Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* : The Making of a "Woman"

"ผู้หญิง" หรือ...คือสิงธรรมชาติ ใน*ออร์แลนโด*

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Abstract

Despite her own dismissal of the work as merely "great fun," of scarce poetic significance compared to her other serious experimental works, this paper argues that *Orlando*'s fantastic logic is carefully applied as a strategic device to accommodate and celebrate the Sapphist desire between her lover Vita Sackville-West and Woolf herself, which is unarticulated within the patriarchal/heteronormative narrative. The marvel is seeing how Woolf in *Orlando* develops her strategy to legitimize the "outlawed" homoeroticism. In the light of Judith Butler's influential theory of gender performativity–that gender is always a process in which we "do" rather than we "are"–we clearly see how Woolf, through the protagonist's fantastic sex change and relocations within different cultures, ingeniously contests the heteronormative assumption that sex, gender and sexuality exist in

relation to one another. This significant collapse of the tripartite interrelation severs the compulsory relationship between one's genitalia and one's gender, and hence permits the true liberation of one's sexuality.

บทคัดย่อ

แม้เวอร์จิเนีย วูลฟ์ จะปฏิเสธความสำคัญของ*ออร์แลนโด*ว่าเป็นเพียงงานเขียนที่ไม่มีนัยสำคัญในด้านการทดลองการใช้นวัตกรรมทางวรรณศิลป์ บทความชิ้นนี้มุ่งชี้ให้เห็นว่าที่จริงแล้ววิธีการเขียนแบบแฟนตาซีใน*ออร์แลนโด* มีความสำคัญต่อตัววูลฟ์เองเป็นอย่างมากในฐานะเครื่องมือที่ใช้ในการพูดถึงความต้องการแบบ "แซฟฟิสต์" ที่วูลฟ์มีต่อวีต้า แซกวิลเวสท์ ซึ่งเป็นเนื้อหาที่ไม่สามารถเกิดขึ้นได้ในวาทะกรรมการเขียนแบบปิตาธิปไตยที่ผูกขาดให้ความรักต่างเพศเท่านั้นเป็นบรรทัดฐาน บทความได้ใช้ทฤษฎีของจูดิธ บัตเลอร์ ช่วยในการเผยให้เห็นถึงวิธีการที่วูลฟ์รื้อสร้าง "สมมุติฐาน" (ที่กลายเป็นเรื่อง "ธรรมชาติ") ที่ว่า สภาพเพศเชิงกายภาพ (sex) เป็นตัวกำหนดการแสดงออกความเป็นหญิงหรือชาย (gender) และการเลือกคู่ครองต่างเพศเท่านั้น (heteronormative sexuality) การรื้อสร้างดังกล่าวจึงนำไปสู่อิสรภาพในการเลือกคู่ครอง

Since its publication, *Orlando*'s significance has been underrated. Critics such as Robin Majumdar dismisses it as "the thing with the least seriousness"[1]. Even the writer herself alludes to it as merely "a joke...a writer's holiday", "an escapade after these serious poetic experimental books"[2]. A "joke" though it is, that it is openly dedicated

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[1] Robin Majumdar and Allen McLaurin (ed.). *Virginia Woolf : The Critical Heritage* (London : Routledge and Kegan Paul) 1975. 235.

[2] *The Diary of Virginia Woolf* (ed.). Anne Oliver Bell and Andrew McNeillie. 5 vols. (London : Hogarth Press) 1977-1984. iii. 131.

to Vita Sackville-West, Woolf's lover, teases our curiosity to see if it is hiding some serious agenda. For a joke, after all, is often the thing we care about too much to risk stating seriously. But what seriousness is this that the author herself did not dare risk, but dismissed as inappropriate for inclusion within her serious poetic corpus? Sapphism or Woolf's "love that dare not speak its name", to use Oscar Wilde's phrase, towards Vita Sackville-West is an issue of such seriousness the author disguises it and only approaches it by means of fantasy–a strategic device to accommodate and legitimize their "sapphist" desire (Vita prefers "sapphism" to "lesbianism"), the love between two women, which cannot be voiced in the patriarchal/heteronormative narrative. Through the deliberate use of fantastic logic, Woolf creates Orlando–a fictional incarnation of Vita Sackville-West–as a man who, at the age of thirty, *became* a woman and has remained so ever since.

