sight: “the river was strewn with icebergs . . . and human creatures who had been trapped in the night now paced their twisting and precarious islands in the utmost agony of spirit. Whether they jumped into the flood or stayed on the ice their doom was certain” (62). Orlando sees an “old man . . . reading aloud from a holy book . . . a cat suckling its young; a table laid sumptuously for a supper of twenty; a couple in bed” (62-63). After the wild confusion of the river Orlando races to the sea, just in time to witness “the ship of the Muscovite Embassy . . . standing out to sea” (64). Melting, a term
often used to describe the act of falling in love, here signals the end of love, and the arrival of spring brings not a beginning but an end.

Winterson also includes frozen scenery in *The Passion*. The novel’s third section is titled “The Zero Winter” and details, among other things, Henri and Villanelle’s first meeting and their walk from Moscow to Venice. “The Zero Winter” is strewn with magical realist snow and ice imagery. When offered a drink by Patrick while on the frozen lookout post, Henri recounts, “I smelled it. It smelt of age and hay. I started to cry and my tears fell like diamonds. Patrick picked one up and told me not to waste my salt. Meditatively, he ate it” (84). Henri’s first encounter with Villanelle features not ice but snow:

She laughed and said the Russians could hide under the snowflakes.
Then she said, “They’re all different.”
“What?”
“Snowflakes. Think of that.”
I did think of that and I fell in love with her. (87-88)

Like Orlando, Henri falls in love in a fantastically frozen space. When Henri approaches his friend Domino about deserting, Domino sends him on his way with a thin gold necklace frozen in an icicle: “he had cleaned it and hung it out of sight and this morning had seen it so encased. An ordinary miracle” (87). Domino’s icicle is miraculous indeed. Though Henri fears it lost on the trip to Venice, Villanelle later reveals, “I have it’ . . . she fished into her bag and drew it out as cold and hard as the day he had plucked it from the canvas and sent me away” (116). Much later, while imprisoned on San Servelo, Henri notes, “my talisman had melted . . . I knew then [Domino] was dead, though I do not know how or where” (152).
Henri is linked to Domino through ice, and, as in *Orlando*, melting signals the end of a relationship rather than the renewal and rebirth generally associated with the melting of winter’s ice and snow.

In both *Orlando* and *The Passion* ice and snow are the accouterments of the most blazing emotions. Both Orlando and Henri fall in love while surrounded by snow, and Henri’s heartfelt friendships with Patrick and Domino are also signaled by ice imagery. This combination of a not-just-cold but fantastically frozen landscape with emotions generally described in heated terms recalls Merrell’s description of magical realism as a way of synthesizing the binary ideas put forth by human culture. Love and passion erupt not while comfortably at home, Woolf and Winterson claim. Instead, they are extremes which seem to require extremes in order to emerge. In Woolf’s and Winterson’s fictional spaces, images of hot and cold are toyed with just as ideas of fantasy and reality challenged. *Orlando* and *The Passion* leave no binary intact, not even those created by figurative language.

While many of *Orlando*’s fantastic occurrences are ornate and sustained, there are several smaller, more subtle touches that contain just as much magic. Woolf makes clever reference to such events while in the guise of Orlando’s biographer, writing “often it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (119). Biography, Woolf asserts, is not a representation of facts, but instead is an imaginative act on the part of its author. It also exists in the space between fact and fiction, fantasy and reality. Woolf, in fact, continually pokes holes in the notion that the label biography is any sort of guarantee of hard reality. Thus we learn of Orlando’s week-long sleeping episodes
and elaborate visions of England while among the gypsies at Broussa. It's also revealed that Orlando's servants and even dogs also enjoy her long life-span, proving that you can go home again. Eventually, she marries a man whose improbable occupation was “to voyage round Cape Horn in the teeth of a gale" (252). Near the end of the novel, Woolf even plays with the idea of magic itself, as Orlando reflects, “the very fabric of life now... is magic. In the eighteenth century, we knew how everything was done; but here I rise through the air; I listen to voices in America; I see men flying - but how it's done, I can't even begin to wonder. So my belief in magic returns” (300). For Orlando, whose life-span allows her to personally witness four centuries of technology, fantasy literally becomes reality. In her youth, flying was a dream, but in her adulthood it is a factual possibility. Just as Orlando exists between the poles of male and female, she also exists between those of fantasy and reality.

