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MODERNISM AS A MEANS OF EXPRESSING DISSIDENT SEXUALITIES: VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*

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Abstract

Literary Modernism allowed for the development of new themes, forms and styles. This paper analyses Virginia Woolf's novel *Orlando* and explores its origins, how it was inscribed in its time and in the Modernist literary current, and how it opened up the treatment of new themes in English literature. The analysis proves why this novel is fundamental to the development of Modernism, and how the author approached and developed her ideas about gender, sexuality, women’s writing and identity.

Keywords: Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, Modernism, androgyny, gender.

Table of contents

Declaración jurada i
Abstract ii
Keywords ii
Table of contents iii
Introduction 1
The origin of the research and its main goals 1
State of the art 2
Methodology 5
1. The Origins of *Orlando*: Virginia Woolf's Relationship with Vita Sackville-West 6
2. The Modernist Movement as a Means for the Expression of New Ideas 12
3. The androgynous ideal: gender exploration in *Orlando* 18
Conclusion 27
Works cited 30

Introduction

The origin of the research and its main goals

This research is the result of the knowledge acquired during the Bachelor's Degree in English Studies at UNED. My main objective is to demonstrate the knowledge acquired throughout these years and to apply it to a 20th century literary text: *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf. There are many reasons, both personal and academic, for choosing this subject and this course of study.

On a personal level, since the beginning of my university studies, literature has always been the part that has interested me the most, especially modern and contemporary literature. Over the last few years I have read the works of many English authors and I wanted to investigate more about one of the figures that fascinates me most in the world of literature: Virginia Woolf. I was especially interested in discovering how the author introduced queer themes into her works, as the beginning of the 20th century was the first time that works with LGBT+ characters were published. On an academic level, I was interested in applying the knowledge I have acquired in English Literature as well as in Gender and Literature. I wanted to discover for myself the Modernist characteristics in Virginia Woolf's novel, as well as to decipher and analyse the novel's subject matter from a feminist perspective. It is an apparently simple novel, but the more we analyse it, the more the reader can discover that this is a book open to different interpretations and readings. The novel hides and suggests much more than one might think at first glance.

It is precisely this quality that made me choose *Orlando* over any other novel by Virginia Woolf. I think it is the best work of fiction in which she exemplifies her "androgynous ideal", and is therefore of great interest for queer studies. It is also a novel that analyses the arbitrariness of gender roles, and has sparked countless debates among various feminist currents. *Orlando* is undoubtedly a work that can generate different (sometimes even contradictory) visions, and this is what makes it so attractive to any literary scholar. Nevertheless, it is not one of Virginia Woolf's best known novels, compared to some of her other

publications, such as *A Room of One's Own* or *Mrs. Dalloway*. This made my personal study of the work more of a research and challenge than if I had chosen one of her more "classic" works. In addition, *Orlando* is studied in the UNED programme, but very briefly, and its reading is not compulsory, so the work aroused a special interest to me.

The essay is divided into three distinct sections, which serve to introduce and analyse the text in depth. The first chapter of the paper delves into the origins of *Orlando*, contextualizing the life of Virginia Woolf and her relationship with Vita Sackville-West, who inspired the main character. In the second chapter I place the novel in its literary context, and attempt to illustrate some of the key features of literary Modernism through examples taken from the book. Finally, in the third chapter I have analysed the work in depth from a feminist and queer perspective, in order to study and delve into the main themes and characters of the novel. All in all, we obtain a very complete vision of this novel by Virginia Woolf, a book from 1928 that reveals themes that still resonate and are relevant nowadays.

Some of the questions this work seeks to answer are:

- What are the origins of *Orlando*?
- How did Virginia Woolf contribute to the expansion of the Modernist movement with this novel?
- What are the most innovative formal features in *Orlando*?
- How does Woolf present her "androgynous ideal" in the novel?
- How did the author manage to evade censorship and depict LGBT+ characters?
- How can we interpret the novel from a feminist/queer perspective?

State of the art

Virginia Woolf has been one of the most analysed authors since the publication of her major literary works. *Orlando* (1928) is not one of her best-known works, as some critics have considered it to be an "inferior" novel, and for some time it

was classified as a mere pastime or entertainment. However, the book aroused particular interest among the feminist and queer movements, as its subject matter, form and style were pioneering in the representation of sexualities far removed from the norm imposed by heteropatriarchy.

Many people have written about Virginia Woolf's relationship with Vita-Sackville West, but the analysis offered by Nigel Nicolson (Sackville-West´s son) in *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973) is particularly noteworthy. Also, the publication of the correspondence between Woolf and her friend/lover allows us to learn more about the motivations behind the publication of *Orlando*. There are also many scholars who have interpreted and examined the relationship between these two authors, such as Louise A. DeSalvo or Sherron E. Knopp. They point out how *Orlando* is far from being a "joke", and demonstrate Woolf's achievements by setting the story in its context. Victoria L. Smith´s article (2006) suggests that the text restores lost loves and lost objects to both Vita Sackville-West and Virginia Woolf. She also emphasises how the author represents in the novel the modernist concern with the inadequacy of language, and how this applied to women authors in particular. Other scholars like Maureen M. Melita have focused on analysing the origins of *Orlando* in chivalric novels, and how androgynous characters could already be found in this type of medieval works.

Particularly relevant to the Modernist analysis of the work is the reading of the essay *Modern Fiction* (1919), by Virginia Woolf. The author criticises the form, style and authors of previous literary generations while proposing a new, modern fiction based on total thematic freedom and a departure from conventionalism in both plot and style. This manifesto propagated the new Modernist ideas and has influenced many writers since its publication. *Orlando* is a paradigmatic example of a Modernist work, in which the author put her own literary theories and beliefs into practice. Some scholars, like Angeliki Spiropoulou (2010) have explored how time is represented in Woolf's novels. Besides, *Orlando* was especially interesting for post-structuralism theorists, because of Virginia Woolf´s questioning of binary oppositions and her merging into one character of what could be seen as contradictory traits. This current has focused particularly on Woolf's depiction of the instability and subjectivity of identity. In her research, Karen Kaivola (1998) points to the need of Virginia

Woolf to conceptualize identity in new, radical ways, since the existing paradigms were already obsolete.

