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**An Interpretation of Virginia Woolf's
Orlando from the Perspective of
Gender Performativity**

**Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
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Degree of Bachelor of Arts**

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Abstract: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* is a novel that explores the construction of gender identity through the transformative experiences of its protagonist. This study finds that the development of the storyline and the awakening of the protagonist's gender consciousness are closely tied to changes in geographical and social contexts. Applying Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, this study analyzes the theme of gender identity in the novel and concludes that the fluidity and complexity of gender identity are largely shaped by social norms and cultural expectations. To further interpret Woolf's reflections on gender roles and identity, this study focuses on the protagonist Orlando's journey of self-discovery and concludes that only by challenging traditional gender binaries and embracing the fluidity of gender performance can individuals achieve a more authentic and inclusive gender identity.

Key Words: Virginia Woolf; *Orlando*; gender performativity; gender identity

摘要: 弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫的长篇小说《奥兰多》是一部探讨性别身份构建的小说。在该作品中,故事情节的推动和主人公性别意识的觉醒都与地理和社会背景的变化密切相关。本研究运用朱迪斯·巴特勒的性别表演理论,分析小说中性别身份的主题,认为性别身份的流动性和复杂性在很大程度上是由社会规范和文化期望塑造的。为了进一步探讨伍尔夫对性别角色和身份的反思,本文还着重分析了主人公奥兰多的自我发现之旅,认为只有通过挑战传统的性别二元对立,并拥抱性别表演的流动性,个体才能实现更真实、更具包容性的性别身份。

关键词: 弗吉尼亚·伍尔夫; 《奥兰多》; 性别表演; 性别身份

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1. Introduction

1.1 A Brief Introduction to Virginia Woolf and *Orlando*

As an outstanding British modernist writer of the 20th century, Virginia Woolf is an important representative of feminist literature. With her keen literary insight and unique narrative style, Woolf explores key issues such as the position of women in the social structure, the solidification of gender roles, and the limitations of women's creative freedom. Woolf's works often use delicate psychological descriptions and stream-of-consciousness techniques to reveal women's inner difficulties under traditional social norms, thus posing a powerful challenge to the established gender concepts and providing an important basis for the development of feminist literary theory. Jane Goldman praised Woolf as "the founder of modern feminist literary criticism" (Goldman, 2007:66).

Orlando, as one of Woolf's most creative works, is a romantic autobiographical novel with a highly imaginative plot. It follows the fantastical experiences of the main character, Orlando, who transforms from a male aristocrat in the 16th century to a woman in the 20th century, spanning several centuries. In the process, Orlando undergoes many changes in identity, gender, and love. The novel is highly innovative in both narrative structure and thematic exploration. It takes the gender transformation of the protagonist Orlando as the core plot, and his identity transformation from male to female is not a simple fantasy setting, but is endowed with profound gender cognitive significance. The differences in social roles, emotional experiences, and transformation of self-identity that Orlando experience under different gender identities offer readers a unique perspective to examine and reflect on the stereotypes of the traditional gender binary. Through this strategy, Woolf reveals the fluidity and social construction of gender identity, emphasizing that gender is not a fixed biological attribute, but is profoundly influenced by culture, history and social environment. Orlando not only has great significance in literary form, but also provides an inspiring dimension for gender studies and the evolution of feminist thinking. Stef Craps celebrates this novel as an "subversion of deep-seated and taken-for-granted assumptions about gendered behavior" (Craps, 2006:175).

1.2 Research Framework

Taking the gender transition of the protagonist in the novel as an entry point, this study applies Judith Butler's gender performativity theory to explore how social norms shape an individual's gender identity. Gender performativity theory suggests that gender is not a natural attribute, but is constructed through the behavior and performances of individuals in society, which are influenced by socio-cultural norms and discursive power structures (Butler, 1990: 33). This study adopts textual analysis to deeply analyze Orlando's gender transformation process from male to female, revealing the complexity and dynamics of her gender identity.

Social status, family education, social customs and other norms on gender roles lead Orlando to predominantly exhibit "masculine" qualities such as bravery, frankness and love of adventure in his male period. In contrast, during her female period, she predominantly exhibits "feminine" qualities such as sentimentality and sensitivity. Ultimately, Orlando experiences the process of gender transformation from male to female and realizes his gender identity. After a series of explorations, struggles and growth, Orlando finally realizes his gender identity and accepts himself as one with both male and female qualities. The intersection and fusion of these gender performances blurs traditional gender boundaries and highlight the fluidity of gender identity. Through textual analysis, this study explores the profound influence of gender norms on Orlando's gender performances within a specific historical period. It reveals how social norms shape an individual's gender identity through gender performances, and how an individual adjusts and adapts his or her gender performances under the pressure of social norms.

