

# **BETWEEN CONFORMITY AND TRANSGRESSION: GENDER EXPRESSION IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S ORLANDO**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

“[W]e have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (Woolf, *Orlando* 97). Playful, multifaceted, and deliberately perplexing, Virginia Woolf’s presentation of Orlando in the novel *Orlando: A Biography* serves as a canvas for an array of interpretations of gender<sup>1</sup> and identity, and therefore lends itself to various approaches within Queer Theory. Some authors read the text from a lesbian-feminist viewpoint (Knopp; Meese; Nair), others treat it as a narrative on transgender identity (Craps; Crawford). While many scholars apply Judith Butler’s ideas on gender and imitation in their analysis and emphasize aspects of androgyny and fluidity, few also consider Orlando’s deliberate attempts at conforming to gendered expectations as a means of passing as decidedly male or female. However, coupling Butler’s ideas with a framework of passing can deepen the understanding of Orlando’s various modes of gender expression within different social contexts and highlight the multifaceted ways of performing gender. This paper thus aims to analyze how both transgressive and deliberately conforming strategies of gender performativity in attire, social interactions, and androgynous presentation expose the constructed nature of heteronormative, essentialist notions. Consequently, it is argued that the novel destabilizes fixed notions of gender and reveals how Orlando’s fluid identity subverts the binary framework, exposing it as a socially constructed performance.

The first part of the paper focuses on Butler’s thoughts on gender as performative practice and complements it with a theoretical framework of passing. The second part shifts the focus towards a critical analysis of Orlando’s portrayal concerning outward appearance. Building upon the importance of this aspect, the third part concerns itself with behavioral codes and Orlando’s reaction to gendered expectations in various social situations. The final part then examines their individual identity outside the constraints of compulsory gender performance in relation to Woolf’s ideas on androgyny. While knowledge of societal conventions of various eras may present valuable information for the analysis, this paper must omit discussions of historical backgrounds. Similarly, topics such as Orlando’s (homo)sexuality or the impact of Woolf’s parodic writing style cannot be discussed due to the limited scope of this paper.

## **GENDER PERFORMATIVITY AND PASSING**

Judith Butler’s approaches to gender and identity, though published after the release of Woolf’s novel, serve as an essential source for a closer analysis of the key topics discussed in the narrative. Butler argues that, rather than being a fixed biological category one is born with, gender is not natural but “constructed through specific corporeal acts” constituting what is then perceived as gender (“Performative Acts” 521). This performative reenactment of behaviors stereotypically assigned to one or the other sex highlights the absence of a true, original notion of gender and therefore of a stable gender identity

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with Woolf’s writing, the terms “sex” and “gender” are used interchangeably.

(Butler, "Imitation" 1130f.; Butler, "Performative Acts" 528). Furthermore, Butler argues how deliberate practices of breaking socially constructed gender norms through nonconforming behavior and appearance, such as drag, may expose this performative nature of gender and reveal gender identity as a mere perceived naturalness of certain norms ("Imitation" 1130). Butler also critiques the assumption of heterosexuality as biologically natural ("Performative Acts" 524). They view heteronormativity as a compulsory part of gendered performance since failure to adhere to the expected norms may result in social sanction and exclusion, shaping identity through societal pressure (Butler, "Imitation" 1133). Butler advocates for an understanding of gender and sexuality as neither fixed nor natural and demonstrates how one may challenge established power structures imbued in gender norms through understanding and exposing gender as performance ("Imitation" 1136f.).

While Butler's approach focuses on people's mostly subconscious compliance with implicit rules of gender performativity, the notion of passing complements this theory by examining the effects of conscious adherence to rigid gender norms. In her essay on the experiences of bisexual women, Jessa Lingel defines passing as the capacity to "assume [...] membership within multiple communities," a practice she shows applies not only to gender but to religious, cultural, and racial contexts (381). Passing, Lingel argues, requires both knowledge of the persisting social norms and their underlying power structures within the community one wishes to assimilate to and the performance of one's identity in accordance with them (382). As a result, it reveals the efforts required for the performance and subversively exposes and criticizes their necessity (Lingel 389).

Applied to gender, this paper focuses on the performance required for Orlando's passing, and consequently being recognized by

society, as either male or female<sup>2</sup>. Orlando rejects, mocks, and subversively criticizes, but at times also deliberately participates in performances of gender. Reading the novel through a framework that combines Butler's ideas of gender constitution and its deliberate utilization in the attempt of passing shows that, rather than reinforcing false binary ideas of gender essentialism, both Orlando's conformity and nonconformity to stereotypical norms serve to reveal gender as performative, fluid, and socially constructed.

