

Crack, Transformation and Breakthrough of Heterosexual Matrix

-- An Analysis of Character Relationships in Orlando: A Biography

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ABSTRACT

This essay applies Judith Butler's theory to analyze how characters shape the protagonist's gender identity and awareness of marginalized groups, in *Orlando: A Biography*. Through Orlando's interactions with Sasha, the Archduke, and Shel, the research traces her journey from deviation from traditional gender norms to acceptance with a fluid gender identity. By examining the impact of these characters, this study aims to highlight gender equality as the theme and the constraints behind the heterosexual matrix.

KEYWORDS

Orlando; Gender Performativity; Heterosexual Matrix.

1. INTRODUCTION

The opening scene from Virginia Woolf's 1928 novel *Orlando: A Biography*, where the protagonist undergoes a sudden gender transformation, is a pivotal moment symbolizing gender identity and fluidity. Despite Orlando's physical transition, their actions are generally exceptions to traditional gender norms, suggesting a complex deconstruction and reconstruction of gender identity. Through analysis of Orlando's relationships with Sasha, the Archduke, Shel, and marginalized groups, it is found how external influences evoke Orlando's gender expression, depicting the fluidity and liberation from societal constraints.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Since its release, *Orlando* has attracted many international and domestic scholars. This work has been investigated mainly from narratology, psychoanalysis and postmodern feminism. In narratology, researchers not only detect the novel narration of this biology, based on Orlando's over 400 years of living, but also analyze its diachronic narrative structure, focusing on how the social historical context in the *Orlando*, from Victorian times to modern times, influences or leads to the development of narrative structure. As Wu claims that, "*Orlando* records Woolf's thoughts on the relationship between historical truth and literary truth, literary texts and historical contexts, reflecting an attempt to rewrite history through literature"(7) and this consideration of historical text is expressed by the diachronic narrative structure. As for psychoanalysis, as "dreams are a way for people to address their unconscious wishes. These wishes are unacceptable to our conscious mind and thus remain trapped in the recesses of the subconscious"(Martin et al. 3), Woolf uses *Orlando* to convey her subtle

sentiments. When integrating *Orlando* with the author's experience in real life, researchers found the author's desire is condensed and displaced on the character Orlando, a mixture to represent both the author herself and her lover, Vita, just as Susan said: "In my view, Woolf actually merges with Orlando, becomes Orlando at times, because she cannot bear to leave Vita or to have Vita leave her"(15).

Of all the interpretations of this book, postmodern feminism is of the most relevant to this study and is the most valuable aspect. To analyze it, the text is explored in the aspects of androgyny and gender performativity. In terms of androgyny, *Orlando* creates a gender that possesses with both masculinity and femininity, which is what makes a real human without gender biases, as Yuan stated that: "it advocates for gender equality and partnership between men and women, recognizing and embracing gender differences to create a free and equal society"(4). In aspects of gender performativity put forward by Judith Butler, this theory is used to analyze the heterosexual matrix behind the setting, using parody, drag so on and so forth. Just as Lu and Bao claims that Orlando "prefers to return to the Gypsies, whose clothing does not clearly indicate gender" and because of the unisexual clothes, Orlando experiences "the blurred boundaries between male and female in Gypsy society"(6).

Therefore, the study of *Orlando* is mainly about narratology, psychoanalysis and postmodern feminism. Although there are some studies using gender performativity to explain how Orlando break through heterosexual matrix, they lack the perspective of Orlando's relationships with other characters. Therefore, this research will analyze the relationships between Orlando and Sasha, the Archduke, Shel and other marginalized groups, respectively to explain how Orlando made her way to overcome heterosexual matrix gradually.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This research uses Judith Butler's gender performativity theory put forward in her famous book *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. The theory concerns subjects of sex/gender/desire, production of the heterosexual matrix and subversive bodily acts. As Butler put it: "when the constructed status of gender is theorized as radically independent of sex, gender itself becomes a free-floating artifice"(10), sex and gender are distinguished in such a binary sense that on the contrary enhance the structure of consistent sex, gender and desire that serve to uphold the heterosexual matrix, within which " 'masculine' and 'feminine', 'male' and 'female' exist only..."(141), and the cultural matrix through which gender identity has become intelligible requires that certain kinds of 'identities' cannot 'exist'—that is, those in which gender does not follow from sex and those in which the practices of desire do not 'follow' from either sex or gender.(23).

Furthermore, in heterosexual matrix, heterosexual hegemony and phallogocentrism are formed to set stereotypical rules for both heterosexual male and female and marginalize sexual minorities. At the same time, heterosexual matrix confines people in a binary mindset and in stereotypical gender acts.

