

“we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman”.

Queering and theory-building potential in Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando*

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando* (1928) impressively anticipates that becoming and being a woman (or a man) are cultural processes of inscription and internalization of gendered roles. Orlando miraculously changes their sex from male to female, and thus has to restart the process of ‘becoming’ a gender by developing a new gender and social identity. The novel drafts a performative gender concept that is characterized by indefiniteness in terms of content and narration, namely different devices of *queering* that are used to question and deconstruct heteronormative ideas of ‘normality’ and to capture the process of developing not only a *different* gender identity but a *gender fluid* identity with a number of selves. Identity is increasingly conceptualized independently from the body and as constituted by individual mental elements, memories, interactions, and situational behavior. The novel dissolves the entity of identity in favor of a pluralistic, dynamic, and processual concept of identity – and thus anticipates and narratively performs important 20th century post-modern and feminist discourses of subject, gender, and the complex construction of identity.

Keywords: Woolf, Gender, Identity, Narration, Queer, Queering, Subject, Gender fluidity, Cross-dressing.

I

Introduction

Gender is not only an important part of self-constitution, it is also a crucial category for the perception by others: by classifying someone into a binary gender category they become intelligible, as Judith Butler states (cf. 1990, p. 16). This applies to real human beings as well as to literary characters: We use our real-life knowledge and experience in order to understand fictional characters, their identity, their behavior, and motivations. The challenge of making people and their gender intelligible is one that also concerns the question of how to linguistically capture identity and experience¹. Literature participates in this process of capturing human experience in language, and, consequently, is part of certain discourses. Literature does not emerge in or from a discursive-free space, but positions itself in relation to certain discourses (e.g. of normality and normativity, sexuality, gender, sociality, family, or

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even morality/ethics, etc.): it can reproduce and continue discursive concepts, or write against them, undermine them, subvert them (and anything in between). Regarding identity concepts, especially in relation to gender, literature and the world of fiction are spaces that allow pushing the (hetero-)normative borders of understanding identity, gender, and human experience beyond what is physically, societally, psychologically, and discursively possible. In fiction, an alternative reality can be conceptualized and played out, which is especially appealing for experimenting with identity and gender configurations. It allows articulating new ways of being in the world that are not – or not yet – possible or accepted in the non-fictional world.

Queerness is one of those things that do not fit heteronormative conceptualizations of sex, gender, and desire and therefore seemed impossible to think, live, or even capture in words for centuries. This has been changing only since the 1980s and '90s with a rising visibility of and awareness about queer identities and their varieties in society and academics. Queerness in this article is understood in the broad sense of the umbrella term it has come to be. In the 1980s and '90s 'queer' still mostly denoted gay or lesbian because those communities appropriated the originally negative term for self-denotation as a form of rebellion, empowerment, and visibility. Queer studies groundbreaking author Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick addresses the difficulties of the term 'queer'. She uses queer mainly "to denote [...] same-sex sexual object choice, lesbian or gay, whether or not it is organized around multiple criss-crossings of definitional lines" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8), directly parallels queer experience with "violence against gay- and lesbian-bashing" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 3) and explicitly refers to "histories of exclusion, violence, defiance, excitement" (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 9), and from there unfolds her queer reading methodology. However, Sedgwick also recognizes the

open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or *can't be* made) to signify monolithically. (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 8)

Since then, the term has opened up even more radically, offering a variety of people an opportunity for identification and community who do not identify and/or desire within the framework of binary, cis-heteronormative and/or heterosexual norms (cf. Degele, 2005, p. 15; Diversity Arts Culture, 2022). So, today, queer does not only refer to non-heterosexual sexual orientation, but equally to a non-conformist gender identity. This radical openness exemplifies in the variable use of the term as well. Grammatically it is used as noun or adjective but also as a verb ('to queer' means to irritate, mislead someone, to bring something out of balance and out of a given order, especially concerning identity allocations as 'naturally given', cf. Degele, 2005, p. 16). The unifying aspect is, overall, its delineation of heteronormative concepts, "it acquires its meaning from its oppositional relation to the norm" (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). The paradox is that queer, on the one hand, functions as self-denotation (and as such has empowering effects for the self-associated communities), and on the other hand, queer

in itself rejects any categorial fixation. “Queer is by definition whatever is at odds with the normal, the legitimate, the dominant. There is nothing in particular to which it necessarily refers. It is an identity without essence” (Halperin, 1995, p. 62). But in this paradox lies the great potential of destabilizing heteronormative structures, as Halperin continues:

It is from the eccentric positionality occupied by the the queer subject that it may become possible to envision a variety of possibilities for reordering the relations among sexual behaviors, erotic identities, constructions of gender, forms of knowledge, regimes of enunciation, logics of representation, modes of self-constitution, and practices of community – for restructuring, that is, the relations among power, truth, and desire. (Halperin, 1995, p. 62)

In literature, however, queer identities can be found long before ‘queer’ became a term and concept in gender studies, sociology and literary studies. Already in the early 19th and 20th century, there are literary characters that are located outside and beyond the binary categories of male or female, that are queer ‘avant la lettre’. As a result, literary texts that articulate such identities outside the binary and heteronormative gender norms contribute to understanding and seeing queer identities in the real world, and they further participate in the development of poststructuralist, deconstructivist, and anti-essentialist gender theories by formulating their basic ideas aesthetically ‘avant la lettre’. They do this by deconstructivist devices of so called “queering”, which means devices that aim to disarray and unsettle the heteronormative order by showing and articulating ‘the other’, e.g. by breaking rules and conventions, by consciously playing with and disappointing expectations, or by inconclusive actions. Popular examples are cross dressing or drag that play with the gendered coding of clothes and make-up, but there are many possible and highly individual forms and practices of queering in art and everyday life. By those means, the notion of ‘normality’ is challenged and opened for re-negotiation (cf. Degele, 2005, p. 22)². Sedgwick points out the political dimension of queerness in literature and literary criticism as a form of agency

to make invisible possibilities and desires visible; to make the tactic things explicit; to smuggle queer representation in where it must be smuggled and [...] to challenge queer-eradicating impulses frontally where they are to be so challenged. (Sedgwick, 1993, p. 3)

Queering therefore can also mean to actively bring queerness into the (literary and canonical) discourse, to give voice and visibility to ‘other’ forms of life, identity, and sexuality.