Androgyny in *Orlando* is probably the most researched subject of this work to date. Of particular importance is the author's own contribution to the subject in one of her most influential works, *A Room of One's Own* (1929). The author gave a series of lectures at Cambridge University women's colleges in 1928, around the time *Orlando* was published. As a result, some of the ideas developed in the novel follow the line set out in these lectures. Of particular relevance are the author's ideas about the "androgynous ideal", which have sparked a wave of feminist debate over the decades. In the 1960s and 70s, androgyny gained popularity as a subversive alternative to rigid gender roles. However, feminist critics such as Carolyn Heilbrun and Nancy Topping Bazin soon questioned its efficacy, arguing that androgyny relied on patriarchal notions of gender difference and heterosexist structures. Elaine Showalter further criticized the concept as an evasive fantasy, promoting a more distinctly female literary tradition. In the 1980s, a new generation of feminists challenged earlier essentialist perspectives and embraced the idea of gender as constructed and contradictory. In the 1990s androgyny was considered outdated and irrelevant. Yet, its periodic resurgence within feminism suggests an ongoing and unresolved debate, particularly with the current fourth wave's emphasis on inclusivity towards trans and intersex identities. Dissenting voices argue that androgyny and trans identities reinforce gender binaries, highlighting a key issue within contemporary feminist discourse.

All these debates make *Orlando* a seminal work for feminism and queer studies. Authors who have explored the novel's incursion into themes of sexuality, gender and androgyny include Adam Parkes, Christy L. Burns, Karen Kaivola, Jane de Gay and Esther Sánchez-Pardo González. These scholars have analysed Virginia Woolf's description of characters, the language she uses, her literary style and the importance of the novel in women's writing. They confirm Woolf's need to experiment with new styles in order to guide future women writers and encourage them to publish their work. Some of them, like Adam Parkes and Christy L. Burns, have explored the importance of cross-dressing in the novel as a subversive tool for transcending the limitations of gender. Christy

L. Burns (1994) dissects *Orlando* and questions whether it's the clothes that make the (wo)man, how much of the self is essentially our own and how Woolf's resistance to conforming to the "spirit of the age" affected her writing. Jane De Gay (2007) studies how Orlando experiences life after becoming a woman, and how gender constrains her.

All of these analyses reveal various aspects of the subtext of Woolf's novel, revealing her thoughts on issues of gender, identity and literature. Nevertheless, research on this subject could be endless, since there can be as many interpretations of *Orlando* as there are readers.

Methodology

The first step in starting my research was to find a novel from the early 20th century that dealt with the themes I wanted to explore: sexuality and gender in the context of Modernism. After a brief inquiry, I decided to carry out a close reading of *Orlando*, by Virginia Woolf. During this first reading, I wrote down all the passages that I thought might be useful to illustrate my research: *Orlando* as a Modernist novel that deals with dissident (non-heterosexual) sexualities. As I read on, I realised that the novel was constantly revolving around issues of sexuality and gender, which are the focus of my study.

To find other research papers on the subject and to explore what had already been written about this novel, my main tool was the JSTOR digital library, as well as Google Scholar and ProQuest. There I found most of the aforementioned works, as well as other relevant studies listed in the bibliography. After having carefully read these works and noted down some of the main theories defended by each author, I was able to begin to organize all these ideas and work out the basic structure of my paper with the main sections I wanted to deal with: the origins of the novel, its Modernist characteristics and its treatment of gender and sexuality.

Once I had completed the initial outline, I decided to look for literary theories to support the main points on which I have based the study. To do so, I reviewed the feminist and queer theories I had studied throughout my degree. The philosopher Judith Butler developed the idea of the performativity of gender in

Gender Trouble (1990), and I applied this to the study of *Orlando,* because it explains Woolf's notion of gender as a social construct. This position was also taken earlier by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1962). Virginia Woolf was a predecessor of these two philosophers, and this reinforces her as a key figure in the development of certain feminist debates that flourished in the decades following her life and work.

With regard to women´s writing and the lack of a literary tradition and "voice" for women, I applied the theories of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their research for *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1984). It was also important for me to add the theories of Hélène Cixous on a distinctive female writing ("écriture feminine"). All these ideas of originality, creativity and innovation were linked to the main tenets of the Modernist movement. I have also applied to *Orlando* Julia Kristeva's theory of "women's time" (1986), crystalized in a non-linear representation of the story, which is cyclical and eternal.

In general terms, I have tried to incorporate a feminist and queer vision when revisiting Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*. To do so, I have drawn on the sometimes opposing views of different authors, and attempted to analyse the novel through these works. After several readings of the novel, I was able to unravel and better understand what Woolf intended to achieve with her work. In a study of analysis and interpretation, it is difficult to know with certainty what the author was thinking and what ideas she was trying to defend, especially in a context of censorship and repression. In order to carry out this exhaustive study, I have relied on the following elements: a detailed study of the context and society in which the novel was written, Woolf's correspondence with Vita Sackville-West and with other friends and writers, some essays published by the author herself, and the work, research and theories of numerous literary scholars. All of this has allowed me to gain a comprehensive view of the subject for this paper.

1. The Origins of *Orlando*: Virginia Woolf's Relationship with Vita Sackville-West

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) was a renowned essayist, editor, literary critic and Modernist writer who played a pivotal role in the development of the novel

genre. She was born in London, and although she was self-educated thanks to an easy access to her father's library, she was never allowed to receive a formal education. This led to a sense of deprivation at never having been educated like her brothers. In her novels and essays she developed and explored her ideas about gender, women's writing, feminism and fiction. As we will see in this work, she challenged conventional gender norms and portrayed the subjective nature of experience in her writing, characteristics that have made the author very influential in literature and feminist theory from her time to the present day.

Orlando is Woolf's sixth novel, and even though it can be read as a light-hearted and simple comedy, the story hides serious and complex undertones. As Bowlby points out, "the very playfulness of fantasy [can], sometimes, be a way of saying the most serious things." (Introduction XVI). The novel follows the life of a young nobleman who lives in Elizabethan England. At the age of thirty Orlando undergoes a fictional sex change in his/her sleep and then goes on to live for 300 years without aging, up to the time when Woolf published the novel (1928). Throughout this work, Orlando is a treasurer, ambassador and poet, and s/he has romantic relationships with both men and women, although his/her main love is Sasha, a Russian Princess who betrays Orlando. Despite the change of sex, Orlando's character, intellect and personality remain the same, but his/her gender change does have social consequences, as Orlando begins to experience the limitations that women face simply because of their gender. Beneath its parodic tone and irony, the novel is an exploration of British history, literature and ideals from the 16th century until the beginning of the 20th century, and it allows Woolf to explore some of the themes that most interested her, such as gender, women's writing and androgyny.

The character of Orlando was inspired by the author's relationship with Vita Sackville-West, an English poet and novelist with whom Virginia maintained a relationship as lovers and close friends. Both authors were members of the Bloomsbury Group, which was a society of intellectuals, writers, philosophers and artists in the early 20th century. The group was characterised by its liberal attitudes, including the acceptance of diverse sexual orientations.

