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## WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*: TRANSGRESSING THE BOUNDARIES OF MODERNIST NOTIONS OF GENDER AND TIME<sup>122</sup>

### Introduction

*Orlando: A Biography* is a novel dedicated to Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, which was called "*the longest and most charming love letter in literature*" by Nigel Nicolson, Sackville-West's son (1973: s. 202). The novel with its experimental nature brings together many diverse elements: it is a biography above all, as the title of the novel denotes; it is fiction, considering the time span of the novel which covers more than three centuries in Orlando's life and the fact that in the middle of the novel Orlando becomes a woman; regarding Orlando's growing up and personal development, the novel also resembles a Bildungsroman. Goldman highlights Woolf's "*experiment with genre*" in addition to her modernism, feminism, and oppositional language which blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction, prose and poetry, art and life (2006: s. 38). Virginia Woolf's writing is representative of the modernist period in literature, since her feminist writing questioned women's equality in marriage and in education opportunities. In the Victorian era, deprived of many basic rights, "*women were leading their lives as if they were prisoners of Panopticon*" (Köseoğlu 2010: s. 192). However, as a consequence of the changes in gender notions in the twentieth century, postmodernism –seen by some a continuation of modernism– may also be discovered in modernist literature and Woolf's work. Lewis puts forth that the "*seeds of postmodernism are present in the highest of high modernist works*" (2008: s. 156). Thus, this chapter intends to analyse Woolf's employment of gender relations and time conception to argue that the novel indeed transcends modernism and taking it a step further it employs some postmodern elements.

Michel Foucault refers to the function of the evolution of the Catholic pastoral in the reification of Western sexuality and states that confession culture preferred a more refined language emphasising discretion in the seventeenth century; however, its scope widened greatly: "*According to the new pastoral, sex must not be named imprudently, but its aspects, its correlations, and its effects must be pursued down to their slenderest ramifications: a shadow in a daydream, an image too slowly dispelled, a badly exorcised complicity between the body's mechanics and the mind's complacency: everything had to be told*" (1978: s. 19). In this way, instead of simply avoiding taboo subjects and suppressing them, the Catholic pastoral put sexuality into discourse and produced sexual discourses reifying and petrifying sexual identities and an ethics of sexuality. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries there was a discursive explosion which, for Foucault, led to "*a centrifugal movement with respect to heterosexual monogamy*" (1978: s. 38). The emphasis on and the normalisation of heterosexual monogamy inevitably resulted in the marginalisation of same-sex relationships and the reification of *unnatural* acts. Lewis states that in 1895 Oscar Wilde's conviction and imprisonment for sodomy created a new consciousness of same-sex acts and relationships and despite continuing persecution homosexuals such as Forster, André Gide, Marcel Proust and Woolf were more open about their orientation fighting against "*compulsory heterosexuality*" (2008: s.14-15). The late-Victorian era also witnessed women's suffrage movements and prioritised the New Woman, challenging the Victorian notions of sexual identities. As a result, the distinct traditional roles attributed to men and women were questioned and rejected by many. In the twentieth century, Judith Butler, in the preface to her *Gender Trouble* claimed that gender is performative indeed and added;

"what we take to be an internal essence of gender is manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body. In this way, it showed that what we take to be an "internal" feature of ourselves is one that we anticipate and produce through certain bodily acts, at an extreme, an hallucinatory effect of naturalized gestures". (1999: s. xv)

As a Foucauldian, Butler argues that there is no essence of manliness or womanliness; these gender roles are nothing but reifications constructed by societies. These constructs, however, are naturalised and prioritised over the unnaturalised minorities. However, as Butler claims, gender is nothing beyond a reiterated

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set of acts and nothing more than performance. Thornham also admits that people construct gender “*in the service of a regulatory heterosexual binarism. Gender, like other categories of knowledge, then, is the product not of truth but of power expressed in discourse*” (2001: s. 46).

