Mind vs. Body and Society
Androgynous Self-Perception and Social Preconceptions of Gender in Virginia Woolf’s Orlando

Sinne vs. Kropp och Samhälle
Androgyn Självuppfattning och Sociala Fördomar om Genus i Virginia Woolfs Orlando

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Abstract

This essay argues that Virginia Woolf’s *Orlando* (1928) suggests that self-perception is not tied to sex and gender because of the difference in the protagonist’s perceptions of his/her gender and sex and the society’s perceptions of the protagonist’s gender and sex. In the essay, a distinction between the mind and the body of the protagonist is used to stress the difference between his/her self-perception and his/her biological sex. Furthermore, gender as a social construction is used as a third part in discussing self-perception, sex and identity. The essay discusses how Orlando does not change as a person even though the body and sex do, and how s/he has to conform to society’s gender norms in various ways. Finally, the essay shows how Orlando is not an exception since other characters’ gendered behavior is determined by society’s preconceptions as well. The essay concludes that society’s gender norms oppress people who live or want to live outside these norms.
Virginia Woolf is known to address issues of gender, and how women in the arts can interact with and oppose the patriarchy. Before the famous lectures that became *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), Woolf puts her ideas down in a highly fictional matter, in *Orlando* (1928), trying out the idea of androgyne that she expresses in the lectures to the fullest. In short, the novel follows the poetry-loving Orlando from being a sixteen-year-old nobleman in the 16th century to ending up a thirty-six-year-old career woman in the year of the novel’s publication. The novel spans over a long time period, over socioeconomic classes, life experiences, and addresses gender issues by portraying the protagonist as androgynous. Woolf’s visualizing of the idea of androgyne in *Orlando* becomes evident in the imaginative sex change that occurs almost halfway into the novel. This feature is crucial to the depiction of gender throughout the novel and will be dealt with later in this essay.

Even though androgyne seems to be an interesting theme, and of interest to Woolf, *Orlando* was not a coveted topic in earlier research. Indeed, in a 1997 article, Lisa Rado states that *Orlando* has been ignored by critics, even though “this text is centrally preoccupied with issues of politics, gender, and creativity – to a greater extent even than To the Lighthouse, The Waves, and The Years [...]” (Rado 150). Critics have often regarded *Orlando* as a love letter to Vita Sackville-West, a biography or a novel meant to mock everything and, therefore, not something to be viewed seriously (Lehmann 61-63; Peach 138-39; Cervetti 165; Burns 359-60; Sánchez-Pardo González 75). Katerina Koutsantoni, however, describes how Woolf promoted a sexless universe in her works, were “[...] the two genders intersect and complement each other”, and states that Orlando is a good example of this (128). Since the novel is clearly linked to Sackville-West (Woolf was inspired by her ancestors, the noble family Knole) it seems to have been difficult for earlier critics to see beyond this and study the novel as primarily a piece of fiction. The subject of gender, self-perception, and sexuality that is the foundation of the novel was hence left somewhat unacknowledged, even though more recent research has explored the themes of gender and sexuality to a greater extent.

This essay will focus on self-perception and social perceptions of gender and will argue that the difference in the protagonist’s perceptions of him/herself and the society’s perception of the protagonist’s gender and sex shows how *Orlando* suggests that a person’s self-perception is not necessarily tied to gender and sex. The protagonist is androgynous but is throughout the novel compelled to act according to the conducts of men and women that society has appointed. Even though Orlando is both a man and a woman, s/he is perceived throughout as either one of the genders and has to conform to society’s perceptions of gender,
which makes him/her unable to live out his/her full potential as an individual. A distinction has been made in this essay between the mind and personality of the protagonist, i.e. the androgynous self-perception, and the body of the protagonist, i.e. the sex. This distinction has been made to stress the difference between the two aspects of a person’s being; the personality that carry the emotions and reflections and the sex that is just a part of the body. A third part of the equation is gender as a social construction, created by society to differentiate the sexes.