In this diverse perspective of queering and in the spirit of a very broad understanding of queer itself, literary narration can be understood as a fluid, queer cultural practice itself and even performative with regard to narratological techniques such as narrative perspective and voice, its reliability, character naming and design, or constructions of time and space. Tyler Bradway recently made this connection of queerness and narration even stronger in a formal approach, stating that “[n]arrative is a condition

of possibility of queerness” (Bradway, 2021, p. 712). The hypothesis of this paper is that the narrative construction of (gendered) identity is aesthetically parallelized with the cultural construction of gender. This will be shown by examining the specific queer and queering elements in Virginia Woolf’s novel *Orlando* from 1928. By turning to not only to a queer character but also queer narrative strategies, Woolf dissolves stable gender and eventually subject concepts, thereby anticipating 20th century gender theory and poststructuralist subject theories that dissolve the unity of the subject.

Orlando (Woolf 2018 [1928])³ is (and has been for decades) an outstanding text for questions about gender in the field of literary criticism. Additionally, debates about gender and sexual identity continue to be pressing topics in art, society, and academia. No wonder, the ‘Schaubühne Berlin’ showed an adaptation of Woolf’s novel in 2019 stating that it “undermines all rigid categories effortlessly and with artistic freedom, charges them with new meaning, and shows them as fluid” and that Virginia Woolf “created one of the most flamboyant hero_ines in literary history, whose profusion of identities goes beyond any narrow attribution” (Schaubühne, 2019; translation P.B.).

2

Narration and the construction of gender

At any rate, when a subject is highly controversial – and any question about sex is that – one cannot hope to tell the truth.

Woolf (1967 [1929], p. 7)

The novel’s protagonist Orlando is born as an attractive, aristocratic, and wealthy (biological) man in the 16th century, he (at this point in the novel Orlando is still addressed with male pronouns by the narrator) learns what it means to be a man in society in different epochs over centuries before miraculously turning into a woman after a mystical trance. Orlando then has to develop a new gender identity, now as a female, and integrate into rigid social norms in the 18th and 19th century and has to continue this adaption until the 20th century.

Woolf’s novel experiments with narrative forms and genre conventions. Paratextually labeled as “A Biography” in the subtitle, it is rather “biographical fiction” (Burns, 1994, p. 342)⁴, or a parody of a ‘biography’ since its most important narrative trait is the unreliability of the narrative voice, which stands in harsh contrast to the genre of biography that is usually dedicated to a rather fact-oriented mode of presentation. The narrator accompanies Orlando retrospectively through the centuries, comments, assesses, contextualizes, makes insertions, and gives historical explanations – it appears to be a zero focalization and the narrative voice would be identified as extradiegetic-heterodiegetic. Nonetheless, doubts about this seemingly objective narrative position are constantly raised. The narrator seems to have been present as an eye witness at

various occasions, stating for example: “[o]f their [papers of high importance, P.B.] contents then, we cannot speak, but can only *testify* that Orlando was kept busy” (WO, p. 112; italics P.B.). However, the narrator often cannot precisely tell what happened and gets caught up in contradictions. This also affects the time dimension: although there are numerous supposedly authentic dates and historic traces, it is often not clear what century Orlando currently lives in, which leads to uncertainties about the reliability of the provided information and constantly undermines the narrative authority. At one point, the narrator calls themselves not a ‘biographer’ as usual but a “memoir writer” (WO, p. 195), which refers to a completely different, subjective genre of self-narration and thereby increases the insecurity about *who* is telling *whose* story here. There are many more examples like these that show that this narrator is only *pretending* to be omniscient through narrative devices and thus permanently demonstrates, structurally and performatively, the unreliability of this specific narration, and of any construction of reality and authenticity. Consequently, we as readers are faced with the same challenge as Orlando when trying to write poetry: “And he [Orlando] despaired of being able to solve the problem of what poetry is and what truth is and fell into a deep dejection” (WO, p. 94)⁵.

Interestingly, this narrative authority is – explicitly and implicitly – exposed as male, and yet often evaded ironically:

But Orlando was a woman [...]. And when we are writing the life of a woman, we may, it is agreed, waive our demand for action, and substitute love instead. Love, the poet has said, is woman’s whole existence. [...] But love – as the male novelists define it – and who, after all, speak with greater authority? – has nothing whatever to do with kindness, fidelity, generosity, or poetry. (WO, 245f.)

This passage almost seems like a comment on the own – marked as male – practice and authority of narration. Still, whenever a male narrating mode is used, it seems so highly ironized that it reveals a criticism against male narration, the economy of male narration, and thus against the whole framework of hegemonic masculinity. This ironic and self-undermining mode of narration takes part in the over-all “parodic deconstruction of essentialist claims tentatively offered in the text”, as Burns (1994, p. 343) puts it. This performative undermining of a male tradition of narration can in itself be read as a queer narrative strategy, as an act of deconstruction and writing-against a male-dominated (narrating) economy.

