From Man to Woman to a New Understanding of Gender: Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*

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Abstract: Both Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* and Angela Carter's *The Passion of New Eve* depict the transformation of a male character into a female one. In both texts these changes are not initially desired by the subjects but rather they are imposed on them by forces outside their control. Their transitions from male to female stirs in both novels a debate regarding the construction of gender by society and its influence in people. This article will analyze the way Orlando and Evelyn/Eve enter womanhood after going through a sex change and how both transformations imply a loss of power and privilege once the characters are no longer men. It will also compare and discuss the alternatives Woolf and Carter offer in terms of the new understandings of gender they propose.
Keywords: *Angela Carter, masculine domination, performativity, sex change, Virginia Woolf.*

In *The Passion of New Eve*, originally published in 1977, Angela Carter depicts the transformation of Evelyn—a man—into Eve—a woman—through a surgical and psychological procedure carried out by a group of radical feminists who worship an underground divinity called Mother. Carter's novel is riddled with references to Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, published almost fifty years before. In both novels, the sex change takes place after a ritual that foregrounds the perception of gender as a social construction, which, as stated by Judith Butler, may be regarded as a norm that is reinforced as long as it is 'acted out […) and reidealized and reinstituted' by our behavior in society [Butler, 2004: 48]. In the two novels the transition from man to woman is not due to an inner change associated with the person's biology but rather an understanding of social customs and the subject's loss of power in the patriarchal order. The following pages will analyze these two common themes in the two novels: I will begin by focusing on the rituals that Woolf and Carter employ to represent the sex change of Orlando and Evelyn/Eve, and the resulting loss of social power that these characters have to endure once they are no longer men. I will then discuss how, ultimately, attending to these issues, both authors' aim is to suggest new understandings of gender and gender relations.

In her reading of *Orlando,* Rachel Bowlby suggests that the change from man to woman can be read as implying 'a move away from the centuries of patriarchy, and the coming of a 'women's time" [Bowlby, 1997: 43]. Her suggestion points out a widespread desire at the time to change the way gender and, in particular, femininity is perceived and discussed, trying to overcome the patriarchal structures. These structures can be described

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under the light of Pierre Bourdieu's analysis of masculine domination, which he considers to be the prime example of an established social order made up by a series of 'relations of domination, its rights and prerogatives, privileges and injustices [that make] the most intolerable conditions of existence […] be perceived as acceptable and even natural' [Bourdieu, 2001: 1], and that is perpetuated, partially, through what Bourdieu describes as a 'symbolic violence' that is carried out through symbolic channels such as recognition, feeling and communication [Bourdieu, 2001: 2]. Carter's *The Passion of New Eve*, which can be read as a rewriting of Woolf's *Orlando* in a postmodern context [Laing, 2001: 87], also questions the relations of domination that make up these patriarchal structures. In her effort to undermine myths—as Carter famously wrote, she was in the 'demythologizing business' [Carter, 1983, 70]—she became interested in finding out 'what certain configurations of imagery in our society, in our culture, really stand for, what they mean, underneath the kind of semireligious coating that makes people not particularly want to interfere with them' [Katsavos, 1994: 12]. Such emphasis on 'myths' within a gender as a social construct context is already present in Woolf's *Three Guineas*, as quoted by Bourdieu, which is read by the French scholar as a choice of language that implies a symbolic, magical and ritual transformation that draws the reader closer to understanding male domination within its symbolic dimension [Bourdieu, 2001: 2-3]. Hence, as it will be argued bellow, both *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve* explore the anti-essentialist notion that categories such as feminine and masculine do not have an absolute foundation.

In the following excerpt, whose relevance is paramount for the plot of the novel, Orlando's transition from man to woman takes place while he is in a sleep trance. On its seventh day, three figures enter his room: our Lady of Purity, our Lady of Chastity, and our Lady of Modesty. While they move around Orlando, these creatures chant in unison:

> For there, no here [all speak together joining hands and making gestures of farewell and despair towards the bed where Orlando lies sleeping) dwell still in nest and boudoir, office and lawcourt those who love us; those who honour us, virgins and city men; lawyers and doctors; those who prohibit; those who deny; those who reverence without knowing why; those who praise without understanding; the still very numerous [Heaven be praised) tribe of the respectable; who prefer to see not; desire to know not; love the darkness; those still worship us, and with reason; for we have given them Wealth, Prosperity, Comfort, Ease. To them we go, you we leave. Come, Sisters, come! This is no place for us here [Woolf, 2004: 86].