## CLOTHES MAKE THE (WO)MAN

Outward appearance influences Orlando's presentation and self-perception throughout the novel as it functions as a vehicle for gender expression. Koppen suggests that clothes "as embodied cultural practice contribute to bringing forth and performing culture" and thus have a performative function in relation to Butler's theory (1). *Orlando* opens with the words "He - for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it [...]" (Woolf, *Orlando* 11). While the first word clearly assigns Orlando as male, the ambiguous nature of his clothing contradicts a stereotypically masculine appearance. Descriptions of him having "shapely legs," a rosy face, and wide "eyes like drenched violets" deepen the first impression of Orlando as a young nobleman with feminine features (Woolf, *Orlando* 12). Although his behavior and social standing distinguish him as a boy at the beginning of the story, his ambiguous attire already sets the premise for the rest of the novel, effectively foreshadowing the role clothes play in the constitution and performance of gender.

<sup>2</sup> For reasons of clarity, this paper utilizes masculine pronouns when talking of Orlando before the gender transformation and feminine pronouns afterward. When discussing Orlando as a character outside the context of the immediate plot, the singular gender-neutral pronoun "they" is used.

After her return to England, Orlando's new attire seals her passing as female. Now dressed in a "complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, [...] the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank," she is flirted with by the captain of the ship and offered privileges reserved for women like having "an awning spread for her" (Woolf, *Orlando* 108f.). Lingel notes that passing depends on an audience affirming the performance as natural (388). Accordingly, Orlando successfully passes through adapting to a stereotypically feminine dress code, since she is recognized and affirmed as a woman by the people surrounding her. García-Madrid points out how she first becomes aware of the beauty of her own body when wearing a dress, signaling her newfound self-recognition as female (García-Madrid 111; Woolf, *Orlando* 109). A later passage reaffirms how clothes have the power to constitute identity: "[T]hey mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking" (Woolf, *Orlando* 132). Correspondingly, clothes do not only outwardly gender the person wearing them but also influence self-perception through the internalization of gender identity labels such as female.

Yet, attire can imprison as much as it reveals. Orlando soon recognizes how the same clothes now constituting her identity restrict her freedom of agency and independence. She complains that the skirts hinder her steps when walking and considers that, if she were to leap overboard the ship, she would not be able to swim but have to depend on a man's help to save her from drowning (Woolf, *Orlando* 109). While the proposition holds some appeal for her, it becomes obvious that impractical women's clothing of the early 18<sup>th</sup> century supports, necessitates, and thus reinforces patriarchal, binary understandings of gender-specific access to mobility and agency.

Another example of the socially imposed restrictions of dress is the nineteenth-century tradition of hiding pregnancy by wearing a crinoline. The narrator calls attention to both the physical and mental strains this attire imposes on women as they describe how Orlando "stood mournfully" and was "dragged down by the weight" of the article of clothing (Woolf, *Orlando* 168). Rather than a conscious choice of clothes, the crinoline is "submissively adopted" and thereby presented as a compulsory imperative forced upon women (Woolf, *Orlando* 168). The recognition of these restrictions through the functionality of dress exposes the arbitrariness of gender norms. It is not the biological sex, but rather the deliberate adoption of corresponding clothes that decide over a person's degree of agency. Subsequently, clothing in *Orlando* also underlines its inherent gender policies, enforcing rigid binary roles regarding social standing and independence. As Orlando herself states, "[v]ain trifles as they seem, clothes have, they say, more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us," pointing out the performative act of dressing a certain way (Woolf, *Orlando* 131). While clothes remain powerful tools of expression in highlighting or concealing one's gender, they alone are not decisive of one's portrayal, which is furthermore imbued with societal expectations ranging beyond the confines of a gendered dress code.

