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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Subverting Genders and Sexualities: A
Queer Approach to *Orlando* (1928) and
Cloud Nine (1979)

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ABSTRACT

This essay is an attempt to prove that both *Orlando* (1928) and *Cloud Nine* (1979), written by Virginia Woolf and Caryl Churchill respectively, can be considered pre-queer feminist works that anticipate some of the most important ideas of Queer Studies years before the actual appearance of Queer Theory itself. After explaining some of the queer concepts explored by Michell Foucault and Judith Butler such as *subversiveness*, *power relations* and *heteronormativity* or *gender performativity* as an introduction to Queer Theory, I will analyse the most relevant characters in the works and their implications to prove that both authors question these contemporary notions in society, as well as subvert genders and sexualities in their literary works despite their obvious generational and style differences. Both authors use time as a political statement through their characters' lives and leaps in time to show how individual bodies can be affected by the change in temporality. Their works suggest an anticipatory ideology that fully developed itself at the end of the twentieth century with the beginning of Third Wave Feminism, which promotes the liberation of the individual from society's restrictions and culturally constructed oppressive categories.

KEY WORDS: Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*, Queer Theory, Feminism, Gender, Sex, Sexuality, Subversiveness, Heteronormativity, Gender Performativity, Identity, Time, Third Wave Feminism

RESUMEN

Este ensayo es un intento de demostrar que tanto *Orlando* (1928) como *Cloud Nine* (1979), escritas por Virginia Woolf y Caryl Churchill respectivamente, pueden ser consideradas obras pre-queer feministas que anticipan algunas de las ideas más importantes de los Estudios Queer años antes de la aparición de la Teoría Queer en sí. Después de explicar algunos conceptos queer que exploran Michell Foucault y Judith Butler como *subversión*, *relaciones de poder*, *heteronormatividad* o *performatividad de género* como una breve introducción a la Teoría Queer, analizaré los personajes más relevantes de las obras y sus implicaciones para demostrar que ambas autoras cuestionan estas ideas contemporáneas en la sociedad, y para demostrar que, además, subvierten géneros y sexualidades en sus obras literarias a pesar de sus evidentes diferencias generacionales y estilísticas. Ambas autoras usan el tiempo como una declaración política a través de las vidas de sus personajes y los saltos temporales y demuestran cómo los cuerpos individuales se pueden ver afectados por el cambio de temporalidad. Sus obras sugieren una ideología anticipatoria que se desarrolló totalmente a finales del siglo veinte con el comienzo de la Tercera Ola feminista, que promueve la liberación del individuo de las restricciones de la sociedad y categorías opresivas construidas culturalmente.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Virginia Woolf, *Orlando*, Caryl Churchill, *Cloud Nine*, Teoría Queer, Feminismo, Género, Sexo, Sexualidad, Subversión, Heteronormatividad, Performatividad de Género, Identidad, Tiempo, Tercera Ola Feminista

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INTRODUCTION

It is a fact that Queer Theory has distanced itself from its radical beginnings to become an obscure, theorised subject to many contemporary queer scholars. It is not my intention to write another literary analysis to enlarge the number of queer-feminist perspectives written for the academia. I believe that questioning the normative in literature and praising the new century's ideology while ignoring the sexist and homophobic social reality is a mistake. Writing about Queer and Feminist Literatures must have a clear social purpose. I consider that a Feminist Literature analysis cannot be separated from its queerness and that reinterpretations of pre-queer feminist works are necessary to reflect on present human issues that were already implied in some past literary examples; as in my analysis of *Orlando* (1928) and *Cloud Nine* (1979). Virginia Woolf and Caryl Churchill anticipated in both literary works, despite of their generational or literary differences, most of the ideas that came to the forefront of Queer and Feminist Theory in the 1990s. By portraying non-normative characters that mock the normal gender and sexual conventions of society, and, by transgressing the chronological literary conventions with their political use of time, both authors subvert normative genders and sexual categories of their respective generations and expose, in a similar way, society's restrictions for individual identity and freedom.

