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The Queerness of *Orlando*: Judith Butler's
Performance and Constructiveness of Gender in
Virginia Woolf's novel

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation argues and demonstrates that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* reflects a Butlerian queer understanding of the concept of gender. Butler's ideas that gender is a performance and a social and cultural construction are the basis for the analysis. By analysing the performative character of Orlando's gender, this paper shows that Woolf shares a similar view with Butler when speaking about gender. Her representation of Orlando's sexual identity goes beyond and challenges the traditional view of male and female roles. Additionally, this paper explores how Virginia Woolf, throughout her representation of Orlando's sexual identity, achieved to open the door for a new way of seeing an acceptance of what is seen as "unnatural" in the traditional view related to gender categories.

Key words: *Orlando*, Judith Butler, gender, performativity, constructiveness, androgyny.

En este trabajo de fin de grado se pretende mostrar cómo *Orlando* de Virginia Woolf presenta una visión *queer* y butleriana del concepto de género. Las ideas de Judith Butler sobre el concepto de género como una actuación y una construcción social y cultural son la base principal para el análisis. Analizando el carácter performativo del género en esta novela, el presente trabajo muestra que Woolf comparte una opinión similar con Butler con respecto al género. La forma en la cual Woolf representa la identidad sexual de Orlando va más allá y desafía la visión tradicional de las categorías de género. Asimismo, este trabajo examina cómo Virginia Woolf, mediante su representación de la sexualidad de Orlando, logró presentar una nueva forma de ver y aceptar lo que se considera "antinatural" por la sociedad cuando hablamos de las categorías de género.

Palabras claves: *Orlando*, Judith Butler, género, actuación, construcción, androginia.

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INTRODUCTION

It is outstanding the way in which literature can make normal characters to look like amazing ones and, at the same time, to make fictional characters resemble real persons in real life. This was the main characteristic that captured my interest while reading the novel *Orlando* (1928) by Virginia Woolf. This work shows us the life of an English nobleman in the form of a fictional autobiography. Throughout the experiences of the protagonist, the author shows us how is the life of a person that is not considered to belong to a stereotypical “gendered” social class. *Orlando* points out an essential question that almost every person searches for the answer at a certain point in his life; the question related to the concept of our sexual identity. This work explores the concept of gender and identity by placing the protagonist, Orlando, in a social context and pretending to show how humans are moulded by social constraints. It also tries to figure out to what extent humans are free to choose their own identity, if it is biologically marked or if it is constructed and shaped by the culture, or the society, in which we live.

This dissertation will focus on the analysis of one important aspect when speaking about identity, particularly, on one’s gender and sexual identity. Most of us, when reading a novel, do not spend too much time analysing if a character is more complex than the traditional division regarding gender. Normally, these characters are included in one of the stereotypical categories: male or female. We do not explore further if those characters represent more than just one gender category. We assume that some features are common to male and some others are conventionally characteristic to females, and we do not question ourselves why that is masculine or feminine, or who decides that.

By reading Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, one starts to question what gender is and how we define it, and how we see people according to the gender they have. Moreover, one starts to question how we perceive those persons who cannot be placed in one of those traditional categories of male or female. This interest in how we understand gender led me to read about gender performance from the perspective of Judith Butler, one of the most important gender and queer theory scholars. She mainly worked on how gender categories are constructed and by reading them I noticed that they could be applied to the work of Virginia Woolf in relation to its main character in *Orlando*, seeing that the author of the novel tries to present a critique of the stereotypical gender division categories. Virginia Woolf is maybe one of the most well-known writers analysed from the point of view of feminist theories and this is important for this paper since the concept of gender performativity is explored by Judith Butler taking as starting point the feminist theories. This theory was the one Judith Butler used in order to develop and explain her concepts of performativity and constructiveness when speaking about gender categories. These concepts Judith Butler explored are of great importance in the Queer studies.

Despite the fact that Woolf's writing has been much analysed by feminist theorists, this analysis will bring up a new way of reading one of her most important novels. In addition to Butler's ideas on gender, for the purpose of the analysis, it is necessary to present the way in which Virginia Woolf understands the concepts of gender and sexual identity, with a special emphasis on the concept of androgyny, as they are presented in her theoretical work *A Room of One's Own* (1929) and make an analysis of how she presents the androgyny in *Orlando*. In relation to the idea of gender as performance, it will also be important to analyse the way in which Virginia Woolf uses clothing and cross-dressing: being this related with the concept of gender as a performance as explained by Butler.

The starting point for this dissertation is Queer theory and the concepts studied by Judith Butler. The main source for the analysis of *Orlando* is Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* (1990), where she presents a critique of the existing binary system when speaking about gender. She explains the concept of gender as performance and the constructiveness of sexualities taking as a starting point the previous theories that speak

about a consolidated binary system. This dissertation also takes into account her work *Bodies that Matter* (1993), and her ideas in the essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist theories” (1988). Moreover, it is also important to mention some general ideas about Queer theory, which was very much influenced by Judith Butler’s work in the field of gender classification and sexual identity.