Before becoming a woman, Orlando is an aristocratic, wealthy young man who succeeds socially as well as professionally: first, Orlando becomes the Queen’s treasurer in the 16th century, later, in the 17th century, he travels to Constantinople as royal ambassador and enjoys a good reputation. At first glance, Orlando does not seem a suitable figure of subversion and the ‘other’. However, Orlando’s privileged status allows the novel to shift the focus even more on other aspects of identity, especially sex and gender. From the very beginning, the supposed clarity of Orlando’s gender

is constantly undermined narratively, starting with the very first sentence of the novel: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it [...]” (WO, p. 13). The narrative voice makes itself almost suspicious by putting this seemingly unnecessary emphasis on Orlando’s sex and thus immediately puts gender and sex in the center of attention (cf. Gymnich, 2000, p. 297)⁶. The apparently unambiguous becomes questionable through the emphasis of its unambiguity (cf. Caughie, 1989, p. 42). By directing our attention to the aspect of sex, the narrative voice points to what the readers are *not* supposed to think: that Orlando’s sex is definite.

Orlando’s success in different male dominated areas of life, especially international politics, makes the sudden sex change even more unexpected and troubling. It is a fantastic incident that is neither narratively introduced nor accounted for. The miraculous metamorphosis is accompanied by the three allegorical figures Purity, Chastity, and Modesty, who remind us of the Moirai, the Greek goddesses of faith⁷. Then, after a sleep-like trance, Orlando awakens as a woman. The claim to truth demanded by the droning trumpets during the metamorphosis (“THE TRUTH”, WO, p. 127) and by the ‘biographer’ constantly throughout the novel is undermined and demonstrated as absurd through the magical, fairy tale, and mythical elements of the metamorphosis.

After the metamorphosis, the narrator acknowledges the change of sex (“we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman”, WO, p. 127) and performs the change of pronouns effortlessly after justifying it pragmatically:

Orlando had become a woman – there is no denying it. But in every other respect, Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity. Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same. His memory – but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘she’ for ‘he’ – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (WO, p. 128)

The adjusted naming practice performatively creates a new gendered reality and simultaneously shows distinctively how gender is highly bound to its linguistic articulation and is even constituted by language, although language can never fully capture (gendered) reality. Calling someone by certain gendered names, pronouns, etc. is shown as a performative act that has an effect on reality: naming practices are denoting practices. Thus, the change of pronouns functions as a means of what I want to call narrative performativity.

Orlando’s reaction to the metamorphosis is equally remarkable: “Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath” (WO, p. 128)⁸. The narrator continues:

The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it. Many people, taking this into account, and

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 ever since. (WO, p. 128f.)

The discrepancy between Orlando’s composure, or rather non-reaction, to the metamorphosis and the detailed introduction and commenting of the metamorphosis by the narrator (cf. WO, pp. 124-9) is remarkable. This discrepancy increases even more when taking into consideration the assumed high evaluation of such an event by the readers that will perceive the sex change as an unbelievable turn that would precipitate someone into a serious identity crisis. Especially the unequal parallelization of the ‘painless accomplishment’ of the change by Orlando, on one side, and, in contrast, the “great pain” the change causes in scientists, emphasizes this extreme discrepancy on the level of narration. Additionally, the quoted passage calls to a number of discursive assumptions that mark Orlando in different ways as queer (in a broad sense concerning non-heteronormative identity concepts): the assumption that Orlando “had always been a woman” and that the sex change would then be the bodily execution of this gender identity would make Orlando a transgender person (although it is in no way a true-to-life portrait of a transgender person). The second assumption that Orlando is, despite the female physiognomy, a man, so, still identifying as a man, is not any less queer; it would mean that Orlando has a trans* identity in a broad sense. The decision is put into the hands of science. On the one hand, queerness – or more specifically, queer gender identity – is thereby generally marked as something worth examining and thus potentially pathological (at least from a biological and psychological perspective), tied to the contemporary discourse. On the other hand, the narrating voice distances itself from this rigid discourse and the attempt of objective evaluation und scientific terminological fixation by deciding for the readers that the exact scientific capture of Orlando’s identity is not of any interest. Instead, the change is simply acknowledged as it is. In its critical position towards the discursive order and the narrative power to go beyond this order where needed, this is one example of how the novel executes strategies of queering productively and even performatively.

Moreover, the quoted section must remind us of Michel Foucault’s explanations about the development of a medical discourse in the 18th century that involves the compelling urge to make sex unambiguous by medical analysis. According to Foucault, this is the turning point for the modern deployment of sex and sexuality, and complex power relations controlling the body. This medical discourse claims sole authority to scientifically diagnose and prove one’s sex, it is imperative and absolute. In *The Will to Knowledge*, Foucault elaborates that around the 18th century, a “political, economic, and technical incentive arises to speak of sex”. Not so much as a general theory of sexuality but rather “in the form of analysis, bookkeeping, classification, and specification, in the form of quantitative or causal surveys” (Foucault, 1983, p. 29; translation P.B.). Kilian, who refers to Foucault, calls it an “almost violent production of truth that the sexuality

dispositive demands” (Kilian, 2004, p. 35; translation P.B.), and Foucault claims an “incessant demand for truth” (Foucault, 1983, p. 79; translation P.B.) that becomes stronger and continues into our present time⁹. It is exactly this scientific authority that the narrator proclaims when it comes to Orlando’s sex; there immediately is a strong interest in the examination of Orlando’s sex that seems to anticipate Foucault’s theoretical thoughts accordingly. Yet, at the same time, these approaches to identity are negated because they seem to be insufficient to capture Orlando’s truth. As we will see throughout the novel, Orlando’s identity goes far beyond what these sciences call ‘truth’ and is much more complex than the range of existences that sciences are able to think or classify. It is also interesting that the rigidity of the system that suppresses Orlando’s free identity not only shows its full power after the metamorphosis into a woman, but also at what point in time this power unfolds completely: Orlando’s new sexual identity comes to life in the 18th century, which is also the discursive turning point that Foucault identifies. Details like this make Woolf’s novel truly innovative and even theoretically pioneering.