Apart from heterosexual matrix, gender performativity is another core concept derived from Austin's performative utterance. For the reason that "Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual"(Butler xv), gender is the stylized repetition of acts through time, hence can flow. Yet, this is only the language dimension of gender performativity. In this research, the ritual dimension will also be included like the usage of interpellation which is the process of giving someone or something an identity.

Given the similarity of gender performativity and actual performance in a drama, terms like parody and drag are used to underscore the effect of methods that help people's gender "flow", such as through costumes. According to Butler, "as the effects of a subtle and politically enforced performativity, gender is an 'act,' as it were, that is open to splittings, self-parody, self-criticism..."(187). That is, parody, particularly as manifested in drag, is an example of performance

that effectively exposes gender as performative, which then help us to go back to the very first core concept that is performativity theory.

3.1. Orlando and Sasha: Crack of Heterosexual Matrix

Sasha is the first vital character in the book, representing the initial stage of the deconstruction about traditional gender identity. In an extravagant society full of royal decay, Orlando, as a respectable noble, is cultivated in the core of England heterosexual matrix to fulfill what he is expected to finish, hence the consistency of sex, gender, desire formed by the society, just as he vows to follow his masculine ancestors: "...and they had struck many heads of many colours off many shoulders, and brought them back to hang from the rafters. So too would Orlando, he vowed"(Woolf 1).

The period when Orlando spends time with Sasha is a beginning to crack the heterosexual matrix constrained onto Orlando when he is a male. Orlando meets Sasha, a Russian princess, in a royal gathering in which delegations from other countries have an audience with the queen. However, Sasha, not only as a foreigner, but also as an impact to the matrix where Orlando stayed, draws Orlando's attention with her gender-neutral outfit and impressive skating skill, from which Orlando deems her as a male. He speaks to himself: "...a boy it must be—no woman could skate with such speed and vigour..."(14), yet the fact of Sasha being a female proves that masculinity is not exclusive to men, so is femininity to women.

The outfit and behaviors of Sasha goes against with the social norms of Orlando's society, only to plant a seed for Orlando to deconstruct his gender identity and reconstruct an androgynous entity. After knowing Sasha's a female and more acquainted with her, Orlando is so deeply in love with Sasha--whose occurrence, in effect, shows the inconsistency of sex, gender and desire because of her vigorous pace and unbridled passion, threatening the traditional heterosexual matrix--that he even breaches the commitment with his fiancé.

However, faithful as Orlando may seem to Sasha, she betrays him when he asks her to elope with him but leaves, which can be foreshadowed when Orlando easily lost in Sasha's complements and even patronizes her in a superior male's stance. "But Sasha was silent. When Orlando had done telling her that she was a fox, an olive tree...and had given her the whole history of his family"(19). The extract shows that though Sasha realizes he still confines their relations in the binary oppositions of genders, Sasha belongs to the object and the Other, whereas Orlando is the subject and the Center. In another word, he never regards Sasha as an individual, but rather as his subsidiaries which can be disposed of freely.

Although Orlando is under the influence of traditional binary mindset and despite Sasha's abandonment, yet it not only foreshadows him with parody by changing costumes, but also leaves him with contemplation of the relationship between male and female, wondering the deeper reasons of Sasha's audacious rejection to such a respectable nobleman, hence producing a crack in his originally impenetrable heterosexual matrix.

3.2. Orlando and the Archduke: the Transformation of Heterosexual Matrix

Archduke is the only person who witnesses Orlando both in male and female; who greatly impels the transformation of heterosexual matrix of Orlando. When Orlando is still a male, the Archduke meets in his mansion party dragged as a female due to Archduke's affection for Orlando. However, the parody of Archduke proves to be unsuccessful given his vulture-like appearance and, as a "female", out-of-place behavior of harassing Orlando, which directly contributes to Orlando's departure to Constantinople as ambassador.

The turning point takes place in Constantinople when overnight Orlando becomes a woman physically. However, though she is a woman in body, Orlando's words and deeds do not match with her social female identity immediately, so the process of how Orlando becomes a real "woman"

socially can be observed. In the Ritual dimension of gender performativity, interpellation is one of the ways to construct someone's identity, therefore when Orlando returns to England where heterosexual matrix is strictly formed, her sex, gender and desire unconsciously in line with each other to conform to the heterosexual hegemony, as "she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the Captain offered, with the greatest politeness, to have an awning spread for her on deck..."(81). She not only knows what she is called, but she also understands the rules she needs to follow as a girl, which she will use to demand and regulate her actions and behavior, and thus actively include herself in the field of power "performance" in a passive situation.

Orlando, feeling uncertain about her gender identity, is proposed to by the Archduke, who appears in his true male form, regardless of her sudden change in sex. This moment suggests that gender, sex, and desire can exist independently. Inspired by this, Orlando freely shifts between genders by changing costumes, parodying traditional gender norms while embracing her inner androgyny. As depicted in the book, Orlando's ability to switch genders is met with acceptance, as seen when Captain Bartolus immediately offers hospitality upon seeing her in a skirt. This scene reflects the novel's exploration of gender fluidity and the individual's right to self-expression.