In order to see how Woolf’s personal ideas about sexuality can be related to Butler’s theories, the first section of the first chapter is dedicated to present Woolf’s literary style and what influenced her to write about sexuality in such a modern way as it can be seen in *Orlando*. This section includes a brief introduction dedicated to the author, the period and the novel in order to help the reader to understand why this critique to the traditional division of gender categories is done not in a very obvious way. Sandra M. Gilbert’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *Orlando* (1928) and C. B. Cox's *The Free Spirit: A Study of Liberal Humanism in the Novels of George Eliot, Henry James, E. M. Forster, Virginia Woolf, Angus Wilson* (1963) offered useful background data about the writer and the work. In order to understand Judith Butler’s concepts, it is important to mention some important ideas about Queer theory and the authors that influenced her to speak about the concept of performativity and how a subject is constructed, being these concepts the main features taken into account in the analysis of the novel. Consequently, the second and third sections of the first chapter will be dedicated to present a theoretical background necessary in the process of analysis of *Orlando*, being indispensable to present Judith Butler’s theories in relation to sexual identity and gender categories. Consequently, the second chapter of this dissertation will concentrate on the proper analysis of the work pointing out those features in common with Judith Butler’s theories. The second chapter will be divided into three sections. The first one is going to introduce Woolf's novel and present a brief summary. The second section of this chapter will be dedicated to the analysis of Woolf’s concept of androgyny in relation to Butler’s concept of performance. Finally, the third section will be dedicated to explore and analyse the concept of constructiveness as explained by Butler. This last chapter will be followed by the third chapter that will contain a conclusion summarising the most relevant points examined in the previous sections.

Therefore, this dissertation will focus on how gender is presented in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and how her illustration of gender can be related to Judith Butler's ideas regarding gender as a social construction and seen as a performance of social, historical and cultural constraints. It will prove that *Orlando*, from the perspective of Judith Butler's theories, presents a critique to the standard division regarding gender categories. Moreover, it will show that Woolf shares the same view with Butler: the idea that gender is performative and a cultural construction.

1. QUEER THEORY: STUDYING GENDER AND SEXUALITIES

1.1. Virginia Woolf and Sexual Identity

Virginia Woolf is considered one of the most extraordinary writers not only in English literature but all around the world and this is due to her way of writing. She was being critical in a way that was accepted at the beginning of the 20th century, and this is extraordinary since in that period speaking about gender identity without being censored was a great achievement. It is outstanding that Virginia Woolf could have created a work so complex and modern in her times when sexuality was a topic quite new to explore in a literary text without risking to be censored. As C. B. Cox states in *The Free Spirit* she: “(...) spent all her life experimenting with new form, never settling into one distinctive narrative method” (105). We see that by reading her novels and, as C. B. Cox affirms: “Virginia Woolf’s purpose is to describe a form of awareness, not to draw dogmatic conclusions” (109). In *Orlando*, she did that by using fantastic elements in order to make the novel seem unrealistic, but at the same time presenting her own views of how we are educated to be male or female and this can be clearly seen in *Orlando*. The way in which Woolf mixes real events with fantastic ones makes her writing extraordinary. Some of these fantastic elements are time and sexuality, aspects analysed in the second chapter of this dissertation.

In order to understand Woolf’s perspectives regarding gender as shown in *Orlando*, it is necessary to present some of her main ideas about women writers and the act of writing itself at the beginning of the 20th century. Virginia Woolf is considered one of the most important feminist writers and one of her most important contributions to feminist literary theory is the publication of *A Room of One’s Own* (1929). The way in which she writes about sexual identity is innovative but it is important to mention that she belonged to the Bloomsbury Group, a group of intellectuals, writers and artists who were considered very modern at the beginning of the 20th century. This group of intellectuals influenced the way she saw sexuality and the way she wrote about it. This is one of the reasons why *Orlando* can be easily connected with Judith Butler’s ideas about gender and it can be considered one of those literary texts that anticipated Queer theory, a theory that deals with gender and sexual identity, and that was theorized decades after *Orlando* was written.

As I have previously mentioned in the Introduction, androgyny is another aspect to be taken into account when speaking about gender in Woolf's *Orlando*. It is remarkable how she broke with the stereotypical literary conventions using a biography in order to relate fantastic events. This makes the reader have doubts about whether the novel is fantasy or reality. Sandra Gilbert in her Introduction to *Orlando*, quotes Virginia Woolf's words who affirmed that the novel could be "truthful but fantastic" (*Orlando* xxv) and, by saying this, she breaks with the literary conventions of what is considered a biography. In order to understand Woolf's concept of androgyny it is necessary to see how she speaks about an androgynous mind. This can be clearly seen in the following paragraphs from *A Room of One's Own*. It is important to highlight these paragraphs in order to see the way in which Virginia Woolf sees androgyny since it is important to consider her personal ideas about androgyny when she wrote *Orlando*. Virginia Woolf mentions Coleridge and states in *A Room of One's Own* that,

(...)Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine, I thought. But it would be well to test what one meant by man-womanly, and conversely by woman-manly, by pausing and looking at a book or two. (...) He meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. In fact one goes back to Shakespeare's mind as the type of the androgynous, of the man-womanly mind, though it would be impossible to say that Shakespeare thought of women. And if it be true that it is one of the tokens of the fully developed mind that it does not think specially or separately of sex, how much harder it is to attain that condition now than ever before. (...) No age can ever have been as stridently sex-conscious as our own... (98).