Elements of queering like the above become stronger throughout the novel. They are not always as explicit as in the paragraph addressing the scientific failure to define Orlando’s sex, sometimes they need a very close look at the text and its implications. What unites them, though, is that the constant destabilization of identity and gender categories is supported by the narration itself. They intertwine in a narrative and performative interplay. The crossing of sex and gender boundaries is always executed on the level of narration, too. As briefly mentioned, time is another crucial dimension of this narrative strategy of questioning the seemingly stable categories of identity and being human. Orlando runs through five centuries in a life span of 30 years, thereby deconstructing the human condition itself as mortal and dependent on time. As Orlando’s gender becomes less finite and more complex, the narration increasingly loses its reliability concerning time and the ‘factuality’ of information. The results are more and more narrative lacunas and gaps that increase the readers’ insecurity and serve the novel’s queering strategies.

3

“it is clothes that wear us”: the subversive potential of clothes and the performativity of gender

After the metamorphosis, Orlando’s old male self synthesizes with the new female body that forces them to adapt new patterns of behavior, clothing, etc.¹⁰. Nonetheless, Orlando’s self and the stability of their identity seem safe at first. But back in England, Orlando is quickly confronted with the constraints of the binary gender order that especially concern women in the 18th century. As a consequence, Orlando loses their indifference towards their new gender role that is inevitably interwoven with their anatomical body. Orlando’s rising awareness about gender roles and codes first shows in a reflection about female clothing. Orlando has to learn, adapt, and internalize

the rules and codes of behavior, clothing, social interaction, and language that apply to women of their time. They have to develop a completely new gender identity as a consequence of the sex change – Orlando has to ‘become a woman’, in Simone de Beauvoir’s words –¹¹, and then ‘perform’ it convincingly in order to be perceived and accepted as a woman in society. Orlando’s sense of performing gender shows structural similarities with Judith Butler’s theory of the performative character of gender:

In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface*, but never reveal, the organizing principle of identity as a cause. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally constructed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are fabrications manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler, 1990, p. 136; italics in original)

One of those “corporeal signs” is Orlando’s transformed anatomical body that reacts back on the social and behavioral dimension of identity that is performed in relation to “other discursive means”, one of which are clothes as a first visual marker of (assumed) sexual identity in correspondence with other social and interactionist gender conceptualizations. We see parallels to Beauvoir again, who claims that “the truth is that anyone can clearly see that humanity is split into two categories of individuals with manifestly different clothes, faces, bodies, smiles, movements, interests, and occupations” (Beauvoir 2011 [1994], p. 4)¹². Clothes seem to have more meaning than merely covering and protecting the body. They play a crucial role in the construction of gender identity.

Orlando understands the relationship between clothes, gender perception, and identity and reflects on its arbitrary character. Therefore, important devices of Orlando’s process of ‘becoming a woman’ (or for any performance of gender in society) are clothing, cross-dressing, masquerade, and disguise, which are all crucial motives in the novel. Orlando develops a playful way of handling clothes and their gendered implications. Sometimes, there are just small hints to the fragility of binary gender categories and the coding of clothes: “So then one may sketch her spending her morning in a China robe of ambiguous gender” (WO, p. 202). Sometimes, the queerness of Orlando’s clothing practice is more obvious, e.g. when Orlando dresses up ‘as a man’ in their old male clothes and goes out and effortlessly ‘plays’ the male role because they can easily recall to their experience of being a man. There seems to be a ‘bodily memory’ (“Körpergedächtnis”, Kilian, 2004, p. 215) that Orlando can activate, and after a short phase of settling in, they can act and move securely in the male role pass as male, and even flirt with a woman called Nell:

Orlando swept her hat off to her in the manner of a gallant paying his addresses to a lady of fashion in a public space. [...] Through this silver glaze the young woman looked up at him (for a man he was to her) [...]. She rose; she accepted his arm. (WO, p. 198)

But there is more than just the element of cross-dressing or disguise in this practice; Orlando truly re-feels being a man: “To feel her [Nell] hanging lightly yet like a

suppliant on her arm, rouse in Orlando all the feelings which become a man. She looked, she felt, she talked like one.” (WO, p. 198) It seems as if ‘she was one’ is the only missing element in this row, so strongly does Orlando feel the male identity. This strong feeling goes beyond a dress code or cross-dressing practices. It shows the performativity of gender roles and deeply jeopardizes the allegedly stable binary order of the sexes. This is reinforced by introducing the dimension of desire into the complex dynamics of sex, gender, and clothes. Throughout the cross-dressing, Orlando also develops bisexual and gay desires, which opens another dimension of queerness: “For the probity of the breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally.” (WO, p. 202) As explained before, the history of the term ‘queer’ is one of gay communities appropriating the negatively connotated term for themselves as an act of empowerment. So, it originally refers to a group that was marginalized and persecuted for their sexuality, their desire. By equipping Orlando with this extra dimension of queerness that comprises not only the multiplicity of their gender identity by and after the metamorphosis but also a dimension of non-heterosexual, ergo non-normative and non-conformist desire, makes the articulation of queerness in the novel more complex and avant-gardist.

Besides the articulation of queer practices of dressing and desire, the novel theoretically reflects on the performativity of gender and identity in relation to clothes: “Thus, there is much to support the view that it is clothes that wear us and we them; we may make them take the mould of arm or breast, but they mould our hearts, our brains, our tongues to their liking.” (WO, p. 172f.) The theoretical reflection about the impact of clothes on our way of being, our experience of ourselves as gendered subjects, goes even further:

The difference between the sexes is, happily, one of great profundity. Clothes 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. [...] For here again, we come into a dilemma. 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 the very opposite of what it is above. (WO, p. 173f.)