The pages of *The Passion* are also tinged with magic. We learn that Patrick's “left eye could put the best telescope to shame” (21), a trait that earned him his job as lookout. While on top of his pillar he tells Henri about the goblins of his native Ireland, treasure seekers who once shrunk his boots: “he searched his pockets and handed me a tiny pair of boots, perfectly made, the heels worn down and the laces frayed. 'An' I swear they fitted me once'” (39). Perhaps most astonishing is the recovery of Villanelle's stolen heart. When Henri disbelieves Villanelle's claim that her lover still has her heart locked up in her house, she took my hand and put it against her chest.

"Feel for yourself."
I felt and without the slightest subterfuge moved my hand up and down. I could feel nothing. I put my ear to her body and crouched quite still in the bottom of the boat and a passing gondolier gave us a knowing smile. I could hear nothing. (115-116)

After breaking in to her ex-lover’s mansion, Henri discovers “a silk shift wrapped round an indigo jar. The jar was throbbing” (120). He returns the jar to Villanelle, and turns away. “I heard her uncork the jar and a sound like gas escaping. Then she began to make terrible swallowing and choking noises and only my fear kept me sitting at the other end of the boat, perhaps hearing her die . . . her heart was beating” (120-121). In the world of The Passion, magical realism is tied to language, and figurative speech becomes literal. The line between fantasy and reality is made all the more blurry by the knowledge that an innocuous phrase like “losing one’s heart” can become an all too accurate statement. Winterson uses such language to both highlight and deconstruct binary notions of fantasy and reality in fiction.

Winterson and Woolf both use magic “[to illustrate] the way that our passions and fantasies have the power to transform the mundane, rational world by generating events which defy the laws of nature” (Palmer 108). Both do this by linking magic to emotion. Orlando literally sleeps like the dead after various emotional exhaustions just as Villanelle literally loses her heart when she falls in love. Helena Grice and Tim Woods claim Winterson also “frequently uses fantasy to destabilize any notion of the transparency of language” (7), a description that could also apply to Orlando. Villanelle literally loses her heart just as Woolf gives literal meaning to expressions like “frozen solid” and “the sleep of
the dead.” In Woolf and Winterson, the space between fantasy and reality houses emotional and intellectual complexity, the gradations of which binary thinking often destroys.

Magical realism is by its very nature hard to pin down, a feature that makes it both frustrating and attractive. In the hands of Woolf and Winterson it becomes many things: a conflation of fact and fantasy, a tool for critiquing history, if not for creating a subtle form of revisionist history, a way of expressing relativity, and a method of representing emotion as a material part of the plot. What links all of these ideas together is the challenge they pose to binary constructs. In the worlds of Orlando and The Passion, there is no fact or fiction, no fantasy or reality. Everything exists in the space between such binaries. When Orlando’s biographer admits to using imagination to round out the story, and Henri, Patrick, and Villanelle all coyly tell the reader, "I’m telling you stories. Trust me'’ (5, 40, 69, 160), they are all highlighting the challenge that magical realism poses to binary thought.

In Orlando and The Passion, as in all magical realist texts, the fantastic is an aspect of life that goes largely unquestioned by the text’s inhabitants. As Orlando tells us, magic is “the very fabric of life” (300). Like sexual ambiguity, magical realism attempts to knit together ideas that are too often treated as opposing forces. Chapter III will delve into the relationship between sexual ambiguity and magical realism in these novels, and the ways the two function as a social critique.
Claiming that a particular piece of fiction is engaged in social criticism lacks a certain degree of specificity, not to mention originality. After all, it is the nature of fiction to foreground social or personal injustices and seek to illustrate and often resolve them. Often, it is the critical response that determines the degree to which any given work will be treated as social critique. Hence, the cover of *Great Expectations* trumpets it as being about "the dangers of being driven by a desire for wealth and social status" while *Orlando* is labeled a "charming love letter." While it has freely been acknowledged that Woolf used *Orlando* to "glance satirically at the position of women in different ages and poke fun at masculine pedantry" (Marder 24), the notion that the ideas put forth in *Orlando* might contain a serious challenge to the social order has been entertained only in recent years. The emergence of a writer like Jeanette Winterson, who combines magical realism with a pointed disregard for traditional gender roles, makes it much harder to assume that a character who ages five years per century and changes sexes can’t also have something serious to tell us.

