

## CONSIDERATIONS ABOUT THE AMBIGUOUS BODY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO* (1928): THE DYNAMICS OF ANDROGYNY AND NEO-ANDROGYNY

CONSIDERACIONES SOBRE EL CUERPO AMBIGUO EN *ORLANDO* (1928) DE VIRGINIA WOOLF: LA DINÁMICA DE LA ANDROGINIA Y LA NEO-ANDROGINIA

Laura Blázquez Cruz  
Universidad de Jaén

### ABSTRACT:

The novel *Orlando* (1928), by Virginia Woolf, shows the presence of cross-dressing as a constant, a fact that highlights the questioning of the normative in relation to female and male corporeality, according to exclusively biological parameters, in which the genitals are the epicentric axis for the classification. From a diachronic perspective, the vision of cross-dressing, mainly through androgyny, has shown how the dominant culture and thought has considered it to be a characteristic associated with divinity or the teratological and is regulated by medical-legal committees in favor of a biological evolution in accordance with the dominant heteronormativity. Through an analysis of Woolf's novel, the objective of our study is to show gender issues that are practically a century ahead of the debate on gender and identity. From a contemporary perspective, it is evident that through cross-dressing, the author proposes alternatives to the biological binary, questioning the morphology and behavior of socially imposed gender, a position in line with Foucault's biopower, and opens the possibility to liquid property of gender constructed through physical appearance and behavior. The latter, moreover, is another pillar for gender analysis in *Orlando* through Sandra Bem's concept of neo-androgyny or social androgyny.

**KEY WORDS:** Cross-dressing, androgyny, neo-androgyny, gender.

### RESUMEN:

La novela *Orlando* (1928), de Virginia Woolf, muestra la presencia del "cross-dressing" como una constante en la obra, hecho que evidencia el cuestionamiento de lo normativo en relación a la corporeidad femenina y masculina, según parámetros exclusivamente biológicos, en los que los genitales son el eje epicéntrico para la clasificación. Desde una perspectiva diacrónica, la visión del "cross-dressing", principalmente a través de la androginia, ha puesto de manifiesto cómo la cultura y el pensamiento dominantes lo han considerado como una característica asociada a la divinidad o lo teratológico, y es regulado por comités médico-legales a favor de una evolución biológica de acuerdo con la heteronormatividad dominante. A través de un análisis de la novela de Woolf, el objetivo de nuestro estudio es mostrar cuestiones de género que se adelantan prácticamente un siglo al debate en torno al género e identidad. Desde una perspectiva contemporánea, se evidencia que, a través del "cross-dressing", la autora propone alternativas a lo binario biológico, cuestionando la morfología y el comportamiento del género impuesto socialmente, posición en línea con el biopoder de Foucault, y abre la posibilidad a la propiedad líquida del género construida a través de la apariencia física y el comportamiento. Este último, además, es otro pilar para el análisis de género en *Orlando* a través del concepto de neo-androginia o androginia social que propone Sandra Bem.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** "cross-dressing", androginia, neo-androginia, género.

## 1. INTRODUCTION: ANDROGYNY AND HERMAPHRODITISM FROM A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

*Orlando* revolves around the gender issue with the presence of androgyny and cross-dressing in various characters. Woolf's work is a narration in the third person through the filter of a biographer who restricts the breakdown of Orlando's life to the most important events and occurrences of his existence, according to the narrator's criteria. It should be noted that in between what is explicitly mentioned and, therefore, not obvious through the temporal ellipses, a large part of the details is related to the body of this aristocratic character. Thus, corporeality is the central axis in the work and everything that happens through physicality has a cause-and-effect relationship in the behavior of the rest of the characters, as well as in Orlando's *modus vivendi*.

The biological body acts as a descriptive measure of the different social customs reflected throughout the almost four centuries that are included in this fantastic story: from the Renaissance period, with the reign of Elizabeth I of England, through the Victorian period, until reaching 1928, the beginning of the modern era. This succession of centuries and consequent change of setting offers an evolution and a reflection about the way body, androgyny, sexuality and cross-dressing are perceived in society at each historical moment. In order to interpret these specific changes and to illustrate the different prisms through which the body is conceptualized, it is paramount to show a brief historical journey from classical times.