From this paragraph we begin to see that Virginia Woolf has a deeper understanding of what it means to be an androgynous being. She quotes Coleridge in order to support his idea that an androgynous mind is superior to a "womanly mind" or a "manly" one and she continues by writing that,

One has a profound, if irrational, instinct in favour of the theory that the union of man and woman makes for the greatest satisfaction, the most complete happiness. But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be united in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? And I went on

amateurishly to sketch a plan of the soul so that in each of us two powers preside, one male, one female; and in the man's brain the man predominates over the woman, and in the woman's brain the woman predominates over the man. The normal and comfortable state of being is that when the two live in harmony together, spiritually co-operating. If one is a man, still the woman part of his brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her. (Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* 97)

Woolf tries to explain that a perfect androgynous mind is the one in which neither the masculine side nor the feminine one is superior to the other, meaning that an androgynous mind should be a harmonious mixture between both genders acting at the same time. This is one important idea that is taken into consideration during the analysis of *Orlando's* protagonist since this concept is related with Butler's concept of gender as performance. Presenting an androgynous protagonist, Woolf shows that a person "performs" a gender or another according to the pre-established cultural and social conventions. What Woolf did was to create a character that performs a gender in the same way as Butler did when she explained her concept of gender as performance. She mixed two genders in one single person; each gender performing at a specific moment.

As it can be seen by looking at her theoretical work *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf's personal ideas and understanding of sexualities are crucial and make the difference in her writing, creating works as *Orlando*; novels that make the reader to reflect on controversial topics such as sexual identity.

1.2. Queer theory: the basics.

This section is dedicated to explain, in general lines, what Queer theory is and to mention some of the most relevant authors who contributed to the elaboration of this literary theory. Its name comes from the term "queer" that in the 19th century was used to say homosexual in an offensive way ("Queer"). The meanings this word has are several, but most of them were considered offensive during the 19th century. One of the definitions provided in the online Oxford English Dictionary for the term "queer" is "denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms" ("Queer"). By looking at this definition, the initial connotation was to describe one person who was not considered to correspond to one of those two stereotypical gendered categories considered socially

accepted. Moreover, the same dictionary entry provides the following synonyms for this term: “strange”, “odd”, “eccentric”, “of questionable character”, “suspicious” and “homosexual” (“Queer”). Taking into account the connotations of this word, it is understandable why at the end of 19th century it was used by heterosexuals as a disrespectful way to address those persons who were considered abnormal due to their sexual orientation. In the last decades of the 20th century, homosexuals started to use the word *queer* instead of *gay* in order to make this term sound less offensive. With the passing of time and the studies in the field of sexualities, queer started to have other connotations, not only related to homosexuals with a derogative tone but being associated with any sexual orientation losing, in most of the cases, the offensive meaning.

Consequently, as the definition of the word queer states, queer theory deals with the classification of genders and the division between the biological sex and the sexual identity. It is a theory that explores how all sexualities are divided into categories being considered normal or abnormal. Moreover, it is about biological sexual categories versus those socially constructed. As Patricia Waugh writes in *Literary Theory and Criticism*, this is a theory where,

(...) sexualities are conceptualized in terms of fluidity, contradiction, and indeterminacy; desire is bodily and embodied, but it is also linguistic and discursive and sex is de-linked from gender such that sexuality is no longer understood within the framework of the heterosexual matrix. (444)

This theory rejects the idea that there are clear boundaries between gendered categories such as male, female, homosexual or heterosexual and it states that there is no category being considered as the “normal” one. Additionally, queer theorists support the idea that every type of sexuality is “abnormal” since this classification of sexual identities is influenced by social and cultural norms of what is being considered acceptable. When we speak about a queer identity we may imagine a person with no clear boundaries between one gender and another and in the queer theory the “body per se does not speak outside the cultural and discursive formations which make the body a contentious site of meaning” (Waugh 444).

Moreover, queer theory questions to what extent sexual identity and orientation are influenced by the biological characteristics of a person or its instinct. There were several

authors dealing with the topic of sexual identity such as Lee Edelman with his work about the rhetoric of sexuality, Eve Sedgwick's *Tendencies* published in 1994, Michael Foucault's *History of Sexuality* (1976) and Freud's psychoanalysis. Waugh affirms that Freud and psychoanalysis "have undoubtedly been associated with a view of sex in which the sexual is aligned with the genital; and his work on sex and sexual identity is often figured solely in terms of biological instinct" (431). This idea of a sexual orientation correlated with a biological and intrinsic instinct is what Queer theory criticizes.

Some of the most relevant contributions in the field of queer studies are the ones by Judith Butler. She was critical with the way in which Freud and Beauvoir theorized gender and sexual identity. Her criticism related to the concept of gender as examined by Freud and Beauvoir are the basis for her works where she develops and presents a new way of seeing gender categories and sexualities. Waugh states that Butler "argues most powerfully that identities figured as feminine or masculine do not axiomatically require the anatomical grounding which has traditionally differentiated sex and gender identities" (441). Butler argues that having a binary system of gender identities is what makes natural the traditional class division and "queer" those who do belong neither to the female nor to the male category. That is why in this paper Judith Butler's ideas are going to be the basis for the analysis of the protagonist of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*.

1.3. Judith Butler's Queer Theory

After presenting a general view of what Queer theory is, this third section is going to focus on presenting Judith Butler's ideas, which are going to be the basis for the further analysis. As previously stated in the Introduction, this dissertation is going to focus on the concept of gender as performance and the idea of constructiveness of sexual identity studied and described by Judith Butler. In order to understand her ideas it is necessary to show the way in which Butler argues against the existence of a binary system of gender categories. The existence of this consolidated binary system was what made her investigate on this topic, leading her to develop new views about how sexualities are seen and understood.