1. QUEER THEORY: Theoretical Framework of Subversiveness

To *subvert* is “to overturn an established or existing practice, belief or rules”.¹ Subverting something means challenging the conventional ideas that arrange society and, therefore, the ideas that shape the individuals that compose it. When an individual is *subversive* s/he is an outsider; s/he is *queer*. The study of the *queer* and its theory appeared as the theoretical framework for the study of subversiveness, especially in terms of gender and sexuality. To

¹ “Subvert.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. OED Online, 2017. Web. 9 March 2017.

understand the importance of my analysis of subversive aspects of *Orlando* and *Cloud Nine*, the term *queer* and its theory must be examined, but also its most representative ideologists and the main theoretical concepts they developed for its interpretation.

1.1 Short Introduction to Queer Theory: The Term *Queer* and Its Origins

The origin of the term *queer* goes back to the eighteenth century, when it was used offensively as “strange, odd or eccentric”.² Later, in the twentieth century, it was primarily used as a derogatory term against people outside of the gender or binary sexual categories of society and, who, as a response against homophobic attacks, proudly reclaimed the word to designate themselves at the beginning of the 1980s (López Penedo 17-18). However, it was not until Teresa de Lauretis used the term *Queer Theory* in 1991 for the first time that Queer Studies became popular. Although this theory has multiple definitions and approaches, it designates the complex study of “the resistance to whatever constitutes the normal” (Micir 349). Not limited only to the categories of sex and gender, Queer Theory focuses on how culture and power relations construct individuals’ identities, concepts that the most influential queer theorists, Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, define in their works.

1.2 Main Queer Theorists: Michel Foucault and Judith Butler

When analysing from a queer perspective the concept of gender and sexual subversiveness in the works of *Orlando* and *Cloud Nine*, it is inevitable to mention the philosophers Michel Foucault and Judith Butler, who established the basic concepts for Queer Studies: the concepts of *power games* and *gender performativity*.

Following Foucault’s theory, the internal structure of *power* is described as a series of relations along with the concept of *knowledge* in society. Queer Theory considers sexuality as

² “Queer.” *Oxford English Dictionary*. OED Online, 2017. Web. 9 March 2017.

a cultural product and, therefore, a specific sexuality becomes *the normal* in society because it is the consequence of power and knowledge relations in society that legitimize specific truth discourses and constitute, at the same time, what Foucault calls *games of truth*: a set of rules through which truth is produced (López Penedo 26). These games of truth determine the power strategies that underlie the social discourses and establish specific binary categories of sex, gender and sexuality as *natural*. Truth games create, consequently as the opposite, the *unnatural* or *subversive*, considered deviations from the culturally constructed binaries of man and woman.

Along with the Queer concept of constructed sexuality, the theorist Judith Butler explains how gender is also a category created through time with her definition of *gender performativity*: “That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status . . . words, acts and gestures create the illusion of . . . a gender core . . . [which] is maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality” (185-186). This means that gender is constructed through the constant repetition of acts or gestures, but it does not have a biological origin. She uses the example of the *drag* performance to exemplify her theory: “[D]rag fully subverts . . . and mocks . . . the notion of a true gender identity” (186). Drag creates an exaggerated parody through the imitation of the opposite gender behaviour and appearance to create an artistic performance. It is a Queer Theory concept developed in the 1990s but that can be seen already in both *Orlando* and *Cloud Nine* with their mockery of gender normativity through the characters’ appearance and clothes.

1.3 Queer Concepts of *Gender, Sex, Sexuality* and *Heteronormativity*: Devices of Oppression

Queer and Feminist Literatures free the individual from society’s restrictions. To understand both the feminist and queer critiques explored in the works of Woolf and Churchill, it is necessary to clarify the basic concepts of *gender, sex, sexuality* and *heteronormativity* that will be used throughout the following sections.

Queer Theory makes the distinction between the biological sexual identity with which one individual is born and one's gender identity, which is the inner feeling of being male, female, both genders or something else. Sexuality, consequently, is completely independent from these categories. Butler defines the concepts of sex and gender as "regulatory fictions" that consolidate and naturalize the "power regimes of masculine and heterosexist oppression." (46) Biological sex and gender assigned at birth work as the power tools to regulate heteronormative sexuality in society, maintaining heterosexuality as *normal*. A person is, by default, assigned to a specific binary gender category and is expected to be sexually attracted to a *complementary* gender, therefore heterosexual since the moment s/he is born. Thus, heteronormativity would invalidate and oppress other sexualities that differ from the convention, a situation that can be compared to the masculine and patriarchal oppression suffered by women in society. This is what both *Cloud Nine* and *Orlando* display: a feminist and queer critique that shows a different way of understanding Feminism and oppression before the *official* origin of Queer Theory in the 1990s.