1.3 The Significance of the Study

Applying gender performativity theory to analyze gender role fluidity and social norms in *Orlando* illuminates the novel's deconstruction and reconstruction of traditional gender roles, which in turn helps us to understand the role and significance of the work in its socio-cultural context. This analysis is not only of significance in the academic field, but also has a positive impact on the social level.

From an academic point of view, this analysis helps enrich and develop gender performance theory and promotes multidisciplinary cross-studies. Gender transformation and integration in Orlando provide a vivid literary example of gender performativity theory, and demonstrates the construction process of gender. By analyzing the fluidity of gender roles in the novel, it can further expand the

connotation of gender performance theory and explore the dynamics and diversity of gender identity. In addition, this method of analysis can promote the intersection of literary studies with gender studies, sociology, and other multidisciplinary fields. The interdisciplinary research perspective enables us to understand more comprehensively the manifestations and meanings of gender issues in literary works, thereby deepening our understanding of the construction of gender identity.

At a social level, this analysis contributes to promoting gender equality and diversity, and advances society's deeper understanding of and reflection on gender issues. The fluidity of gender roles and the deconstruction of social norms in *Orlando* help to break down the traditional gender binary and advance the development of gender equality and gender diversity. The critique and deconstruction of gender norms in the novel trigger social reflection on existing gender norms and roles, revealing the limitations these norms place on individual freedom and development. Therefore, it can provide society with new perspectives and promote a more in-depth discussion of gender issues, which in turn promotes society's acceptance and understanding of gender diversity.

In conclusion, analyzing *Orlando* through the lens of gender performativity theory is not only academically significant, which can enrich and develop gender performance theory and promote multidisciplinary cross-research, but also socially impactful as it fosters the development of gender equality and diversity, and promotes a more in-depth understanding and reflection of gender issues in the society.

1.4 The Layout of the Study

Focusing on Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* through the lens of Judith Butler's gender performativity theory, this thesis is divided into five chapters. The first chapter gives a brief introduction to Virginia Woolf and the novel, *Orlando*, outlines the research framework and significance, and presents the overall structure of the thesis. The second chapter provides a literature review, summarizing and evaluating current researches on *Orlando* from China and abroad. The third chapter explains the theoretical framework, namely Butler's theory of gender performativity with a particular focus on its core arguments. The fourth chapter combines theory and textual analysis of *Orlando* to examine the construction of Orlando's gender identity from three dimensions: masculine traits of Orlando's male period, feminine traits of

Orlando's female period, and the integration of gender identities. The last chapter concludes the thesis by summarizing its findings.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Domestic Studies on *Orlando*

Domestic research on *Orlando* began relatively late, and the research perspectives primarily include feminism, gender construction, and narratology. Feminism is one of the most important themes in the study of *Orlando*. Scholars focus on Woolf's writing practice and its contribution to feminism, particularly her reclamation of a female tradition of writing exploring the richness and foresight of Woolf's feminist thought (Yang, 2013:104). When exploring the theory of intersexuality in *Orlando*, scholars often link it with another research perspective of gender construction. Lv (2002) argues that Woolf presents the intertwined, confusing and conflicting state of male and female temperaments in the protagonist Orlando through the plot of gender transformation, which reveals the traditional binary thinking mode and criticizes the traditional gender norms. Chen (2014) further analyzes the theory of androgyny in the book, and she believes that androgyny is not only a strategy to guide women to get rid of the long-standing constraints of patriarchal society, but also a means to fundamentally eliminate gender antagonisms and achieve true freedom and equality.

In addition, the theme of gender construction also focuses on the multiple influences on Orlando's gender change, such as clothing, social environment, space and so on. Pan (2006) points out that Orlando's cross-dressing and mixed-dressing, which defy the rules of the mainstream culture, often lead to a separation between his gender and gender identity. This not only influences people's perceptions of his gender, but also is an important factor in the change of his psychological gender. Xu (2016) explores the revision of social and gender identities in *Orlando*, arguing that Orlando's gender transformation is not only a physical change, but also a challenge to social gender norms.

From a narratological perspective, scholars have analyzed how *Orlando* presents feminist themes through unique narrative techniques. Cai and Xie (2015) interpret *Orlando* from the perspective of "new biography" and explore how Woolf explores the inner reality of the biographer through three-dimensional narrative representations.

2.2 Foreign Studies on *Orlando*

Foreign scholars have primarily focused on the novel's non-linear temporal narrative and its manifestation of Woolf's feminist thought. In exploring its non-linear time narrative, scholars often draw connections to the protagonist's gender change in the novel. Biswas (2020) argues that the protagonist's sex change disrupts the linearity of straight time, and a false equivalency is drawn between gender identity and biological sex. De Riso (2023) holds that "androgynous mind" in *Orlando* is presented through the removal of temporal boundaries between past and present, the ambivalence of the protagonist's sexual identity and, most importantly, the "unity of purpose" of Orlando's sexual identity. Whitmore (2015) explores bi-gender and bi-sexual time in the novel, arguing that *Orlando* constructs a "bi-sexual time" through gender transformation and temporal fluidity, reflecting Woolf's unique understanding of gender and time.