Before the fantastic sex change–the fulcrum point of the novel which will validate "dissident" homoeroticism–we have seen Orlando, an English subject of rank, already trying to transgress the rigid demarcation of the gender binary male/female through his attraction to sexually ambiguous beings, but failing. The first captivation is with Sasha

> when he beheld...a figure, which, whether boy's or woman's, for loose tunic and trousers of the Russian fashion served to disguise the sex, filled him with highest curiosity...the extraordinary seductiveness which issued from the whole person.[3]

Noteworthy is the fact that Orlando's abrupt passion for Sasha surfaces

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[3] Virginia Woolf. *Orlando*. (London : Penguin Books) 1998. p. 26.

before the distinction of gender; whether it is a boy or a woman, his passion for "the figure" is already immense. But as if aware that he is committing a crime of homoeroticism, Orlando suddenly bars himself from further amorous contact with the figure who he thinks shares his sex :

> 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.** (Ibid. my emphasis)

Although this ambivalent figure eventually turns out to be a woman, it is not a coincidence that we see Orlando re-wrestling with the same subversive desire when he feels "the beating of the Love's wings" (*O*, 82), again, with the sexually ambiguous Archduchess Harriet Griselda of Finster-Aarhorn whose "inappropriate" body and behavior seems a great deviation from the gender codes of femininity[4]. However, similarly with the case of Sasha, no sooner has he been aroused by this androgynous figure than he takes up a self-imposed censorship on his transgressive desire; the "Love's wings" of "the bird of beauty" instantaneously becomes a "horror!" of "the heaviest and foulest of the birds; which is the vulture" (*O*, 82). Without quite an

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[4] The aberrations include her excessive height : "something over six feet two", that her laughter sounds "so much tee-heeing and haw-hawing that Orlando thought she must have escaped from a lunatic asylum" and that she shows "a knowledge of wines rare in a lady, and made some observations upon firearms and the customs of sportsmen in her country" (*O*, 80-81). As revealed later in chapter 4, all these deviations from female stereotypes yield a realistic effect; the Archduchess is actually an Archduke who "had seen a portrait of Orlando and fallen hopelessly in love with him" (*O*, 126), hence his cross-dressing as a woman whose femininity and womanhood are subject to doubt.

intelligible motive, Orlando feels the strongest revulsion to send the object of his affection away to her carriage.

It is to be observed that Orlando's self-imposed homophobia, his reluctance to embrace his own transgressive desire, is deliberately conceived under the canopy of the English culture where sex and gender distinction is stark, especially when Orlando is a gentleman of rank. Thus, Woolf's relocation of her protagonist to the exotic territories of "otherness" where the ultimate sexual transgression is realised and all the rigid distinctions of gender, class and race are let loose. That Orlando's transgressive desire is impossible in one culture and possible in another reflects the instability and arbitrariness of the norms each society imposes upon its subjects.

Orlando's fantastic sex change which "seemed to have been accomplished painlessly" (*O*, 98) is purposefully contrived within the new locale of Orientalism where the Sapphist desire is legitimized as no longer "transgressive" or "outlawed". As the novel is a tribute to Woolf's lover Vita Sackville-West, the protagonist's sex should eventually be transformed to match her model's. And to accommodate her Sapphist desire, this fantastic sexual transfiguration affects only the protagonist's physicality–changes take place only in the body and genitals, not in her mental state. Her (now that "he" has become "she" and for the sake of convenience) consciousness and memory, a convenient proof of one's identity, stay perfectly intact : "Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity" (*O*, 97). Especially Orlando's attraction to the female sex persists, as accentuated by the narrator : "...if the consciousness of being of the same sex had any effect at all, it was to quicken and deepen those

feelings which she had had as a man" (Ibid.). Woolf's use of fantasy to physically metamorphose the protagonist into the female sex in order that she might still enjoy the same object of desire as before is obviously a strategic detour from the patriarchal/heteronormative writing norm, which propagates rigorous interrelation between sex, gender and sexuality. Woolf here is doing the same subversive task Judith Butler, a feminist-turned-queer theorist[5], carries out this task in her influential book *Gender Trouble*[6] in which she invalidates the heteronormative assumption that sex, gender and sexuality have an inevitable dependency to one another : that if one is biologically female, one is to assume feminine characteristics and thus must only desire men, the opposite sex.

To collapse this compulsory tripartite alliance, both Woolf and Butler very ingeniously prove that gender, after all, is unnatural; its ontological effect is not naturally given, but produced according to the dominant discourse of each particular historical context. After going through the fantastic sex change, Orlando is awaited by an old gypsy on a donkey to be dispatched to live among other gypsies in a mountain. There she has transformed herself into a whole new person with the help of the "deconstructive" philosophy of the gypsies who despise formal style of behaviour, patriarchal domination, and

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[5] An oversimplifying explanation of the differences between Feminism and Queer theory would be that 1) while the former believes in the fixed and stable binary oppositions such as male/female and thus hetero/homosexuality, the latter (influenced by Derrida's Deconstruction) seeks to demonstrate the instability of such binaries. 2) Feminism sees subjectivity as a fixed ontology, whereas Queer theory proves it to be fluid and socio-cultural context dependent.

