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CLOTHES AND IDENTITY IN VIRGINIA WOOLF'S *ORLANDO*
BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is a novel about a young nobleman who changes from a man to a woman in the middle of the novel. The novel thus strongly engages with the topic of gender identity, with an emphasis on clothing. The present thesis aims to analyze how clothes affected Orlando's (gender) identity. The concluding argument is that clothes did not have as much of an effect on Orlando's gender identity as they did on her identity as a woman.

The thesis consists of an introduction, a literature review, an analysis of the novel, and a conclusion.

The introduction provides background information on the writer and the novel, as well as a brief plot summary. It also explains the reason behind the topic choice and outlines the argument of the thesis.

The literature review summarizes previous studies and analyses of the novel. It covers topics such as sexuality, gender, and androgyny.

The analysis of the novel is divided into two parts. The first part examines Orlando's life as a man and how clothes affected him during that time. The second half analyzes Orlando as a woman and how clothes influenced her after the change. The research method for the analysis is a close reading of the novel within the framework of gender theory.

The conclusion summarizes the main findings of the thesis.

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis explores Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1928), and the effect clothes have on Orlando, the central character of the novel. This introduction gives a short plot summary of the novel, the reason why this topic was chosen, and the outline of the argument I wish to make with the following paper.

Virginia Woolf (1882-1941) is considered one of the most important writers of the 20th century modernism (British Library. N. d.). Some of her most well-known works are *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925) and *To the Lighthouse* (1927), and she wrote pioneering essays on topics such as literary history, women's writings, and the politics of power (Reid. 2023). The style and subject matter in which she worked ranged from technology to class, sexuality, and gender roles (British Library. N. d.). *Orlando* is a book where Woolf specifically and explicitly writes about gender and sexuality and explores the androgynous nature of a character. In *A Room of One's Own* (1929), an essay of Woolf's that deals with the subject of gender, Woolf also explores the possible androgyny of a person: "[i]n each of us two powers preside, one male, one female" (2004). In this paper, Orlando of both genders is examined, and how they sometimes appear as androgynous. What is of particular interest to me is how in *Orlando*, gender (Orlando's or otherwise) is often discussed in relation to clothing. As the topic of gender identity, fluidity, and androgyny is openly discussed in today's world, *Orlando* helps to broaden this discussion. *Orlando* allows to think specifically of clothes and gender identity in relation to each other, as the novel makes a lot of references to garments, and how certain garments influence gender identity. Because of this, *Orlando* can be used to analyze whether Woolf's idea that in each of us there are two powers is correct and how clothes influence or help to bring out one or the other gender. *Orlando*, one of Woolf's most playful and popular novels, is based on, and dedicated to Woolf's lover and life-long friend Vita Sackville-West. The book spans over four centuries,

from the Elizabethan time to the 20th century, with the main character only aging about 30 years and transforming from a man to a woman. With *Orlando*, Woolf gives a novelistic approach to biography and the mocking tone of it exposes the artificiality of gender and genre prescriptions (Reid. 2023) which will be further explored in the literature review.

The novel *Orlando* begins in the late 16th century England with Orlando pretending to chop off the heads of moors like his father and grandfather had done before him, cherishing the English tradition. In addition to respecting traditions, he is also an attractive and adventurous young nobleman and thus soon finds himself in the favor of Queen Elizabeth. Orlando's relationship with the Crown ends, however, when the boy is seen kissing a young lady. After leaving the royal court Orlando seeks out lower class life, frequenting pubs and having relationships with the women he finds there. Eventually, Orlando returns to the noble life and becomes engaged to Euphrosyne, a woman of high birth and connections. Then the Great Frost of 1709 (a period with extremely low temperatures) happens and Orlando meets Sasha, a Russian princess. Orlando falls in love with her, but Sasha betrays him and leaves England. Orlando is heartbroken and sleeps for many days after which he wakes up and decides to become a poet. Following another betrayal, this time from Nicholas Greene, Orlando leaves England for Constantinople where he is appointed an ambassador. Shortly, the nobleman falls into another trance-like sleep and when he wakes, he has become a woman. Woolf writes: "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" (2003: 67). The change happened only to Orlando's biological sex; their identity remained the same in every other aspect. Due to this Orlando takes the change seemingly easily and decides to travel with Romani people for a little bit. However, conflicts arise, and Orlando decides to sail back to England. In England, Orlando reclaims her position in high society, after winning