On the other hand, scholars have explored the issues of transgenderism, gender fluidity, and gender manipulation from the aspects of transsexuality and androgyny theory to analyze Woolf's feminist thoughts. Among them, androgyny theory is the most discussed topic. González (2004) points out that Orlando is neither entirely male nor fully female, but an androgynous figure who challenges the rigidity of traditional gender roles. Laura (2022) delves into the book's portrayal of gender fluidity and male and female identities, particularly in terms of intersex traits, revealing how Woolf's work anticipates and transcends contemporary gender discourse to offer a new way of understanding gender identity. Melita (2013), through a comparative study of gender identity, demonstrates that gender transformation and intersex traits in *Orlando* challenge and transcend traditional gender binaries.

2.3 Research Gaps in the Current Studies of *Orlando*

Although scholars both domestically and internationally have studied the book from various aspects and perspectives, some studies still point out the need to go beyond a single gender perspective and adopt a more comprehensive critical perspective, such as eco-feminism theory (Zhang and Lv 2013). In the established studies of *Orlando*, although scholars have analyzed it theoretically from multiple perspectives, including those applying the theory of gender performativity, most of the studies fail to adequately integrate the historical background and socio-cultural context in which the novel is set, especially those related to gender norms. This deficiency is particularly evident when analyzing the gender cognitive process of the

novel's protagonist, Orlando, leading to certain gaps in the relevant interpretations. Therefore, when exploring Orlando in depth, it is necessary to re-examine its historical and cultural contexts, especially the profound influence of gender norms on its characterization and thematic expression, so as to more comprehensively and accurately understand the process of Orlando's gender identity formation and the profound significance behind it.

3. Theoretical Framework: Gender Performativity Theory

3.1 The Definition and Development of Gender Performativity Theory

The idea that gender is a form of performativity was first introduced by Judith Butler in 1988 in her book *Gender Trouble*. In the book, Butler asserts we should “consider gender, as a corporeal style, an ‘act,’ which is both intentional and performative” (Butler, 1988: 161). In other words, gender is not a fixed, innate attribute, but an identity constructed through bodily acts and performances. She further explores the problem: in what senses is gender an act? Butler argues, “the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated. This repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established” (Butler, 1988: 162). Her answer reveals two important features of gender performance. Firstly, gender performance has a ritualized and dramatic character, similar to performances on stage. These performances follow certain social norms and cultural scripts, just as characters in a play need to act according to the script. Secondly, gender identity is not established through a one-time act, but is consolidated and reinforced through constantly repeated behaviors. Through reexperiencing, the individual gradually internalizes these gender norms and makes them part of his or her own identity, and ultimately, gender identity is gradually “naturalized” as if it were an innate attribute. These two features are clearly shown in her subsequent works, such as *Bodies That Matter On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, and *Undoing Gender*. Besides, viewing gender as a fluid process rather than a fixed endpoint, she calls for more inclusive social conditions in which diverse gender identities could be recognized without attachment to medical or legal authority (Gao and Fei, 2016).

The theory of gender performativity not only develops a unique understanding of gender identity, but also draws extensively on various theoretical frameworks beyond feminism. Inspired by Michel Foucault’s view of “discourse as power”, Butler argues that discourse and power are mutually constructive and can shape identity. Jacques Derrida’s theories of “discursive repetition” and “discursive reference” emphasize the repetitive and open-ended nature of language, providing Butler with a perspective for understanding the fluidity and subversive possibilities of gender identity. John Austin’s theory of “speech acts” allows Butler to recognize the action and practice of discourse, further illustrating that gender identity is constructed through the repetitive practice of discourse. Jacques Lacan’s theory of the “psychological mechanism of

disguise” helps Butler to analyze the illusion of the “existence” of the gendered subject. In addition, Butler deepens and questions Simone de Beauvoir’s view that “one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Beauvoir, 1973: 301), arguing that the process of constructing gender identity is more complex, and that there is no fixed distinction between biological sex and social gender. By integrating these theories, Butler put forward the theory of gender performativity, which argues that gender identity is formed through the constant manipulation of discourse, power and practice, and is fluid and unstable, thus breaking down the fixity and binary opposition of traditional gender identity.