Historically, hermaphroditism and androgyny begin as interconnected concepts that represent bodily duality as far as gender is concerned. However, currently the first refers to the presence of both male and female genitalia in a single body, that is, it is a biological notion, while androgyny is more related to the ambiguous appearance in the same body of traits of both genders, as well as behaviors socially associated with one or the other. Therefore, in the latter case it is a more physiognomic and culturally established notion. In any case, it is the socio-cultural conventions that historically relegate both notions to the "normal, exceptional, divine or monstrous, depending on the interweaving between cultural/religious conventions, and the limits of the empirical knowledge of each civilization" (Melián, 2021, p. 356).

In classical times, androgyny is linked to the sacred, to corporeal perfection, to the eternal return as a symbolic corporeity of self-procreation, which is why it is linked to creation and the end of time and, consequently, it has been a concept of representation of divinity in many religions (DeVun, 2018, pp. 132-146).

This image is inherited, in the genesis of the medieval period, to represent the souls that, prior to the Original Sin or after the resurrection, are shown in the form of androgynous nudes (Pérez, 1967). However, between the twelfth and thirteenth



centuries there is a concealment of the body linking it to sin and it is at this time that the pseudoscience of physiognomy appears, trying to relate physical features with moral characteristics. In this context, precisely, the hermaphrodite body —in a similar way to the female body— is associated with a denoted negative charge (Le Goff et al. 2014), relating it to plagues, diseases such as black bile or even the Original Sin. This association is called the “disappointment of the androgynous myth”, which causes a distance between androgyny, as a mythical concept, and hermaphroditism, in its biological meaning (Libis, 2001, p. 164).

In the Renaissance era, the historical period in which Woolf's *Orlando* begins, the thought about the sexes is that of a *continuum*, for which hermaphroditism is an acceptable biological possibility, even being considered as the “third sex” (Nederman et al., 1996, pp. 497-517). It is no coincidence that the novel begins when Orlando is 17 years old, a vital stage where the body already begins to be biologically conducive to sexuality and reproduction. In fact, the novel revolves around this issue, the relationship that exists between the body, biological sex, gender—opening a debate on heteronormativity—and social role—the innate and innate behaviors shown in society as to whether they are masked or shown—all supported, furthermore, by the change in the second skin: clothes.

## 2. THE BINARY IN THE GENDER UNDER DEBATE

The treatment of androgyny serves to open a debate that differentiates the male/female sexual dichotomy, a polarity that, in postmodernism, gives rise to a liquid gender. However, one wonders if Orlando's change of sex (by means of what we could be called “oneiric transsexuality”) influences his identity. It is true, however it may be, that the author uses the resource of sex change together with cross-dressing to describe the situation of both genders and “criticize power relationships as well as women's subordination by men” (López García, 2019, p. 21) through a diachronic narration of approximately four centuries. Moreover, and as a consequence of this dichotomy, at the same time it reflects the inheritance of the treatment of the body of medieval times and the categorization of the female body as the result of the Original Sin, it being related to two primordial female figures: Eve, whose nudity is described and represented with long hair and pronounced curves, a body with pejorative connotations since it is responsible for temptation and, on the other hand, Maria, whose corporeality appears covered up to her head, with only her face and hands visible. It is evident that, in this case, the body that represents cleanliness and the sacred appears veiled. Such medieval vision also affects androgyny for it is historically related to the sacred, with the eternal return, although, with the arrival of the XII-XIII centuries, the disappointment of the androgynous myth occurs since, from the relationship of the androgynous with the

figure of the hermaphrodite, the equality of the presence of both sexes in the same body is broken. In connection with this, Libis (2001) claims there is no true hermaphroditism in a body and, therefore, the juxtaposition of the two biological sexes (male and female) in an individual is always done at the expense of one of them, in such a way that the hermaphrodite emerges as an error, a tricked and truncated synthesis. Consequently, the unconscious that acts in the mythological work bears badly being “deceived” by a reality that disapproves of it. (p. 164)

### 2.1. ORLANDO AND NEO-ANDROGYNY

Woolf’s fantastic text allows for a description of the treatment of the anormative body from the Renaissance to modern times. It begins in the reign of Elizabeth I of England and is materialized through a character who begins as biologically male and an aristocrat. This allows the author to provide the protagonist with greater action maneuverability precisely because his body is not part of the social gear, which would limit him to physical work tasks, such as the ones carried out by the lower social classes. To be more precise, Orlando’s body is exempted from any economic obligation and this allows physiognomy to be treated from a biological perspective with a constant connection between the character and nature: “I have loved, beneath all this summer transiency, to feel the earth’s spine beneath him; [...] [A]s if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer’s evening were woven web-like about his body.” (Woolf, 1963, p. 10). This circumstance separates the notion of sex from that of gender, while permitting to examine how this issue influences his behavior in society with regard, precisely, to gender and his sexuality.