To present the argument the essay has been divided into three parts: The first one concerns the protagonist’s own perceptions of his/her gender. The second part demonstrates how society’s perceptions of gender force the protagonist into living according to the gender norms and how society perceives him/her differently due to his/her clothing. The third and last part of the essay shows how society’s perceptions of gender affect other characters as well. Since the essay presupposes that Orlando is androgynous, “s/he” will be used as a pronoun to describe Orlando throughout the essay. The choice to use this pronoun is a way to emphasise the androgyyn of the protagonist further, as well as emphasising that gender and sex is not tied to self-perception.

Before going into the different sections of the essay, to avoid misunderstandings, I will define a couple of concepts that are vital to the essay: sex and gender. Sex is the least complicated concept since it simply refers to the two biological sexes, male and female, and also the biological differences between males and females (Mills 7). In contrast, gender is the assumed social differences between men and women i.e. the social construction of differences between men and women (Mills 7). Sara Mills also points out that these two often are mistaken for one another, which is unfortunate since the distinction is important (7). Sex is not something that we choose; we are born a certain sex. Gender, on the other hand, is something we are born into: we are socialised into the different norms of gender. Mills exemplifies this by giving an account of how women are told that caring for others, including children, is something that comes naturally to them; hence women believe they are the best people for the job (7). This is just one of the misconceptions of gender that is created and recreated in the social structure; there are many for both women and men. When a social structure has been maintained for a long time, it becomes a norm. Norms are difficult to reveal, and even more difficult to break. Virginia Woolf, however, gives it a good try in *Orlando*.

Chris Coffman points to a difficulty in critically reading *Orlando* with modern eyes, however, since what was considered an inversion of sexuality at the time the novel was
written is today considered two separate elements; sexual orientation and gender identity (par. 6). He continues to suggest that the narrator in Orlando gives the reader three accounts of the relation between sex and gender: “gender constructs sex […] gender expresses an essential sex […] people are essentially androgynous” (par. 19). The narrator finally settles that Orlando’s gender cannot be decided, after not having come to terms with the relationship. Coffman concludes that this conclusion is fundamental to the novel: sex is not the basis onto which self-perception and behaviour can be attached at all (par. 19). Orlando vacillates between the two genders, but his/her personality remains the same throughout the novel, despite living through different historical eras and cultures.

The very first sentence of the novel reads: “He – for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it […]” (Woolf 5). Immediately the reader’s attention is drawn to sex and gender. A novel’s first sentence is a crucial one, setting the tone and/or giving the reader a first impression of the protagonist, and one of the most vital questions one wants answered about the protagonist is his or her sex. In Orlando Woolf delivers the answer directly, without hesitation or decoration, most likely since she knows this is what people want to know from the start. As indicated, the distinction between sex and gender is not visualised in the quote above since the distinction between the two concepts were not formulated at the time Woolf wrote the novel. Fashion or clothes are actually a part of the social structure, an argument that will be dealt with further in the section on the society’s perceptions of the protagonist’s sex and gender. By stating the protagonist’s sex so bluntly, the novel actually plays a prank on the reader, making him/her compelled to reflect upon sex and gender from the first sentence. J.J. Wilson states that Woolf by this first word makes the reader think “just what she does not want us to think” (qtd. in Cervetti 166). When the novel starts with “he” it also makes an interpretation of the sex change that later occurs more difficult, since the ideas that Orlando is transsexual or a transvestite are dismissed when being so frank about his/her sex. It is because of the sex change a division between the mind and the body of the protagonist becomes vital, since there is a change in sex and not in self-perception, and this issue will be dealt with thoroughly later in the essay. The text speaks for itself: Orlando is a man at the beginning of the story, and the text is just as candid at the time of the sex change: “He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! we have no choice left but confess – he was a woman” (67). However extravagant this feature may seem it forces the reader to accept the idea of the protagonist not identifying with only one sex, but with both.
There is not a lot to go on in the first half of the novel regarding Orlando’s reflections on his/her gender, most likely because Orlando does not reflect on his/her gender when being perceived as a man. Since men are the norm in a patriarchal society, there is no need for Orlando to reflect upon his/her gender at this time in the novel. Being a man is a socially constructed norm and as such invisible to some extent. Because Orlando is perceived as a man and, therefore, is regarded as the social norm, s/he is never questioned or mistreated: hence there is nothing to reflect upon. In the introduction to the 2003 Wordsworth Classics edition of Orlando, Merry M. Pawlowski states that Woolf in Orlando has realised her claim that women could not have become great writers in the Elizabethan era because of their sex. Thus, Orlando has to start his/her life as a man; it enables him/her to indulge in titles, property and the freedom to write poetry (Intro. xv).