Judith Butler's work *Gender Trouble* presents in the first part a critique to the traditional feminist literary theory and, to accomplish this, she mentions other feminist

theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir with whom she seems to share the idea that gender is constructed. Butler uses Beauvoir's statement that "One is not born a woman, but rather, becomes a woman" (Beauvoir in Butler, *Gender Trouble* 3) to criticize Beauvoir for how she speaks about this consolidated binary system of gender categories. Beauvoir is more concerned with the idea of having a binary gender class division, and why one category is superior or inferior presenting her idea that there is always a superior one. Butler argues that instead of analysing and protesting for having a binary opposing system of gender categories, one should investigate how these categories are constructed, and why one person should be associated with one gender category or another. She wonders: "What sense does it make to extend representation to subjects who are constructed through the exclusion of those who fail to conform to unspoken normative requirements of the subject?" (*Gender Trouble* 9), asking for what happens with those who cannot be placed in a male or female category. To explain this, Butler affirms that women are bound within a "heterosexual matrix" and, consequently, we should reconsider the "possibilities for sexuality and identity within the terms of power itself" (*Gender Trouble* 42). By affirming this, Butler pretends to explain that a category is forced and constructed by political, social and cultural constraints and she critiques the traditional classification of gender and sex.

Furthermore, she explains that a physical difference between a male and female does not create only two gendered categories. Being born with masculine genital organs is correlated with a masculine sexual identity and this is socially constructed, and Butler argues that: "Gender is not the culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which "sexed nature" or a "natural sex" is produced and established as "prediscursive", prior to culture, a politically neutral surface on which culture acts" (*Gender Trouble* 10). It is clear that there is a physical difference, but it is made evident only through the cultural construction of a gender and Butler argues that the belief that a predetermined sex is prior to a gender is what supports the theory of a binary system. In her words, the

(...) distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed; hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex. The unity of the subject is thus already

potentially contested by the distinction that permits of gender as a multiple interpretation of sex (*Gender Trouble* 9-10).

Butler goes on explaining the concept of performativity, affirming that gender is a performance; someone is what it does, not born in one specific category. To explain this concept of gender as performance Butler states that “gender proves to be performative—that is, constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always doing, though not doing by a subject who might be said to pre-exist the deed” (*Gender Trouble* 34). In other words, Butler affirms in her essay “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist theories” that “gender is a construction that regularly conceals its genesis” (522). By saying this she pretends to explain that a repetition of acts is what creates identities and makes these identities to be seen as “natural” in a society where the heterosexual matrix is the accepted one. Butler continues by explaining how “performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration” (*Gender Trouble* xv). Humans choose a gender and perform it through repetition. By doing this, a person becomes one gender or another. That is why Butler affirms that gender is culturally and socially constructed through repetitive performances.

The same idea is presented by Butler in *Bodies that Matter* (1993) where she states that “performativity must be understood not as a singular or deliberate “act” but, rather, as the reiterative and citational practice by which discourse produces the effects that it names” (2). In the views of Judith Butler, performance is not seen in the sense of a theatrical performance which most of the times is seen in a comic way but rather as a performance of what we already are.

We live in a world in which there are “intelligible genders” that Butler defines as “those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice and desire” (*Gender Trouble* 23). What Butler states is that there are some social and cultural norms that encourage accepting heterosexuality as the “normal” sexual orientation. She claims that these “intelligible” genders create restrictions for those who cannot be placed in a category of male or female, such as lesbians, drags, homosexuals, etc. The latter are considered the “unintelligible” genders,

those who do not fulfil the expected notion of being male or female. During a long time, being part of such an unintelligible category was sanctioned and Butler represents how “performing one’s gender wrong initiates a set of punishments both obvious and indirect, and performing it well provides the reassurance that there is an essentialism of gender identity after all” (“Performative Acts and Gender Constitution” 528). It may be considered that the most well-known act of performance in gender is cross-dressing used by drags. Drags use cross-dressing to exaggerate in a comic way some aspects of a gender that is considered stereotypical. Butler affirms that “in imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself” (*Gender Trouble* 187), meaning that our gender is determined by performed repetitive actions.

What Butler does is to redirect and reconstruct gender theory and she wants to show that these intelligible categories are created through a list of norms considered socially and culturally acceptable which exclude a great part of humans who do not fit those stereotypes. It is now when she speaks about the constructiveness of a sexual identity. Butler tries to raise awareness that all human beings are important and all genders deserve a place without limiting them in one category or another. In her words “we might suggest that bodies only appear, only endure, only live within the productive constraints of certain highly regulatory schemas” (*Bodies that Matter* xi). By explaining the concept of performativity of genders, Butler explains and connects this aspect with the constructiveness of the sexual identities.

She continues speaking about gender as performance and explores how subjects are constructed, and why some are seen as intelligible and some others are not, and for this she uses Michel Foucault’s idea that, “juridical systems of power produce the subjects they subsequently come to represent (...) juridical subjects are invariably produced through certain exclusionary practices that do not “show” once the juridical structure of politics has been established” (*Gender Trouble* 3). Additionally, Butler argues that the category of a subject is given by someone in a higher position, relating the constructiveness of a subject’s sexual identity to the relations of power between individuals and the authority. This means that one constructs its identity according to someone who decides if it is a *he* or a *she*, the heterosexual frame being the stereotypically accepted one. Butler explains that in order to become an intelligible subject, someone in a higher position has to classify that subject in one of the categories of male or female.

As a consequence, the constructiveness of a sexual identity does not rely on the subject itself, it is imposed by an external power, delimited by social, cultural and historical constraints.

In her view, the heterosexual matrix is the one creating norms for those considered intelligible or unintelligible genders and she strikes to prove that those norms give the constructiveness of a sexual identity no matter the biological characteristics, meaning that a sexual identity is culturally created. The idea of constructiveness of gender is related to the one of belonging to an intelligible or unintelligible category. From Butler's point of view, one gender is intelligible since it is constructed in the heterosexual matrix, the one which is seen as the normal. To perform an identity of male or female gives to a subject the denomination of being considered a person with an intelligible sexual identity. This is due to the fact that in a society, the heterosexuality and the binary division of gender categories are the dominant and accepted ones.