Gender performativity theory has been widely accepted in academia, and has influenced multiple disciplinary fields, including literature, sociology, psychology, education and other fields. This theory provides an important theoretical framework for understanding the construction of gender identity and gender issues, thereby promoting the in-depth development of gender studies. For example, Sara Salih affirms in *Judith Butler* that gender itself is performative behavior and gender performativity theory “has changed the way we think about sex, sexuality, gender and language” (Salih, 2002: 53). In *Judith Butler: Ethics, Law, Politics*, Elena Loizidou places Butler’s gender theory within the framework of social ethics, law, and politics, and emphasizes that gender performativity theory is encouraging the “gradual impotent law” (Loizidou, 2007: 102) to exert its influence or restraints on individual’s gender identity. In *Judith Butler: Sexual Politics, Social Change and the Power of the Performative*, Gill Jagger discusses Butler’s theory of gender politics in detail, arguing that it provides a theoretical support for gender equality, and “allows the possibility for resistance and resignification” (Jagger, 2008: 104) of the social change.

3.2 Core Arguments of Gender Performativity Theory

There are three central ideas that run through the development of gender performativity theory. Firstly, gender is not a product of nature, but a result of repetitive social gender regulation. In the 1960s and 1970s, feminism, in an attempt to refute the idea that “biology is destiny,” commonly divided gender into biological and social gender. Butler, however, challenged this gender binary, arguing that even “biological sex” itself is a product of cultural interventions, shaped by practices like intersex surgery and social norms, so there is no such thing as a pure “natural sex” (Liu, 2016: 30). For example, a doctor’s announcement of a baby’s sex at birth has

effects on the construction of the baby's gender identity. Drawing on Foucault's theory of "discourse as power" and genealogy, Butler further points out that gender identity is continuously constructed and naturalized through repeated reinforcement by various discourses and social institutions, which obscure its constructed nature (Butler, 1988: 162). In this process, gender norms are enforced through social discourses and power mechanisms, compelling individuals to conform or face exclusion and oppression. This coercion is evident in both macro social structures and micro daily life, such as gender role expectations and family role divisions. Repetition and coercion are important features of drills in the process of gender identity construction.

Secondly, gendered bodies are performative, produced and sustained through bodily acts and other means. Butler argues "acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this on the surface of the body" (Butler, 1990: 173). In other words, behaviors, gestures, and desires have the effect on shaping the inner identity or essence of the individual, but this effect is not produced directly through the interior of the body, but rather on the surface of the body through a symbolic absence. That is, the inner identity of an individual is inferred by observing their actions, gestures, and desires, but this inference does not directly reveal the nature of the inner identity, but rather through an indirect, symbolic implication. Therefore, Butler draws a conclusion that the performative gender body has no "ontological status" (Butler, 1990:173), which is apart from the various acts that constitute its reality. In other words, gender identity is not an independently existing entity, but relies on these performative behaviors and symbols to exist. Without these external performances, gender identity cannot be defined and recognized. Gender symbols are expressed not only through language and culture, but also are presented and consolidated through bodily movements, sounds, and clothing (Ke, 2010: 71-72). Thus, the performative body is an integral element in the construction and expression of an individual's gender identity.

Thirdly, gender should be understood as an open, pluralistic, and inclusive category rather than a closed normative structure. Society regulates an individual's gender performance through language, behavior, appearance, and clothing, assigning gender-specific meanings and values to these norms. For example, women are expected to exhibit quiet and gentle traits, while men are expected to exhibit brave and strong traits. However, since societies and cultures are not fixed and gender

expression norms change, gender expression norms are also fluid and diverse. For example, the skirt is not exclusively a symbol of femininity in all cultures. Therefore, Butler calls for the redefinition of gender identity through the “critique and deconstruction” (Butler, 2004: 198) of these power relations and social discourses. It is essential to break down traditional binary notions of gender and provide space for the diversity of gender identities, and to reconstruct more inclusive and pluralistic gender identities.

In a word, gender is not a natural product, but is constructed through the repetitive regulation of social and cultural norms. And gender identity is also performative, constructed through the performativity of bodily behaviors, gestures and desires. This performativity and changing gender norms make gender identity diverse, fluid and ambiguous, and therefore gender should be seen as an open, pluralistic and inclusive category rather than a closed normative structure.

Therefore, using gender performativity theory to interpret gender role fluidity and social gender norms in *Orlando* can reveal its deconstruction and reconfiguration of traditional gender roles, and provide a deeper understanding of how individuals make adjustments to their gender performances and identities under the influence of social norms. The process of Orlando’s gender transformation vividly exemplifies the view of gender as a social construct, as her gender identity is constructed and reinforced through a series of performative behaviors. At the same time, Orlando exhibits qualities that go against traditional gender norms during both her male and female periods, and this fluidity of gender identity challenges traditional binary notions of gender and reveals the complexity and diversity of gender identity. Through this analysis, it can gain a deeper understanding of the socially constructed nature of gender identity, as well as the role and significance of the work in its socio-cultural context.