In the spirit of these thoughts, Orlando never considers the relation of body, sex, gender, and clothes as naturally given after the metamorphosis. Hence, they never feel alienated from their ‘new’ body but only need to adjust the clothes and behavior in line with societal expectations put on this new body. Thus, the highly constructed relationship between sex and gender, for which clothes serve as a performative medium of intelligibility, is articulated in the character of Orlando. The novel shows a mutual and correlating relation of gender specific clothes and behavioral patterns that are adapted by wearing these exact clothes:

The change of clothes had, some philosophers will say, much to do with it [that Orlando adapts certain ‘female’ attributes; P.B.]. Vain 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. (WO, p. 172)

To put this in theoretical terms: the novel discusses the discursive diction of certain dress codes that are rather power systems of clothes that people are subjugated to if they want to be perceived as a certain gender, in order to be intelligible as a person as Butler states (1990, p. 16): “‘persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognizable standards of gender intelligibility”¹³. It is a correlation that is inevitable and imperative – one *has* to be a gender. Clothes ‘force’ into a gender (and social/societal) role while constituting it at the same time. The adaptation of clothing to the now female sex thus articulates more than just a superficial dress code. It shows a systematic and powerful binary gender order that Orlando opposes increasingly. Clothes *produce* gender. Societal codes *produce* gender. However, clothing can free the individual from those forces or undermine them, e.g. through cross-dressing. Orlando’s cross-dressing is very complex and could only be shortly touched in this article. By putting on different clothes and costumes, Orlando can slip into different gender roles that allow them to “try female and male behavioral patterns and their variations of desire” (Schößler, 1999, p. 66; translation P.B.). That way, Orlando shows impressively what ‘doing gender’ is (see for an introduction Holzleithner, 2002, pp. 72-3). But it goes even further than this performative idea of ‘doing gender’: the seemingly clear “connection of clothes and sex identity” is problematized continuously and clothes are marked as “unreliable sex characteristics” (Gymnich, 2000, p. 297; translation P.B.). By showing how easy it is to pass as a different sex/gender identity, namely by just dressing differently, the novel exposes how fabricated and manipulable these categories are. Thereby, the novel “uncover[s] like few others that clothes, gestures, and facial expression produce gender” (Schößler, 1999, p. 65; translation P.B.). That is one of the specific queer and queering qualities of the novel: it displays and performs queerness in various forms; it shows that the binary gender order is produced culturally, artificially, and arbitrarily, that it is unreliable and therefore can be undergone, played and experimented with as well as changed, which Orlando shows in their own queer dressing practices.

4

The dissolution of identity

Through their queer practices of clothing and desire, Orlando increasingly, and against the restrictive gender roles of the (now) 19th century, develops towards a gender fluid character: they fulfill the heteronormative expectations of marriage, motherhood, and femininity¹⁴, but only to gain freedom in other areas of life, especially with regard to their literary writing. As a gender fluid character, Orlando has access to spaces of experience beyond the binary gender order, in which identity is and can be designed more freely. Orlando’s specific queerness is increasingly constituted by their

overcoming of gendered identity borders in favor of a radical autonomy of identity that only submits contextually to the societal order when necessary for the sake and safety of their freedom.

As can be seen, the fantastic sex change is only the beginning of a development that leads away from the binary concept of sex. By means of clothing and behavioral changes and adaptations, Orlando is situated more and more beyond and between gendered categories: “Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided.” (WO, p. 174f.) Orlando’s identity is complex and multi-faceted due to the metamorphosis and the trans-historic experiences made over several centuries (cf. Gymnich, 2000, p. 307). Still, in spite of all changes, they continue being Orlando. But this Orlando is never just one but a multiplicity of Orlandos, a diversification of an “eminently pluralistic identity” (Gymnich, 2000, p. 307; translation P.B.). This ‘pluralistic identity’ is impressively exposed shortly after the metamorphosis in a paragraph that has been discussed before. The wording is crucial here: although identity stays in singular, the use of the third person plural “their” and the fluctuating use of all other personal pronouns create a strong case for Orlando’s pluralistic concept of identity:

Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered *their* future, did nothing whatever to alter *their* identity. *Their* faces remained, as *their* portraits prove, practically the same. His memory – but in future we must, for convention’s sake, say ‘her’ for ‘his’, and ‘she’ for ‘he’ – her memory then, went back through all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle. (WO, p. 127; italics P.B.)

Here, identity is thought radically independent from the body and is constituted mainly through individual mental elements, memories, interactions, and behavior. *One* body does not mean *one* identity. Burns calls it a “disidentification present in identity” (Burns, 1994, p. 350). Towards the end of the novel, this pluralistic view on identity that crosses the entity and boundary of gender becomes increasingly strong and finally dissolves and abandons the concept of an integrated, whole identity, or, using the words of the novel: “I’m sick to death of this particular self” (WO, p. 281).

For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not – Heaven help us – all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? [...] [T]hese selves of which we are built up, one on top of another, as plates are piled on a waiter’s hand, have attachments elsewhere, sympathies, little constitutions and rights of their own, call them what you will (and for many of these things there is no name) [...]. (WO, p. 281)

The passage continues by increasingly narrowing the perspective and voice on Orlando, almost like a stream of consciousness:

[F]or she was, to hear her talk, changing her selves as quickly as she drove – there was a new one at every corner – as happens when, for some accountable reason, the conscious self, which is the

uppermost, and has the power to desire, wishes to be nothing but one self. This is what people call the true self, and it is, they say, compact of all the selves we have it in us to be; commanded and locked up by the Captain self, the Key self, which amalgamates and controls them all. (WO, p. 282f.)