2. QUEERING GENDERS AND SEXUALITIES: Parodies of Normative Identities

Both *Orlando* and *Cloud Nine* were written as parodies within their different temporalities; they threaten somehow the established social norms and present characters that differ from the *natural* categories of society. Although they were published more than fifty years apart, they both constitute an attempt to parody the normative categories that impede the visibility of other identities. They mock heteronormativity showing Butler's concept of *gender performativity*, and they acknowledge, at the same time, non-binary individuals and relationships, whose visibility is the germ of the Trans-Feminist movement, the new direction towards which the twenty-first century Feminist movement is leading.

2.1 Subversion of Gender and Sexuality in *Orlando*: Mocking Heteronormativity

Virginia Woolf, being aware of her own condition as a non-conventional female writer, portrayed in *Orlando* most of her ideas related to subversion in a heteronormative world. She creates the character of Orlando as a mockery, as a subtle provocation against normality to acknowledge the fluid nature of gender and sexuality.

Orlando subverts the gender binary as he, suddenly, becomes a woman in the middle of the novel: “Orlando had become a woman . . . But . . . [he] remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity” (Woolf 67). The androgynous protagonist’s gender changes, but s/he does not show any difference in personality. Her actual change into a woman comes along with her change of clothes; she became “a little more modest . . . and a little more vain, as women are . . . The change of clothes had . . . much to do with it . . . They change our view of the world and the world’s view of us” (Woolf 92). Woolf is showing the concept of *gender performativity*; gender is not something intrinsic and Orlando is the proof. One is not born a man or a woman, Orlando remains the same person as s/he has been, and it is only when s/he begins to adopt the women’s roles, manners and clothes of the time that her personality changes. Woolf anticipates this modern Queer Theory concept of fluidity and performativity in her work: “Different though the sexes are, they intermix. In every human being a vacillation from one sex to the other takes place, and often it is only the clothes that keep the male or female likeness” (93). Gender “has no ontological status,” as Butler claims (185), but it is constructed. The binary division is perpetuated depending on one’s biological sex, but gender is *performed*, it is an imitation, just as Butler proves with drag and Woolf with Orlando’s clothes.

Moreover, Woolf parodies society’s heteronormative ideas and fixed sexualities with the portrayal of Orlando’s fluid sexuality. According to Rachel Blau Duplessis, *Orlando* shows “drastic changes in the definition of heterosexual love” (327). S/he maintains heterosexual

relationships since *he*, as a man, has relationships with many women, being the most important his romance with the androgynous princess Sasha and, as a woman, her marriage with Shelmerdine, a man with feminine attributes. However, Orlando is attracted to him regardless of his gender since she even seems to know and accept that her husband's real gender is female: “‘Are you positive you aren't a man?’ . . . and [Orlando] would echo, ‘Can it be possible you're not a woman?’” (Woolf 127). Woolf parodies in this way society's concept of heterosexual love and depicts a subversive sexual and romantic desire which does not obey the heteronormative expectations of society.

2.2 Subversion of Gender and Sexuality in *Cloud Nine*: Crossdressing, Drag and Non-Binary Relationships

If *Orlando* is a parody of gender roles and heteronormativity in 1920s Britain, *Cloud Nine*, published in 1979, is a provocation. More than one decade before the actual origin of Queer Studies, Churchill was putting Queer sexual politics on the stage. She subverted the gender binary and heteronormativity using cross-casting and invited spectators to consider different types of non-binary relationships. Just as Woolf used Orlando's clothes to prove the imitative nature of gender, Churchill subverts “‘concepts as ‘femininity’ and ‘masculinity,’ . . . and [acknowledges] Butler's concept of ‘gender performativity’” with the cross-representation of the characters on stage, which shows the difference between biological sex and gender as a social construction (Joodaki and Bakhshi 128).