## **GENDERED EXPECTATIONS IN SOCIETY**

Clothes, the narrator comments, "are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath. It was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman's dress and of a woman's sex" (Woolf, *Orlando* 132). Orlando's conscious choice of gender identity precedes any external changes visible to society. Thus, while gendered clothes may serve as a vehicle to convey a certain outward expression, they do not suffice to convincingly determine one's "societal gender" (García-Madrid 113). The transformation from man to woman then does not occur, as García-Madrid and Sanyal claim, simply through a change of clothes, but through Orlando's own display of socially deemed appropriate behaviors in her newly assumed role (García-Madrid 113; Sanyal 83). Wearing skirts does not suffice for Orlando to pass as a woman if she does not adopt the corresponding code of conduct. While they may support a perfunctory gender expression, her inexperience threatens to expose her nonetheless since, unaccustomed to her new role, she fails to meet behavioral expectations. Unlike "mature women, who have had the run of it all their lives," Orlando initially struggles to play her role correctly, as illustrated by her mistake of showing her ankles and nearly causing a sailor to fall from the mast (Woolf, *Orlando* 109ff.). Eventually, she learns of the "penalties and the privileges" of her position through observation, realizing that she may indulge in pleasantries reserved for the female sex but that she must also keep to certain rules (Woolf, *Orlando* 108ff.). By learning and following them, Orlando accepts her new position and, as Craps describes it, gradually "becomes feminized" (180). Thereby, gendered behavior is portrayed as a learned phenomenon and can therefore be constructed and reconstructed to maintain public images.

Furthermore, the novel establishes that Orlando is acutely aware of her constant

gender performance. The traits required for her to pass as a woman do not come naturally but require “the most tedious discipline” (Woolf, *Orlando* 110). However, according to Butler, failure to comply with the societal codes would result in punishment and disqualify her from passing, so the constant performance is a compulsory one in most social environments (“Performative Acts” 528). At first glance, Orlando’s efforts to conform to stereotypical expectations may sustain the notion of an essential binary framework (Craps 181). Nevertheless, the work that is necessary to portray a naturalness of gender at the same time exposes how any adherence to gendered norms of dress and behavior is a culturally charged undertaking aimed at fulfilling socially constructed obligations.

When cross-dressing, Orlando adapts the according dress and customs to claim membership of either binary gender category in different social contexts for her own benefit (Woolf, *Orlando* 153f.). Having experienced both sets of privileges and responsibilities, she weighs the duties of men against the “pleasant, lazy way of life” as a woman (Woolf, *Orlando* 109). On a surface level, the main advantage consists of navigating society in a way that allows her to take part in the advantages only accessible to either sex so that “the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied” (Woolf, *Orlando* 153). However, through Butler’s lens, Orlando’s frequent shift of presentation portrays a deliberate, subversive critique against the very norms she conforms to by showing the ease of slipping into either role through performance of stylized customs. As Burns points out, Orlando does not merely play the roles required of her but strategically decides on her chosen portrayals of gender, thereby claiming agency and a freedom of choice which society would otherwise deny her (346). While many see this as an escape from patriarchy (Dutta 256; Channing 13), Orlando critiques both

men’s and women’s stereotypical behavior (Woolf, *Orlando* 113). Her knowledge prompts her desire to act out both roles, culminating in “an intermix of alternating genders that sometimes correspond to her biological sex and sometimes does not” (Kaivola 252). In conclusion, Orlando’s cross-dressing does not only present a refusal to adhere to one set of customs and its responsibilities, but it also portrays a subversive act of rebellion by assuming a fluidity of identity that permits her to control the general system of gendered expectations through her performance.

## **NONCONFORMITY, FLUIDITY AND ANDROGYNY**

Beyond the external pressure to conform, Orlando’s performance does not merely oscillate between two ends of a binary gender spectrum. While the previous part establishes the necessity of passing through gendered attire and behavior, Orlando’s mode of presentation outside of society proves how her gender is an act solely played to appease social expectations rather than an expression of an inherent identity. The departure from Constantinople after her transformation marks a turning point in her story because it can be interpreted as a temporary retreat from society and its rules altogether. While living among the Romani people<sup>3</sup>, Orlando adopts an ambiguous attire. Clothing as a physical marker of gender appears to be unnecessary because “the gipsy woman [...] differ very little from the gipsy men” (Woolf, *Orlando* 108). Despite her lack of gender-conforming dress and behavior, her peers regard her as one of their own, which shows that claiming membership of their community does not require adherence to traditional gender roles. As a result, Orlando realizes that despite having been biologically female for some time, “she had scarcely given her sex a thought” until her return to England (Woolf, *Orlando* 108). Evidently, her adherence to gendered norms

<sup>3</sup> Woolf uses the term “gypsies”, a common way of referring to an ethnic group pursuing a nomadic lifestyle at the time of *Orlando*’s publication. While her writing does not imply overtly negative views of these groups, the word is nowadays considered derogatory and becomes increasingly replaced by the use of “Roma”, “Romani” or “Romani people”.

mainly serves to navigate English society rather than representing innate values of femininity or masculinity.