With this said, Orlando actually reflects upon how s/he does not seem to fit in with the gender norms even before the sex change. At the beginning of the novel, the reader is given a brief account of Orlando’s parents, through his/her perspective. Rado establishes how Orlando’s father is an absent and dreadful imperialist who has killed many men in foreign countries, a life that does not tempt Orlando. His mother is described as beautiful, but she is also absent, and without passion, and Orlando is disturbed with her. Not being able to identify with either parent, or either men or women, Orlando finds an option in the androgyny (Rado 152). Since Orlando’s parents seem to represent the norm of their genders, the fact that Orlando does not identify with them is a first tendency that he/she does not identify with the gender norms either.

The feeling of not identifying with the gender norms also becomes evident when Orlando tires of the nobles and spends time disguised in a cloak at a shabby pub, and s/he is surrounded by intrigued women: “They perched on his knee, flung their arms round his neck and, guessing that something out of the common lay hid beneath his duffle cloak, were quite as eager to come at the truth of the matter as Orlando himself” (Woolf 13). The protagonist is at this point very young, and as many young people curious about his/her own body and person. Orlando’s reflection about his/her own body suggests that s/he has not yet come to terms with it. Orlando is experimenting, spending time in the pubs of the poorer quarters out of curiosity and boredom. S/he has sexual encounters with several girls, of various ranks, and eventually grows tired of the primitive ways of the people at the pub. (In contrast, Orlando later in life spends time with female prostitutes and finds their company very pleasant and educating). These displays of Orlando’s rather snobbish attitudes towards people of lower socioeconomic class than him/herself raise the question of whether there are different
perceptions of gender in different classes as well. This question will be addressed in the section about the society’s perceptions of the protagonist’s gender.

Orlando seriously starts to reflect upon his/her gender after the sex change. S/he goes to sleep and wakes up after a week and finds him/herself having a female body. Nevertheless, Orlando’s self-perception does not change. As plainly as the text states the protagonist being a man at the beginning of the novel, as plainly does it state him/her having changed into a woman: “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” (67). Note the use of the pronoun “their” in the quote. The chosen pronoun indicates how Woolf might have viewed Orlando’s gender; that s/he is both a man and a woman, and in this way two genders at once, a “they”. Despite the dramatic change of sex, Orlando remains calm and unaffected by the event, which shows how s/he has not thought of him/herself as only a man before the change, but partly a woman as well. Woolf even mocks the reader who tries to logically understand the sex change:

Many people, taking this into account, and holding that such a change of sex is against nature, have been at great pains to prove (1) that Orlando had always been a woman, (2) that Orlando is at this moment a man. Let biologists and psychologists determine. It is enough for us to state the simple fact; Orlando was a man till the age of thirty; when he became a woman and has remained so ever since. (68)

Orlando does, however, not reflect upon his/her androgyyny immediately after the sex change, which is due to him/her living with gypsies for some time before returning to his/her life in the English culture. The impact of the gypsy culture, and why Orlando does not reflect upon his/her gender during this time, will be discussed in the next section about society’s perceptions of the protagonist’s gender. When Orlando leaves Turkey, after working as an Ambassador in Constantinople and living with the gypsies, to go back to England s/he starts to notice the change s/he has gone through: “It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought” (75). At the time of the journey, Orlando wears the female fashion of the time, of a woman of his/her rank, for the first time. Even though the clothes are pretty and fashionable, Orlando notes how ill-equipped s/he is to do anything physical; the garments are so heavy that if s/he fell overboard s/he would have to rely on a sailor to rescue him/her. The clothing holds women back from being as physical as men and, therefore, the women are in need of the men’s help in various situations; it becomes
a way to decrease women’s independence. The protagonist, who has lived as a man for thirty years already, discusses with him/herself how s/he feels about this fact. Orlando is described as being like a child in a toy cupboard, playing with the new expectations put on him/her because of him/her now being addressed as a woman. The protagonist then realises that s/he will have to live with the men’s expectations, and accept their idea of him/her not being able to care for him/herself. Thus, Orlando goes on discussing the advantages and disadvantages of the two genders, but cannot conclude one gender being superior to the other: They are both glorious and silly in different respects. After some time on the ship back to England, Orlando understands the burdens of both genders, since s/he can identify with both of them: “[…] 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” (77).