What is more, the fact that Orlando refuses his proposal alludes to Orlando's awareness that women are born and made to be male wife as they are interpellated as the identity of women constructed by society. Hence, the function of the Archduke plays an important role in shaping androgyny in Orlando and transform the heterosexual matrix in a larger degree.

3.3. Orlando and Shel: the Breakthrough of Heterosexual Matrix

When Orlando refuses her first pursuer as a female, she thinks an androgynous entity like her will fail to obtain both love and life, which undermine her confidence and resolution to completely overcome the heterosexual matrix that constrains her. But the dilemma collapses itself the moment Orlando meets Shel before she just decides to stay with nature forever and never get married because she is unwilling to follow the times and marry someone she does not love. It turns out that Shel, equivalent of a soulmate, shares the most of androgyny and the least of social norms just like Orlando. As following,

"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...and it was to each such a revelation that a woman could be as tolerant and free-spoken as a man, and a man as strange and subtle as a woman, that they had to put the matter to the proof at once.(139).

shows that both are astonished by the "abnormal" gender performance that they present because in public stance, Orlando can be bold as a warrior and Shel can be sensitive as a girl. From the fact that Orlando blesses Shel of his sailing cause instead of following him wherever he goes, she already considers Shel as the reflection of herself, without an attempt to educate him with gender standard which is what constructs the traditional society.

From this, Orlando fully gets rid of the shackles of heterosexual matrix in that she pursues her writing career which has been suppressed in the past 400 years by the gender stereotypes and makes great success eventually.

After meeting Shel, Orlando realizes that she has the ability to embody any identity she desires. As depicted in the novel, Orlando possesses a multitude of selves, including the boy who serves the Queen and the girl who embraces life with passion. These varied selves represent different facets of Orlando's personality, and she can freely access any of them. Recognizing her potential for endless possibilities, Orlando transcends the confines of the heterosexual matrix and rejects the notion of a fixed gender identity. This realization marks a significant breakthrough, as it challenges the constructed nature of gender by male-centric culture. The encounter between Orlando and Shel symbolizes the liberation from societal norms and the embrace of fluidity in gender expression.

3.4. Orlando and Marginalized Groups: Deconstruction of Gender Identity

Apart from three major characters Orlando meet, the two acquaintances she has with marginalized groups, Gypsy and prostitutes, leave an indelible effect on Orlando's contemplation to deconstruct her gender identity. Prior to returning to England, Orlando lives with the Gypsy who not only wear clothes that are of no difference between males and females, but also run the hierarchy of power that is eradicated with gender differences. The life of the Gypsy provides Orlando a utopian society where androgyny exists harmoniously, making Orlando to flow her gender through the change of clothes afterwards.

As for the prostitutes like Nell, they provide Orlando with the society where parody in heterosexual matrix, like pretending to be fragile and emotional, is transient and only serves to cater for males. For example, the scene when Orlando dressed like a male first meets Nell depicts how Nell shows her parody.

Yet, having been so lately a woman herself, she suspected that the girl's timidity and her hesitating answers and the very fumbling with the key in the latch and the fold of her cloak and the droop of her wrist were all put on to gratify her masculinity.(115).

Just as Fan states that: "concurrently, gender may also transcend the dichotomy of male and female and refer to the existence of gender outside the binary"(6), Orlando realizes that gender is not fixed in the region of binary sex, but can be dragged to any kinds, hence the deconstruction of traditional gender identity.

4. CONCLUSION

Orlando: A biography is not only a biography recording a transgender person's life, but also like a coming-of-age one, from which Orlando's perception of gender and identity evolves along with her relationships with Sasha, the Archduke, Shel and marginalized groups, culminating in the ideal state of androgyny. The heterosexual matrix looming above Orlando's life starts to crack when Sasha gives Orlando a heartbreaking love story, transform when Orlando encounters the Archduke in both male and female, and topple when Orlando experiences parody and androgynous society among marginalized groups. If all the above relationships takes an performative effect on Orlando progressively, then as "gender identity is the stylized repetition of acts through time..."(Butler 179), Orlando's love relationship with Shel is the time when Orlando fully deconstructs gender identity and break through the heterosexual matrix. From a crack, to transformation, to breakthrough, Orlando eventually no longer defines herself under the framework of heterosexual matrix but gleans more insight into her gender identity, leading an androgynous life.

In all, this research has analyzed the breakdown of heterosexual matrix in the new perspective of relations of characters, combined with Judith Butler's gender performativity and how gender identity is deconstructed thereby, adding more studies to the book's research, promoting gender equality against heterosexual hegemony and fixed gender identity in society.

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