The author's deliberate cross-casting emphasizes the cultural origin of gender and its difference from the category of sex. The best examples of this subversion are the characters of Betty, a female character played by a man, and her son, Edward, whose character is played by an adult woman. The fact that a man plays Betty's role “shows that [her] gender . . . is the effect and result of the dominant ideology and the mandatory discourse of heterosexuality”

(Joodaki and Bakhshi 130). Betty herself says: “The whole aim of my life is to be what [my husband] looks for in a wife. I am a man’s creation as you see, and what men want is what I want to be” (Churchill 1). Betty is biologically female, but the fact that her character is portrayed by a man indicates that her actual culturally constructed gender is masculine. The case of Edward is similar. He is biologically a man but he is portrayed by a woman on stage, which means that his actual gender is female. Churchill represents the characters’ inner disagreement with the gender imposed by society and the fact that gender is performative and constructed since childhood with the character of Edward, who is constantly reprimanded for playing with dolls, and asked to perform the masculine gender according only to his biological characteristics.

Furthermore, Churchill subverts heteronormativity with the representation and visibility of multiple characters whose sexualities differ from the normal, such as Ellen, Victoria – who divorces her husband to initiate a lesbian relationship – or Gerry, Edwards’s boyfriend. Edward himself is the representation and embodiment of the *queer man* in the play, since he does not fit within society’s labels. He is presented as a gay man who is not ashamed of displaying a *feminine* attitude but who has sexual relationships with both men and women. He disagrees with the conventional gender-binary distinctions when he says: “I like women . . . I’d rather be a woman . . . I’m sick of men . . . I think I’m a lesbian” (Churchill 72). He frees himself from the categories of heterosexual and even homosexual when he starts a relationship with both Victoria and her girlfriend Lin, embracing “pansexuality’ or ‘bisexuality’,” subverting gender expectations and conventional views of sexual orientation (Harding 269). Churchill creates a world characterised by the failure of heterosexual or monogamous relationships when they are imposed on individuals. She comes ahead of her time before Queer Studies existed and denounces the repression that heteronormativity implies for personal freedom and self-expression.

2.3 Transgression of the Normative: A Queer Trans-Feminist Vision in *Orlando* and *Cloud*

Nine

Since the development of Queer Studies in the 1990s, which influenced profoundly the development of the Third Wave Feminism, the different Feminist Waves have developed a better understanding vision of gender and sexuality away from the essentialism that characterised them decades ago. Although this vision seems to be part of a recent understanding of sexual politics, there were concepts already implied in the feminist works of *Orlando* and *Cloud Nine* years before Queer Theory became influential, as examined previously. This fact might suggest that the natural evolution of Feminism could be the Trans-Feminist vision, which seems to be leading into the acceptance of other different identities: queer or transgender individuals who have also been oppressed by patriarchal society's impositions.

3. QUEERING TIME: Temporality and Its Consequences on Sexual and Gendered Bodies

One of the most distinct characteristics of both *Orlando* and *Cloud Nine* is their unique temporality. *Orlando* lives more than three-hundred years, and *Cloud Nine* goes from the British Victorian society to 1979. What the authors have in common is that their unconventional use of time can be also an element of subversion. Time can be read from a Queer perspective: "To read time queerly is to be attentive to all of the ways temporality affects gender, sexuality and bodily life" (Micir 354). They use the passage of time to criticise and subvert the normative institutions that create modern life and that have oppressed women and non-binary individuals' bodies and identities throughout history.

3.1 *Orlando*'s Subversion of Oppressive Institutions throughout 300 Years: A Queer Critique of Marriage and Social Class

The queerness in *Orlando* resides, not only in his/her sudden change of gender or sexuality, but also in the change of his/her personality over three-hundred years. His/her non-normative sexual conduct depends on the century s/he is living as s/he embraces masculinity or femininity, which also represents a reaction against the normal. Melanie Micir argues that “Orlando is really only able to become a queer subject – experiencing everything from heterosexual courtly desire to ambiguous sexual longing, from gendered disinheritance to single motherhood – because [his biography] takes place over three centuries” (354). It is the fluid temporality that allows Orlando to experience reality as a non-binary non-conformist subject, and also what allows him to develop a consciousness about his/her own subversive condition. Woolf criticises the “institutions of heteronormativity -including, but not limited to marriage, family and inheritance” (Micir 350).