Similarly, Orlando comprehends the social behaviour expected of a woman even further when having to socialise with the Archduchess/Archduke, a boring, cross-dressing man who is desperately in love with and courts Orlando. The difference in conduct between the genders becomes evident when the Archduchess reveals herself to be a man, and Orlando suddenly finds him/herself alone with a person of the opposite sex: “She was alone with a man. Recalled thus suddenly to a consciousness of her sex, which she had completely forgotten, and of his, which was now remote enough to be equally upsetting, Orlando felt seized with faintness” (87). Orlando understands that when being perceived as a woman s/he will have to act according to other expectations than s/he had when being perceived as a man. This change of behaviour is also seen later in his/her dealing with the Archduke, when Orlando finds him so tedious s/he wishes s/he was a man and could have speared the Archduke with a rapier.

After some time of practising the socially excepted behaviour of women, Orlando learns to use society’s perceptions of gender to his/her advantage. By knowing how each gender is perceived s/he makes use of the perceptions to be viewed as the gender s/he for the moment wants to be perceived as, depending on the chore s/he attempts. This realisation gives Orlando both a delight and freedom many others cannot attain:

[...] 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. (Woolf 108)

Orlando can change clothes as s/he sees fit, and in that way use his/her androgyny, well within accordance with society’s perceptions. In other words, Orlando uses society’s
obsession with the differences between the genders as a way to crisscross between them. S/he can be dressed as a woman in the morning, change into men’s knee breeches to cut the nut trees, and then change back to a dress of taffeta, and in the evening dress entirely as a nobleman to roam the streets for adventure. Susan Moller Okin has come to a similar conclusion: Orlando has the fortune to be able to live a richer life than any man or woman, and doing so “[...] through periods when the sexes were extremely differentiated by society and its customs and laws [...]” (36). The importance of clothes as a way to determine gender identity will be discussed more thoroughly in the section on society’s perceptions of the protagonist’s gender.

The crisscrossing between genders also enables Orlando at one point to once again seek out the company of people of a lower class than his/her own. Just as Orlando as a young nobleman went disguised to a shabby pub, s/he disguises as a nobleman one night and meets the prostitute Nell. Since Orlando is androgynous, s/he distinguishes how Nell plays the part of the kind of woman noblemen usually desire. Nell’s acting as a particular kind of woman ties back to Orlando’s realisation on the ship back to England; when s/he comes to the understanding that when being perceived as a woman, s/he will constantly have to conform to men’s perceptions of him/her. When Orlando takes off the disguise Nell throws off her “disguise” as well, feeling at ease and being herself again. Living as both genders consequently enables Orlando to consort with different kinds of people and in that way gain more experiences in life. So, when Orlando has learnt to crisscross between genders, s/he also finds an ideal way of life. The novel even, yet again, mocks the reader who still tries to determine Orlando’s gender identity: “Whether, then, Orlando was most man or woman, it is difficult to say and cannot now be decided” (Woolf 93). Even though the protagonist’s gender is undecided, his/her body and sex has clearly changed and his/her self-perception remains without question androgynous.

In contrast to Orlando’s own reflection upon his/her gender stands how society perceives Orlando. Since Orlando does not reflect upon gender when being perceived as a man, society’s view of his/her gender is not as apparent before the sex change. Because, as mentioned above, a man is seen as the norm in a patriarchal society. The reader quickly learns that Orlando is an admirable young lord, with everything that this entails in the form of rank and estates. Noticeable is also how Orlando in this part of the novel seems to be able to break the expected social code of being monogamous when s/he has sexual relationships with different women. The first encounter the reader has with Orlando’s sexual escapades is when Queen Elizabeth gets angry when seeing him/her with a girl. However, due to being an
unmarried youngster, Orlando is excused: “He was young; he was boyish; he did but as nature bade him do” (Woolf 12). Here it becomes evident how the protagonist’s privileged position both as a man and a Lord gives him/her permission to act on his/her sexual impulses. When Orlando later on falls in love with and starts courting a Russian princess, Sasha, s/he is already engaged to a Lady Margaret. Orlando breaks this engagement without hesitation when meeting Sasha, and even though s/he is later exiled from the court due to this affair, Orlando does not suffer any great losses. S/he seems simply to have angered Lady Margaret’s family, but loses no title, property or reputation because of the event.