4. An Analysis of Gender Performativity in Orlando

4.1 Masculine Traits of Orlando's Male Period

In sixteenth-century England, societal norms and expectations played a crucial role in shaping Orlando's masculine identity. According to Judith Butler, "the action of gender" requires repeated performance, which is "at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established" (Butler, 1988: 162). Orlando's masculinity is initially constructed through his inheritance of wealth and power from his prominent aristocratic family. His pursuit of personal ambition and social recognition further align with the societal expectations of masculinity. Additionally, Orlando's dominance in romantic relationships and his ability to disregard traditional moral norms for personal fulfillment reflect the internalization of societal gender norms and the double standards of the time. Through these actions, Orlando successfully reveals himself as a male figure conforming to societal expectations, highlighting the dynamic interplay between social mechanisms and individual gender identity construction.

4.1.1 Social Roles and Expectations

In the process of constructing Orlando's male identity, society plays a dominant role in the construction of Orlando's male identity, especially in terms of social status, personal ambition and career achievement. Because for Orlando, social status is given by the society, and the ambition and achievement are generated in compliance with the social expectations. Butler argues that "gender reality is created through sustained social performances" (Butler, 1990: 180). Here, gender reality refers to the concept of gender as understood and accepted by the general public. Society is constantly constructing and reinforcing individual gender identities by categorizing genders and assigning specific roles and social expectations to each gender, and ultimately these roles and expectations become gender reality over time.

In sixteenth-century England, society's expectations of men were expressed through wealth, power, social status, personal ambition, and achievement. These roles and expectations became an important basis for men's construction of masculinity. Orlando, who comes from a long-standing and prominent aristocratic family, initially constructs his masculinity by inheriting the family's great wealth and great power. In addition, the favor of Queen Elizabeth I further enhances Orlando's social status,

enabling him to participate in court affairs, and this empowerment and social recognition further strengthen his masculinity. As “the spirit of chivalry and dominant masculinity easily attracted gender expectations” (Zhou, 2020: 4), these accumulations of power and wealth not only constitute an important part of Orlando’s masculinity, but also make him an ideal male figure in the eyes of many women. When Orlando appears at the Court of King James, he was “young, rich, and handsome. No one could have been received with greater acclamation than he was. Many ladies were ready to show him their favors” (Woolf, 1928:14). This episode not only reflects society’s expectations of male roles at the time: an ideal male should be young, wealthy and socially prominent, but also demonstrates Orlando’s success in constructing his male identity.

In addition to wealth and power, personal ambition and achievement are likewise seen as key elements of masculinity. Orlando’s professional ambition to become the greatest poet of his time reflects his pursuit of personal fulfilment, which is in line with the social expectations of men at that time that they should have professional ambition and personal fulfilment. At the same time, his request for the king to appoint him as the Turkish ambassador further demonstrates his masculinity in actively participating in social affairs and seeking higher power and prestige. These behaviors and ambitions are not only recognized by the society, but also reinforce his masculine identity in practice. As male identity was largely represented by professional ambitions and personal achievements in the socio-cultural context of the time, Orlando succeeds in portraying himself as a male figure who conformed to the expectations of society through these behaviors.

4.1.2 Behaviors and Mannerisms

Guided by his social role, Orlando gradually internalizes gender norms and performs a male identity that conforms to social norms, and this repetitive behavioral performance further reinforces his male gender perception. Butler believes that “the effect of gender is produced through the stylization of the body” (Butler, 1990: 179). Society prompts individuals to internalize stereotypical gender norms into their own patterns of behavior and gender identities, thus transforming gender from a biological attribute into a socio-cultural phenomenon, and that is the process of gender being “naturally occurring representation” (Jiang and Yuan, 2021: 187). In *Orlando*, the influence of society on the construction of Orlando’s male identity mainly originates

from his fathers' values of pride in war. "Orlando's fathers ...had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters" (Woolf, 1928: 1). It can be seen that Orlando's fathers are combative and aggressive warriors, known for the so-called chivalry and hang of heads to demonstrate strength and power. This gender-specific norm internalizes the notion that men are supposed to be brave and warlike, and Orlando demonstrates what is known as "the power of the man" by imitating his father's aggressive behavior in order to demonstrate so-called chivalry and masculinity: "slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters" (Woolf, 1928:1). This behavior is not only an imitation of the father's behavior, but also a performance of masculine power. This performative act is exactly what Butler emphasizes as gender manipulateness—the construction and reinforcement of gender identity through repetitive behavior.