With Foucault and Butler’s contributions, in addition to many other gender theorists, one can see a changing attitude towards gender and sexuality from modernism to postmodernism. Especially in the 1990s, many writers, activists, conferences, and journals dealt with LGBT culture and employed the stigmatised term *queer*. “*This was both to remind the reader of homophobic prejudice and to suggest a form of criticism that uses a pejorative signifier of transgressive desire and sexual instability as a metaphor to describe a category that goes beyond categories*” (Sim 2001: s. 345). Sexuality, therefore, especially in the late-twentieth century is regarded as a fluid, diverse and unstable construct discursively produced and perpetuated. This is why for the influential theorists of queer reading, such as Butler, Sedgwick, and Miller, deconstruction and postmodern theories are fundamental and of great value. In his *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1979) Jean-François Lyotard argues that grand narratives of Western culture should be rejected since they have lost all their credibility (qtd in Sim 2001: s. 3). Grand narratives are theories which claim to have access to the truth and power to explain everything; however, they turn into authoritarianism because they reject any form of challenge or criticism. Heterosexuality, heteronormativity, sexuality, monogamy and gender roles are all grand narratives and thus they all have to be questioned and deconstructed. However, this chapter only deals with the constructed nature of gender roles before it moves on to analyse the time concept in the novel.

## Discussion

Gender identity is one of the biggest grand narratives constructed by societies over the course of time. Concerned with women’s rights and roles, Virginia Woolf lays bare the constructed nature of gender and destabilises it in *Orlando*. The very first sentence of the novel reads: “*HE—FOR THERE COULD BE NO DOUBT of his sex*” (Woolf 2003: s. 5). With the opening line, Woolf mocks the fixed notion of gender identity and the following portrayal of Orlando practising his swordsmanship “*in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor*” which foregrounds his masculinity sharply contrasts with his physical description:

*“The red of the cheeks was covered with peach down; the down on the lips was only a little thicker than the down on the cheeks. The lips themselves were short and slightly drawn back over teeth of an exquisite and almond whiteness. Nothing disturbed the arrowy nose in its short, tense flight; the hair was dark, the ears small, and fitted closely to the head. But, alas, that these catalogues of youthful beauty cannot end without mentioning forehead and eyes”* (Woolf 2003: s. 5-6).

Orlando is 16 years old at the beginning of the novel and he lives in the Elizabethan era. In the extract he is depicted like the ladies in Petrarchan sonnets, which were quite popular in the period. However, Woolf’s use of this catalogue of clichés is subversive and by way of using it she in fact blurs the boundary between the masculine and the feminine. Undermining all theories claiming truth is postmodern and Woolf—as seen in the opening line—mocks this gender truth holding an antifoundational stance against the dogma of sexuality. Another character used by Woolf to destabilise gender identity is the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn and Scandop-Boom in the Roumanian territory, who is the Queen’s cousin and visiting the court. She sees Orlando’s picture and wants to meet him. In chapter 4 this character reappears in Turkey, for she has chased Orlando from England. Orlando, now a woman, offers her some wine and when she turns to present her the glass, she finds instead;

*“a tall gentleman in black. A heap of clothes lay in the fender. She was alone with a man. Recalled thus suddenly to a consciousness of her sex, which she had completely forgotten, and of his, which was now remote enough to be equally upsetting, Orlando felt seized with faintness. ‘La!’ she cried, putting her hand to her side, ‘how you frighten me!’ ‘Gentle creature,’ cried the Archduchess, falling on one knee and at the same time pressing a cordial to Orlando’s lips, ‘forgive me for the deceit I have practised on you!’ Orlando sipped the wine and the Archduke knelt and kissed her hand. In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes.”* (Woolf 2003: s. 87)

The Archduke Harry was a man indeed; however, he fell hopelessly in love with Orlando and as a result he decided to crossdress. This scene seems to be the embodiment of Butler’s theory of performativity. Gender is performative and in the relationship between Harriet/Harry and Orlando the constructed nature of sexuality is revealed through the deceit played upon Orlando. Especially after they gain awareness of each other’s sex, Woolf depicts how the two acted the parts of a lady and a gentleman. Another scene in which Woolf subverts the gender stereotypes is the one in which Orlando goes for a walk in the park. While walking, she trips and her ankle is broken. She decides to lie as if waiting for a prince on a white horse, a Prince Charming figure who suddenly appears to help a damsel in distress in romances and fairy tales. And very soon