various lawsuits that were held against her because of her new female gender. Orlando continues to write her poem, that she started as a man, and travels in literary circles. She also occasionally dresses as a man to enjoy the freedoms allowed for the men. By the end of the book Orlando has married Marmaduke Bonthrop “Shel” Shelmerdine, fulfilling an expectation had for women, and finally publishes her poem “The Oak Tree”.

The aim of this paper is to portray how and what kind of effect clothes had on Orlando’s identity. Because there are two sides to Orlando’s life there are two arguments to be made as well. When Orlando became a woman, her clothes took on a noticeably bigger role in her gender identity than they did while Orlando was a man. It was the clothes that reinforced Orlando’s gender identity, as the female clothes were restrictive (big skirts) and did not let Orlando enjoy her freedoms that she was accustomed to as a man. Therefore, the argument to be made is that for male Orlando clothes do not play a significant part in the formation of his gender identity. As a privileged male, clothes are not something Orlando has to think about a lot, because they do not enforce any restrictions imposed by gender roles onto him. Rather, they are a tool to get away with cosplaying as a lower-class citizen, to claim the pleasures otherwise out of reach for him. However, with female Orlando clothes were consequential to her gender from the beginning. It was the clothes that made the transformation into the new gender complete, and it was clothes that set restrictions on activities and behaviors that she could no longer do. Only after dressing in men’s clothes could she, once again, enjoy the life she knew and had grown accustomed to. In what follows, I will analyze in greater detail how clothes affected Orlando as a man, and Orlando as a woman.

LITERATURE REVIEW: PREVIOUS WRITINGS ON *ORLANDO*

Due to its complexity and distinctive concept Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* has allowed for many different aspects of it to be studied over many decades – early criticism on Woolf, sometimes also referred to as the New Criticism (predominant in the 1940s and 1950s) primarily focused on form and style. The 1970s and the so called second wave feminism however also triggered many more political readings of Woolf, and since the 1990s, various different approaches, both theoretical and archival, have swept the Woolf studies. This literature review will focus on feminist and queer theories from the late 20th to early 21st century. The main emphasis will be on gender and clothing, giving an overview of what the critics of the aforementioned time thought about Woolf's *Orlando* in the context of sexuality and androgyny. What is of specific interest to me, is the relationship between clothes and gender.

When reading different studies and analyzes on *Orlando* it seems that authors agree that *Orlando* is a parody of traditional Victorian biographies. Christy L. Burns expresses that “[o]ne need always remember that *Orlando* is a parodic biography, and several strands of biographical beliefs prevalent in the Victorian era are being parodied throughout the novel” (1994: 344). Pamela L. Caughie claims that “[t]he text of *Orlando* is as unstable as the sex of Orlando” (1989: 42) which also demonstrates that *Orlando* is a mocking text, rather than a serious biography. Echoing Woolf's own words, Stef Craps points out that the novel is “‘a joke’, ‘farce’, ‘a writer’s holiday’, ‘an escapade’” (2006: 175). There are different opinions and reasons given as to why *Orlando* is written comically. One of them is “to make readers laugh” (Parkes. 1994: 434). However, according to Burns the reason is somewhat more complex. Burns concludes that Woolf's desire for identification of Vita Sackville-West (and perhaps herself) draws her toward biographical fiction but the need for differentiation sends her into parody (1994: 342). In *The Art of Biography* (1939) Woolf contemplates about

whether only the lives of great men should be recorded. Although *The Art of Biography* was published later than *Orlando* it is nevertheless a reflection on Woolf's feelings. She believed that anyone who has lived a life is worthy of a biography.