Besides, the internalization of societal gender norms leads to Orlando's dominance in romantic relationships, which in turn solidifies the construction of his male identity. Butler sees power as the subject that "compels individuals' bodies to signify the prohibitive law as their very essence, style, and necessity" (Butler, 1990: 171). Society has the power to associate masculinity with strength, decision-making ability, and the protector role, while associating femininity with submissiveness, dependence, and the protected role. Furthermore, social mechanism has the power to compel men to dominate in romantic relationships. In the social environment of the time, men had more power to choose the partner compared to women. Orlando, who grows up in this social environment, absorbs and internalizes this value, which is why he falls in love with Sasha despite the existing marriage contract. For Orlando, he has the power to pursue true love against all odds: "her kinsmen would abuse him for deserting a great lady; his friends would deride him for ruining the best career in the world – it weighed not a straw in the balance compared with Sasha herself" (Woolf, 1928: 35). This behavior is not only a result of Orlando's personal emotional quest, but also a result of the role of social gender norms on the individual. In addition, the social mechanism of the time had a double moral standard for male behavior. This double standard allows men to go against the social norms to a certain extent, while women were expected to follow them to the letter. Therefore, even though Orlando's behavior goes against traditional moral norms, his love for Sasha is not significantly hindered by the outside world. More importantly, this acquiescence is actually society's way of reinforcing Orlando's male gender identity.

4.2 Feminine Traits of Orlando's Female Period

The transformation of Orlando's gender identity is deeply influenced by changes in social roles, expectations, and interactions. Initially, despite her biological transition to womanhood, Orlando's self-perception remains masculine. However, societal norms and expectations gradually reshape her gender identity through changes in clothing, social roles, and interactions. The shift from male aristocratic robes to female attire like corsets and skirts symbolizes her evolving gender identity, while legal restrictions and societal expectations reinforce her new role as a woman. Social interactions further solidify her femininity, as seen through the reactions of those around her, such as Captain Bartorus's chivalry and the Archduke's admiration. These external validations contribute to Orlando's internal acceptance of her female identity, which manifests the dynamic and socially constructed nature of gender.

4.2.1 Transformation of Social Roles and Expectations

After transitioning into a woman, Orlando's social roles and expectations change accordingly, which further shakes up her original gender perception as a male and gradually strengthens the female traits. Within gender norms, everyday behaviors, language, dress, and other forms of performance are imbued with meaning, and gender as a cultural signifier is continually consolidated through repetitive performance. As "gender is built through programmed repetitive actions in a superficial space of establishment" (Cheng, 2012:184), various programmed factors in Orlando's social environment that contain gender meanings constantly send her the message that she is a woman, which greatly influences her perception of gender. In the early stages of Orlando's gender transition, her self-perception of gender remained male, despite her biological sex having changed to female: "it is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought" (Woolf, 1928: 123). It is not until she rejoins England, a place where the distinction between men and women is everywhere, that she begins to realize she has become a woman and begins to realize the penalties and the privileges of her position: "these skirts are plaguey things to have about one's heels. Yet the stuff is the loveliest in the world" (Woolf, 1928: 123).

However, the ensuing social norms of femininity begin to shake her gender perception. The most visual manifestation of this is the change in clothing: from the

initial male aristocratic robes, to the less gendered Turkish garments, to the typically English female clothing such as corsets and long skirts. These strongly feminine outfits begin to change Orlando's perception of herself and begin to hide the "the gender under the cover of the dress" (Lu and Bao, 2014: 198). Furthermore, these garments are external symbols of gender identity, which convey her identity to the outside world (Pan, 2006: 4-5). Besides, these clothes are materialized manifestations of society's norms on the process of individual gender identity. While women's clothing reinforces her feminine identity, it also continues to dismantle Orlando's original masculine identity. Even Orlando herself has realized it: "The change of clothes had more important offices than merely to keep us warm. They change our view of the world and the world's view of us" (Woolf, 1928: 152). These bodily experiences further reinforce her female identity, then she begins to shake her gender identity: "as if she belonged to neither; and indeed, for the time being, she seemed to vacillate; she was man; she was woman" (Woolf, 1928:128).

In addition, the law's restriction on women's inheritance rights also profoundly affects Orlando's gender identity. Because the law does not recognize women's independent inheritance rights, Orlando loses the power, wealth, and honor she enjoyed as a male after her gender transition. Her identity changes from that of an accomplished aristocrat to that of a "towel-sewing" mistress. This shift in identity is not just a change in social status, but also a reorientation of gender roles. The expectations of society also changed: she is no longer expected to fight for her country, but to make tea for her guests. The outside world keeps reinforcing the idea that she is a woman, then in turn further reinforces Orlando's gender identity as a woman. More importantly, in the process of shifting gender identities, Orlando's ideas about women are constantly updated, even to the point of completely reversing the views of the male period. She more deeply appreciates the weakness of women's situation: "women must realize their own value through marriage and reproduction" (Chen, 2014: 88). On the one hand, this psychological change is a new gain for a new gender identity, and on the other hand, it suggests that Orlando is beginning to empathize with women and is beginning to classify herself as a woman.