*“she saw a man on horseback. He started. The horse stopped. ‘Madam,’ the man cried, leaping to the ground, ‘you’re hurt!’ ‘I’m dead, sir!’ she replied. A few minutes later, they became engaged. The morning after, as they sat at breakfast, he told her his name. It was Marmaduke Bonthrop Shelmerdine, Esquire.”* (Woolf 2003: s. 123)

Shelmerdine is Harold Nicolson, Vita Sackville-West's husband and in this scene Woolf wittily depicts how the two met combining fact and fiction. She intentionally blurs the boundary between biography as a genre and fiction, which contributes to the postmodern spirit of the novel. As for the subversion of gender roles, the hilarious depiction of the depth of the newly-met couple's love is exemplifying: "*Oh! Shel, don't leave me!*" she cried. *'I'm passionately in love with you,' she said. No sooner had the words left her mouth than an awful suspicion rushed into both their minds simultaneously, 'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried. 'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried*" (Woolf 2003: s. 124). Gender, with this portrayal, gets much closer to Baudrillard's *simulacra*, where one cannot distinguish between simulation and reality (Sim 2001: s. 11). The dialogue reveals not only the fact that both Sackville-West and Nicolson were homosexuals but also that gender is a performance without any essence at all. However, since gender roles precede human beings, it is not the case that individuals act these roles; rather it is gender stereotypes which reiterate and re-establish themselves through the agency of individuals.

In addition to the problematisation of the concept of gender, time notion is also distorted in *Orlando*. Temporal disorder and the erosion of the sense of time are seen in both modernism and postmodernism. In modernist fiction an "*experiment in the rendering of time*" and "*scepticism about the linear or sequential arrangement of events into traditional plots*" can be observed (Lewis 2008: s. 153). Henri Bergson and Albert Einstein were influential on the conception of time at the beginning of twentieth century. Before the twentieth century people lived in a Newtonian universe in which time was absolute and one could measure it precisely. However, "*Einstein showed that when objects move at speeds approaching that of light, they appear to have their own system of time quite different from that of another object that is at rest*" (qtd in Lewis 2008: s. 24). In other words, two different bodies could have their individual time. Henri Bergson, with his duration theory (*durée*) underlined "*the flux of immediate experience*" and put forth that time "*should be experienced as a continuous duration*" (qtd in Lewis 2008: s. 32). However, postmodernist approach to time differs from the modernist one. For example, Linda Hutcheon states that "*postmodernist writing is best represented by those works of 'historiographic metafiction' which self-consciously distort history*" which can be achieved by several means such as apocryphal history, anachronism, or the blending of history and fantasy (qtd in Lewis 2001: s. 124). Orlando's life spans more than three centuries; the novel opens in the Elizabethan era and ends in the twentieth century. The novel, being a mixture of biography and fiction, obviously blends history and fiction, which distorts the concept of time. In the novel, Woolf makes the influence of Bergson and Einstein crystal clear when she interrupts the narrative and elaborates on the conception of time:

*"But Time, unfortunately, though it makes animals and vegetables bloom and fade with amazing punctuality, has no such simple effect upon the mind of man. The mind of man, moreover, works with equal strangeness upon the body of time. 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."* (Woolf 2003: s. 47)

The depiction of time in the quotation above is the embodiment of the modernist notion of time highlighting the disjunction between the standardised clock time and the subjective experience of time. Thus, Woolf's depiction of time brings it closer to the modernist vision of time. However, the author's interruption employing her own voice is not a modernist element and in many other instances the novel goes beyond modernism and bears a postmodernist approach to the idea of time. As Barry Lewis puts forth postmodernist fiction disrupts both past and present: "*It disorders the linear coherence of narrative by warping the sense of significant time, kairos, or the dull passing of ordinary time, chronos. Kairos is strongly associated with those modernist novels which are disposed around moments of epiphany and disclosure*" (2001: s. 124). However, postmodern fiction ridicules such importance ascribed to any given time. Even the moment when Orlando becomes a woman in the third chapter of the novel, the moment is depicted as chronos, not kairos:

*"THE TRUTH!"*  
at which Orlando woke.  
He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before  
Us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess –he was a woman.  
The sound of the trumpets died away and Orlando stood stark naked . . . Orlando looked himself up and down in a long looking-glass, without showing any signs of discomposure, and went, presumably, to his bath." (2003: s. 67)

In this chapter Orlando is the ambassador in Constantinople in Turkey. An insurrection occurs there and the rebels do not kill Orlando, whom they find in his bed in a trance, supposing that he was already dead. After seven days, Orlando wakes up to find himself transformed into a woman. In any other novel the sex change scene could have been the climax, whereas in this novel the boundary between chronos and kairos is blurred, just as the one between minor and major events. Woolf subverts the notion of significant time deliberately to demonstrate that gender is indeed without any fixed essence. After Orlando's sex change, the other characters affirm the fluid nature of sexuality by not showing any reaction to or astonishment at Orlando's becoming a

woman. The postmodernist approach to time is also seen in the portrayal of history. The novel does not give a panoramic view of history; instead, it employs a symbolic language to imply a transition from one era to another, which also blurs the distinction between major and minor events, bracketing the major ones. This portrayal also brings the novel closer to apocryphal history, for it renders the authenticity of history questionable. To illustrate, at the end of chapter 4, Orlando saw that

*“a small cloud gathered behind the dome of St.Paul’s. as the strokes sounded, the cloud increased, and he saw it darken and spread with extraordinary speed . . . . With the twelfth stroke of midnight, the darkness was complete. A turbulent welter of cloud covered the city. All was darkness; all was doubt; all was confusion. The Eighteenth century was over; the Nineteenth century had begun.”* (Woolf 2003: s. 111)

The French Revolution and the Industrial Revolution are two major events in this period but in the excerpt they are never stated explicitly. Two major events are bracketed and the reader can only witness how the protagonist feels and perceives the change. The transition from the Elizabethan age to the Jacobean is depicted similarly. In the first chapter, Orlando was loved by the Queen and nothing was denied him, until one day the Queen saw in her mirror that he kissed a girl: *“Snatching at her golden-hilted sword she struck violently at the mirror. The glass crashed; people came running; she was lifted and set in her chair again; but she was stricken after that and groaned much, as her days wore to an end, of man’s treachery”* (Woolf 2003: s. 11). The Queen does not appear after this incident in the novel and very soon Orlando feels tired of the manners of people which he finds primitive and *“he left off frequenting the beer gardens and the skittle alleys, hung his grey cloak in his wardrobe, let his star shine at his neck and his garter twinkle at his knee, and appeared once more at the Court of King James”* (Woolf 2003: s. 14). Without any explanation about the queen’s death or the succession of James I, Orlando simply sees the king when he goes to the court. He acts as if the king has always been there. In addition to the employment of apocryphal history, in this chapter Woolf also uses anachronism by mentioning the Great Frost (1708-09) in the Jacobean period:

*“The Great Frost was, historians tell us, the most severe that has ever visited these islands. Birds froze in mid-air and fell like stones to the ground. At Norwich a young countrywoman started to cross the road in her usual robust health and was seen by the onlookers to turn visibly to powder and be blown in a puff of dust over the roofs as the icy blast struck her at the street corner.”* (Woolf 2003: s. 15)

In the excerpt, in addition to the anachronistic use, Woolf also blends history with fantasy, which renders the novel postmodern with the use of historiographic metafiction. History and time are self-consciously distorted by means of apocryphal history, anachronism and the blending of history and fantasy in order to help the reader question and reject grand narratives.

## Conclusion

Virginia Woolf wrote some of the best examples of the modernist literature. However, as seen in the discussions, she took the movement a step further especially in her depiction of gender and time. Regarding the former, she lays bare the constructed and performative nature of sexuality and gender roles employing various characters and incidents in the novel. In this way she reveals the fact that gender and sexuality are not fixed or stable; instead they are fluid, which brings the depiction closer to the postmodern notions of sexuality and gender. As for the time conception, Woolf goes beyond modernism by way of combining history with fiction and blurring the boundary between the two especially when she interrupts the narrative in her own voice. Her employment of historiographic metafiction takes the novel away from the modernist use of time and brings it closer to postmodernism.

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