Nigel Nicolson, Vita's son, called *Orlando* the "longest and most charming love letter in literature." (202). Woolf felt it necessary to seek Sackville-West's permission in order to write *Orlando* due to its highly personal nature. In her letters, Woolf wrote to Vita: "But listen; suppose Orlando turns out to be Vita; and it's all about you and the lusts of your flesh and the lure of your mind." (*Letters* 3, 428-29). To which Vita replied: "My God, Virginia, if ever I was thrilled and terrified it is at the prospect of being projected into the shape of Orlando…You have my full permission." (Sackville-West, *Letters,* 238). In general, the two authors' correspondence with each other was full of the language of love, expressing their pain at being separated and discussing their work in progress.

Despite of their love for one another, both were concerned about publishing an openly homosexual novel at a time when it was considered deviant. That's why, when Virginia was conceiving *Orlando*, she wrote: "Sapphism is to be suggested. Satire is to be the main note…Everything mocked." (*Diary 3,* 131). *Orlando*'s style and tone, as well as its fantastical elements were Woolf's strategy to escape censorship. The novel is considered a mock biography, because it satirizes the conventions of biographical and historical writing. It is also a "roman à clef", a French term for a novel in which the characters and events are thinly veiled versions of real people and events. The term literally translates as "novel with a key," implying that the reader must use the key (often provided by the author or common knowledge) to uncover the true identities behind the fictional characters. However, although Virginia transformed reality into fantasy in order to get her novel published, its writing was daring for the time. Authors such as Smith do acknowledge that "for Woolf to write a public, sapphic love letter, to dedicate the book to Sackville-West, and to include photographs of Vita Sackville-West as Orlando, was audacious and remarkable to say the least" (63). Woolf's correspondence with Vita shows that the main inspiration for the novel was the life and personality of her friend and lover:

> Should you say, if I rang you up to ask, that you were fond of me?
>
> …
>
> I'm rather excited about Orlando tonight: have been lying by the fire and making up the last chapter. (Letters 3, 443)

Knopp concludes that *Orlando* “was a way to heighten intimacy –not a substitute for physical lovemaking but an extension of it” (27). The novel was therefore an act of love, even though both Vita and Virginia were married at the time of its publication. Sackville-West was married to Harold Nicolson, but it was not a love relationship; rather, she saw her husband as a companion and playfellow, and their relationship was “unphysical” (Nicolson, 33). An equivalent of this type of relationship can be found in Orlando's anomalous marriage to Shelmerdine:

> She was married, true; but if one’s husband was always sailing round Cape Horn, was it marriage? If one liked him, was it marriage? If one liked other people, was it marriage? And finally, if one still wished, more than anything in the whole world, to write poetry, was it marriage? She had her doubts. (264)

By marrying Harold, Vita conformed to the ideas of the time about the sanctity of marriage, but still struggled with love affairs that defied social norms and conventions. The character of Sasha was based on Violet Keppel, a childhood friend of Vita’s with whom she was lovers for many years, despite being married: “Vita Sackville-West and Violet Keppel had become lovers in 1917 and spent two years running away together and repeatedly being brought back to their respective and respectable positions in society” (Smith, 62). The relationship resulted in a major public scandal and caused personal trauma for Vita.

Orlando was heavily influenced by Sackville-West's own account of her family history, *Knole and the Sackvilles* (1922). Knole was the country house where Vita was born, but even though she was an only child, she was unable to inherit it because of laws that prevented a woman from inheriting property. Many of the ideas related to history and impermanence developed by Sackville-West in this work are transformed into art through the prose of Virginia Woolf (DeSalvo, 204). Another source of inspiration for Woolf was Ludovico Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso*, which follows the story of the same chivalrous knight. Melita argues that Woolf’s novel is “strongly founded upon the conventions developed by Ariosto and the literary genre that he helped to define” (130).

The androgyny of the main character, who has both male and female characteristics, was also inspired by Vita herself. Sackville-West wrote in her diary: “Cases of dual personality do exist, in which the feminine and the

masculine elements alternately preponderate…I have the object of study always to hand, in my own heart" (Nicolson, 106). She occasionally cross-dressed as a man, viewing it as a natural expression of her identity. In the novel *Orlando* we can find many instances of androgyny, as we will see in more detail in the last chapter.

Orlando was far more successful than any of Woolf's other books, selling more than twice as many copies in six months as *To the Lighthouse* (1927) did in a year. One reason for this may have been that this novel was less complicated than her previous works, but undoubtedly its subject matter and the novelty it brought to the literary scene also contributed to its success. In February 1929, Woolf wrote to Vita expressing her delight at the impact that *Orlando* was having in America: "The percentage of Lesbians is rising in the States, all because of you" (*Letters 4*, 14). It is precisely *Orlando's* style and tone that saved the book from censorship, at a time when other works such as *The Well of Loneliness*, by Radclyffe Hall (which was published only four months after *Orlando*), were censored and banned. Stephen Gordon, the main character of Hall's novel, is a woman who adopts traits traditionally considered to be masculine and who rejects and dislikes female submissiveness and domesticity. The novel was a realistic representation of what was considered at the time to be "sexual inversion", and for this reason it was banned. *Orlando*, on the other hand, used fantasy and humour to portray the reality of Vita Sackville-West's life. Even though Woolf felt that *The Well of Loneliness* was too controversial, she attended the trial against Hall's novel to counter the charges of obscenity.

Orlando is a gift to Vita Sackville-West because the novel idealizes herself and her life. As mentioned above, Vita was unable to inherit Knole, the 500-year-old country house where she was born and which she cherished. Because of the laws of the time, it was her uncle who inherited the family mansion. In the novel, Woolf restores it to its rightful owner: "Virginia by her genius had provided Vita with a unique consolation for having been born a girl, for her exclusion from her inheritance, for her father's death earlier that year" (Nicolson, 190). For Woolf, the imagination was the only satisfactory way to embrace the lost past and to rewrite English history. In the novel, when Orlando returns to England as a woman for the first time, she has to face a myriad of minor litigations: "The chief

charges against her were (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" (119). However, thanks to Woolf's imagination and in defiance of the laws of the society of the time, Orlando gets his house back without much trouble.

Woolf also idealized Vita in romantic terms in her novel, making Orlando a much more faithful and constant lover than Sackville-West actually was in real life: "For Woolf, *Orlando* is a compensation for the loss of Sackville-West, a mourning of her. She gets to keep a 'fixed' Sackville-West, a woman who will not betray her" (Smith, 67). This improved image prompts Vita to write a letter to Woolf in which she mentions that "you have invented a new form of Narcissism, - I confess, - I am in love with Orlando - this is a complication I had not foreseen" (*Letters,* 289). But despite of this romanticised version of Vita, Woolf also portrayed some of her flaws, because Orlando was at times a clumsy and undistinguished writer. In fact, the wild goose serves as a symbol of the literary genius that Orlando could never attain: "But the goose flies too fast (…) Always it flies too fast out to sea and always I fling after it words like nets (…) And sometimes there's an inch of silver –six words- in the bottom of the net. But never the great fish who lives in the coral groves." (313).