Orlando is also a love letter from Woolf to Sackville-West but to write a biography about one's lover is to undergo a deep realization and identification of that person. The wish to keep the readers from identifying Sackville-West and herself from the characters and to keep her life and art separate is what pushed Woolf towards parody. Burns notes, on two separate occasions, that the notion of truth and parody are connected in *Orlando*: "In her novel truth is destabilized and turns into parody through an emphasis on period fashions, cross-dressing, and undressing of 'essential bodies'" (1994: 343) and "Orlando's sex change parodies the philosophical search for bare, naked, essential truths" (1994: 350). Woolf uses parody to subvert the truth which gives her the possibility to deny the connections between the characters of *Orlando* and Vita Sackville-West and herself. However, not only does the use of parody in *Orlando* allow for a disconnect between Woolf's personal life and the novel, it also encourages readers and critics to question "essential" truths, including truths about gender and sexuality.

The mocking tone of parody permitted Woolf to explore the issue of sexuality. The way Woolf wrote the novel, with Parkes describing it as "a joke not to be taken too seriously" (1994: 446) enabled Woolf to avoid the disapproval faced by many other writers of the time who wrote about homosexual love (Parkes. 1994: 446). Through labeling and presenting *Orlando* as a parody or an escapade Woolf could mask the protest against the prevailing heteronormative sexual codes of English society, both of Woolf's own time, and of the past (Winter. 1996: 174). It is a known fact that the novel was written for and about Woolf's friend and lover Vita Sackville-West, which is why *Orlando* is often treated as a lesbian novel (Parkes. 1994: 446). Burns remarks how through the courtship of Sasha and

Archduchess Harriet, Woolf “ironizes gender stabilization and comes very close to valuing homosexual love explicitly” (1994: 352). The sex change left Orlando’s identity untouched, meaning the object of her desire were still women and thus there was the possibility of non-heterosexual desire (Parkes. 1994: 449). Furthermore, Parkes suggests it is implied that Orlando enjoyed the love of both sexes equally (1994: 451). She also argues that Woolf ridiculed heterosexual romance, treating marriage and childbirth as relatively unremarkable (Parkes. 1994: 450). The representation of non-heterosexual love could have ended with Woolf on trial for the same reasons as Radclyffe Hall was. However, Hall was accused of using ‘facts’ while Woolf’s work was seen as exploiting the theatrical properties of sexual identity, as she mocked normative sex and gender codes, destabilizing the grounds on which those legal conventions were founded (Parkes. 1994: 436-437). Thus, because *Orlando* was written, marketed, and viewed a parody Woolf was able to freely write about her lover and non-heterosexual desire without facing any legal challenges like some other writers of that time.

Orlando should not, however, be treated as just a joke of a biography or a theatrical, fictionalized performance of gender. Stef Craps argues that the novel is “a radical text, whose subversion of deep-seated and taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered behavior is suppressed by its reduction to an escapade or a mere tribute to Vita Sackville-West” (2006: 175). *Orlando* contains a vast imagery of gender, sex, and the role clothes play in them. Craps also mentions that there is a presumption that first there is a sex that gets expressed through gender and sexuality and that people are either fully male and thus masculine or fully female and therefore feminine (2006: 175-176). A lot of critics, however, argue against the notion that gender is an expression of sex and that people are either fully masculine or feminine. Craps herself concludes that the assumed connections between sex, gender and desire are an illusion of performatively produced fabrications set to serve the interests of

heterosexuality and masculine supremacy (2006: 176). Judith Butler comments that: “the distinction between sex and gender serves the argument that whatever biological intractability sex appears to have, gender is culturally constructed: hence, gender is neither the causal result of sex nor as seemingly fixed as sex” (1999: 9-10). When speaking of Woolf and *Orlando* specifically “Both Orlando and the narrator imply that sex and gender roles are fundamentally uncertain, that human personality is deeply ambiguous,” writes Parkes (1994: 455). In *Orlando* Woolf writes that: “[i]n 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” (2003: 92-93) thus raising the question of whether clothes ‘make the (wo)man’ and further suggesting that everyone wavers between one sex and another. This allows gender studies to inquire about the extent to which society – not biology – outlines the difference between men and women (Burns. 1994: 343).