The passage above does not imply an essentialist idea of ‘true’ identity but the “true self” is characterized by the lack of reducibility to *one* essence or entity. There seems to be no ‘truth’, “for this is one of the cases where the truth does not exist. Nothing exists. The whole thing is a miasma – a mirage” (WO, p. 177). So, even more important than the question of sex that seems at the center of attention at first glance, questions about the subject, self, and identity are negotiated in the novel: “it [...] informatively examines the tensions between notions of *essential* personal identity and *contextually re-defined* subjectivity” (Burns, 1994, p. 344; italics in original).

The pluralistic conceptualization of identity seems almost prophetic regarding the processual post-modern subject idea, as Hebert (1992, p. 16) emphasizes: “Woolf was exploring the discontinuities of the self in her fiction. In her narrative strategies she was a prophet of the self-in-progress, the subject-in-process of postmodernism”. Nancy Cervetti (1996, p. 175) reinforces the novel’s subversive power with regard to several concepts:

Woolf laughs in the face of the law, the ‘natural’ body, codes of dress and behavior, and romantic love. Over and over the text mocks its own pursuit of Orlando, its own attempt to pin him down, to know the biographical facts of her life and define her essential person. The text marks subjectivity as multiple and shifting, and any attempt to define Orlando’s identity is useless. Through laughter Woolf subversively repeats and ridicules convention and suggests the possibility of refusing an essentialist and binary mode of thinking. Through *Orlando*’s pleasures and laughter, Woolf creates another location from which to evaluate and participate in the social construction of gender, the body, and our lives.

In its notion of gender as socially constructed, as a culturally and historically embedded and regulated performance, Butler’s “claim that gender identity is a stylized repetition of acts through time” (Cervetti, 1996, p. 168) seems anticipated, whereby the novel shows the possibilities of “gender transformation in the arbitrary relation of these acts and in their parodic repetitions” (Cervetti, 1996, p. 168).

The question of a “fixed identity” (Burns, 1994, p. 344) and whether it exists is inevitably connected to gender: “Gender trouble is contagious in Orlando, a playful trouble that questions the possibility, the need, or the advantage of any stable notion of identity” (Cervetti, 1996, p. 169)¹⁵. By showing the constructionist character and instability of a gender identity based on an ‘essential truth’, *Orlando* is questioning the existence of such essential truth and *one* singular identity itself¹⁶. This does not only show strong parallels to Butler’s theories about sex and gender but also to French poststructuralist conceptualizations of the subject that radically question the “idea of a complete, monolithic subject” (Gymnich, 2004, p. 132; translation P.B.). Interestingly,

French poststructuralists like Hélène Cixous, Lucy Irigaray, or Julia Kristeva use very similar formulations for their conceptualizations of subjectivity to those that can be found in the novel, especially with regard to Orlando's pluralistic identity towards the end:

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 well have as many thousand. [...] [A]ll were different and she may have called upon any one of them. (WO, p. 282)

Toril Moi (1985) connects Woolf and her literary work to Julia Kristeva's deconstructivist identity and subject theory, in which – amongst other things – she radically challenges the dichotomy of men and women, their alleged entity, and their ascription to the metaphysical sphere. Kristeva emphasizes the openness and processuality of the subject and brings it to the term “sujet-en-procès” (subject-in-process) by transferring the notion of an unstable, incoherent subject that is located in a complex “area of tension of heterogeneous forces” (Braun, 2002, p. 380; translation P.B.)¹⁷ into a “dynamic identity model that re-formulates identity as result of performative linguistic acts and social processes” (Kolesch, 2002, p. 383; translation P.B.). This processual subject is heterogeneous and indefinite, and it is “subjugated to contradictions, constraints, and experiences of alterity that are not only articulated in the productive act of speaking and writing but are transformed themselves” (Kolesch, 2002, p. 383; translation P.B.).

Kristeva dissolves the notion of a “coherent, unified self” (Shippers, 2011, p. 35) and emphasizes “the fluidity of subjectivity, which characterises [sic] the concept of the subject-in-process” (Shippers, 2011, p. 36). Especially with regard to sex and gender, Kristeva criticizes the essentialist notion of the self and identity radically: “The belief that ‘one is a woman’ is almost as absurd and obscurantist as the belief that ‘one is a man’” (Kristeva, 1981a, p. 137). She suggests to “‘dissolve identity’, challenging those theories that proclaim fixed categories of male and female” (Shippers, 2011, p. 37), which leads to the question: “What can ‘identity’, even, sexual identity’, mean in a new theoretical and scientific sphere where the very notion of identity is challenged?” (Kristeva, 1981b, p. 33f.)

We can see avant-gardist traits in the theoretical and philosophical parallels between Kristeva and the novel's identity concept that withdraws from traditional definitions, a perspective for which Moi (1985, p. 13) makes a strong case: “Here, I feel, Kristeva's feminism echoes the position taken up by Virginia Woolf some sixty years earlier.” Cervetti (1996, p. 174) supports this hypothesis:

Woolf was sixty years in advance of Julia Kristeva in calling for the deconstruction of the opposition between masculinity and femininity and challenging the very notion of identity. Because Orlando lives through centuries, defies labels, and loves both men and women, it is impossible to define or identify with him/her in any traditional way.

Cixous calls the subject “by definition [...] a non-closed mix of self/s and others” and states that “[a] subject is at least a thousand people” (Cixous, 1994, p. xvii). Similar to how Cixous distances herself from a unified subject that constitutes an entity, and, for that matter, from an entity-oriented approach to literary characters that would reinforce established patriarchal structures (cf. Gymnich, 2004, p. 133), Woolf seems to dissolve the entity of the subject in her novel. Cixous states:

So long as we do not put aside ‘character’ and everything it implies in terms of illusion and complicity with classical reasoning and the appropriating economy that such reasoning supports, we will remain locked up in the treadmill of reproduction (Cixous, 1974, p. 387)¹⁸.