Sackville-West also explored her relationship with Virginia Woolf in her novel *Family History* (1932). According to DeSalvo, this novel "is Sackville-West's gift to Virginia Woolf of fictional children, just as Woolf had restored Knole to Sackville-West in *Orlando.*" (212). Virginia never had offspring with her husband Leonard, and in this novel Vita explores the idea of the couple having two extraordinary children. The author also explores the theme of women who deny and suppress their sexuality. Some authors have commented on "Woolf's inability to give full acknowledgment to her own lesbianism" (DeSalvo, 207). Nevertheless, there is no doubt that in *Orlando*, Woolf was able to explore a ground-breaking subject from a position of safety, that of a fictionalised recollection based largely on real characters and events. The mythical and magical protagonist infuses the work with a layer of fantasy that allowed Virginia Woolf to explore controversial themes at the time. As one of the leading lights of

the Modernist movement, Woolf was attempting to revolutionise English literature at the time, as we will see in more detail in the next chapter.

2. The Modernist Movement as a Means for the Expression of New Ideas

The Modernist movement gained influence in literature at the end of the 19th century and reached its peak during the early decades of the 20th century. At this time, society's confidence in its institutions and authorities began to waver, leading to a questioning of the Victorian values. After the First World War, society suffered from insecurity, and this combined with industrialisation and technological advances left people with a sense of uncertainty and fragmentation. Stevenson explains that “modernist fiction changed radically in structure and style because the world it envisaged changed radically at the time” (8). The theories of Darwin, Marx, Freud, Nietzsche and Einstein, among others, influenced the Modernist movement, intensifying the sense of scepticism towards old certainties.

Virginia Woolf is one of the leading exponents of Modernism in literature. In 1919, the author published an essay entitled “Modern Fiction”, in which she broke with the literature of the previous generation and proposed a guide for contemporary fiction writers. One of the main points she made was the need to explore new themes, structure, form and style:

> If a writer were a free man and not a slave, if he could write what he chose, not what he must, if he could base his work upon his own feeling and not upon convention, there would be no plot, no comedy, no tragedy, no love interest or catastrophe in the accepted style. (160)

According to Woolf, novelists should break away from the tradition of "materialism" and prioritize "spiritual" themes over external matters such as plot. After the years of the Enlightenment, Woolf suggested writing primarily from the soul rather than writing rationally from the mind: “let us record the atoms as they fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness” (“Modern Fiction”, 161). Here Woolf was essentially describing some of the most characteristic qualities of Modernism.

If we analyse *Orlando*, we can find some of the main aspects of Modernism in this innovative work. Virginia Woolf commented in a letter that her novel would "revolutionise biography in a night" (*Letters 3*, 429). She would achieve this by mocking the traditional conventions of the biographical genre. In her essay "New Biography", the author expressed her thoughts on the impossibility of giving a complete recollection of the facts, as some authors of the time claimed to do:

> If we think of truth as something of granite-like solidity and of personality as something of rainbow-like intangibility and reflect that the aim of biography is to weld these two into one seamless whole, we shall admit that the problem is a stiff one. (473)

Woolf rejected the idea of a supposed absolute objectivity, since in any biography or historical narrative it is necessary for some facts to be foregrounded while others remain obscured. *Orlando* is considered a "parodic biography" because the narrator asserts that the biographer's "simple duty is to state the facts as far as they are known, and so let the reader make of them what he may" (*Orlando*, 63). But, as we can see throughout the novel, this is not the case, as the narrator/biographer breaks these rules very often: "Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, we have to admit a thousand *disagreeables*[1] which is the aim of every good biographer to ignore" (*Orlando*, 4). Woolf parodied not only the biographical genre, but also literary and social history. Bowlby points out that taking "a character who lives for five hundred years is a device first of all to show up the illusory position of the history-writer as a reliable *re-constructor*[2] of a past 'world'." (*Virginia Woolf: Feminist Destinations*, 128-129). In her novel Woolf also parodies various literary periods and styles by exaggerating their qualities to the point of ridicule, as in this passage during the Restoration: "His floridity was chastened; his abundance curbed; the age of prose was congealing those warm fountains…Also that the streets were better drained and the houses better lit had its effect upon the style, it cannot be doubted" (108-109). This humour, irony and absurdity are also key elements of literary Modernism.

Another important Modernist innovation was its view of language. Saussure argued that language is a social phenomenon and not something naturally

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[1] This word appears as follows in the original quote.

[2] This word appears as follows in the original quote.

given. Thus, meaning is never fixed, and language becomes an unreliable tool for representing reality. We can find a clear example of this in Orlando's description of Sasha:

> Snow, cream, marble, cherries, alabaster, golden wire? None of these. She was like a fox, or an olive tree; like the waves of the sea when you look down upon them from a height; like an emerald; like the sun on a green hill which is yet clouded –like nothing he had seen or known in England. Ransack the language as he might, words failed him. He wanted another landscape, and another tongue. English was too frank, too candid, too honeyed a speech for Sasha. (47)

This inadequacy of language is also found during Orlando's change of sex (which is defined as "indescribable"), or the difficulties that the biographer -and also Orlando- face when trying to communicate what they want. According to Smith, despite of these obstacles, Woolf was able to evoke the objects and passions that she wanted to convey (68).

The mutability and ambiguity of language is linked to another important feature of Modernist literature, especially among women writers, and that is the relevance of subjectivity. We have already seen how Woolf mocked the historical and biographical genres for their supposed "objectivity". According to her, identity is not something single and unified either, but there is a multiplicity of selves within each person: "For she had a great variety of selves to call upon, far more than we have been able to find room for, since a biography is considered complete if it merely accounts for six or seven selves, whereas a person may have as many as a thousand" (*Orlando*, 309). Modernists in general and Virginia Woolf in particular rejected essentialism and absolute "truths". Orlando represented a fragmented self which was a mixture of qualities: male and female, English and foreign, heterosexual and homosexual. According to post-structuralist theories, this could be seen as a drastic departure from an identity based on an authentic "self", which was a dominant feature of literary works of earlier periods. Poststructuralists claimed that identity was fictional, and the character of Orlando exemplifies how it is profoundly unstable and unfixed. Like the goose that Orlando is trying to hunt, identity is elusive: "Haunted! Even since I was a child. There flies the wild goose. It flies past the window out to sea…But the goose flies too fast." (313). We could interpret this as the impossibility of grasping a fixed identity and the "essential" truths of life.