Research in gender studies and feminism generally agrees that gender is determined by society and thus in part the clothes a person wears. Judith Butler writes that: “[t]he movement from sex to gender is internal to embodied life, a sculpting of the original body into a cultural form.” (2004: 25) *Orlando* is a good representation of this, because, as Burns analyzes: Orlando’s body was affected by the sex change, but her gender did not change until her clothing did, which pressured her to conform with the social expectations of gendered behavior. The transformation only emerged after the change of clothing (Burns. 1994: 351). When traveling in women’s clothes, Orlando immediately felt the difference. Orlando became aware of how the change in garments allowed her to have the attention of the Captain of the ship she was traveling on, how she had never seen her skin look to such advantage as it did when she was wearing a skirt, and how if she were to fall overboard, she would not be able to swim to safety in the clothes she is wearing. Furthermore, Orlando continues to switch between the clothes of both genders, a motif used to show the similarities

between men and women and that underneath their clothes they are very much alike, but their clothing either gives them freedom (in the form of trousers, for example), or restricts their freedom (in the form of long, wide skirts, for example) (2014: 474). This idea is taken further by both Caughie and Parkes with the former asserting that “our identity is as changeable as our apparel” (1989: 45) and “/.../ in order to change from female to the male role Orlando only has to wear different clothes” claimed by the latter (1994: 451). Parkes goes on to wonder about the freedom that non-gendered and changing identities could bring and muses whether by wearing the same clothes sexual differences could be eliminated altogether (1994: 451).

This assumption, that clothes change us, does not come without criticism, however, because as Parkes notes, “If clothes wear us, then we are constructed, and potentially censored, by some external agency,” (1994: 452). Caughie discerns that it was not clothes that changed Orlando but something inside her changed instead, which then caused her to put on women’s clothes. There seems to be a contradiction between clothes being natural and fitting versus arbitrary and deceiving. According to him, Woolf is merely presenting two positions in 18th century: that clothes are vain trifles while also being expressive of identity (1989: 45-46).

The gender ambiguity expressed via clothing also brings us to another major theme in *Orlando*: androgyny. “In *Orlando* one cannot, and indeed need not, decide to what sex Orlando most belongs; while there do appear to be two sexes, two poles of gender, there is no law that fixes them in one place, or that assigns one identity to one pole,” (Parkes. 1994: 452) refers to the idea of androgyny in *Orlando*. Burns reaches the same conclusion, saying that the male and female characters in *Orlando* combine in various ways thus resulting in Orlando being more androgynous rather than one sex or the other (1994: 347). Moreover, Parkes uses a quote from *Orlando*:

[a]nd mincing out the words, she was horrified to perceive how low an opinion she was forming of the other sex, the manly, to which it had once been her pride to belong. /.../ And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censoring both sexes equally, as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman; she knew the secrets, shared the weaknesses of each. (2003: 77)

to affirm the idea of androgyny being present in the novel (1994: 449). Caughie further argues for the androgyny in *Orlando* by saying it is used as a metaphor for change and openness in the novel (1989: 48). The insertion of androgyny into *Orlando* has opened the subject up for additional analysis as seen from Caughie who goes on to discuss androgyny in more depth (1989: 42, 44-45, 47).

In my thesis, I will build upon the criticism of *Orlando* that takes the novel's critique of heterosexuality and normativity seriously. In particular, I will further analyze how Woolf's use of clothes contributes to her challenge of binary sex and gender models and helps her to move towards androgynous and/or non-binary conceptions of gender.

ANALYSIS: CLOTHES AND ORLANDO

The way in which Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (1929) is set up - with the first half of the text depicting Orlando's life as a man and the other part as a woman, allows for it to be analyzed in different parts as well. The following text will be divided into two sections: Orlando as a man and how his clothes affect his (gender) identity and Orlando as a woman and her clothes in relation to her identity after the gender change. For the part in which Orlando is a man I use the pronoun 'he' and where Orlando is a woman I use 'she'; if Woolf's novel or my argument refer to both female and male Orlando, I will use the pronoun 'they'. Since it would be impossible to feature every instance where Orlando's clothes are mentioned in the book, only the most noteworthy examples will be looked at. The chosen occurrences will be analyzed to determine what kind of role clothes play in the making of Orlando's identity in relation to both their gender and overall being.