What Woolf and Winterson want to tell us is, in fact, bound up in the very elements of *Orlando* and *The Passion* that so many critics consider trivial (or, alternately, "charming"). In these novels, sexual ambiguity and magical realism are tools Woolf and Winterson use to critique gender roles, the categories of fact and fiction, and other binary social constructions. Sexual ambiguity, with its conflation of the male and the female,
embodies a non-binary response to gender, just as magical realism works to eliminate
dualistic representations of human culture.

In chapter I, the sexual ambiguities of the characters in *Orlando* and *The Passion*
were explored, with particular attention to the novels’ treatment of cross-dressing,
androgyny, and bisexual or homosexual relationships. Woolf uses cross-dressing to highlight
the rigidity of gender roles, as her characters continually relate to each other in a manner
dictated by male or female costume rather than deeper attributes. Winterson uses cross-
dressing in a similar fashion, but also depicts it as a sexualized practice, sometimes done for
the sake of titillation. Androgyny in *Orlando* is chiefly represented by the title character’s
sex change, which allows him/her to have the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of a man and
a woman. Winterson employs two characters, a masculine woman and a feminine man, to
explore the implications of androgyny. Woolf and Winterson differ most significantly in
their depiction of homosexuality. In *Orlando* all relationships are at least dressed as
heterosexual whereas *The Passion* freely depicts a lesbian love affair as well as overt
homosexual desires. Each of these threads ties into Woolf’s and Winterson’s critique of
binary gender and its associated constructions.

The sexual ambiguity of *Orlando* and *The Passion* is, first and foremost, engaged in a
critique of traditional gender roles. The very essence of sexual ambiguity lies in its refusal to
conform to typical notions of masculine and feminine, and Woolf and Winterson not only
fail to conform, but also suggest that the distinction itself is entirely without merit. In many
ways this is a more radical move for Woolf, who wrote *Orlando* only ten years after British
and American women won the right to vote. Winterson’s critique of gender rests on the more secure foundation of years of feminist criticism and theory on gender. Burns addresses this aspect of Orlando, stating that “advocates of gender studies will recognize an early formulation of contemporary questions about the extent to which society - and not biology - delineates distinction between ‘men’ and ‘women’” (“Re-dressing” 343). Winterson echoes Woolf’s qualms about gender, and, through the character of Villanelle, “draws attention to the inauthenticity of all gender roles, foregrounding their performative dimension” (Palmer 112).

Woolf and Winterson establish gender as a performance in a number of ways. Perhaps the most obvious instance of this in Orlando is the episode with Nell the prostitute discussed in chapter I. Orlando, however, considers the role of women soon after she herself becomes one:

She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled. “Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires,” she reflected; “for women are not (judging by my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely apparelled by nature. They can only attain those graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline.” (156-157)

For Orlando, “woman” is a performance from the outset. When she returns to her ancestral home, “no one showed an instant’s suspicion that Orlando was not the Orlando they had known,” yet her servants are soon telling each other “what with the towels wanting mending
and the curtains in the chaplain’s parlour being moth-eaten round the fringes, it was time they had a Mistress among them” (170). It can be safely assumed that the “Orlando they had known” showed scant interest in the towels and curtains, yet it is immediately expected that this Orlando will turn herself over to the role of Mistress. Here Woolf is subtly skewering the power dynamics of a binary gender system - after all, it is the wealthy former ambassador to Constantinople who is now expected to spend all of her time mending towels. Winterson depicts the performative nature of gender in a more subtle way. The mild-mannered Henri, who is continually identified with hearth and home, is recruited to be a soldier, yet eventually tells Villanelle that “he had been in the army eight years without so much as wounding a man” (147). By nature Henri is feminine and romantic, reflecting that “wherever love is, I want to be, I will follow it as surely as the land-locked salmon finds the sea” (44). Yet he is compelled to play perhaps the most masculine of roles. As in Orlando, the performative aspects of gender are further highlighted by dress. Henri says of Napoleon, “he had me out of my soldier’s uniform and in Court dress. Impossibly tight. It made him laugh” (34). For Henri, both outfits are comical and a construction. He is, in his way, as limited by the masculine as Orlando is by the feminine.