To conclude with this section, Butler's ideas were not primarily thought to be used in the analysis of literary texts. Nonetheless, by using them in the analysis of *Orlando*, this dissertation tries to give a new perspective of how Virginia Woolf achieved a literary work of a great importance much before the queer theory was developed, and that *Orlando* is way too much complex that it can be seen at a first reading.

2. THE QUEERNESS OF *ORLANDO*

2.1. *Orlando*: More than Fiction

This section is dedicated to the analysis of gender issues in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* from the perspective of Judith Butler's theories regarding gender and sexualities. The analysis focuses on the way in which Virginia Woolf defies the traditional gender class division throughout her main protagonist, and presents a kind of criticism against this standard gender class division. As stated in the preceding section, the analysis is based on the theories of Judith Butler. Those two main ideas discussed in the first chapter regarding gender as performance and as a cultural construction are the guide for this new reading of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. The analysis is done in order to see to what extent Virginia Woolf shares the same views with Judith Butler and how the reader answers to this new concept of gender presented by Woolf in *Orlando*. It shows that, throughout the analysis of its protagonist, this novel can have a new interpretation; it can be placed into the category of works considered queer and thus analysed from the perspective of this literary theory.

The novel begins with a 16th century nobleman called Orlando whose favourite pastimes are falling in love and gaining skills in writing. To forget about a love disappointment, Orlando leaves England and goes to Turkey to work as an ambassador. It is here where the change from male to female happens in a miraculous way. After this change, the protagonist lives for a short period of time with a gipsy community as a woman, and she experiences what it means to be a woman. Being not accustomed to her new identity, she returns to England and in this part of the novel is when we see that the protagonist is being aware of the benefits of being male or female and he/she plays with clothing in order to enjoy those advantages. By doing a superficial reading we could say that Orlando has the same problems that every humans have, but if we do a deeper reading we see that the protagonist of this work is experiencing both genders in one person. The character does not change his personality; he only changes his appearance and due to this Orlando can be seen as an androgynous human being.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Virginia Woolf uses fantastic elements mixed with reality in order to send a critical message without being censored, being her novel

considered fictional and not a traditional biography. One of those fantastic elements is the concept of time; the novel begins in the 16th century and ends up in the 19th century. By doing this, the author is able to present historical events and how the changes in a society influenced human beings and their concepts about gender roles. The concept of gender is another fantastic element since the author plays with this; the protagonist being a man at the beginning of the novel and ending being a woman through a miraculous transformation. These fantastic elements in *Orlando* allow the protagonist to change his gender in the middle of the novel and also to use cross-dressing and clothing as a way to escape social constraints regarding gender division of that time. That being said, the next section analyses the way in which Virginia Woolf presents her protagonist as being an androgynous person and how this is related to the idea of performativity explained by Butler.

2.2. Androgyny and Performance in *Orlando*

Virginia Woolf explains in her theoretical work *A Room of One's Own* her perceptions of what it means to have an androgynous mind, or to be an androgynous person. What is important to mention is that, although Virginia Woolf wrote mainly fictional works, her theoretical work *A Room of One's Own* can be considered of great importance in the field of queer studies. She anticipates the Queer theory with her theoretical work in which she speaks about sexualities in a very modern way. She writes that “it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly” (102). *A Room of One's Own* was published one year later than *Orlando* and it seems that Woolf tries to present a theoretical background for her androgynous protagonist in *Orlando*. In this way, Woolf achieves to show the reader how her personal concept of androgyny affects her fictional characters.

This idea of androgyny is connected with Butler's idea of gender as performance. When Woolf speaks about an androgynous human being she is not referring only to the appearance one could have; she speaks about an androgynous mind. Virginia Woolf explains that for an androgynous person is easier to perform both genders since being an androgynous human being allows that person to perform femininity or masculinity as it pleases. Moreover, Woolf considers an androgynous person being superior to a person

performing just one gender. What she affirms when speaking about an androgynous mind is that “if one is a man, still the woman part of the brain must have effect; and a woman also must have intercourse with the man in her” (*A Room of One’s Own* 97). This statement is her most important idea to take into account in order to represent all sexualities in one person.

Taking as a starting point this idea of a woman-manly or a man-womanly, in the next paragraphs, the androgynous appearance of Orlando is analysed. This is done in order to show that, despite the fact that Woolf wrote her novel at the beginning of the 20th century, she shares similar ideas with Judith Butler regarding gender as performance. First of all, it is important to mention that the protagonist of the novel, just from very beginning, was described as being an androgynous person allowing Orlando to *perform* both genders since his appearance is ambiguous. Woolf’s description of Orlando is of a man but using words that are easily connected with pureness and innocence, characteristics normally associated with femininity. Reading the portrayal given by the author, one is clearly thinking of a man-womanly, as it can be seen by reading the following statement: “He had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temple” (*Orlando* 12). There is no doubt that Woolf describes Orlando as being a handsome man, but she does not portray him with masculine traits, she does it in a peculiar way attributing him characteristics of both genders. Taking into account his physical appearance it could be said that he represents, at least at a superficial level, an androgynous human being.

What Woolf does is to express the same idea as Butler did in her work *Gender Trouble* that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very expressions that are said to be its results” (34). In *Orlando* this is shown using the narrator’s words that the protagonist “remained precisely as he had been” (98), meaning that although there was a transformation, the protagonist remained the same up to the moment he/she realised that by using feminine clothes and acting as a woman he/she could benefit from the advantages of belonging to the feminine category.