Orlando’s body is initially presented as male—“He—for there could be no doubt about his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it” (p. 8), although through cross-dressing, the first break between sex and gender occurs. Orlando is biologically masculine and, in fact, in this first historical period, sexual behavior is mainly heterosexually active, since he has relationships with women from different social classes: “He was Young; he was boyish; he did but as nature bade him do. [...] Orlando’s taste was broad; he was no lover of garden flowers only; the wild and the weeds even had always a fascination for him” (p. 13). However, the first ambiguity around the masculine/feminine binary appears when his physical appearance is described with traits more connected with feminine beauty:

Observe that though the shapely legs, the handsome body, and the well-set shoulders were all of them decorated with various tints of heraldic light, Orlando’s face, as he threw the window open, was lit solely by the sun itself. A more candid, sullen face it would be impossible to find. [...] 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. Alas, that people are seldom born devoid of all three; for directly we glance at Orlando standing by the window, we must admit that he had eyes like drenched violets, so large that the water seemed to have brimmed in them and widened them; and a brow like the swelling of a marble dome pressed between the two blank medallions which were his temples. Directly we glance at eyes and forehead, thus do we rhapsodize. (p. 8)

Virginia Woolf begins by placing the character as a contemplative being, a quality that in the historical period of the Renaissance—when the narrative begins—is more related to the female, since the role of women was more subject to passivity and socioeconomic dependence on the male, a fact that was inherited from medieval times and which relates the image of women to the Virgin Mary as the ideal in her characteristic angelic, patient, pure and pensive woman. Continuing with the description of Orlando in full shot, his physicality is described as a well-shaped body with defined shoulders, that is, the image created in the reader is that of perfect body proportions, as Leonardo da Vinci maintains with the Golden Ratio (from classical times). However, Orlando's body is not characterized by an outstanding muscle mass that can relate it to the strength traditionally associated with masculinity, that is, the assumed wide pectorals of the man in the Renaissance canon, precisely because he is portrayed at the time of adolescence, when the body is in transit towards adulthood.

Regarding his face, the appearance of the first hair on the upper part of the lips is mentioned, this being a masculine characteristic. In any case, this trait is intermingled with the female aspect of the forehead and the eyes since, on the one hand, this is a facial part that Renaissance women used to shave to try and give a more visual breadth. In Orlando, it is seen as clean and wide as a marble dome, a material that, due to its white hue, is associated to the aforementioned face of the Renaissance woman. On the other, Orlando's eyes are highlighted since they are remarkably large and violet, which completes the image of delicacy, in contrast to a masculine face where the predominant feature would be a strong jaw and bushy eyebrows.

## 2.2. SASHA: ANDROGYNY AND MONSTROSITY

One more example of this proclivity to associate characters with the notion of the ambiguous appears during the London Carnival, in the period of "The Great Frost" (1607-1608), when Sasha makes her first appearance:

He beheld [...] a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for the loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex [...]. The person, whatever the name or sex, was about middle height, very slenderly fashioned, and dressed entirely in oyster-coloured velvet, trimmed with some unfamiliar greenish

coloured fur. But these details were obscured by the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person. [...] [I]n the narrative we may here hastily note that all his images at this time were simple in the extreme to match his senses and were mostly taken from things he had liked the taste of as a boy. [...] When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be—no woman could skate with such speed and vigour—swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question. But the skater came closer. Legs, hands, carriage, were a boy's, but no boy ever had a mouth like that; no boy had those breasts; no boy had eyes which looked as if they had been fished from the bottom of the sea. [...] She was not a handsbreadth off. She was a woman. Orlando stared; trembled; turned hot; turned cold; longed to hurl himself through the summer air; to crush acorns beneath his feet; to toss his arms with the beech trees and the oaks. (p. 16)