Neither Woolf nor Winterson is content with merely establishing that gender is a social rather than biological construct. Both also depict the injustices, often financial, that a binary gender system works to support. After becoming a woman, Orlando nearly loses her home and fortune due to patriarchal inheritance laws. Likewise, Villanelle tells us that “there aren’t many jobs for a girl . . . and what I would have most liked to have done, worked the
boats, was closed to me on account of my sex” (53). For women, assumptions about gender limit both financial security and personal choice. Both Orlando and Villanelle subvert society’s limitations by cross-dressing; Orlando dresses as a man to regain the freedoms she knew when she physically was a man and Villanelle dons a male costume in order to work at the Casino. Though Orlando eventually secures her inheritance (much depleted by a hundred years worth of lawsuits), Villanelle achieves wealth only by marrying a man who eventually sells her to the French Army, a betrayal highlighting the financial implications of traditional marriage. Kennard argues that “the link between enforced heterosexuality, a strict binary gender system, and political and economic power is made overt in Orlando” (161). It is equally, if not more, overt in The Passion, as Villanelle achieves true financial security only by marrying or by dressing as a man. Women’s access to economic power is in both cases contingent on the male role. Here, cross-dressing works to “overturn patriarchal hierarchies of power” (Jones 157).

The character of Orlando and Villanelle further complicate gender dynamics by consistently refusing to adhere to the traditional female role of love object. Orlando’s wooing of Sasha early in the novel established him/her as the pursuer, an active rather than passive role. When the female Orlando is sought by the Archduke Harry, she maneuvers him into gambling with her, and eventually “cheated so grossly that even he could be deceived no longer” (183). For Orlando, the position of mere love object is so reprehensible that she flouts all social convention in order to avoid it. Perhaps Orlando’s strict avoidance of the passive female role is best explained by Winterson herself: “Woolf wanted to say
dangerous things in *Orlando* but she did not want to say them in the missionary position” ("Gift" 68). Winterson’s Villanelle is similarly opposed to playing love object. Palmer writes that “by portraying herself not as the object of Henri’s love but as the lover of the Queen of Spades, [Villanelle] successfully repositions herself in the narrative in the role of active agent” (105). In her relationship with Henri Villanelle also refuses the passive role. Henri tells us:

One night she turned over suddenly and told me to make love to her.

“I don’t know how.”

“Then I’ll make love to you.” (105)

Their refusal to submit to their assigned role marks Orlando and Villanelle as not only ambiguous but sexually subversive in their pursuit of love. Orlando, who possesses the fantastic ability to compare gender roles, settles on the active, male-identified part, while Villanelle simply eschews the passive female role in favor of aggressively asserting herself in her relationships. In this context, binary gender is not only being critiqued, it is being done away with entirely.

Like sexual ambiguity, magical realism is inherently a comment upon a binary system. By combining the fantastic with the real, magical realism is uniquely positioned as a means of exploring the limiting nature of categories like fact and fiction, the terms used to arbitrarily separate the historically real from the imagined, and fantasy and reality, the terms applied to fiction as a means of differentiating between the possible and the impossible. In chapter II, Woolf’s and Winterson’s use of magical realism in *Orlando* and *The Passion* was
with Orlando further challenges the boundary between fact and fiction, hinting that factual representations of historical figures are themselves fictional. Winterson similarly includes Napoleon and Josephine, among others, in The Passion, a move leading Palmer to argue that "the interplay she creates between historical personages and fictional characters has the effect of problematizing the distinction between history and literature by blurring the difference between the two" (109). The figure of Henri serves as the most direct challenge to binary fact and fiction, as he interacts with both the historically real Napoleon and the magical, web-footed Villanelle.