Woolf criticises marriage as an oppressive institution for women when Orlando “had to yield completely and submissively to the spirit of [the nineteenth century], and take a husband” (120). Despite describing herself as “nature’s bride,” and stating that “[she] shall wear no wedding ring,” she is aware of her condition as a mature single woman in Victorian society who needs a husband to survive (Woolf 122). Even though she was extremely rich as a man, she must give all her properties in favour of a male heir or a husband when she becomes a woman, a subversive critique against the system’s discrimination of women and its attempts to normalize heteronormativity.

Along with her critique of marriage, Woolf also addresses social class and gender self-awareness. Orlando goes through a process of consciousness raising about her own body as a woman and her non-normative identity. She understands the consequences of having a feminine identity in the patriarchal society in eighteenth-century England when she befriends a group of

queer outsiders. These outsiders are a group of low-class prostitutes that initiate Orlando into the world of women's issues and sexuality and she states that "[she] had never known the hours speed faster or more merrily" (107). After having spent time earlier that night with the famous poet Alexander Pope and his stereotyped ideas about women, "Orlando professed great enjoyment in the society of her own sex, and leave it to the gentlemen to prove . . . that this is impossible" (108). She understands at this point the meaning of being female in a patriarchal society that defines, marginalizes and silences women, especially those who belong to the most stigmatized social classes. Orlando is only able to understand the gender differences of society and her own subversive condition with the passage of time, which affects all individuals' personal conceptions of their bodies.

3.2 *Cloud Nine*'s Passage of Time Used as a Political Statement: Marriage and Sexual Liberation

While Virginia Woolf narrates Orlando's subversive life making him/her aware of the passage of time, Caryl Churchill, on the contrary, leaves the Victorian family of *Cloud Nine* unaware of the more than one-hundred years leap in time from the First to the Second Act to "[demonstrate the] causality and change in sexual politics" (Diamond 194). By exposing the contrast between the restrictiveness of the Victorian Era and modernity, she emphasizes the change in the patriarchal discourse and history through a strong critique of the heteronormative institutions of family and marriage, which are "fractured by gender empowerment and alternative sexualities and ways of living" in 1970s Britain (Godiwala 14).

The patriarchal heterosexual family built on the institution of marriage is questioned in the Second Act by almost all the characters, who reject marriage or get divorced. However, the contrast with the First Act can be seen, especially, with the character of Betty and her liberation from her husband Clive. He defined her life and personality in the Victorian times as "a man's

creation” (1). Now, in 1979, she desires to have economic independence and wants to live alone: “I’m going to leave [Clive] and I think I might need to get a job . . . I’m finding a little flat, that will be fun” (55-57). Churchill criticises, in this way, the lack of women’s freedom, but, especially, their lack of sexual freedom in the past.

The author emphasizes women’s sexual self-discovery in modernity, as in Betty’s case: “I used to think Clive was the one who liked sex. But then I found I missed it” (82). Churchill shows the acceptance and visibility of different types of sexual identities and relationships in the twentieth century that subvert the normative monogamous ideas of societies, as it is, for example the relationship of Lin, Victoria, and her brother Edward. She manages to prove how time can affect women and non-binary individuals’ vision of sexuality and their own bodies, but also how achieving personal freedom is possible through time.

CONCLUSION

Woolf and Churchill subvert normative identities with their queer vision of the categories of gender, sexuality, and even time. They acknowledge the fluidity of identity inside of the artificial constructs of normativity and the effect that temporality has on changing sexual bodies. It has been proved that both authors anticipated queer concepts of the present century, challenging a rigid society with non-conformist characters that free themselves from society’s impositions. Past queer feminist literary authors wrote to subvert and awake the society of their times, but the themes they explored are timeless. Literature should be constantly reinterpreted outside of its original temporality to be understood and to be expanded in its social purpose. Analysing literature from a contemporary perspective gives it the power to change over the generations. Reinterpreting literature could actually be a form of queering time itself.

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