The person on whom Orlando's character is based, Vita Sackville-West, was also an ambiguous and fragmented being: she was both part of and alienated from the aristocratic class, a woman with bisexual interests and an identity that was neither unified nor singular. These polarities are reflected in Orlando, a character who moves between the private world as a writer and the public life as an aristocrat and ambassador in the service of the Empire. And, as we will explore further in the last chapter, Orlando is also a man and a woman, highlighting the instability of essence and the ambiguity and artificiality of gender roles. Stereotypically masculine and feminine traits intermingle in the figure of the protagonist. Bazargan points out how in the opening of the book Orlando is "practicing swordsmanship on the Moor's head, which is an emblem of English conquest and supremacy…But the gruesome exercise is followed by Orlando's act of writing 'ten pages and more' of poetry on nature" (35). These contradictions gave rise to far more complex characters during Modernism, always in flux, and with their past intermingled with the present.

Time was another field of exploration for modernist authors such as Virginia Woolf. Julia Kristeva introduced the idea of "Women's Time", which proposed that women's experience is arranged in cyclical and eternal rhythms, rather than in the linear time of men (191). When Orlando becomes a woman, a new cycle begins in her life. In her novels, Woolf often uses memory and time to define the identity of her characters. Spiropoulou emphasizes that "Woolf is well aware that how the past is represented is a major stake in the feminist and wider political struggle" (3). Like identity, time is neither objective nor universal, but is experienced individually and subjectively, as this passage from *Orlando* demonstrates:

> An hour, once it lodges in the queer element of the human spirit, may be stretched to fifty or a hundred times its clock length; on the other hand, an hour may be accurately represented on the timepiece of the mind by one second. This extraordinary discrepancy between time on the clock and time in the mind is less known than it should be and deserves fuller investigation. (94-95)

This is an example of how the time of the mind is free and different from chronological time. Individuals experience time in a personal and irrational way, as when Orlando sleeps for a week and wakes up whenever he "decides" to.

The idea of time is connected to that of involuntary memory and the stream of consciousness, a technique developed and extended by Virginia Woolf. Ideas of the subconscious and involuntary memory were present in Woolf's *Orlando*:

> Memory is the seamstress…runs her needle in and out, up and down, hither and thither. We know not what comes next, or what follows after. Thus, the most ordinary movement in the world, such as sitting down at a table and pulling the inkstand towards one, may agitate a thousand odd, disconnected fragments, now bright, now dim, hanging and bobbing and dipping and flaunting. (75-76)

Modernism was characterised by this fragmentation, subjectivity, and by experimentation with the inner monologue of the characters, whose thoughts are reflected in the novel as they would appear in their minds: disconnected and sometimes even unintelligible. This free association of ideas can be seen in Orlando's rambling thoughts: "A snob am I? The garter in the hall? The leopards? My ancestors? Proud of them? Yes! Greedy, luxurious, vicious? Am I? (here a new self came in). Don't care a damn if I am. Truthful? I think so. Generous? Oh, but that don't count (here a new self came in)." (203). As we can see, Woolf follows Orlando's thoughts as they come to his/her mind, in a hurried way. This fragment also reflects the multiple identities of Orlando, who is a multifaceted being.

As already mentioned, Woolf was more interested in the emotions of the characters than in the plot of the novel. A central feature of her literary style is what she labelled "moments of being". For Woolf, moments of being were times of revelation and clairvoyance in which a fact or event, often trivial, triggered a myriad of emotions in her characters. She explored how these moments of heightened consciousness and awareness could be captured in literature. In the novel, while Orlando is buying some fabrics at a store, she is suddenly struck by the memory of Sasha, her great love from centuries ago:

> Here, as she was fingering the linen abstractedly, one of the swing-doors between the departments opened and let through, perhaps from the fancy-goods department, a whiff of scent, waxen, tinted as if from pink candles, and the scent curved like a shell round a figure –was it a boy's or was it a girl's? –young, slender, seductive- a girl, by God! Furred, pearled, in Russian trousers; but faithless, faithless!
>
> 'Faithless!' cried Orlando (the man had gone) and all the shop seemed to pitch and toss with yellow water and far off she saw the masts of the Russian ship standing out to sea. (288-289)

As we can see, the entrance of an androgynous being (at first we don't know if it is male or female) into the shop triggers an emotional response in Orlando in

the form of a memory of Sasha, the Russian princess who betrayed Orlando long ago. When Orlando met Sasha he was also unable to distinguish whether it was a man or a woman, and this, combined with the women's clothes, furs and jewellery, creates a unique moment of unintentional memory that seems to transfer the protagonist from the present moment to the past.

Symbolism, an important Modernist feature, is also remarkable through *Orlando*. One of the most important symbols is that of the oak tree, which appears from the beginning of the novel as a sign of stability and continuity. We can find a certain parallelism between Orlando's character and the oak tree, since both of them survive many generations in the midst of the tumultuous changes of human history. The origin of this symbol can be found in Virgil's *Georgics*: "the oak…extends its aura … / No winter tempest rages or rains / turn it over; it stays unmoved and / many durations of men it survives. Its strong branches and legs reach far" (31). Orlando's character is often praised for his long reaching legs. The oak tree, like the protagonist, is lonely, standing on its own in the top of a hill. Orlando feels a connection with the tree and sits and thinks under it during times of uncertainty and transition: "He sighed profoundly, and flung himself…on the earth at the foot of the oak tree. He loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth's spine beneath him" (9). The oak tree is also comparable to England itself and its culture, because in English thought the oak represents continuity and supremacy in contrast with other aspects of society that are ephemeral and changeable, such as fashion, literary styles or values. Woolf wanted to show how the roots of English culture extend deeply into the past. "The Oak Tree" is also the name of Orlando's poem, with which she finally gains recognition from the general public.

Another important symbol in the novel is that of the ship, which represents adventure and exploration, and a metaphor for the human desire to surpass the limitations of existing knowledge. Smith also points to the image of Vita/Orlando as a ship throughout the novel: "For if you see a ship in full sail coming with the sun on it proudly sweeping across the Mediterranean from the South Seas, one says at once, 'Orlando'." (*Orlando,* 251). In contrast to the tree, the ship represents transformation and change. For example, when the protagonist travels to Constantinople in a ship, it represents his desire for freedom and self-

discovery. Just as ships are replaced over time by more modern vessels, Orlando also undergoes important transformations throughout his/her life, starting with his/her gender. Orlando's journey is not only physical but also metaphorical, as it is a voyage of self-discovery of his/her own identity. It seems that the protagonist's name, Orlando, is the only thing that remains the same throughout the novel.