Addressing history as a conflation of fact and fiction serves a similar purpose for both Woolf and Winterson. By "historicizing the institution of marriage and condemning it as indecent" (Cervetti 169), Woolf is able to make the issues at work in Orlando socially relevant to her 1928 audience. When Orlando does marry, it is "a deep obeisance to the spirit of the age" (Cervetti 170), entered upon not because Orlando particularly desired a husband, but because, as Woolf puts it, "the transaction between a writer and the spirit of the age is one of infinite delicacy, and upon a nice arrangement between the two the whole fortune of his works depend" (266). Here Orlando echoes Woolf's critical work, which often explored the negative effects marriage and society had on the work of women writers. Winterson is also concerned with the contemporary relevance of her writing. Palmer argues that Winterson "employs scenarios located in the past to create an arena where topics of

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5 Woolf explores the effects women's traditional roles have had on female artists most explicitly in A Room of One's Own.
contemporary significance can be encoded and explored” (109). Embedded throughout The Passion is a critique of male-identified war and violence, personified by Napoleon. Henri is unflinching in his criticism of the brutality of war and the ensuing mistreatment of women, telling us “no one’s on your side when you’re the conqueror. Your enemies take up more room than your friends. Could so many straightforward ordinary lives suddenly become men to kill and women to rape?” (79). Comments like these work to condemn not only the terrible campaigns of long-dead Napoleon, but the ways in which war remains brutal and usually pointless.

The co-opting of history into a fictional space is one aspect of Woolf’s and Winterson’s use of magical realism as a means of exploring distinctions between fantasy and reality. Both Orlando and The Passion toy with the invisible yet omnipresent line separating fantastic fiction from literary realism, and claim the space between as political ground. Orlando initially failed to be taken seriously not because Woolf wasn’t provocative on the subjects of gender, biography, and history, but because she was also overtly fantastic in her choice of protagonist. Cervetti argues that “one way to reinscribe a text into dominant culture is to rewrite it in critical conversations by reducing it to particulars, to the personal and romantic, to biography or therapy” (172). Another way is to insist upon realism as the only means of transmitting serious ideas. As Burns points out, “the use of fantasy has often been opposed to that of realism, in a dichotomization that suggests that only real portraiture can convey the force of social ills” (“Powerful” 367). Woolf and Winterson both challenge the limitations of such a dichotomy. In a different essay, Burns argues that Winterson is
engaged in a “move toward fantasy as a source of social strength” (“Fantastic” 287) as a means of refuting the notion that fantastic writing is merely a form of escapism. In Orlando and The Passion, fantasy is not only an aspect of the novels’ criticism, it is integral to it. Orlando critiques four centuries of English culture by living through them, just as Henri and Villanelle challenge the overpowering nature of war by simply walking away from it, all the way from Moscow to Venice.

Another aspect of Woolf’s and Winterson’s blurring of the binary distinction between fantasy and reality is their use of figurative imagery and language. As discussed in chapter II, both novels combine fantastically icy landscapes with depictions of love and passion. Orlando’s Great Frost freezes the Thames to “the hardness of steel. So clear indeed was it that there could be seen, congealed at a depth of several feet, here a porpoise, there a flounder” (35-36). Yet it is on this almost comically frozen surface that Orlando forges perhaps his most passionate relationship. The Passion’s ice is similarly magical, and, in the case of Henri’s icicle, as unmeltable as the steel-hard Thames. Henri himself highlights the discrepancies between burning passion and endless winter: “Love. In the middle of a zero winter. What was I thinking?” (88). Love and cold are not binary ideas, of course, but language often puts them at odds. Love and sex are “hot” and “steamy,” while those uninterested in such activities are “frigid” and “cold.” Woolf’s and Winterson’s snowy settings poke fun at binaries constructed by language as well as those created by society. Orlando and The Passion also tackle the gulf between literal and figurative language. Orlando ends the novel discussing her life as a literal wild goose chase (313), just as Villanelle
literally loses her heart to the Queen of Spades (115). In both novels, figurative language is, like history, up for grabs. The breakdown of categories like fact and fiction and fantasy and reality extends even to the words on the page.