Orlando as a man

Already the first sentence of the novel directs attention to Orlando's clothes: "[h]e – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it –" (2003: 5). This can be a possible foreshadowing of Orlando's forthcoming sex change. The fashion of the time that Woolf is referring to is late 16th century English fashion. Since there are very few references to Orlando's clothes in the novel when he is still a man (already hinting at the fact that for the male Orlando, clothes were not as important as to the female one), besides the occasional mentions of stockings (2003: 8 & 61), I will first briefly describe the 16th century fashion. Mark Cartwright (2020) gives a detailed description of the garments worn at that time. He elucidates that men wore linen underclothes with embroidery or lace decorations. Trousers were either thigh- or knee-length, often billowed, and included

a codpiece which was essentially a padded, often exaggerated, area covering the crotch. Most common upper piece of clothing for men was the doublet, a short and tight-fitting jacket. Similar to the trousers, the doublet also had an extra padding. The padding, made of wool, cotton or horsehair, was supposed to resemble armor (see Figure 1) but the wearer ended up having to strut like a peacock, giving it its name – the peascod. Sarah Bochicchio (2020) adds that: “[b]elow the knee, men wore stockings, which were often fastened with ribbons or garters”. These clothes were lavishly decorated (see Figure 2). Another author giving insight into Elizabethan fashion, and by extension the clothes Orlando wears in the beginning of the novel, is Christopher Breward. In *The Culture of Fashion* (1995: 42) he argues that the power of the courtly dress was a way to disguise and mask the realities of the body.

In the context of *Orlando* this idea could be relevant to the androgyny in the novel which I will further explore shortly. As Orlando was a young upper-class man there was seemingly no reason for him to mask his body. However, looking at it from an androgynous perspective, the masking of the body could be a way to enforce the notion of androgyny, even if subconsciously. Breward uses an extract from Tomkis “Lingua or the Combat of the Tongues” (1607): “[f]ive hours ago I set a dozen maids to attire a boy like a nice gentlewoman; but there is such a doing with their looking glasses, pinning, unpinning /.../ a ship is sooner rigged by far than a gentlewoman made ready” (qtd. In Breward 1995: 42) as an introduction into the fashion of the Elizabethan era but it also illustrates how clothes can disguise and transform. The extract and Breward’s own words give away the prevalent fashion and societal norms of the Elizabethan times that Orlando lived in at the beginning of Woolf’s novel.

Merry M. Pawlowski, in the introduction for the 2003 edition of *Orlando* (2003: XIII) suggests that the element of doubt put in place by the mention of clothes in the first sentence alludes toward androgyny and Woolf’s intent to challenge society’s assumptions about

sexuality. Rognstad (2012: 47) argues that one must consider the fact that the symbolism of clothes is determined by the period they existed in. In the 20th century, when Woolf was writing *Orlando*, the garments the 16th century nobles wore might have looked feminine and gender ambiguous but for the people of that bygone time the clothes were masculine and elegant (Rognstad. 2012: 47). However, Rognstad also maintains Orlando's androgyny. She insists that the androgyny was more obvious in the novel when Orlando was a woman as well as the performance she put on when moving between the genders, which I will be talking about in further detail in the second half of the next subsection. Nevertheless, the androgyny was there even when Orlando was still a man, as the first sentence of Woolf's novel indicates. Rognstad writes that: "At this time [of being a man], Orlando is only unconsciously aware that he embodies both sexes, and thus femininity and masculinity intermix more freely as Orlando has not yet learned how to separate his one self from the other" (2012: 34). This is because in the 16th century, as well as today, men do not have to think about their gender and sex because masculine gender and male sex do not set as many restrictions on their personality as female gender and sex. As I will show in the next part, women's life and what they can and cannot do is on the contrary significantly influenced by their gender.¹