It is exactly this “treadmill” that the novel opposes. There is no unified, coherent, final character any more. Although caught up in the binary system since “[one] (cannot) step completely outside of the existing (patriarchal) world” (Burns, 1994, p. 347), Orlando undermines the notion of stable categories of identity and the subject that readers expect and know from their real-life experience, and which therefore seem articulatable. Woolf, instead, offers a more open concept of a pluralistic, often androgynous identity. Moi (1985, p. 13) therefore rightly confirms Woolf a strong feminist power: “She has understood that the goal of the feminist struggle must precisely be to deconstruct the death-dealing binary oppositions of masculinity and femininity.” It is a “non-essentialist form of writing” that not only denies “a final, unified meaning” but “reveals a deeply skeptical attitude to the male-humanist concept of an essential human identity” (Moi, 1985, p. 9). Burns supports this notion of identity portrayed in *Orlando* and claims it to be very close to some of these theoretical thoughts:

[W]hat is ‘revealed’ or ‘unveiled’, the ‘truth’ of Orlando’s sex – that *he* is a *she* – points only to the essential instability of essence, the reversibility inscribed within the ‘truth’. What is essential here is to be *without* an essence. What is revealed is the reversibility of sex. This is no mere playful fancy on Woolf’s part, however; it leads to reconsider the nature of sexuality and the constructedness of gender. (Burns, 1994, p. 350)

Art, literature, and fiction become performative media of the deconstruction of essential identity in *Orlando* and reveal the fiction of such identity concepts themselves. Such a modelling of identity has theory-building potential, I argue, which becomes evident in the structural and philosophical similarities between Orlando’s processual (gender) identity and poststructuralist and gender theories. The novel raises questions that are in the center of post-modern discourse – not only on the level of *histoire* or in its philosophical passages, but also on the level of *discours*, on the level of narration itself. Orlando has to stay intangible, impalpable because their identity is so plural, indefinite, and open. We *feel* this pluralistic, intangible self on the level of narration, while reading and while feeling more and more insecure about who or what Orlando is because the narrator increasingly fails to capture this complex identity linguistically and narratively. It shows in the incompetence of the narrator (and language itself) to capture Orlando’s identity:

[T]he notion of an essential self being comically reduced to a belief that Woolf's less than competent narrator struggles to defend, while the parody of that narrator's attempt results in the realization of the modern, constructive figuration of subjectivity. (Burns, 1994, p. 346)

Woolf dissolves the subject and the entitarian idea of identity and aesthetically opens a post-modernist discourse that will become so strong and develop further in the course of the 20th century, a feminist discourse that progresses into a queer-feminist discourse and sets the foundation for the gender and queer studies.

5

Summary: Gender theory 'avant la lettre'

In *Orlando*, the search for an essential 'truth' is central and evident in various ways and contexts, but it is continuously doomed to failure against the complexity of Orlando's individual gender identity that displays the construction and performativity of gender categories. The concept of an essential 'core identity' is dissolved productively in favor of a pluralistic and ambiguous notion of gender identity and thus is an anticipation of important elements of poststructuralist and gender theories.

For that, several narrative devices are used: first, the unreliability of the narrator is made productive in order to raise doubts about what is 'true' and to exhibit the in itself constructionist character of any narration or 'reality'. Second, fantastic and mythological motives equally serve the doubt of the readers in the narrated and thus in gender categories generally. Third, clothes and (cross-)dressing practices are an important motive for articulating inconclusive gender identities; especially masquerade and disguise in clothing practices, namely cross-dressing, are means of questioning and de-naturalizing the 'truth' of identity and gender categories. Clothing becomes a performative medium by demasking itself as superficial and unreliable for the detection of one's sex or gender. Thereby, the novel not only confirms the concept of gender as socially constructed and produced but negotiates the very foundation of how we perceive and interpret people and identity and how these processes are imprinted discursively by cultural patterns. In its resistance against the definite, conclusive tangibility of 'truth' of identity, *Orlando* shows avant-gardist ideas of late 20th poststructuralist theory and early 21st century gender and queer theory, especially the work of Butler and her successors.

Thereby, the novel takes part in the de-naturalization of heteronormative structures – in the sense of queering. It shows how strong the discursive power is that produces, shapes, and maintains sex and gender categories and how difficult it is to break through the entangled patterns of perception and interpretation, the habit of reading people in line with a heteronormative gender order. *Orlando* opens up the possibility for a discourse that exceeds the boundaries of sex and sexual identity and thus also binary gender categories and desire. That is what gives the novel its important theoretical and even theory-building potential, beside the articulation of queer identity. If there

was something like ‘truth’, it is not equivalent to definiteness or unambiguity but it is ambiguous and does not need naming/nomination in order to be legitimized – and yet, it can be articulated. That is the reason why there is no final resolving of who or what Orlando is – because there simply is not just *one* answer. Gender and identity are conceptualized as plural, heterogeneous, and a continuum. These concepts can be operationalized theoretically and legitimize gender and queer studies not only in our socio-cultural environment (‘Lebenswelt’) of everyday life but also in literary-aesthetic discourse because they anticipate and articulate theoretical thoughts aesthetically ‘avant la lettre’.

Language and the narrative act itself are constantly displayed as a system of organization and production of meaning that also affects gender. Language appears to be an auxiliary construct that is not at all objective but – like the gender it denotes – carries discursive imprints. It is insufficient to reflect the complexity of human, especially gendered, reality. This insufficiency especially concerns gender understood as a mode of existence and experience, of being in the world, that can never be fully covered by language because it is so individual and therefore cannot be generalized or objectified.