[6] Judith Butler. *Gender Trouble : Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. (New York : Routledge) 1990.

most importantly, the rigid distinction between genders : "the gypsy women, except in one or two important particulars, differ very little from the gypsy men" (*O*, 108). Having been familiarized with this kind of sexual and gender ambiguity, on her return to English soil–where she is forced to buy a new "complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in the dress of a young Englishwoman of rank..." (Ibid.)–Orlando is startled to find herself, up to this very moment, never having given her sex a thought : "Perhaps the Turkish trousers which she had hitherto worn had done something to distract her thought" (Ibid.). She, as a product of the gypsy deconstructive belief, has just recognised herself as a woman when she is reminded by, first, the very "coil of skirts about her legs" and, second, the Captain's greatest politeness "to have an awning spread for her on deck" (Ibid.). What we learn from this very important passage is the fact that Orlando's gender is not natural and has never been produced as either male or female until it is put into a certain socio-cultural context, which in this case is the English gender codes–that the female sex is to wear certain kind of outfit and that the male when seeing this "signifier" is to respond with supreme gentleness–another set of "signifiers" representing, in that particular culture, masculinity. Woolf's juxtaposition of the same subject in different socio-cultural contexts yielding contrast rather than unanimity challenges the absolute validity of the heteronormative compulsory interrelation between sex and gender. Orlando has not been anything at all until she enters the matrix of the English gender code which requires a female body to perform femininity. Especially when femininity means helplessness–the stereotype which Woolf further debunks as not naturally given but socially constructed in her caricature of Orlando's

hyperbolic helplessness through the metaphor of death at the point when she becomes a wife of a husband :

> "Madame," the man cried, leaping to the ground, "you're hurt!"
>
> **"I'm dead, sir!"** she replied.
>
> A few minutes later they became engaged. (*O*, 176)

It is through marriage that English society sustains power relation between men and women as center and supplement; marriage is the institution where gender performativity[7], bestowing the ontological effect of "male" as dominant and "female" as subservient, takes place.

These deconstructive anecdotes demonstrating the arbitrariness of what we usually take for granted as natural and self-evident remind one of Judith Butler's deconstruction of the inter-dependency between such binary oppositions as sex/gender and nature/culture. Within the heteronormative matrix, of which English society is one of the most representative, "sex" when identified with "nature"–the privileged polarity–will be given the originality and thus authority to dictate the possibility of "gender" whose inferior ontology is derived by means of acculturation or "culture". Therefore, as Woolf's subversive anecdote demonstrates, if a true liberation of gender and sexuality is ever to be achieved at all, it must only be conceived outside this oppressive paradigm; that is to prove that gender is not natural. Orlando is not a woman until she *is made so*.

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[7] "Performativity" is the term Judith Butler coined to denote the unnaturalness of gender whose ontology, which is merely provisional, never pre-exists its cultural inscription. The effect of gender is produced by "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame". It is not something we *are*, but something we *do*. The implication of gender as "doing" rather than "being" is that "there is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Butler, 1990. p. 25).

If gender is not natural and has no relation to sex, what then should its nature be? Liberating herself from the heteronormative compulsory interrelation between sex, gender and sexuality, Woolf in *Orlando* at her best expounds how gender is *acquired* by means of "performativity". When back to England and becoming tired of pouring tea to the circle of the wits–Mr. Pope, Mr. Addison and Mr. Swift–the newly transformed Orlando–whose understanding about the nature of gender is revolutionized by her exposures to the arbitrariness of different norms and beliefs among different cultures–increases the pleasure of her life by assuming different gender identities, especially as a "man" whose predilection for "the ill-lit, ill-paved, ill-ventilated courtyards that lay about Gerrard Street and Drury Lane[8]" (*O*, 155) becomes well known. Unshackling herself from the compulsory dependency between sex and gender, Orlando *performs* as a man and chooses a same-sex object of desire, a new possibility for her sexuality :

> Orlando swept her hat off to her (the prostitute) **in the manner of a gallant paying his address to a lady** of fashion in a public place...Through this silver glaze the young woman looked up at **him (for a man was to her)**... To feel her hanging lightly yet like a suppliant on her arm, **roused in Orlando all the feelings which *become* a man.** She looked, she felt, she talked like one (*O*, 152) (My emphases).

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[8] The neighbourhood where the practice of prostitution was ubiquitous at the time.

The above extract illustrates how a "free-floating artifice"[9] named Orlando acquires her masculinity by means of cross-dressing and imitation of masculine gender codes. Through this imitation or recitation of specific non-verbal language designated as masculine–"sweeping her hat off in the manner of a gallant paying his address to a lady"–Orlando becomes *provisionally* masculine by her own choice. As much as the earlier "coil of skirts about her legs" anecdote demonstrates that Orlando is not born a woman, but becomes one, this hat-sweeping sketch also confirms that one is not born a man, but becomes one. Thus, be it femininity or masculinity, gender is never naturally given, but voluntarily produced.