This Muscovite princess is presented in clothing that creates ambiguity, since the appearance of the tunic and trousers does not reveal the biological marks that help the perceiver, in this case Orlando, to distinguish whether it is a man or a woman. This ambiguous presentation of the character is followed by the attraction that arouses in Orlando and a premature conclusion that it is a boy because of the way he skates, his body, limbs and chest, although, when he gets closer, he sees that it is a woman. In short, it is a polarized and dual description, characterized by both attraction and confusion, which highlights the importance of “fixing gender [as] an important part of courtship” (Burns, 1994, p. 352). This conjunction of ambiguity through clothing, through his physiognomy, as well as his actions, leads to generic ambiguity, emphasizing Orlando's confusion towards Sasha's identity. We could state this type of liquid gender falls inside the category of what Bem calls neo-androgyny or social androgyny (1974), typical of postmodernist thought, a concept that is historically ahead of the context of history, since, until well into the 20th century, androgyny is studied mainly from the perspective of modernism considering the binary dichotomy of physical features of the female and male gender.

Sasha's androgyny is relevant for not only does it present the binary dichotomy in vogue until the beginning of the 20th century, but it also projects a vision of medieval heritage with that imbalance of the biological sexes present in the same body that Ambrose speaks of, more specifically, one in which the female part is loaded with negative connotations because in this religious context the female body is related to lust (Ambrose, 2012), as well as to the sexual ambiguity of the devil (Bauhini, 1614). In fact, although Sasha has a minor textual relevance in the narration, her indirect presence is embodied through Orlando and the memories he has of her, those that lead him to a trance causing his long death-like sleep states. Her representation is, consequently, monstrous when reference is made in society to the sexual overtones this character provokes in Orlando as a man: “To see him go out again! And something interesting in the expression, which makes one feel, one scarcely knows why, that he



has suffered! They say a lady was the cause of it. The heartless monster!!! How can one of our reputed tender sex have had the effrontery!!!” (Woolf, 1963, p. 50).

Evidently, physical aspect acquires a special relevance in the story. It is an element that has historically determined the social categorization of the Other, the body as a source of otherness, even of the monstrous. By referring to Sasha’s enigmatic origin, whose birthplace may or may not be associated with the aristocracy, Woolf echoes the medieval heritage of monstrosity by referencing medieval travel books such as Mandeville’s *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (1356) and the centric view that relegated the inhabitants beyond the oceanic border—as primitive beings, related to a space beyond civilization—, monsters and *mirabilia*: “He suspected at first that her rank was not as high as she would like; or that she was ashamed of the savage ways of her people, for he had heard that the women in Muscovy wear beards and the men are covered with fur from the waist down” (Woolf, 1962, p. 20). In the monstrosity of the bearded woman, the ambiguity of the physical features of both sexes in a single body is evident, just as Orlando imagines the inhabitants of the country of origin of the Russian princess. Sasha’s assumed androgynous physical trace relates her to the concept of “virile woman” Walde Moheno refers to (1994, pp. 49-50), in addition to social character traits—neo-androgynous—such as Sasha’s way of skating, dressing or eating.

### 2.3. ARCHDUCHESS HARRIET GRISELDA: CROSS-DRESSING TO OVERDO THE GENDER

Another relevant example of gender ambiguity comes in Orlando’s next sex-appealing figure: the Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn and Scandop-Boom. This aristocrat is presented as a woman, however, her manners and her knowledge are more akin to masculinity, according to the canons and the historical context—“a knowledge of wines rare in a lady, and made some observations upon firearms and the customs of sportsmen in her country, which were sensible enough” (Woolf, 1963, p. 44) —, since social habits, as well as sports and hunting are activities that were relegated to the sphere of masculinity during the Restoration, giving way to the desexualization of women—which will be even more predominant in the Victorian era—because “women had the role of caretaker of the home, good wife and procreator, or [...] Angel of the House” (Blázquez, 2021, p. 11). Later, in the story, the reader learns about the Archduchess again once Orlando returns to England, although, on this occasion, the androgynous aspect is emphasized, bordering on the monstrous due to the overdoing of gender, which finally resolves the ambiguity and decant for the male sex:

For it was a familiar shadow, a grotesque shadow, [...] She was loping across the court in her old black riding-habit and mantle as before. [...] This the fatal fowl

herself! [...] There was something inexpressibly comic in the sight. She resembled, as Orlando had thought before, nothing so much as a monstrous hare. She had the staring eyes, the lank cheeks, the high headdress of that animal. [...] soon the two ladies were exchanging compliments while the Archduchess struck the snow from her mantle. [...] here she turned to present the Archduchess with the salver, and behold—in her place stood a tall gentleman in black. A heap of clothes lay in the fender. She was alone with a man.