In this way, *Orlando* not only challenges and criticizes the prevailing gender order and its cultural production but also the insufficiency of linguistic constitution that goes along with this order. However, the novel is able to stand these gender ambivalences and polyvalences, the un-definability of things, humans, and phenomena, and is yet still able to create a fulfilled subject that ‘makes sense’. Through structural comparison of subject and gender theories with aesthetic and narrative subject constitution, literature can appear as an inspiration or even experimental ground for theoretical thoughts, as a medium that participates in a variety of not only aesthetic but also social, theoretical/academic, and political discourses. As Bradway has recently argued, narrative can be understood “as an ecology of interdependent forms – aesthetic and nonaesthetic – in contiguous torsion with one another” (Bradway, 2021, p. 712). Herein lies the extraordinary potential of literature that shows exemplarily in *Orlando*: as a space in which the ‘other’, unknown, unthinkable, unspeakable is thinkable and possible, where it can be tried out and be integrated in existing structures, or where those exact structures can be deconstructed.

Notes

1. Cf. Caughie (1989, esp. p. 42): “One must assume a sexual identity in order to take one’s place in language, in order to express anything. Sexual identity is assumed in language.”
2. Butler (1990, p. 137; italics in original) also recognizes the quality of drag as revealing the fabricated character of gender: “In imitating gender, drag implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself – as well as its contingency.”
3. In the following cited with the abbreviation wo, page.
4. Burns (1994, p. 342) calls the novel “unfaithful to the genre of biography.”
5. Note the striking intertextual reference to Goethe’s autobiography *From my Life: Poetry and Truth* (German: *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit*) (published between 1811-1833); cf. Klein (2011, p. 85).

6. Furthermore, the sentence contains an allusion to the motive of masquerade and the disguising character of clothing that will become a leading motive throughout the novel and is frequently used as a means of playing with gendered codes of appearance and behavior.

7. In Greek mythology the Moirai (in Roman mythology called Parcae) Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos are the three goddesses of fate that hold the thread of life and thereby the fate of humanity in their hands. Interestingly, they carry a metaphorical dimension of clothes in the Homeric narration: they are spinners and thereby can be integrated in the recurring motive and metaphorical play surrounding clothes and masquerade throughout the novel; cf. Zimmermann (2000, p. 389).

8. Again, the allegedly omniscient narrator who is supposedly witnessing the events speaks in a conjunctive mode (“presumably”), and is thereby raising doubts about the truth and factuality of the narration that is constantly claimed. Also, the term “looking-glass” suggests a subjective looking rather than an objective mirroring, which supports the thesis that scientific objectivity concerning sex and, even more, gender is limited, supported by the narrative objectivity falling apart. The “looking-glass” may be read as a reference to the early sociological theory of Charles Horton Cooley from 1902 about the interactionist formation of identity, which he calls “looking-glass self”. Cooley understands the constitution of the self as a permanent imagined perception/observation and evaluation by others in a social community (cf. Cooley, 1922 [1902], esp. p. 168ff.). Furthermore, the mirror scene is coded as a moment of (self-)recognition in literary history, which functions here, however, at first, as plain visual capture. True self-recognition and -reflection – especially regarding one’s own sex and gender – that looking in the mirror symbolically entails, set in much later under social-interactionist and cultural conditions and lead Orlando to a deep self-experience and the insight about their own multiplicity.

9. See also Shumway (1989, pp. 141-55) who summarizes Foucault’s train of thought pointed.

10. In order to take Orlando’s complex and ambivalent gender identity into account, the pronouns they/them will be used from now on, although the narrator switches to female pronouns after the metamorphosis.

11. “One is not born, but rather becomes, woman. No biological, psychic, or economic destiny defines the figure that the human female takes on in society; its civilization as a whole that elaborates this intermediary product between the male and the eunuch that is called feminine.” (Beauvoir, 2011 [1994], p. 283).

12. Beauvoir clearly writes in the spirit of a still dominantly binary order that knows only two sexes and assigned genders. This view has since been contested radically by gender and queer studies.

13. See also Stauffer (2008), esp. ch. 9.2: “Ironie und Geschlecht: Maria Janitschek, Ricarda Huch, Else Lasker-Schüler und Virginia Woolf” (pp. 312-7, esp. 316f.).

14. Orlando gets married and gives birth to a child. By giving birth, no doubt is being left that Orlando is a ‘real’ woman because it requires female reproduction organs. The birth of the child therefore seems to prove Orlando’s femininity both anatomically (sex) and socially (gender) since they fulfill the social expectation of reproduction that is put on women and seem to reinforce the superficial biological definition of femininity. This makes Orlando’s development towards a body-independent and gender fluid identity against the biological and essentialist concept of ‘sex=gender’ even more remarkable.

15. The reference to Butler’s groundbreaking *Gender Trouble* (1990), in which she develops her theory of the performativity of gender, is clear.

16. This, again, becomes evident in the scene right after the metamorphosis when the ‘truth’ of Orlando’s sexual identity is demanded vehemently.

17. Kristeva follows a long philosophical tradition of reflection about the subject and the self. In the German Romantic period, from Fichte to Novalis, the question of the self, the feeling of the self, and its fragmentary open-endedness is central. In modernity, the aspect of ‘the other’ becomes increasingly important for concepts of the subject and subjectivity (cf. Braun, 2002, p. 379).

18. Cixous continues: “We will find ourselves, automatically, in the syndrome of role-playing. So long as we take to be the representation of a true subject that which is only a mask, so long as we ignore the fact that the ‘subject’ is an effect of the unconscious and that it never stops producing the unconscious [...], we will remain prisoners of the monotonous machination that turns every ‘character’ into a marionette.” (Cixous, 1974, p. 387)

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