The links between Woolf’s and Winterson’s critique of binary gender through sexual ambiguity and binary representations of fact and fiction through magical realism have been touched upon by several critics. Kennard argues that “Orlando transcends gender and time and in so doing subverts the imperial power in which, Woolf argues, both are explicit” (161), linking the gender critique in Orlando to broader social systems. Burns ties gender to binary structures through feminism, claiming that “this tension between fantasy and realism, or liberation and containment, echoes the binary that for Woolf defines the very fabric of women’s consciousness” (“Powerful” 366-367). Seaboyer argues that Winterson’s use of the “historiographic ground of empire and expansionist warfare . . . is constitutive of a text whose political focus [is] gender and sexuality rather politics in the national sense” (486), joining Winterson’s critique of a binary treatment of history to her critique of gender. Burns explicitly links sexuality and magical realism in Winterson’s work, writing that “Winterson is therefore much freer [than Woolf] in her employment of fantasy, using it to create repeated images of strong women who can step clear of the web of demands made by traditional gender roles” (“Powerful” 369).

Woolf and Winterson are also inextricably linked by Winterson’s interest in and admiration for Woolf’s writing in general, and Orlando in particular. In her essay “A Gift of Wings (with reference to Orlando),” Winterson echoes many of the critics cited here in her
refusal to read Woolf through her life and personal experiences, stating "I do not want to think about Virginia Woolf as a would-be mother or a would-be lesbian or a would be well adjusted nobody if only she had not been sexually abused as a girl" (63). Instead, Winterson argues that Woolf's work, like all great writing, should be treated as art, claiming that "Orlando is metaphor, is transformation, is art" (66), and that "the art of Orlando is its language" (70). The sexual ambiguity and magical realism in Orlando are also of interest to Winterson, who writes that "for Orlando, transformation is sex and sexuality" (67), and describes Woolf's novel as "a flying carpet ... ignoring that claims of the clock" (73).

Winterson's open admiration for Orlando brings the two authors ever closer.

In Orlando and The Passion, sexual ambiguity and magical realism are endlessly bound up together, often relying on the space created by one another to form their respective critiques of binary constructions. Sexual ambiguity and magical realism are both inherent to the character of Orlando, who challenges gender roles by changing sex, and evades the line between fantasy and reality by living through 400 years of English history populated by actual historical figures. Many of Woolf's subtler criticisms also rely on her use of both sexual ambiguity and magical realism. Orlando's throbbing ring finger is a comment on both her status as a woman and the Victorian age, just as her "great variety of selves" (309) represent all aspects of both gender and history. The challenge Orlando poses to binary ways of thinking is embedded within the plot, not superimposed upon it. Likewise, The Passion relies on a conflation of sexual ambiguity and magical realism to make its critical statements. Villanelle, like Orlando, represents both the masculine and feminine in her
behavior and body (evinced by her male webbed feet). Henri provides a bridge between sexual ambiguity and magical realism through his feminine traits and his passion for the historically real Napoleon and the magical Villanelle. Winterson depicts a world in which binary notions of male and female, fact and fiction, and fantasy and reality are not just destabilized but uprooted. Passion is never limited by the sex of the love object, just as history is never restricted by reality. Both Woolf and Winterson treat fictional space as an open field, unbound by the binaries that limit everyday reality.

Winterson and Woolf are interested in the space between these binaries, a concern made obvious in *The Passion*: “Somewhere between the swamp and the mountains. Somewhere between fear and sex. Somewhere between God and the Devil passion is” (68). This space between is, as always, a fruitful source of ideas and inspirations, but also a place that cannot be gotten to by reading radical novels as love letters or fairy tales. In *Orlando* and *The Passion*, provocative ideas are hidden in plain view, embedded in the sexual ambiguity and magical realism that forms the backbone of both novels. *Orlando*’s true importance cannot be discussed by reading it through the life of Vita Sackville-West or Woolf’s sexuality, just as *The Passion* cannot be read as merely a fantasy. Both books require that the text itself be the focus of study, for it is the text that best represents the space between.

Perhaps the most admirable thing about *Orlando* and *The Passion* is not the critique of binary ideas found within them, but Woolf’s and Winterson’s ability to engage in such a critique without a hint of pedantry. It is unsurprising (but still unacceptable) that these
novels were initially praised for their wit and cleverness, for they are undoubtedly charming. These aspects of *Orlando* and *The Passion* shouldn’t be trivialized either; rather Woolf and Winterson should be doubly respected for managing to combine fabulous storytelling with serious scholarship, just as they were able to combine male with female, fact with fiction, and fantasy with reality.
WORKS CITED AND CONSULTED