Modernism opened the door to the exploration of new themes, and *Orlando* is an example of this, as it satirised the sexual and gender codes of the time. Woolf was able to explore her erotic interests and same-sex desire in her fiction, albeit in a veiled form. Literature up to that point had been unable to represent dissident sexualities, as Kaivola highlights: "those sexualities that do not easily fit into the existing paradigms demonstrate the inadequacies of the models that shape our thinking and call for radically new ways of conceptualizing identity" (38). This is precisely what Woolf achieves through Modernism: she creates new ways of conceptualising sexuality, gender, desire and identity. For her, "everything is the proper stuff of fiction, every feeling, every thought; every quality of brain and spirit is drawn upon; no perception comes amiss." ("Modern Fiction", 164). In addition to suggesting some of her ideas on gender and sexuality, Woolf was able to display her views on other issues, such as her vision of the past, writing and history. De Gay also mentions that *Orlando* "enacts the imaginative search to rediscover lost origins which Woolf had advocated in *A Room of One's Own*, by using Orlando's long life to trace a heritage for a twentieth-century woman writer back to Renaissance." (70). Through fiction she was able to find her voice, breathe life and femininity into history and infuse it with contemporary relevance. As we have seen in this chapter, Modernist writing techniques were great allies for women writers such as Virginia Woolf, allowing them to explore new forms of expression far removed from traditional patriarchal discourse.

3. The androgynous ideal: gender exploration in *Orlando*

The main turning point in the novel occurs halfway through the book, while Orlando is in Turkey as an ambassador. After a seven-day sleep, Orlando, who until now has been a prototypical gentleman, awakens from his trance as a

woman: “[Orlando] stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess – he was a woman.” (137). Orlando's gender transformation satirizes and parodies essentialism and the philosophical quest for fundamental, naked, and absolute truths. It also leads to an exploration of the constraints that gender imposes on the individual on a social level.

The character of Orlando epitomizes the mutable, fluid and ever-changing subject of literary Modernism. But even though Orlando's body has changed, the narrator points out that the protagonist “remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity.” (*Orlando,* 138). Here Woolf shifts from using the pronoun "he" to using the pronoun “their”, which includes both genders. She also exploits the humorous side of pronouns at other points in the novel, for example, when Orlando returns to England and the housekeeper is surprised by his master's change of gender: “Milord! Milady! Milady! Milord!” (169). It is curious, however, how other characters accept this change without a problem. An example of this is Mrs. Grimsditch’s reaction. She is one of the servants working at Orlando’s country estate: “Mrs. Grimsditch [said] to Mr. Dupper that night, if her Lord was a Lady now, she had never seen a lovelier one” (163).

Orlando´s transformation is treated naturally and succinctly in the novel. There is little explanation as to why this change has taken place, and the narrator avoids making value judgements:

> Many people…holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since.
>
> But let other pens treat of sex and sexuality; we quit such odious subjects as soon as we can. (139)

This passage is also an example of how any narrative is riddled with omissions, evasions and gaps. It serves as a method of self-censorship by not addressing topics that might be considered too controversial, shrouding Orlando's transformation in an aura of fantasy and indeterminacy. The narrator of the story states that in order to talk about this event, “it has been necessary to speculate, to surmise, and even to make use of the imagination” (*Orlando,* 119).

According to Parkes, the narrator is in a constant search of empirical truth, “but that yearning is constantly held in check, and perhaps undermined, by the realization that the record is necessarily incomplete, that the imagination must be called upon to supply what is missing.” (455). This instability and vacillation equates the narrator with Orlando, since both are ambiguous and contradictory beings.

At the time when Orlando was written, the categories of sex, gender, and sexuality were often confused. For Woolf, “sex” encompassed both the body and what we would now call “gender”. There was also the perception at the time that a lesbian was a woman born in the wrong body, as Radclyffe Hall explored in *The Well of Loneliness*. Vita Sackville-West, the woman who inspired *Orlando*, explains in an apologia how she felt about her sexuality:

> I hold the conviction that as centuries go on, and the sexes become more nearly merged on account of their increasing resemblances, I hold the conviction that such connections will to a very large extent cease to be regarded as merely unnatural, and will be understood far better, at least in their *intellectual* if not in their physical aspect … I believe that then the psychology of people like myself will be a matter of interest, and I believe it will be recognized that many more people of my type do exist than under the present-day system of hypocrisy is commonly admitted. (Nicolson, 105-06)

Woolf reflected this sentiment in her novel by creating an intermediate character in-between two genders, breaking down the classical dichotomy that separated and differentiated the masculine from the feminine. Orlando is both a man and a woman as the narrator points out: “Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided” (189). This gives rise to an androgynous character, a theme that Woolf thoroughly explored throughout her career. In *A Room of One’s Own* she reflects on the potential creativity of the androgynous mind:

> It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilised and uses all its faculties. Perhaps a mind that is purely masculine cannot create, any more than a mind that is purely feminine… [Coleridge] meant, perhaps, that the androgynous mind is resonant and porous; that it transmits emotion without impediment; that it is naturally creative, incandescent and undivided. (98)

These ideas were considered radical at a time when androgyny was deemed a destabilizing force leading_to chaos and disorder. Mosse highlights that by the end of the 19th century, “nationalism and respectability assigned everyone his place in life, man and woman, normal and abnormal, native and foreigner; any confusion between these categories threatened chaos and loss of control …

Masculinity meant depth and seriousness, while the feminine was shallow and often frivolous." (16-17). Western civilization did not allow ambiguities in terms of gender: one had to be a man or a woman. Contrary to this point of view, Woolf visualized the human soul as a balance of both male and female elements that need each other to thrive and succeed: "It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly" (*A Room of One's Own,* 104). She represented this idealized androgynous being in the figure of Orlando: "No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace." (*Orlando,* 87). Woolf advocated the idea that indeterminacy and androgyny are positive traits and a source of creativity, strength and liberation:

> And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. It was a most bewildering and whirling state of mind to be in. (*Orlando*, 100)

What Orlando learned as a man over the centuries helped her to become a strong and independent woman in the second half of the novel. But even before his gender change, Orlando is described in terms that have traditionally been used to define women in literature, giving him "eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them" (15). Likewise, when Orlando is a woman, she is described in typically masculine terms: "She fought a duel, served on one of the King's ships as a captain, was seen to dance naked on a balcony" (142). This reversal of roles is one of the main thematic innovations that Woolf introduced in *Orlando.* It is also interesting how, at the beginning of the novel, Orlando embodies the archetypal abandoned woman in literature, when he is rejected and left alone in the rain while Sasha leaves England on a ship:

> Raising himself in his stirrups and shading his eyes, which has the sight of a hawk's, he could just make out the shape of a ship on the horizon. The black eagles were flying from the mast head. The ship of the Muscovite Embassy was standing out to sea. (*Orlando,* 42).