Since gender is acquired by imitation–via dress and non-verbal language–when that specific act of recitation terminates, the ontological effect of that voluntarily conceived gender is also dissipated. Gender thus, besides the fact that it is not naturally given, but produced, is furthermore not a permanent state, but a temporary effect. It is what we *do*, not what we *are*; it is a doing rather than being[10]. This provisional effect of gender is well demonstrated by Orlando's vacillation between the two genders :

> ...for 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. (*O*, 155)

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[9] Butler, 1990. p. 6.
[10] Butler (1990). p. 25.

Produced by the temporary effect of imitation, gender is not a kind of "performance", according to Butler, but "performativity"; "the former presumes a subject, but the latter contests the very notion of the fixed subject"[11].

That gender and sexuality is not determined by sex seems liberating enough, but that one becomes a gender by imitating either masculinity or femininity still, as many people think, gives the sense that this acquired gender–such as Orlando's–does not seem to have originality comparing to the heteronormative tripartite interrelationship between sex, gender and sexuality. Butler addresses this problem in her "Imitation and Gender Insubordination" in which she professes that heterosexuality itself has no authenticity as usually believed :

> There is no original or primary gender that drag [here we have seen Orlando ever engaging herself with cross-dressing] imitates, but *gender is a kind of imitation of which there is no original;* in fact, it is a kind of imitation that produces the very notion of original as an *effect* and consequence of the imitation itself (Ibid.) (Emphasis in the original).

Within Butler's performativity theory, as well illustrated by Orlando's vacillation between the sexes, the importance of sex is obliterated, for there is no sex, only gender, and gender itself is performative. Gender should be defined by what we behave at different times and situations rather than who we biologically are; it is an achievement rather than a natural inheritance.

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[11] Judith Butler. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination". *Literary Theory : An Anthology*. Julie Rivkin and Michel Ryan (ed.). (London : Blackwell) 2000. p. 722.

As a new hypothesis about gender, furthermore, Woolf's liberation of gender and sexuality from their heteronormative compulsory inter-dependence with biological factor opens up many new possibilities, for it entails free-floating, fluid and eclectic rather than fixed, stagnant and limited human potentialities. As put by Butler :

> when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice, with the consequence that man and masculine might just as easily signify a female body as a male one, and woman and feminine a male body as easily as a female one[12].

Woolf's design of Orlando's androgynous marriage speaks very well for this celebration of eclecticism :

> "Are you positive you (referring to Orlando) aren't a man?" He would ask anxiously, and she would echo,
>
> "Can it be possible you're not a woman?"...For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other's sympathy, and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman... (*O*, 182).

In this androgynous marriage in which gender distinction is blurred, a great degree of sympathy is shared because each has the quality of the other.

In the whole picture of Woolf study, *Orlando*, though much underrated in its significance, poses a very interesting question about the almost self-evident fact of the writer's widely recognized position

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[12] Butler. (1990) p. 6.

as a feminist whose works are all along seen as based on the fixity of sexual stereotypes and social gender-roles. Nicholas March, for instance, generalizes that "Virginia Woolf's men are often preoccupied by questions and problems that seem pretentious"[13]. He dedicates an entire chapter entitled "Male and Female in Virginia Woolf" to "look for evidence of any underlying concept of 'maleness' and 'femaleness'" and how the characters exploit these stereotypes in her novels, which of course excludes *Orlando* because its fluid presentation of gender does not fit into the scheme. Woolf's women too, as it always dawns on us when reading, for instance, *Mrs Dalloway* or *To the Lighthouse*, are always in the habit of retreating from political life and instead enjoying a rich inner realm. It seems that without the fantastic logic Woolf uses as a strategic device to create *Orlando*, her other serious poetic works seem to operate within the heterosexual assumption that one's sex, gender and sexuality must go together, creating a coherent subject of male and female as distinctly separate from one another. Woolf's *Orlando* breaches the typical Woolfian poetics of *showing* the things that are already there by instead revealing *how* these gender stereotypes are produced and acquired in certain socio-cultural context. The different voice *Orlando* articulates is its illustration of Woolf's much ignored perspective towards the nature of gender and sexuality as not self-evidently natural, but socially constructed. Collapsing the compulsory tripartite relationship between sex, gender and sexuality the heteronormative matrix dictates to sustain power relations, *Orlando* redefines the ontology of gender as

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[13] Nicholas Marsh. *Virginia Woolf : the Novels*. (London : Macmillan Press) 1998. p. 53.

ever in the process of constructing itself voluntarily by means of performativity.

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