The performative character of gender as explained by Butler can be seen by looking at how Orlando changes his gender as he pleases. The repetition of these acts gives Orlando's sexual identity the performative character as explained by Butler. Orlando is aware that he is performing repetitive acts of what is considered feminine or masculine since "(...) she found it convenient at this time to change from one set of clothes to another" (*Orlando* 128). The narrator continues by writing that "She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed so far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive" (128). This may be easily linked with Butler's idea that our gender and identity is created through the repetition and performance of what is considered feminine or masculine. We perform a gender since there are exterior elements such as the cultural and social conventions that mould our idea of what it means to be a woman or a man.

The fact that Orlando repeats those acts of being male or female as he pleases is an important clue that the way in which Woolf depicts her protagonist as an androgynous person is connected with the performative character of the sexual identity as explained by Butler. This can be easily seen by quoting Butler's words that "performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration" (*Gender Trouble* xv). Although Orlando performs both genders, there is a distinction between the moments he acts as a man and those when he acts as a woman. This is why we may affirm that Woolf's description of a perfect androgynous mind as done in *A Room of One's Own* is not perfectly achieved in this novel since the feminine and the masculine sides act separately at different points in the novel. There is no perfect balance between what is feminine and what is masculine, each side being performed at a specific moment. By performing one gender at the beginning and the other at the end, Woolf shows that there are no clear boundaries between the biological sex and the sexuality one performs. In the first part of the novel the protagonist is a man-womanly and in the second part he transforms miraculously into a woman. Despite the fact that in the second part of the novel Orlando is a woman she decides to play with her appearance performing both sexes.

As we saw in *A room of One's Own*, what is important from the point of view of Virginia Woolf is not the appearance, is the mind. She is interested in depicting an

androgynous mind and at certain points in the novel she achieves to depict an androgynous mind, where the protagonist is delicate and fragile as a woman but with a masculine body. He is shy, passionate, emotional and melancholic as a woman is, meaning that Orlando embodies feminine traits. He begins to be seen as a woman when he acts and dresses as a woman does and this gives his sexual identity the performative character. Woolf achieves to describe an ambiguous sexuality in one single person, and this can be easily seen by analysing Orlando's affairs. He is not attracted by women with feminine stereotypical traits. Looking at his relation with Sasha, the first thing we notice is that he prefers women with a masculine charm. In all his relations, the women for whom he felt sexual attraction had some masculine characteristics. Sasha is the one leaving him and he is the devastated one; Sasha is less talkative and this is a traditionally masculine characteristic. In his relation with the Archduchess Harriet who is "very tall" he is attracted by *her* masculine features, not being aware that he is actually feeling sexual desire toward a man. The narrator says that: "(...) and it was Lust the vulture, not Love, the Bird of Paradise, that flopped, foully and disgustingly, upon his shoulders" (*Orlando* 82), describing passion not love. Since Orlando feels attracted by a woman who in fact is a man, it is an evidence that Orlando's sexuality is considered androgynous since he experiences sexual desires toward women-manly.

What Woolf does with the protagonist is to create a character that embodies and performs two sexualities. She explains that for her love "has two faces, one white, the other black; two bodies; one smooth, the other hairy" (82), showing throughout this statement that the concept of love is determined by binary oppositions. Woolf achieves to break with this idea of love as a binary opposition of male and female by constructing a protagonist where the man-womanly and the woman-manly share the same body. An example of this is Orlando's relation with Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. The author describes Orlando and Marmaduke by saying that "it was to each such revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman" (179). By portraying their relation in this way, Woolf breaks with the stereotypical view of a heterosexual relationship. She interchanges gender roles and she does this by using performances of acts and attitudes characteristic to one gender in characterizing the other one. With this, Woolf's representation of Orlando's relationship

with Marmaduke is done just like Judith Butler explained in her theories about gender as performance: Orlando performs a female character in a masculine body.

2.3. Constructiveness of Orlando's Gender through Performance

Virginia Woolf uses clothing in order to illustrate that gender is only a social construction, something that we assume according to our culture and Orlando changes several times from being male into female just throughout clothing in order to make fun of the social conventions. The moment when Orlando transforms from being *he* into *she*, and how this transformation challenges our traditional view regarding gender class division as being binary is a crucial one. This transformation helps the reader to understand that our concept of sexual identity is constructed. Virginia Woolf exhibits Orlando as an “unintelligible” human being, the protagonist not being included in just one single category. By looking closely at this aspect, this dissertation shows how the author plays with stereotypical conventions in a humorous way in order to break down with those “intelligible” gender categories.

In order to perform a gender, Woolf uses clothing as the perfect way to mock stereotypical binary gender division. Her protagonist performs different identities by using feminine or masculine clothes. This is an important idea we can connect with Butler's view of gender as performance. We can interpret this as an alternative way of creating a sexual identity throughout clothing. Woolf shows that gender is arbitrary, that a sexual identity is performed and assumed to be feminine or masculine since it is a frivolous construction of cultural and social constraints. One is considered to be a woman since it acts as one and wears feminine clothes. Just from the very beginning the author uses clothes to show the reader how we catalogue a person's identity according to the clothes they wear. Woolf, in the case of Orlando, uses clothing as a way of creating doubts about Orlando's identity by stating that “he- for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it” (11). The author also uses clothing in order to construct and perform temporarily a different identity in the case of Archduke Harriet, whose appearance in their first meeting was of a woman although she is a man. Woolf uses clothing in order to reveal Harriet's “real” sexual identity. The reader sees how by removing clothes Archduke Harriet changes from performing a feminine sexuality into a masculine one. When Harriet removes her clothes the reader sees that “in

her place stood a tall gentleman in black. A heap of clothes lay in the fender” (126). This is a clear example of performing an identity as explained by Butler. Additionally, Woolf describes their relationship as a stage performance since “they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse” (126). From this quote we can understand that Woolf differentiates between what is to perform a sexual identity and what is “natural discourse” showing that clothing is a way of performing a gender category.