To support the claim of androgyny in *Orlando*, Rognstad (2012: 35) uses this description of Orlando from the novel: "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 two black medallions which were his temples" (Woolf. 2003:6). Rognstad states that the words and images Woolf uses signalize femininity and that Orlando's features are described as delicate and pure (2012: 35). "Even though Orlando is a

¹ This has been argued by feminist theorists, such as Elizabeth Grosz. Grosz, E. 1990. *Philosophy. In: S. Gunew (Ed.), Feminist Knowledge: Critique and Construct*. Routledge

typical man in many ways, there is a delicacy and fragility about him that hints towards an ambiguous gender identity,” continues Rognstad (2012: 35). This ambiguity is shown through Orlando’s apparent shyness, melancholy, and passionate emotional life (Rognstad. 2012: 35). Orlando also seems to be interested in gender or sex ambiguous women like Sasha, the lower-class women, and Archduchess Harriet (Rognstad. 2012: 36) which can also point towards his own gender ambiguity. By looking at Orlando as an androgynous character and at Breward’s (1995: 42) quote about the fluidity of male and female styles, it can be concluded that the clothes had at least some significance on Orlando’s identity as a man. Even if they were not something Orlando consciously thought about, they were relevant in terms of Orlando as an androgynous character. Putting Orlando into the 16th century, where the fashion norms were fluid (if not outright feminine), and casting doubt on the character’s gender, from the very first sentence of the novel, allowed Woolf to explore Orlando as a fully androgynous character.

While the clothes of the Elizabethan era seemed to have a more subtle effect on male Orlando’s gender identity, the change in his class identity was more obvious. Woolf (2003: 13) describes Orlando as being: “wrapped in a grey cloak to hide the star at his neck and the garter at his knee”. The star and the garter (see Figure 3) most likely refer to the symbols worn by the members of the Order of the Garter, founded in 1348 by King Edward III and considered to be highest civil and military honor attainable (Reid. 2023). Although nobles and commoners wore seemingly similar clothes, the clothes of the lower classes were of poorer quality, thus forming a clear distinction between lower- and upper-class citizens. There were even restrictions on how much someone can spend and what materials and colors the commoners could wear to ensure that the rich remained the most fashionable (Cartwright. 2020). Therefore Orlando, as a nobleman, could not have walked into a pub, in his regular garments, without standing out.

Breward (1995: 70) contends that clothes alongside cultural constructions such as manners and language mark the barriers between social distinctions such as class and sexuality. He further argues that clothes offer a way to disguise and change social and political intentions of a person. In this way, the chosen garments become masks that allow several roles to be played, each with its own status, modes, and activities. Burns (1994: 351) agrees that “[t]he impact of clothing extends also to categories of class”. Although Burns wrote it with female Orlando in mind, the quotation can also be used to argue that male Orlando saw clothes as a tool to disguise himself as a lower-class citizen. Once he was done with his visitations to beer gardens Orlando “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: 14). What is then shown through the wearing and discarding of the cloak is how Orlando, by covering the star and the garter, was able to change his identity and play with his status, going from a wealthy nobleman to a commoner and then right back to nobility. The reason why Orlando chose to disguise himself as lower class could simply be the fact that he could. As a high class gentleman Orlando had the privilege to easily move through social classes without many consequences, which was something not allowed for the lower classes. Orlando also had a liking for low class women and dressing as a commoner helped him engage with them.

During Orlando’s life as a man, clothes seem to be a way to portray androgyny without the character acknowledging it himself. The more significant change to male Orlando’s identity came through a simple cloak instead. The disguise of a cape allowed Orlando to move between social classes as he pleased.

Orlando as a woman

The first mention of clothes in relation to female Orlando mirrors the opening of the book to an extent, and its description of clothes worn by male Orlando: “and [Orlando] dressed herself in those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex” (Woolf. 2003: 68). Both instances express gender ambiguity in Orlando’s clothes provided by the fashion of the times, although Matthew Beeber argues that: “there is no evidence to suggest that the fashion or culture of Turkey or the Ottoman Empire was ever more androgynous than that of England” (2017). However, with male Orlando the clothes offered a sense of vagueness which allowed Woolf to play into Orlando’s androgyny with Orlando remaining seemingly oblivious to it. Meanwhile with female Orlando the gender neutrality of the Turkish garments let Orlando make the conscious decision to stay between genders without having to fully plunge into being a woman before she was ready, as will be shown below.