Again this is an example of gender role reversal and a way of overturning the idea that each person must have a fixed set of behaviours and traits based on their gender. Another interesting point in the novel is that Orlando marries and has children as a woman, but this is narrated in just one line, in an anticlimactic

way: “Orlando was safely delivered of a son on Thursday, March the 20th, at three o’clock in the morning” (211). Usually these events are the climax of the novel, marking a turning point in a woman's life. For Orlando, however, they are mere anecdotes. During the Victorian era women were disadvantaged and discriminated against in comparison to their male counterparts, and this is reflected in Orlando:

> The sexes drew further and further apart…And just as the ivy and the evergreen rioted in the damp earth outside, so did the same fertility show itself within. The life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded. (229)

The innovative idea of including a protagonist who is first a man and then a woman allows Woolf to explore the constraints that gender and culture imposed on women at the time. Compared to men’s public lives, women had to exist in invisibility. Virginia Woolf ironized the disempowerment of women in society:

> “Better is it”, she thought, “to be clothed with poverty and ignorance, which are the dark garments of the female sex; better to leave the rule and discipline of the world to others; better to be quit of martial ambition, the love of power, and all the other manly desires if so one can more fully enjoy the most exalted raptures known to the human spirit, which are”, she said aloud, as her habit was when deeply moved, “contemplation, solitude, love.” (160)

This could be interpreted as both a criticism of the male gender and a parody of what was expected of an ideal woman of the time. Woolf satirises about the "spirit of the age", which acted in those times as a regulating ideological force that distinguished between what was considered morally acceptable and what was not. Living as a woman allows Orlando to experience the unfairness of imposing gender roles that do not conform to reality:

> She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be 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. (99)

The prejudices and discrimination that Orlando had perpetuated as a man are turned against her once she becomes a woman, which allows for a concise critique of the artificiality and arbitrariness of gender roles in society. In Sánchez-Pardo´s words, in Woolf, “gender is described as a cultural process that has to be learned, and is not inherent to sex” (84). According to other authors, such as Simone De Beauvoir, no one is born knowing how a man or a woman should behave, but it is something that is learned and repeated over

generations: “one is not born, but rather becomes, a woman” (De Beauvoir, 295).

Another important aspect is the difficulties women have encountered when writing. Throughout history men have had a tradition of their own when it comes to writing, as for centuries the vast majority of authors were men, while education and writing were considered taboo activities for respectable women. That’s why according to Gilbert and Gubar, “the pen has been defined as not just accidentally but essentially a male ‘tool’, and therefore not only inappropriate but actually alien to women” (8). This could be seen as a major disadvantage, but at the same time it has allowed women to be more creative and free in their writing. Some feminist theorists, such as Hélène Cixous, defend the idea of a specifically feminine type of writing, characterised by its distance from patriarchal models and by its openness, fluidity and opposition to traditional binary thinking. She coined the term “écriture feminine” to refer to it. In her essay *A Room of One’s Own,* Woolf encouraged women to find their own voice and to write, experiment, play and explore with language and writing: “I would ask you to write all kinds of books, hesitating at no subject however trivial or however vast” (107).

As we have seen, Modernism was precisely the ideal literary movement for expressing new ideas in new forms. Modernist women writers rejected the impersonality of their male counterparts, and spoke of their personal experiences and concerns. That is why *Orlando* explores the idea of blank spaces and the invisibility that women writers have suffered throughout history. The main character, Orlando, is a writer both as a man and as a woman. However, when she becomes a woman she hides her manuscript and realises that she is denied the right to write and even to think: “(and as long as she thinks of a man, nobody objects to a woman thinking). And then she will write him a little note (and as long as she writes little notes nobody objects to a woman writing either)” (176). Orlando meets renowned writers, thinkers and poets, but she is treated with paternalism and condescension: “A woman knows very well that, though a wit sends her his poems, praises her judgment, solicits her criticism, and drinks her tea, this by no means signifies that he respects her opinions” (137). Despite this heartless reality, Orlando continues to write and, in

an act of poetic justice, she finally manages to have her work published and become a recognised author.

Another provocative feature in the novel is that Orlando’s transformation opens up the possibility of homosexual desire. Since her identity is unaffected, she is still in love with the same person: princess Sasha. Thanks to her gender change, Orlando is able to gain insight and a better understanding of Sasha's mind:

> And as all Orlando’s loves had been women, now, through the culpable *laggardry*[3] of the human frame to adapt itself to convention, though she herself was a woman, it was still a woman she loved; and if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those feelings which she had had as a man. For now, a thousand hints and mysteries became plain to her that were then dark. Now, the obscurity which divides the sexes and lets linger innumerable impurities in its gloom, was removed, and if there is anything in what the poet says about truth and beauty, this affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity. (161)

The author describes Orlando's feelings for Sasha as a higher and purer form of love than a heterosexual relationship. Virginia Woolf clearly identified Vita Sackville-West as a lesbian, and despite her attraction to her, she did not acknowledge her own sexuality, nor did she associate her sexual desires with a lesbian identity. In spite of this self-denial, she presented Orlando as a bisexual character, who “enjoyed the love of both sexes equally” (*Orlando,* 221).

But Orlando is not the only gender-ambiguous character in the novel. This is also the case with Sasha, who is introduced with a description that does not clarify her gender:

> When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be –no woman could skate with such speed and vigour- … Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy’s, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea. (19)

As we can see, Sasha's character is also ambiguous, since she is a woman mostly described in masculine terms. Another example is that of the Archduke Harry/Archduchess Harriet Griselda. He is a nobleman who falls in love with Orlando when he is a man. In order to deceive Orlando and court him, he disguises himself as a woman (the Archduchess), but he is rejected when Orlando moves to Constantinople. Upon Orlando's return to England as a woman, the Archduke promptly visits her estate, and when he sees that

[3] This word appears as follows in the original quote.

Orlando is now a woman, he takes off his disguise. He offers an explanation, apologizes, and begins to court Orlando once again. This subplot also suggests homosexual possibilities, as the Archduke fell in love with Orlando when they were both men.

Another ambiguous character is Orlando's husband, Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine. Shel displays feminine traits and her sexual identity is as unstable as Orlando's. As already mentioned, although Orlando is now a woman, she is mainly attracted to other women. It is probably for this reason that she is attracted to Shel, as he stands out for his femininity. Conversely, Shelmerdine is attracted to Orlando because of his masculine traits. This makes them both fall in love although they soon realise the irony of their situation: "'You're a woman Shel', she cried. 'You're a man, Orlando!', he cried." (164). Despite his femininity, Shel is a brave sailor, a quality that again destabilises the gender stereotypes of the time.