In contrast, when the protagonist is being perceived as a woman s/he has to conceal his/her sexual desire. Orlando discovers that a woman has to cover herself up, when a sailor almost falls from the mast when getting a glimpse of his/her ankle. At first Orlando thinks that if a man can almost die when viewing his/her ankle, then of course s/he would have to cover them up. On the other hand, Orlando also reflects upon the stupidity in having to cover a woman’s beauty up because men cannot control themselves when they get a glimpse of it. The covering of the body is an expression of the underlying idea of women being chaste: “[...] the whole edifice of female government is based on that foundation stone; chastity is their jewel, their centrepiece, which they run mad to protect, and die when ravished of” (75). Even though Orlando has not been chaste, rather far from it, in the early days of his/her life, s/he has to at least pretend to be when being perceived as a woman since it is a major part of the expected behaviour of women. The restricted sexuality is also evident during this time in the novel when Orlando has to wear a crinoline to disguise the fact that s/he is pregnant. S/he asks him/herself how weak women are when they try to conceal the fact of being pregnant, when it in time will become so bluntly obvious. The crinoline garment is worn with a bit of shame, maybe especially so in Orlando’s case because s/he is not yet married. This passage is brief, but it is yet another example of how Orlando, when perceived as a woman, cannot live out his/her full androgyny.

The importance of how society views gender is also apparent when Orlando leaves Constantinople and ends his/her work as an ambassador to live with a group of gypsies. The gypsies are described as not paying attention to Orlando’s gender, and it is later stated that the gypsy women are not that different from gypsy men. In Woolf’s depiction of gypsy culture, it seems that the issue of gender is not an issue at all; it seems that there is no focus on the differences between the two genders. Since the rest of the novel takes place in England, this brief insight into another culture acts as a criticism against the Western one. It is on several occasions clear that the English culture creates normative social behaviours and
conducts used to differentiate between the sexes throughout the ages we get to follow Orlando. A man shall do this when a woman does that, and vice versa. These expected conducts can be seen in Orlando’s dealings with the Archduke, when he has revealed himself as being a man: “In short, they acted the parts of man and woman for ten minutes with great vigour and then fell into natural discourse” (Woolf 87-88). In addition to showing the expected behaviour, this quote also states that social behaviour is not natural, which suggests that social behaviour is artificial. Another quote showing how the interacting between the two characters is determined by social conventions is Orlando’s reaction to the Archduke’s tears: “[...] but she was beginning to be aware that women should be shocked when men display emotion in their presence, and so, shocked she was” (88). The acting as a man and woman according to gender norms displays society’s view on the genders as well. In the novel, the social construction determines not only genders in general but also Orlando’s gender. Brenda S. Helt also comments on the impact of the social construction of gender:

Orlando is gendered feminine gradually, through a complex social interaction whereby she alters her behaviours and self-perception according to her experience of the reactions of others to her perceived biological sex, while still maintaining an essential subjectivity unaffected by that social interpellation. (144-45)

Helt has reached a similar conclusion as Coffman; that Orlando objects to self being founded on biological sex. Society dictates what is normative behaviour for the genders and because of this Orlando and the Archduke do not act as the people they truly are, but as the woman and man that society dictates they are.

The influence of patriarchy is displayed later on in the novel when Orlando meets Alexander Pope, and s/he is at first ecstatic about sharing a chariot with such a brilliant poet. By peeking at him from his/her seat in the chariot, the protagonist praises Pope’s large head and imagines the great intellect that he must possess. After a short while, Orlando realises that s/he has mistaken Pope’s forehead for a cushion, which shatters his/hers expectations of the poet. These crushed anticipations make the protagonist reflect upon how men look upon women, and how they want women to look upon them in return, by letting Pope embody men in general:

It is you who nourish and protect me, you who scare the wild beast, frighten the savage, make me clothes of the silkworm’s wool, and carpets of the sheep’s. If I want to worship, have you not provided me with an image of yourself and set it in the sky? Are not evidences of your care
everywhere? How humble, how grateful, how docile, should I not be, therefore? Let it be my joy to serve, honour, and obey you. (101)

The whole patriarchy is mocked by the irony of this reflection, even suggesting that men created a God in their image so that women would always have to worship them. The patriarchal structure is fully revealed to the reader when Orlando returns to his/her home in England, only to go through an extended trial to maintain his/her property and belongings. Orlando has to fight the law for centuries before finally getting his/her ownership accepted since women are not allowed to inherit or own property. The trial demonstrates society’s gender norms yet again and shows how its perceptions stand in the way for the androgynous Orlando. Through the trial society tries to define Orlando’s sex, and in that way his/her gender as well. The norms of the two sexes and genders are so deeply ingrained in the culture that even though it takes centuries to reach a conclusion about Orlando, people are willing to go through with it, for the sake of not breaking the social structure they so firmly built. Once again, one of Woolf’s main ideas from A Room of One’s Own, the one about women having to have money and a room of their own to be able to write, is visible in Orlando. At the end of the novel when Orlando is perceived as a woman, legally owns his/her home and has regained his/her fortune, s/he is finally a successful poet.

In addition to society’s perceptions of how men and women should behave, as indicated, clothes play a vital part in the construction of gender in Orlando. Throughout the novel, clothes are used to identify, conceal, reveal and disguise gender. The novel discusses how clothes are a key factor in the social construction of gender:

Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness, while underneath the sex is the very opposite of what it is above. (Woolf 92-3)

When Orlando goes to live with the gypsies s/he dresses in “[…] those Turkish coats and trousers which can be worn indifferently by either sex […]” (68). Note that these are androgynous clothes; s/he is dressing as neither a man nor woman, and because of this, s/he does not reflect upon his/her gender at the time even though a change of sex has occurred. In the androgynous clothes, the protagonist can live as an androgynous individual. As mentioned above, it is not until Orlando has put on the fashion of a woman of the appropriate rank and age that s/he starts to reflect upon his/her gender. It is also these clothes that keep him/her from being as physical as when dressed like a man, which shows how clothes do not only tell the rest of society what gender the person is, but also forces perceptions of gender onto the
person wearing them. For example; since women should look and act in a certain way, according to society’s norm, the clothes are made to fit in with these norms. Nancy Cervetti comments on how the clothes of the nineteenth century prevent the protagonist to perform his/her usual physical pursuits, and that the clothes therefore do not only affect movement, but Orlando’s body and behaviour (169-70). Clothes can in this way act as a way to keep people inside of the norms since it is difficult to break free from them. The novel even states at one point how “Clothes are but a symbol of something hid deep beneath” (92). Here it is clear how clothes are important when perceiving gender identities and another evidence for how clothes can act as carrier of society’s perceptions.

Furthermore, Orlando is described as utterly beautiful, with a well built body, shapely legs and a light of beauty shining from within. The Archduke describes him/her as “[...] the Pink, the Pearl, the Perfection of her sex” (88). After the sex change, there is no change in Orlando’s appearance either: “Their faces remained, as their portraits prove, practically the same” (67). Because of this, the clothes become a great part in Orlando showing of his/her gender identity; it is the clothes that enable Orlando to crisscross between the genders at the end of the novel, as was mentioned in the section on the protagonist’s perceptions of his/her gender. Since the protagonist’s appearance remains the same, and s/he can be perceived as both a man and woman, society has only the clothes to go on when deciphering his/her gender. Clothes are essential in encounters Orlando has with other characters as well. When the Archduke falls in love with Orlando, it is his clothes that conceal his sex, and the loose clothes of Sasha disguise her sex from Orlando when s/he first notices her.