The change from gender-neutral to specifically female clothes brought about a change in Orlando when she set out to sail back to England: “Orlando had bought herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank that she now sat on the deck of the *Enamoured Lady*” (Woolf. 2003: 75). With the change in clothes something else changed in Orlando as she finally became to acknowledge herself as a woman:

Perhaps the Turkish trousers which she had hitherto worn had done something to distract her thoughts; and the gipsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from gipsy men. At any rate, it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck, that she realized with a start the penalties and privileges of her position. (Woolf. 2003: 75)

Therefore, it can be argued that clothes are what impacted Orlando’s transition into a woman the most. Woolf herself notes in the novel (2003: 92) that clothes wear us not the other way around and that they change both our world view and the world’s view of us. The novel then

compares the picture of male Orlando to female Orlando: “[t]he man has his hand free to seize his sword, the woman must use hers to keep the satins from slipping from her shoulders...” (2003: 92) and concluded that had they worn the same clothes, their outlook might have been the same. In her book *Gender Trouble* (1990) Judith Butler refers to Simone de Beauvoir’s belief that: “one is not born a woman, but, rather, becomes one” (1999: 12). With Orlando it happened quite literally, she was not born as a woman but eventually became one, first biologically and then mentally/in terms of gender.

Butler further follows Beauvoir’s statement in *The Judith Butler Reader* (2004.) where she states that: “to ‘exist’ one’s body in culturally concrete terms means, at least partially, to become one’s gender” (2004: 25). That is, essentially, what Orlando did. She put on the clothes that were the cultural norm for the English noblewomen of the 17th century (see Figure 4) which resulted in her feeling like a woman for the first time after her gender change. However, “[i]t was a change in Orlando herself that dictated her choice of a woman’s dress and of a woman’s sex,” (2003: 92) is something that Woolf also believes. This would imply that the clothes did not actually affect Orlando’s identity significantly. Butler maintains that:

[t]aking on a gender is not possible at a moment’s notice, but is a subtle and strategic project, laborious and for the most part covert. Becoming a gender is an impulsive yet mindful process of interpreting a cultural reality laden with sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions. To choose a gender is to interpret received gender norms in a way that reproduces and organizes them anew. (2004: 26)

The given interpretation would then both support Woolf’s argument that the change in Orlando happened before she put on the dress as well as aid the belief that clothes were an important part of the change in her gender identity as they are the sanctions, taboos, and prescriptions of the cultural reality. The fact that Orlando now felt and dressed like a woman did not completely solidify her gender, however. “[W]hen night came, she would more often than not become a nobleman complete from head to toe and walk the streets in search of

adventure” (Woolf. 2003: 109). The dressing in masculine clothes to live a more adventurous life can be looked at as gender performance.

In *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of Performance* (2008) Gill Jagger explains that for Butler, gender “is a kind of enforced cultural performance” (2008: 20), adding that “identity is an illusion which is a product of the performance itself” (2008: 23). What this means then is that after the change in sex, Orlando’s gender became, in a way, fluid. During the day Orlando puts on the performance of a noblewoman, dressing the part, and acting in a manner of which was expected from her. She could no longer “stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree. Her skirts collected damp leaves and straw. The plumed hat tossed on the breeze” (Woolf. 2003: 121). By becoming a woman and having to conform to the expectations set for the female sex (wearing long skirts unsuitable for physical activity), Orlando lost the freedom she had as a man, but which she would still remember. That is why during the night Orlando put on gender performances:

[n]ow she opened a cupboard in which hung still many of the clothes she had worn as a young man of fashion, and from among them she chose a black velvet suit richly trimmed with Venetian lace. It was a little out of fashion, indeed, but it fitted her to perfection and dressed in it she looked the very figure of a noble Lord. /.../ Orlando swept her hat off to her in the manner of a gallant /.../. Through this silver glaze the young woman looked up at him (for a man he was to her) appealing, hoping, trembling, fearing. (Woolf. 2003: 105-106)

Although Orlando was still biologically a woman, dressing in men’s clothes allowed her to take on the gender roles attributed to men and once again and reap the benefits otherwise forbidden for her.

CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was to analyze to what extent Orlando's clothes affected their identity. The assumption was that the most significant change would happen to Orlando's gender identity. When looking at the part where Orlando was still a man it seems that this is not necessarily true. Instead, Orlando used his clothes to manipulate his class status. By wearing different clothes, he was able to get away with visiting pubs and beer gardens and socialize with lower class people who might have been intimidated or otherwise displeased by the star and garter signifying his much higher social status. However, it would be incorrect to claim that clothes had no effect on male Orlando's gender identity. With the way Woolf wrote Orlando as a character, it is apparent that he was androgynous from the beginning. The setting (Elizabethan England) in which male Orlando was placed in, helped to strengthen that idea. By today's standards, and the standards of the time Woolf wrote *Orlando*, Orlando's clothes are feminine. The conscious effect on Orlando's gender identity as a man may seem minimal, however, the feminine look of the clothes is what solidified the androgyny of Orlando's character. Behavior wise, Orlando is masculine, he frequents beer gardens, goes hunting, and pretends to slice the heads off of moors like his father had done before him. In terms of looks, on the other hand, Orlando is described in a delicate way. So, for Woolf, dressing Orlando in clothes that for her would have looked feminine was a way of exhibiting Orlando's androgyny.

The effect clothes had on female Orlando is much more apparent. When Orlando first became a woman, she used gender neutral clothes to soften the transition from one gender to another. There are two approaches as to how clothes affected Orlando's gender change. Some believe that Orlando started wearing women's clothes when she began to feel like one. Others argue that Orlando felt the change in gender after putting on the dresses. This thesis followed the approach that the change in gender happened after the change in clothes. No

matter how you look at it, however, it is certain that once she finally welcomed the traditionally female clothing is when the change became fully complete. Although the transition in gender identity was now final, the impact clothes had on Orlando was not. Having lived as a man most his life, Orlando became aware of the restrictions the noblewoman's clothes she now had to wear, had on her. She used the clothes of her previous gender to occasionally disguise herself as a man to relive the freedom she once had, but that was now limited by her gender and the clothes that came with it.

As this thesis has shown, clothes play a significant role in the formation of Orlando's identity both as a man and as a woman, albeit differently. The topic explored here paves a way for further analyzing the relation between clothing, gender, and class identity. The element of class in relation to Orlando as a woman could and should be explored further in future research as I now only looked at in relation to Orlando as a man.

APPENDIX



Figure 1 Sir Francis Drake



Figure 2 Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester



Figure 3 The star and the garter



Figure 4 A dress from the 17th century

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL

ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Jaana-Liis Raudsalu

Clothes and identity in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*

Riided ja idenditeet Virginia Woolfi romaanis "Orlando"

Bakalaurusetöö

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Annotatsioon:

Käesolev bakalaurusetöö analüüsib riiete mõju Virginia Woolfi romaani "Orlando" nimitegelasele identiteedile. Kuna Orlando oli teose alguses mees ja muutus romaani keskel naiseks, siis pööratakse peamiselt tähelepanu soolisele identiteedile. Töö eesmärk on analüüsida kas ja kuidas riided Orlando (soolist) identiteeti mõjutavad.

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Töö kokkuvõtte leidis, et riietel oli suur mõju Orlando identiteedile. Mehena mõjutasid riided pigem Orlando klassiidentiteeti ning vaid toetasid tema androgüünsust. Naisena oli riietel Orlando soolisele identiteedile suur mõju. Riided ja nendega kaasnevad sotsiaalsed ootused Orlandole kui naisele piirasid nüüd tema vabadusi.

Märksõnad: inglise kirjandus, Virginia Woolf, "Orlando", soolisuus, riided, androgüünia, identiteet

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