Virginia Woolf was ahead of her time in exploring how society and culture delineate the distinction between what is considered masculine and feminine. In this context, it is relevant to notice how clothing can shape our understanding of gender. Woolf explored this through Orlando's cross-dressing, suggesting that gender differences are primarily superficial:

> Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is very opposite of what it is above. (*Orlando,* 121)

The importance of clothes is also highlighted when Woolf writes that "it is clothes that wear us and not we them" (*Orlando,* 188). In her exploration of gender, Woolf seems to wonder whether the clothes make the (wo)man. It is significant to point out that when Orlando "is eventually transformed, this is not effected through a *genital* change. It occurs instead as a *gender* transformation that emerges after a change of clothing" (Burns, 351). At first Orlando doesn't give much thought to her transformation, because she hides out with the gypsies and wears androgynous Turkish trousers. However, when she has to start wearing the typical clothes of an English woman of the time, she abruptly discovers how her gender can affect her everyday life:

> 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. (153)

As soon as she has to change her clothes, she feels the pressure to conform to stereotypical expectations of gender. Sometimes Orlando needs to escape from these social constraints and she cross-dresses as a man. This allows her to relive the freedom that a man might display in public spaces, and also to "enjoy…the love of both sexes equally" (221). In comparison to men's clothing, women's garments hindered their freedom because they were heavier and more cumbersome:

> She stood mournfully at the drawing room window…dragged down by the weight of the crinoline which she had submissively adopted. It was heavier and more drab than any dress she had yet worn. None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. (244-45)

Related to these ideas about gender, clothing and cross-dressing is the notion of performativity. Judith Butler explains in *Gender Trouble* that gender is performative, a social construct based on the repetition of certain behaviours, speech and actions. According to her theory, gender depends on actions, gestures and discourses that define each gender and that are culturally conditioned. Thus, gender is a continuous process of performance, shaped by our interactions with others and the societal norms and expectations that govern our behaviour. She also called for the subversion of the male/female binary, in favour of a more fluid and diverse identity that resisted categorization.

All these ideas were anticipated by Virginia Woolf in *Orlando,* whose concept of gender presents theatrical features. This theatricality can be seen in the use of clothing and cross-dressing throughout the novel. The subjectivity, performativity and transgression of boundaries could be seen as a subversive strategy of repetition of gender models, according to Butler: "The task is not whether to repeat, but how to repeat or, indeed, to repeat and, through a radical proliferation of gender, to *displace* the very gender norms that enable the repetition itself" (148). She labelled this act as a "parody", and indeed, we can consider *Orlando* as a parody, appropriating Shakespeare's comic plots in which his characters used to cross-dress. Once again, these comic devices could be interpreted as a strategy to evade censorship, but, in fact they concealed very serious matters.

The subject of androgyny has also spurred controversy among feminist academics. Some second-wave feminists valued the subversive potential of androgyny because it challenged the rigid gender categories that had prevailed until then. Later on, however, androgyny's ability to provoke became obsolete as its reliance on patriarchal notions of gender difference and its heteronormative framework failed to fulfil its promise for individuals seeking alternative models of gender identity. Feminist literary critics such as Elaine Showalter were more interested in the unique perspectives and experiences of women rather than in androgyny, which she considered an “evasive fantasy” (264). The recurrence of androgyny in feminist discourse indicates that it remains a persistent and unresolved issue.

What is certain is that Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is a fictional exploration of the androgynous ideal proposed by the author in her extended essay *A Room of One's Own*. Woolf sought to destabilise and overturn gender binaries, and the novel itself is a mixture of “masculine” and “feminine” literary traditions, with the epic tradition on one side and the stream-of-consciousness technique on the other. The author's exploration of gender roles, women's writing, sexuality, historiography and androgyny was ahead of its time, and has fuelled feminist and literary debates from its publication to the present day.

Conclusion

After this analysis of *Orlando*, we can conclude that the novel opened up new horizons in modern English literature. Virginia Woolf paid fictional homage to her lover in a subtle yet daring way. The character of Orlando, who can be seen both as a man and a woman, paved the way for the normalization and representation of non-heterosexual characters in literature. Today, such themes and narratives are not surprising, but *Orlando* is a novel that will soon celebrate its 100th anniversary. In her fiction, Woolf was able to explore the restrictions that gender imposes on the lives of women and how it hinders their intellectual development and their position in society. But in an act of poetic justice, Virginia Woolf used this work to reclaim her love for Vita Sackville-West, as well as her personal legacy and her value as a writer. She set an example by portraying a woman who is able to achieve success with her pen and intellect.

This novel could also be considered as an exploration of the “other”, represented by a bisexual, mutable and androgynous being. For centuries, women have been identified under this aura of “otherness", confronted with an eminently masculine literary tradition, in which male authors wrote for men and about other men. In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf satirises how women have been almost invisible throughout literary history:

> Suppose, for instance, that men were only represented in literature as the lovers of women, and were never the friends of men, soldiers, thinkers, dreamers; how few parts in the plays of Shakespeare could be allotted to them; how literature would suffer! (82)

Virginia Woolf shows that a new kind of literature is possible, and that is why she combines the stream-of-consciousness technique with the use of symbols, fragmentation and subjectivity. All these Modernist characteristics aimed to represent how women felt in a male-dominated world: split, alienated and discriminated against. This inequality fuelled the creativity of some women authors, among whom Woolf's figure stands out in English literature. She paved the way for a new feminine mode of expression, characterized by its freedom and subjectivity when compared to the male tradition.

Woolf set out to revolutionise the biographical genre, and at the very least she succeeded in developing and parodying it by making visible all the gaps and silences that exist in any story. In doing so, she demonstrated the utopia of rendering a complete account of history, as any fact will always be filtered through the author's point of view. At the same time, Woolf created a character whose gender was ambiguous and whose presence in literature had the potential to destabilise the reader’s understanding of gender. Modernism enabled and encouraged the exploration of new themes, and Woolf broadened its boundaries, because for her “everything is the proper stuff of fiction” (*Modern Fiction*, 164). The author did not need a literary tradition which she considered obsolete; she had enough creative power of her own to transform and revolutionise literary art with her experimental novels and essays.

In conclusion, Virginia Woolf was able to escape the “spirit of the age” through one of her most innovative novels, *Orlando.* She gave birth to a new type of character who defies categorisation, since like any real individual, it is made up of a myriad of characteristics, some of which are clearly contradictory. The

author showed other women writers that it was possible to escape the male critical eye, and that, with wit and patience, a new literary style and language could be shaped in a way much more in tune with women's realities. Woolf was able to develop new cultural discourses that acknowledged and represented more accurately than ever before the complexities of human sexuality, gender and identity.

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