4.2.2 Transformation of Social Interactions

The construction of gender identity is a dynamic, socially interactive process in which individuals demonstrate and reinforce their gender identity through continuous

performative behaviors. Under the constant repetitive effect of social norms, Orlando's female identity is gradually recognized by those around her, and the reactions of those around her, such as the sailor, her servant, Archduke and so on, further influence her feminization process.

Specifically, through the different treatment she receives as a result of her femininity, Orlando's female identity is further strengthened and ultimately successfully constructed. When she returns to England by ship, a sailor is so shocked by the sight of Orlando kicking his feet exposing one or two inches of calf, like a woman, that he almost drops into the water and only by luck avoids falling. Orlando is outraged by the reaction: "what an odd pass we have come to when all a woman's beauty has to be kept covered lest a sailor may fall from a mast-head" (Woolf, 1928: 126); When she has a dinner with Captain Nicholas Benedict Bartorus, he attempts to demonstrate his chivalry by giving a special treatment because of Orlando's gender: "when Captain Bartolus saw Orlando's skirt, he had an awning stretched for her immediately, pressed her to take another slice of beef, and invited her to go ashore with him in the long-boat" (Woolf, 1928: 153); When she returns to her castle, her servant, Mrs. Grimsdite has a moment of comfort because of Orlando's gender transition: "for what with the towels wanting mending and the curtains in the Chaplain's parlour being moth-eaten round the fringes, it was time they had a Mistress among them" (Woolf, 1928: 138). Furthermore, the Archduke's courtship of Orlando proves successful in constructing a gender identity. The Archduke praises Orlando as the perfect image of her gender, describing that "she was and would ever be the Pink, the Pearl, the Perfection of her sex" (Woolf, 1928: 146). Such reactions to Orlando's gender transition, including behaviors, language, and symbols continually construct and maintain her identity as a female.

4.3 Integration of Gender Identities

Orlando's gender journey exemplifies the integration and embrace of both masculine and feminine traits. Initially, her gender identity is marked by instability and confusion, as she exhibits traditionally feminine qualities during her male period and masculine qualities during her female period. However, through continuous reflection and social experimentation, Orlando ultimately embraces her female body while retaining her masculine characteristics. This integration allows her to maintain her love for nature, literature, and freedom, and to challenge societal gender roles. By

embracing both identities, Orlando finds a more authentic self and achieves freedom from traditional gender binaries.

4.3.1 Intersection of Masculine and Feminine Traits

Although Orlando's behaviors during his male and female periods mostly conform to gender norms, she also exhibits many characteristics that go against traditional norms. This inconsistency and instability are what characterize gender performativity. Although gender identity is constructed through the repetition and performance of specific behaviors, the act of performance is inherently unstable and variable; that is, gender identity is not fixed and "different acts of dressing redefine an individual's gender identity" (Ke, 2010: 71). This instability of dress behavior is particularly evident in Orlando's gender transition. In both the masculine and feminine periods, Orlando exhibits characteristics that are inconsistent with traditional gender norms, thus blurring the boundaries of her gender identity.

During the male period, Orlando displays fantastical, sentimental, and emotionally delicate traits, which are often seen as feminizing characteristics. In addition, his unique pursuit of beauty blurs his masculine identity. Even as he and Sasha fall into the sweetness of love, Orlando remains sentimental: "All ends in death, Orlando would say, sitting upright, his face clouded with gloom" (Woolf, 1928: 28). About clothes, he likes to dress in ornate costumes, complete with rare large garlands of flowers on his shoes: "he had thrust on crimson breeches, lace collar, waistcoat of taffeta, and shoes with rosettes on them as big as double dahlias" (Woolf, 1928: 7). Although it was considered normal for boys to wear lace at the time, these behaviors of Orlando's have deviated from the traditional image of masculinity.

During her female period, Orlando, on the other hand, exhibits traits that are usually seen as masculine, such as bravery and frankness and a love of adventure. She hates women's dress: "None had ever so impeded her movements. No longer could she stride through the garden with her dogs, or run lightly to the high mound and fling herself beneath the oak tree" (Woolf, 1928: 201). Therefore, she chooses to put on again the old clothes which she wears at male period so that "making sure that her petticoats had not lost her the freedom of her legs" (Woolf, 1928: 176). Besides, she acts as a ship's captain, and is even rumored to have eloped with a certain lady. After transforming into a woman, Orlando's stereotypes and prejudices about women are gradually broken down, and she begins to reflect on these prejudices and reexamine

herself. These behaviors not only challenge the norms of traditional female roles, but also further blur her identity as a woman. This instability of gender performance causes Orlando to become confused and disoriented about her female identity.