[...] In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse. The Archduchess (but she must in future be known as the Archduke) told his story—that he was a man and always had been one; that he had seen a portrait of Orlando and fallen hopelessly in love with him; that to compass his ends, he had dressed as a woman. (Woolf, 1963, p. 68)

The character of the Archduchess, described as a woman at the beginning of the narrative thanks to the use of clothing, decides to pass herself off as a person of this gender to conform to the heterosexual canons of affective relationships, that is, when Orlando is biologically a man, this character pretends to be a woman. She is described as a woman in comical-grotesque terms, exaggerated and that hybridizes the human with the animal. In fact, this drag-tinged image is perceived as monstrous by Orlando when he walks through the patio approaching it. However, once this person is aware of Orlando as a biological woman, he resorts to the process of “undoing the [female] gender” (Butler, 2004), stripping off the clothes that had made him pass for a woman. In other words, following Butler, her concept of gender is a social construct, “the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender could very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized” (2004, p. 42). As a consequence and in relation to the deconstruction of gender, the Archduke, biologically a man, initiates a practice of undoing his masculine gender to adopt a feminization through his social, discursive and corporal practices, stereotypically associated with the feminine, although the final result is partially cartoonish and exaggerated—overdone—in Orlando’s eyes. This process of undoing his masculine gender is carried out with the aim of trying to establish a heterosexually affective relationship with Orlando, therefore, once he is aware of the biological sex change in his longed-for beloved, he undoes his temporary feigned female gender and returns to make his gender masculine. Orlando’s gender, then, is what determines which gender the Archduke/Archduchess adopts, readjusting the gender of the latter in discontinuous or intermittent cross-dressing.

Furthermore, the Archduke also reinforces Orlando’s androgynous character through a painting that reflects the gender ambiguity so recurrent in the work: “she



had seen his [Orlando's] picture and it was the image of a sister of hers who was—here she guffawed—long since dead” (Woolf, 1963, p. 44).

Not a coincidence for sure, we must underline the recurrent external origin of the characters that present ambiguity when it comes to being classified on the assumption of various dichotomies. For example, the nationalities of Sasha—from Russia—and the Archduchess Harriet Griselda—from Romania—are relevant in the categorization of the genre; both present a liquid aspect, unclassifiable in terms of gender, a fact that reveals a connection with the Other.

### 3. CROSS-DRESSING AS A PILLAR FOR THE FLUIDITY OF GENRE

The clothes—rather scarce—, the semi-nakedness of the men that Orlando imagines when trying to find out Sasha's origin hint at a country of primitive origin, alien to civilization and closer to nature. Contrastively, clothing is what characterizes the London population that crowds the streets: “all the riff-raff of the London streets indeed was there, [...] all as variously rigged out as their purse or stations allowed; here in fur and broadcloth; there in tatters with their feet kept from the ice only by a dishclout bound about them” (p. 22). Clothes are used as an indicator of status and gender; it has a socially reassuring objective and serves “to be able to pigeonhole [the person] into certain categories” (Sigurtà, 1967, p. 33). Clothes are socially linked to the sex of the individual and, furthermore, they match sex and gender, that is, one dresses as expected of the sex in question and clothes operate as a fixed element of the person. However, Orlando uses it in a dynamic way and this allows him, in the words of Thanem and Wallenberg, to do gender, which “involves managing social situations in such a way that one's behavior and display are regarded gender appropriate or inappropriate” (2016, p. 253). This idea of doing gender is connected to Butler's thesis of gender as an operator within the male/female heterosexual binary dichotomy. For her, “gender is [...] the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex,” prior to culture, [is] a politically neutral surface *on which* culture acts” (Butler, 1999, p. 11), “a product of socially dominant norms” (Thanem and Wallenberg, 2016, p. 255). Thus, the strategies, activities or ways of interacting in society come to reflect what is socially considered masculine or feminine. Among the strategies to do gender and be successfully characterized within the chosen sex, we find the display of social practices—stereotypically masculine or feminine activities, types of work, etc.—, linguistic and supra-linguistic, as well as corporal manifestations—expressiveness, clothing, make-up.