Moreover, Woolf shows the reader that a sexual identity is constructed through performance, using clothing as a way of evading cultural and social constraints. Orlando becomes aware of the fact that clothes define his sexual identity when he uses feminine clothes for the first time and the author explains that “up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought” (108) meaning that Orlando was not aware of his/her identity up to this moment. He realizes that clothes have the power to change how people perceive one’s gender according to the clothes they wear, gender being constructed according to the society in which the individuals live. It seems that Woolf shares Butler’s idea that the body is a receipt with no clear characteristics and due to some external factors a society imposes we create our identity according to what is supposed to be acceptable and normal in that society. Another example of Orlando performing a feminine sexual identity is during the journey from Turkey to England when Orlando realizes that is not only the way she dresses but also the way she has to act in order to take advantage of being a woman. The narrator relates how “it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realized with a start the penalties and privileges of her position” (108). This trip from Turkey back to England is like Orlando’s construction process of creating her feminine sexual identity.

During the journey, the protagonist evaluates the advantages and disadvantages of being a woman and how this affects her social status now that *he* has turned into *she* and she states that,

This is a pleasant, lazy way of life to be sure. But (...) these skirts are plaguey things to have about one’s heels. Yet the stuff (...) is the loveliest in the world. Never have I seen my own skin (...) look to such advantage as now. Could I, however, leap overboard and swim in clothes like this? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of a bluejacket (109).

Moreover, back to England, Orlando interchanges his identity by using clothing in order to take advantage of both masculine and feminine identities. Once again, Orlando uses clothing in order to play with his gender, using masculine clothes. Orlando walks the streets of London and he acts as a perfect English nobleman. When he sees a lady he performs masculine attitudes such as sweeping off his hat “in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public place” (150). There is another instance where Woolf makes an allusion to the constructiveness of genders. This is the moment when Orlando meets Nell who at beginning thinks that Orlando is a man. Nell behaves as a perfect lady does in a man’s company, the way she was educated by the society. The moment Nell discovers that Orlando is also a woman she changes her attitude not being necessary to exaggerate anymore her femininity in order to impress Orlando. The narrator describes that “it was remarkable how soon, on discovering that they were of the same sex, her manner changed and she dropped her plaintive, appealing ways” (151). By doing this, Woolf criticizes in a roundabout way the fact that we are educated to act in a certain way; that our behaviour is socially and culturally constructed. The way in which Woolf depicts gender by using clothing as a way of performing one particular sexual identity goes alongside Butler’s ideas of gender as performance and the constructiveness of identities. According to Butler’s view, our identity is constructed and Woolf represents this in her novel by creating a character whose sexual identity is revealed through clothing; a cultural and socially constructed idea of what it means to be and act as a woman or a man following the stereotypical gender classification into a binary system.

The way in which Orlando uses clothing in order to take benefit of both genders is not the only idea in the novel. Orlando also uses clothing in order to escape social conventions of his time, to avoid the restrictions of belonging into one gender category or another. What we see is that the author tries to show that clothing is not only a way to perform an identity but also an alternative to restrict one’s behaviour according to the clothes a person is wearing. One example of the restrictive character of the clothes is the one of the crinoline which is described as being “heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements” (168). The crinoline is a Victorian symbol, and it depicts the fact that women in that period were supposed to depend on a man and to be passive since women’s duty was to procreate. Another

example of the restrictive character of the clothes in the novel is the moment when Orlando describes the skirt she is wearing as being a “plaguey things” (109) and that she could not take a swim dressed like that. The way in which Woolf uses clothes as an alternative to perform different identities and to restrict one gender category is outstanding since she is doing this in a subtle way without making a direct criticism to gender conventions of the time. The author tries to show the reader how gender categories are constructed by such a superficial element as clothing; how we construct and mould our identity according to the conventions of the society we are living in. Woolf even writes in the novel a statement that in a way summarizes how clothes and social norms construct the identity of a person. Woolf, through the words of the narrator, states that: “Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and not we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking” (132). Thus, from this statement we can understand that Woolf tries to explain that it is clothes that wear us and, consequently, our identity is created by external factors. These factors are normally social and cultural unwritten norms of how one individual should dress and behave according to its gender.

It seems that Woolf, by using clothing as a way to explain that gender is moulded by external elements, shares the same view regarding the constructiveness of the identities as Butler. Woolf achieves to overcome the constraints existing at the beginning of the 20th century and writes about gender as a construction. She succeeds in creating a character that embodies two identities, a person which can be a man or a woman according to its needs. She created a protagonist who can escape social restrictions just by using feminine or masculine clothes. By doing this, the author shares and presents the same idea as Butler; that gender is a socially and culturally constructed category. As Butler explained that “there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very “expressions” that are said to be its results” (*Gender Trouble* 34), Woolf depicted in her novel an individual with no intrinsic identity. Orlando can perform both gender identities since his body is like a blank canvas; he is a woman when he performs repetitive acts that are conventionally accepted as feminine and he is a man when he acts and dresses as a man.

3. CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, Judith Butler's main ideas that gender is performative and a cultural construction were the premise for the analysis of gender representation in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. Using Butler's queer theories, this dissertation has analysed how *Orlando* can be considered a queer literary text since it provides a new viewpoint regarding gender categories and their classification. By doing a reading from the perspective of Judith Butler's theories regarding gender, this paper investigated how Woolf promoted a Butlerian understanding regarding gender categorization decades before this literary theory emerged. The theoretical framework and the analysis of gender issues in *Orlando* helped in establishing a relation between Woolf's fictional text and Butler's theories. It shows that Woolf, in the same way as Butler, criticised the traditional view regarding gender classification.

The first important thing to mention is that Butler's main ideas are evident in Woolf's *Orlando*. Woolf, throughout her protagonist Orlando, presents the idea of gender as performance using elements such as clothing and performing different attitudes in different contexts. What helped the author to present such a view is the fact that she created an androgynous protagonist. Having an androgynous protagonist gave the writer the possibility to play with his sexual identity without creating confusion. In Woolf's text, the overuse of clothing and playing with gender stereotypical attitudes shows a critical perspective of what is considered accepted or not for one gender category. Woolf indirectly criticizes the stereotypical gender conventions and this idea is related with her work *A Room of One's Own*: a text that helped to understand better her view regarding gender and, moreover, what it means to have an androgynous mind. This theoretical text guided us in order to see how Woolf's personal perspectives regarding gender classification influenced her fictional text.

The author of *Orlando* achieved to present a modern view in a period in which speaking about sex and homosexuality or transgender was a taboo. What Woolf did was to criticize the conventions of her time, questioning who are those deciding what is feminine or what is masculine. She criticized the fact that there are conventions constructed for each gender, meaning that having a binary system of gender categories excludes a great amount of human beings who do not belong to one of those traditional

categories. In *Orlando*, the critical attitude is shown by presenting that gender is a performance: that a sexual identity is a performance of what is considered normal for a gender category. It is a fictional work speaking about how a sexual identity is created on the basis of cultural constraints considered stereotypical for male or female. It is a fictional work dealing with theoretical concepts.

Secondly, the idea of constructiveness of gender categories is also explored in Woolf's work. Woolf did this by using fantastic elements but affirming that this transformation did not change Orlando; that only his appearance changed and his performances. This idea that gender is constructed throughout repetition of acts is related with Butler's theories. Both, Woolf and Butler, seem to share the same view that gender is not an intrinsic feature, but something that is constructed through performance. As Butler explained through her theories, gender in her view is a social and cultural construction and this view is present in *Orlando*. The most evident feature is that Woolf uses clothing and gestures in order to show that a person constructs her identity according to the category in which it is biologically included. Additionally, Woolf shows that only by changing our attitudes and our clothes one can be considered to belong into another category. This reveals the fact that our identity is not fixed in relation to our biological sex.

Moreover, *Orlando* is a literary text that presents a new view regarding gender categories, asking for acceptance for all those categories considered unintelligible. In a way, it seems that Woolf tries to overcome gender categorization of her time by presenting stereotypical gender conventions in a humorous manner. In *Orlando*, it is made clear that a person creates its identity by performing features that are culturally accepted to be specific for a gender category. Orlando is considered a woman when he dresses and acts as a woman is supposed to do. Moreover, he feels like a woman when he starts to repeat constantly those acts considered feminine. Although Orlando had suffered a biological transformation, he still uses masculine clothes in order to change his gender as he pleases and to escape restrictions regarding her gender as a woman. By doing this, once again, Woolf challenges the stereotypical view of the existence of a binary system, showing that there are no clear boundaries, that one's sexual identity can be more complex than the traditional idea of having only the male and female gender categories.

By creating a complex personality in which both genders coexist, Woolf achieved to present a Butlerian perspective in her “truthful but fantastic” (*Orlando* xxv) work.

The preconceived idea that one should be and act in a way or another according to its biological sex in order to be accepted and seen as an intelligible gender is what Woolf most powerfully criticizes. She does this in a fantastic way since at the beginning of 20th century to have a woman writing about sexualities was not well considered. Butler’s theories related to how she sees gender and sexual identity as performance and a cultural construction were the basis for this new reading of one of Woolf’s most popular works. This dissertation shows that there are clear similarities in the way Woolf wrote at the beginning of 20th century and how Butler did at the end of the same century.

Taking into account that Butler wrote many texts regarding this topic, it is possible that this paper presents only some of the most relevant ideas of her work as a queer theorist; leaving apart many other issues regarding gender that could be analysed in *Orlando*. Time and space constrained me to limit the analysis of *Orlando* to these two important ideas regarding the performative character of gender and the fact that gender and sexual identity is a social and cultural construction of what we are supposed to be as individuals. An interesting idea for further investigations could be to analyse in *Orlando*, together with these two already analysed ideas, if Woolf changes her writing when Orlando is a man and if the writing changes when the protagonist is acting as a woman. To see if there is any change or not, and if there is how this could be related to the Queer theory.

Finally, I hope that by presenting and applying Butler’s theories to the analysis of Woolf’s *Orlando*, I have managed to show a new way of seeing *Orlando*, being this work of great importance when speaking about gender categories. Moreover, how a writer can defeat the constraints of her time just by using some fantastic elements in order to achieve to make her work readable and Woolf did that in an outstanding way. To sum up, it is important to mention that works like Woolf’s *Orlando* are of great value since this kind of literature helps the readers to open their minds to new ideas without having the necessity to read theoretical works: texts that are normally more challenging than fictional ones.

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