The description of Orlando's transformation further contributes to this understanding of gender as socially constructed, arbitrary, and detached from an essentialist viewpoint. Orlando's biological sex may switch from male to female, but this shift does not fundamentally change her personality and character: "Orlando had become a woman [...]. But [...] [t]he change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatsoever to alter their identity" (Woolf, *Orlando* 98). In this scene, the narrator deliberately plays with a mix of pronouns whereby the gender assigned to Orlando remains blurry and uncertain. Furthermore, Orlando's nakedness after the transformation, paired with the exclamation "THE TRUTH!" aims to emphasize the undeniable biological change. On the contrary, Orlando's unperturbed reaction counters the expectation of a dramatic recognition of her now different physiology (Woolf, *Orlando* 97f.). Not only does this prove that her character remains unchanged, but it also mocks biological essentialism and shows the disconnect between the physical sex and the socially ascribed gender.

This interpretation matches views on identity supported by contemporary queer studies. Modern perspectives argue for a queer and trans understanding of identity that describes it as not "reducible to singularity, sameness, and exclusion" (Joshua Chambers-Letson 119) but rather as fluid and malleable (Lau 238). Following this line of argument, transgender analyses of *Orlando* claim that this initial transformation is not a sex change at all but rather presents the first stage in a process of a fluid gender identity, which is bound to evolve further over the following pages of the novel (Crawford 178). Indeed, Orlando is often described in ambiguous terms and said to possess both "the strength of a man and a woman's grace" right after her transformation, therefore portraying masculine and feminine traits alike (Woolf,

*Orlando* 98). The result is the impression of Orlando as belonging to neither binary sex category but as an "androgynous being" who can freely choose between genders at will but who may also abandon labels and stereotypes altogether (Sánchez-Pardo González 78).

The concept of androgyny is further discussed by Virginia Woolf in her essay *A Room of One's Own* which contains ideas on gender identity that align with and further build upon Orlando's portrayal (Dutta 256; Sánchez-Pardo González 78). Woolf theorizes that the ideal mind is comprised of both female and male attributes, one of which predominates over the other, but which nonetheless cooperate harmoniously (*A Room* 71). This image bears a striking resemblance to passages in the novel: "Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place" (Woolf, *Orlando* 132). Consequently, androgyny as portrayed in *Orlando* shows that, even in moments of gender nonconformity, the main character embodies a fluidity of gender and identity which serves as a counterargument against frameworks of binary essentialism.

## CONCLUSION

In summary, *Orlando* challenges essentialist, binary notions of gender and identity. Butler's approach on gender performativity, as well as the concept of passing, provide a helpful theoretical background for the interpretation of the main character's experiences. The analysis shows how gender-coded clothing influences self-perception and serves as a gendering marker in the effort of passing. This emphasizes how easily a specific gender identity can be assumed through outward presentation according to conventions constructed to reaffirm binary division of genders and their respective access to agency. Additionally, gender performance requires dressing and behaving in accordance with gendered norms. Orlando's struggle and

eventual conformity to the necessary customs illustrate how this behavior is a learned ability which can be played akin to a theatrical role. Taking control of societal expectations then allows them to experience masculine as well as feminine privileges and responsibilities when cross-dressing.

A closer look at the transformation itself and Orlando's following behavior outside of society reveals that gender is not an objective fact but a carefully constructed, assumed role. The physical change only affects their appearance and behavior when confronted with and forced to submit to societal expectations. Their ambiguous mode of self-presentation during their time with the Roma reinforces the assumption that biological sex does not determine Orlando's individual identity. Instead, these scenes point towards an ambiguity of gender perceived as fluid and malleable. On one hand, this aligns with modern queer theories of gender and identity as flexible. On the other hand, it also shows similarities to Woolf's own idea of an androgyny which effortlessly blends aspects of femininity and masculinity into a harmonious, ideal other that transcends biological and socially constructed dimensions of gender. Ultimately, the novel portrays how both the strategies of passing through conformity and subversive, nonconforming dress and behavior expose the performative nature of gender. Woolf advocates for the breaking of essentialist binary stereotypes and instead celebrates fluidity, androgyny, and multifaceted understandings of identity. *Orlando* is a novel that plays with ambiguity and inconsistencies to challenge the arbitrary system of gender categorization, already anticipating modern discourse of queer perspectives on the fluidity of gender and identities beyond the binary framework.

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