Woolf opts for a postmodernist approach to gender (*avant la lettre*), in which the poles are mixed and everything that is impossible to pigeonhole into either of the two typologies is considered ambiguous, anormative and cumulative, although, in order to

represent the social and historical context of the narrative, the duality is present from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, mainly. This dialectic seems decisive and recurrent, even to introduce retrospective references to Orlando's ancestors who lie in the crypt and whose identity the protagonist tries to find out from the bones: "Whose hand was it? he went on to ask. The right or the left? The hand of man or woman, or age or youth? Had it urged the war horse, or plied the needle? Had it plucked the rose, or grasped cold steel?" (Woolf, 1963, p. 29).

It should be also highlighted that in 1928, the year when *Orlando* was published, the first sex reassignment operation had not yet been performed. This would take place in 1930, more specifically with the five sex surgery reassignment operations that the painter Lili Elbe underwent. Obviously, Woolf ignores the medical procedure, does not make references to surgical aspects, and bases her references to gender roles, according to biological sex, within the social context, while emphasizing the three assumed virtues in the woman through her personification in the biblical Virgin Mary as an ideal referent of femininity, "our Lady of Purity [...], our Lady of Chastity [...], our Lady of Modesty" (p. 52), these being the ideal characteristics expected from the new sex of Orlando:

Dwell still in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous (Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. To them we go, you we leave. Come, Sisters, come! This is no place for us here. (p. 53)

This ritual of virtues before the change of sex reveals the social need to do gender in the modernist context of the dichotomy, even when a person is presented with ambiguous features that do not limit gender exclusively to the feminine or to the masculine: "Orlando stood stark naked. No human being, since the world began, has ever looked more ravishing. His form combined in one the strength of a man and a woman's grace" (p. 53). In line with the relationship of the concept of gender as a social construct, Burns (1994) points out that through Orlando's complete nakedness after the change of sex, in conjunction with the entities' claim "Truth! And again they cry Truth! and sounding yet a third time in concert they peal forth, The Truth and nothing but the Truth!" (Woolf, 1963, p. 53), the author parodies the classic philosophical search for the essence of the subject and the need to reveal essential—naked—truths, since the exposure of the genitals reflects the classic connection of the concept of gender around sexuality. However, Burns considers Virginia Woolf shows "instability of essence [which leads] to reconsider the nature of sexuality and the constructedness of gender" (p. 350)



However, biological sex—that is, the genitals with which Orlando is (re)born—appears as a reference to the behavior that is expected from this character in society: “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” (p. 53). In fact, to this respect, Lee points out that Orlando’s character is not altered with this change, “but her perceptions and her social behaviour” (1977, p. 151).

However, in the social context Orlando is in, there is no room for genders that create ambiguity and in the case of the presentation of psychophysical traits that are not stereotypically and exclusively feminine or masculine, the State, through medical courts, has the legitimacy to decide which gender/sex the person belongs to, based on the physical traits that prevail the most in order to avoid the monstrous and uncontrollable limbic state that the lack of definition generates. In this way, the subject was governed in society by what was established: “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” (Woolf, 1963, pp. 53-54), and, likewise, state rights are judicially determined based on biological sex: “Thus it was in a highly ambiguous condition, uncertain whether she was alive or dead, man or woman, Duke or nonentity, that she posted down to her country seat, where, pending the legal judgement, she had the Law’s permission to reside in a state of incognito or incognita, as the case might turn out to be” (Woolf, 1963, p. 65).

This need the State has to control the body is what determines the social role, as well as the sex of the character, since in the society of Queen Anne of England—the genesis of the eighteenth century—the proactive delimitation and social function of masculinity predominates, while women had little projection in society, since they were limited to a secondary role and their function was, essentially, to facilitate male sexual pleasure “Every man, it was said, had been a Prime Minister and every woman, it was whispered, had been the mistress of a king” (p. 75). This pigeonholing in favor of the correct social functioning is what Foucault (1980, 2005) calls biopower because these are bodies that represent disorder and challenge the normal functioning of society so they must be controlled and brought to the order of reason for they escape the control and surveillance exercised by power and the society.