4.3.2 Embrace Both the Male and Female identity

The discomfort of forcefully adapting to societal gender norms makes Orlando begin to think about his true gender identity, and ultimately, through constant behavioral experimentation and reflection, Orlando blends male and female traits and achieves a dynamic unity of gender identity. Gender is not “exactly what one ‘is’” nor “what one ‘has’” (Butler, 2004: 42). In other words, gender is not a fixed essence or an attribute that can be “owned”, but a dynamic, inclusive process that is constantly being performed and constructed. During the process of gender transition, Orlando experiences an exploration and struggle with the female body and social roles. She experiments with many different social behaviors and gradually comes to understand and accept the female body and social roles. However, along the way, she also realizes that both genders have limitations of vision. In the male period, Orlando ignores the social norms and prejudices of women; in the female period, “she is initially too limited by the social role of women” (Kilian, 2023: 310-315), and lack of courage to boldly pursue dreams and express true self. In her mind, masculine and feminine qualities intersect: despite her current female body, she still hates the constricting women’s clothing and still loves adventure.

Through constant struggle and reflection, Orlando eventually embraces a female body while retaining her masculinity, achieving a fusion of male and female traits. Such fusion is exemplified in her dressing in men’s clothing as she “changes her skirt for a pair of whipcord breeches and leather jacket” (Woolf, 1928: 272). With her dual identity, she continues to hold on to her love of nature, her dedication to literature, and her quest for freedom, and ultimately realizes the harmony in mind and gender: “things came mingled and separated and made the strangest alliances and combinations in an incessant chequer of light and shade” (Woolf, 1928: 272).

This integration not only reflects the dynamic and diverse nature of gender performativity theory on gender identity, but also reveals the socially constructed nature of gender identity. Through freeing herself from society’s stereotypical restrictions on gender roles, Orlando maintains her self-identity, accepts her body and gender roles, finds a more authentic self, and realizes her freedom to transcend the

traditional binary oppositions of gender.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the intricate relationship between gender performativity and social norms in Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, utilizing Judith Butler's gender performativity theory to explore how gender identities are shaped and reinforced within socio-cultural contexts. By analyzing the protagonist's fluid gender identity, this study offers new insights into the dynamic nature of gender and its performative aspects.

First, gender identity of Orlando is fluid and socially constructed. The protagonist's gender identity is not fixed by biological sex but is shaped by social norms and cultural expectations. Orlando's male and female periods both exhibit traits that do violate traditional gender norms, and the transformation between genders is influenced by changes in social roles, expectations, and interactions. It can be seen that the nature of gender is dynamic and performative, differing from the traditional binary view of gender as a fixed attribute.

Second, Orlando's journey of gender transformation is a process of continuous adjustment and adaptation to social norms. During the male period, Orlando internalizes and performs masculine behaviors and roles, such as pursuing power and dominance in romantic relationships. After transitioning to a woman, Orlando's gender identity is reshaped by societal expectations, legal restrictions, and the reactions of those around her. This process shows how individuals are constantly influenced and regulated by social mechanisms in the construction of their gender identities.

Third, Orlando ultimately achieves a more authentic and inclusive gender identity by integrating both masculine and feminine traits, which is also the perfect state of gender identity. Through reflection and social experimentation, Orlando embraces her female body while retaining her masculine characteristics, such as love for adventure and freedom. This integration challenges traditional gender binaries and presents a more complex and diverse understanding of gender identity. It reveals that individuals can find a more authentic self by transcending the limitations of traditional gender roles and embracing the fluidity of gender performance.

In conclusion, the analysis in this study finds that *Orlando* stands as a pioneering literary work that masterfully deconstructs traditional gender binaries through its protagonist's fluid gender journey. The process of the protagonist Orlando's struggle

to explore his gender identity profoundly reveals the socially constructed nature of gender roles, challenges the traditional notion of gender dichotomy, and demonstrates a freer state of mind. Woolf's writing strategy, including the ingenious plot set, not only enriches the literary expression, but also demonstrates her keen insight and forward-looking thinking as a feminist pioneer. Through *Orlando*, Woolf calls on people to transcend the limitations of traditional gender roles and embrace the diversity of gender identities, providing important insights for later gender studies and literary creation.

This study aims to contribute to broader conversations about gender equality and diversity. By bridging the gap between literary studies and gender studies, this study encourages further exploration of how literary texts can reflect and challenge societal norms. It advocates for policies and practices that support gender inclusivity, fostering a more accepting environment for individuals who do not conform to traditional gender norms. Ultimately, it seeks to offer a small step toward fostering greater understanding, empathy, and respect for diverse gender expressions in today's world.

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