Clothes are carriers of the perceptions of gender of other characters as well as Orlando, as other characters are also determined according to society’s gender norms. One of these is Sasha. The reader learns that Orlando has had several encounters with women before Sasha, and a few after her as well, but they are only mentioned in a hurry. Sasha is not acknowledged as a woman as straightforwardly as Orlando is as a man at the beginning of the novel. When trying to determine Sasha’s sex, the reader gets a glimpse of Orlando’s perceptions of women, or more correctly, society’s perceptions through Orlando’s eyes. For even though s/he at first thinks Sasha is a woman, Orlando quickly changes his/her mind; “When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be – no woman could skate with such speed and vigour [...]” (17). As stated earlier, Sasha disguises her sex by wearing Russian fashion and Orlando is intrigued by the challenge to determine her sex. The protagonist cheers when it is determined Sasha is a woman since a flirtation with her is now possible. Sasha is described as
beautiful and soft, but also a bit deceiving; Orlando even calls her a fox. She is also different from the other girls Orlando has met and she evokes an interest and passion that s/he has never encountered before, speaking her opinions openly, being educated, and secretive. Most likely Sasha is described more thoroughly than Orlando’s other mistresses because she is different, not only in her less normative gender behaviour, but also in her ethnicity. Sasha’s Russian heritage is noted throughout the passage of the love affair and she is called the Muscovite by the court, and not by her name. Since Sasha breaks a few gender rules set up by the English society and court it is once again apparent how cultures outside of the English have other gender expectations.

The ambivalent treatment of Sasha’s gender also shows that heterosexuality is the norm in society, how regardless of Orlando’s attraction to Sasha, a relationship is unacceptable had she been a man. The impossibility of a non-heterosexual relationship is also seen in the Archduke, who the reader at first encounters as the Archduchess. The Archduke falls in love with Orlando’s picture before the sex change, when Orlando is viewed as a man. Since it would be impossible for the Archduke to approach Orlando in a romantic fashion when they are both men, the Archduke conceals his gender and dresses as a woman. After the sex change, he appears before Orlando again and throws off his disguise. This is another event that highlights how gender is a social construction that suppresses people who want to live outside of the norm.

The prostitute Nell is another example of a character that is determined by society’s perceptions of gender. When believing Orlando is a man, she acts according to society’s conventions, but discards this normative behaviour when perceiving Orlando as a woman. Noteworthy is that Nell is able to drop her act as a normative, objectified woman when being on her own or in the company of other women of her class. Orlando, on the other hand, has to impersonate a woman all the time before learning how to crisscross between the genders. Even when socialising with other women of his/her class, Orlando seems to be forced to enact the normative behaviour of women. Although the protagonist’s socialising with women of his/her class are scarce and not explicitly narrated, Orlando’s dealings with other Ladies when s/he is perceived as a woman suggests that “At one and the same time [...] society is everything and society is nothing. Society is the most powerful concoction in the world and society has no existence whatsoever” (95). The quote shows how company with others in one’s class is a one of the fundamental parts in the nobles’ lives, as well as being utterly shallow and restricted. Orlando has to comply with the norm of a woman of his/her class, or otherwise risks being an outcast of his/her society. Nell, then again, belongs to a
lower socioeconomic class and can therefore break the norms at times since there is no risk of her losing a position in society. By having a profession inhabited by women, Nell both maintains the gender norm of women and breaks it when being in private and not working. Through all these characters, Sasha, the Archduke and Nell, the novel shows how society’s norms are not something that determines only Orlando’s gender but that of people in general. Throughout the novel, people have to conform to the gender norms, regardless if they fit in with them or not. The portrayal of these characters gives further depth to the argument that self-perception is not tied to sex in Orlando.

Orlando’s husband Shelmerdine does not fit in with the norm either. Like Orlando him/herself, Shelmerdine is androgynous, which is established almost immediately: “‘You’re a woman, Shel!’ she cried. ‘You’re a man, Orlando!’ he cried. Never was there such a scene of protestation and demonstration as then took place since the world began” (124). Even though the reader is given little information about Shelmerdine, a connection between him and Orlando, as in the passage above, suggests that Shelmerdine has gone through a similar change as Orlando has and, therefore, they can detect the opposite sex in one another. Shelmerdine’s androgyny is not explicitly explained or proven, and it does not have to be. Since the reader has followed Orlando’s life for over three hundred years already when Shelmerdine is introduced, the idea of androgyny is already settled. All the evidence is already laid out; hence Shelmerdine’s self-perception needs no further explanation. The reader can immediately detect Shelmerdine’s androgyny since the whole novel has focused on explaining Orlando’s. Because Shelmerdine shows the same mix of genders as Orlando does, they find a soul mate in each other. The understanding between the two is at such a deep level that they get engaged when they first meet, and they have even guessed each other’s names before they have revealed them. Esther Sánchez-Pardo González argues similarly that “Orlando prefers sexual ambiguity and indeterminacy to deception, and thus rejects the Archduke’s love but admits Shel [Shelmerdine] and Sasha whose sexual ambiguity parallels hers” (82). Even though both Orlando and Shelmerdine are androgynous, they are still being perceived as a man and a woman. At times, they seem to want to keep their androgynous self-perception to themselves:

‘Are you positive you aren’t a man?’ he would ask anxiously, and she would echo, ‘Can it be possible you’re not a woman?’ and then they must put it to the proof without more ado. For each was so surprised at the quickness of the other’s sympathy [...] that they had to put the matter to the proof at once. (127)
A likely reason for the characters determining of their sexes to each other is the heterosexual norm, as has been discussed above. When being perceived as different sexes, the protagonist and Shelmerdine can enjoy their love for each other freely. The idea of Orlando and Shelmerdine’s androgyny is also visible in Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* in the sequence where Woolf views two people getting into a taxi:

> But the sight of the two people getting into the taxi and the satisfaction it gave me made me also ask whether there are two sexes in the mind corresponding to the two sexes in the body, and whether they also require to be untied in order to get complete satisfaction and happiness? […] Coleridge perhaps meant this when he said that a great mind is androgynous. It is when this fusion takes place that the mind is fully fertilized and uses all its faculties. (Woolf, *A Room* 113-14)

In this passage Woolf’s idea of androgyny, and the relation between sex and gender, is explained more thoroughly than in the fantastical *Orlando* even though the idea remains the same.

Even with their soul mates, Orlando and Shelmerdine act the parts of man and woman. It even seems that Orlando can rest upon his/her gender more steadily when being with Shelmerdine: “‘I am a woman,’ she thought, ‘a real woman, at last.’ She thanked Bonthrop [Shelmerdine] from the bottom of her heart for having given her this rare and unexpected delight” (125). Shortly after having met his/her husband, Orlando is declared a female by the court and the true and only heir to his/her estates and fortune. Having been declared a specific sex by law, Orlando is capable to be perceived as a woman by society as well, especially when marrying. Even though s/he continues to be androgynous, the perception of his/her gender is put to rest and society finds solace in believing his/her gender is determined.

By making Shelmerdine androgynous, Woolf shows how Orlando is not an isolated exception from the norm. Society’s perceptions of gender marginalize people who live or want to live outside the norms of gender, even though the majority of people do not fit in with the norm. The social construction of gender is an ideology and not an absolute truth. Thus, self-perception is not tied to one’s sex, and society should not dictate people’s gender identity, as becomes visible in *Orlando*.

To conclude, Woolf’s *Orlando* is an experimental novel that discusses self-perception, gender and social construction from a modern perspective, despite it being published in the late 1920s. This essay has focused on how Orlando’s androgynous self-
perception is suppressed by the society’s gender norms in various ways. Furthermore, the essay has argued that the differences between the protagonist’s perceptions of him/herself and society’s perceptions of the protagonist’s gender show how self-perception is not necessarily tied to gender and sex. A distinction between the body and the androgynous self-perception of the protagonist has been made to emphasise the difference between the biological sex and the mind. Besides this distinction, gender as a social construction is used by society to differentiate the sexes. That self-perception is not tied to gender or sex is evident since Orlando remains the same person even though the body changes. In addition, s/he does not reflect upon his/her gender, nor identifies with any normative gender roles, before the sex change. After the sex change, the protagonist reflects upon his/her gender due to society treating him/her differently when being perceived as a woman. Society’s perceptions therefore forces Orlando to act according to society’s set gender conventions, which the protagonist in the end learns to use to his/her advantage. Orlando is then able to live as an androgynous individual, by crisscrossing between the genders whenever s/he feels like it. Society’s influence on gender is also visible in the fashion of clothes throughout the novel, as well as the portrayal of other characters in the novel that are also determined by the norms of gender. The novel shows how society’s construction of gender oppresses people living outside of the norm, and also oppresses people not identifying with the gender norms.
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