Although Woolf’s plot ends in 1928, this work shows a postmodernist vision concerning the binary masculine-feminine opposition—which, in fact, disappears—and gender is separated from sex to give way to a fluid, continuous or circular gender. It must be remembered that this historical period is characterized by polymorphism, accumulation and ambiguity (Llano, 1989), features that are also adopted in the

conception around the body and gender to move away from the gender-sex equation. Traditionally, when considering the masculine-feminine opposition, the first of these genders was related to the development of instrumental activities where aggressiveness and assertiveness were necessary, while the feminine was related more to activities that require greater sensitivity and expressiveness. However, it was Sandra Bem (1975) who, among other psychologists, raised the need to reconsider the concept of gender and added the possibility of contemplating individuals who combine traits of both genders, giving rise to the so-called social androgyny or neo-androgyny. The instrument used to detect it was created precisely by Bem, the so-called Bem Sex Role Inventory (BSRI)<sup>1</sup>.

The conclusion drawn from this questionnaire indicates that androgynous people have a greater probability of selecting the behavior that best suits the requirements of each situation (Caplan and Caplan, 1994) and have a diverse repertoire of behaviors, which allows great flexibility and plasticity in global functioning and facilitates adaptation to different environments (Smith, 1998). Adaptability, creativity and flexibility are, then, the predominant traits in the social androgynous, their social performance being related to both physical strength related to the masculine, as well as feminine expressiveness.

When changing sex, Orlando decides to cross-dress as a woman, for which (now biologically) she covers her body excessively, in turn, in an uncomfortable way: "These skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. [...] Could I [...] leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No! Therefore, I should have to trust to the protection of a blue-jacket" (Woolf, 1963, p. 61). This shows her limits as far as her physical movement and her social operability are concerned, together with the fact that it entails dependence on someone else. It is in this outbreak of femininity, starting with her clothing adaptation, when she realizes that "complete transformation into womanhood [...] entails a loss of power and privilege" (López García, 2019, p. 18). In fact, the protagonist begins to consider whether or not it is propitious to follow a *modus vivendi* in accordance with the female: look for a husband – and not a lover – or attend certain literary social events without having the opportunity to say a single word. All in all, in moments of greater yearning for sexual freedom, when she is biologically a woman, Orlando carries out a process of cross-dressing, as a way "to overcome

1 Inventory with 60 characteristics (20 stereotypically feminine, 20 masculine and 20 neutral), in which the subject is asked to indicate in each item from 1 (almost never) to 7 (always) how often such characteristic occurs in the respondent. Thus, based on the responses, four typologies are categorized:

- Androgynous: High score in masculinity and femininity.
- Undifferentiated: Low score in masculinity and femininity.
- Masculine: High score in masculinity and low in femininity.
- Feminine: High score in femininity and low in masculinity. (1975, pp. 37, 42)



constructed models of femininity” (p. 20). This cross-dressing turns Orlando’s body into a fluid one, by means of which a change of clothes equals a change of gender, process which is carried out depending on the occasion (Sanyal, 2014, p. 83) and which allows her access to brothels, walking in the park without having to be accompanied, access to courts to learn about legal disputes, etc.:

Her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. For the probity of breeches she exchanged the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (Woolf, 1963, pp. 82-83)

In short, at an individual level, clothes and cross-dressing allow Orlando the performativity that Butler speaks of since clothes have become political needs (2011, p. 176). These visual elements permit him/her create a neo-androgynous figure, which, at the same time, allows the protagonist to escape the social rigidity in terms of male/female. Such modes lead Orlando to do gender for his/her personal, intellectual, social and sexual enrichment, managing to escape the dictatorship of the body imposed by nature and influencing the way other characters interact with him/her, doing or undoing their gender, depending on their view towards Orlando.

At a higher level, also, the use of clothes provides the reader with historical information since Orlando’s 400-year life and his/her use of clothes allow Woolf “to question the presumed ideas about clothing and how each period with its own culture and norms perform gender through clothing” (Moleshi & Niazi, p. 5).

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