Finally, the sound of trumpets that appeared with them peal 'Truth! Truth! Truth' [Woolf, 2004: 87] to the biographer of the novel, as the three ladies leave Orlando. Their speech explicitly presents femininity as a patriarchal construction created by men to perpetuate their domination. As Bourdieu explains, 'in so far as the principles of vision and division that (the mythico-ritual system) proposes are objectively adjusted to the pre-existing divisions, it consecrates the established order, by bringing it to known and recognized, official existence' [Bourdieu, 2001: 8], which allows the social order to work as a symbolic machine that ratifies the masculine domination it is founded on [Bourdieu, 2001: 9]. In this 'tribe of the respectable', everyone enjoys a series of privileges in detriment of women's emancipation and independence from constructions of femininity that demand pure, chaste, modest subjects, and do not allow them to act outside of social gender boundaries. In this excerpt too, Woolf makes a parody of 'the philosophical search for bare, naked, essential truths' through the figure of the biographer in terms of gender

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and sexuality by having the trumpets peal 'Truth' at the narrator once Orlando's sex has changed [Burns, 1994: 350].

Despite becoming a woman, Orlando is not changed at all by it: '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' although Woolf starts referencing to her character as a 'she' instead of a 'he' from this point on [Woolf, 2004: 87]. Hence, she remains the same, feeling, thinking and acting the same way she did prior to this moment. Even though in the body of a woman, Orlando still feels like her previous self, a fact which confronts ideas of gender identity as being dependent on sexual difference. Thus, the narrator's comment denies biologism, as Orlando's personality remains unaltered despite her physical change. Only through subsequent social encounters with a new physical appearance, she will have to endure changers due to the need to accommodate her gender and sexuality to her socio-cultural context's expectations [Minow-Pinkney, 2010: 125].

Evelyn's change into Eve in *The Passion of New Eve* references the ceremony with the three deities that turns Orlando into a woman, although Carter shifts the tone in her narrative and renders it as parodic as Woolf's [Laing, 2001: 88]. Evelyn is captured by a group of radical feminists who take him to Beulah, their own underground city. They introduce him to Mother, their goddess, who is described as a self-made mythological artefact [Carter, 1982: 57]. For Carter, Mother goddesses make as little sense as Father gods since, as she asserts in her essay on the Marquis de Sade's female characters *The Sadeian Woman*, '[i]f a revival of the myths of these cults gives women emotional satisfaction, it does so at the price of obscuring the real condition of life. This is why [myths] were invented in the first place' [Carter, 1979: 6]. She mocks these fantasies right from the beginning of the procedure that will turn Evelyn into a woman, as the women around him start chanting and worshipping Mother, while confronting Evelyn with his masculinity and the patriarchal system he was part of. Like the three figures in *Orlando*, these women work as a narrative technique to highlight the inequality within this social order, where women are turned into objects and reduced to stereotypes of femininity. Carter, however, does not describe such a peaceful sex change process as in Woolf's account. Evelyn is raped by Mother while her followers act as a choir that celebrates their goddess's actions. Then he undergoes a surgical procedure that will turn him into a woman, during which Mother exclaims 'I am the Great Parricide, I am the Castratix of the Phallocentric Universe, I am Mama, Mama, Mama!' [Carter, 1982: 64]. If Woolf's masquerade emphasized the agents behind the subordination of women within society, Carter's surgical procedure focuses on the myths by which this subordination is justified: men's fear of women acting as castratory agents, just like Mama. In fact, as discussed later, one of the male characters in *The Passion of New Eve*, Zero, exerts his violence on women precisely because, according to him, Tristessa, a famous actress, made him sterile through the cinema screen [Carter, 1982: 101].

However, despite their attempt, the women at Beulah cannot escape gender constructions. Eve is created based on a reflection of masculine desire in relation to women: 'all Mother's sympathies with the female […] are sympathies that Carter sees as inadvertently colluding with patriarchy and it is noticeable that Mother constructs Eve according to a masculine view of what the perfect woman should look like' [Day, 1998: 116]. In fact, Eve is taught how to be a woman by watching films: '[…] the programming began and […] old Hollywood provided me with a new set of nursery tales. I don't know if

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the movies were selected on purpose, as part of the ritual of attrition of my change in ontological status' [Carter, 1982: 68]. The images of melancholia and sorrow coming from the actresses show her 'all the pains of womanhood' that men have constructed [Carter, 1982: 68]. In *The Sadeian Woman* Carter criticizes this type of cinema as the carrier of harmful ideals of femininity:

> The public sexual ideology of Hollywood finally formulated itself, in the nineteen forties […]. Female virtue was equated with frigidity and a woman's morality with her sexual practice. […] But, of course, it proved quite impossible to keep sexuality off the screen. It consistently reasserted itself, even when female virtue was equated with asexuality, because a pretty face and a provocative body remained the first prerequisites of success for a woman in the movies. The movies celebrated allure in itself but either denied the attraction inherent in availability or treated availability itself as a poor joke. […] The cultural product of this tension was the Good Bad Girl, […] whose most notable martyr is Marilyn Monroe [Carter, 1979: 71].

Eve will thus be forced to learn how to be a woman from stereotypical representations of femininity that the women in Beulah are trying to abolish. Moreover, after all the 'programming' Eve goes through, she still sees herself through Evelyn's male gaze, as her desires and identity are still the same, like in the case of Orlando: 'I was the object of all the unfocused desires that had ever existed in my own head. I had become my own masturbatory fantasy. And […] the cock in my head, still, twitched at the sight of myself' [Carter, 1982: 71]. What Carter emphasizes is that, in the construction of gender, complex cultural codes are more important than any biological differences [Peach, 1998: 126]. The masculine domination codes Evelyn had been exposed to prior to being turned into Eve are rooted too deeply in him and surgery will not be enough to get rid of them.

Complete transformation into womanhood is only achieved in both novels through the realization that being a woman entails a loss of power and privilege both Orlando and Evelyn enjoyed as men. It is not until she is on a ship on her way to England that Orlando notices the extent to which her being a woman has changed the way other men interact with her. This instance makes her reflect upon how she perceived femininity when she was a man and how she now must accept that she has lost her superior position:

> She remembered how, as a young man, she had insisted that women must be obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled. 'Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires, […] for women are not [judging from my own short experience of the sex) obedient, chaste, scented, and exquisitely appareled by nature. They can only attain these graces, without which they may enjoy none of the delights of life, by the most tedious discipline [Woolf, 2004: 99].

Up to this point, Orlando had not realized the implications of her sex change. Now that she is put in a position where she has to wear women's clothes and present herself as a woman, she becomes fully conscious of her subordination to men like the one she used to be and her gender change is now effected along with her sex change [Burns, 1994: 251]. It is precisely 'this disciplining of the female body and mind, this existence of social inequality that Woolf aims to debunk through the female Orlando' [Sanyal, 2014: 83]. She might be a woman now, but, as we shall see later, she never does quite settle with either gender, advocating for what we could consider an androgynous personality.

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Eve does not fully understand her condition as a woman in the patriarchal society based on masculine domination until she meets Zero, when her position in power relationships shifts from being the dominant man to being the subordinated woman. In a much more violent way than Orlando, Eve is confronted face to face with the violence of the patriarchal system. Zero, the sadist who rules over a harem consisting of women he can rape and assault whenever he pleases, works as a satire for 'the power of the phallus, which Carter suggests is an arbitrary sign [and whose] power depends utterly on the persistence of his harem's will to believe in him' [Jordan, 1990: 36]. Once she is trapped by Zero, Eve is forced to become one of the wives in his harem. It is once he rapes her that she realizes the way she used to be when she was a man, and how she had treated the women in her life in a similar manner as Zero. In fact, the irony lies in the fact that Zero is an exaggeration of the way Evelyn was, but they are similar nonetheless [Peach, 1998: 130]:

> Each time, a renewed defloration, as if his violence perpetually refreshed my virginity. And more than my body, some other yet equally essential part of my being was ravaged by him for, when he mounted me with his single eye blazing like the mouth of an automatic, his little body imperfectly stripped, I felt myself to be, not myself but he; and the experience of this crucial lack of self, which always brought with it a shock of introspection, forced me to know myself as a former violator at the moment of my own violation [Carter, 1982: 98].

What is left of Evelyn sees himself reflected in the sadist while at the same time her new persona is placed as the victim that has to endure the male sadism impersonated by Zero. Mother's programming through Hollywood movies is finally completed through his violence: Eve was created according to masculine ideas of what women should look like that were depicted in the films and this interaction makes her put into practice the model of passive womanhood she had just learned. Being the victim of Zero's rape is what ultimately makes Eve realize and be conscious of the fact that she is a woman and she has lost all power she had as Evelyn, as it is through these acts that Eve's mind and body finally start matching [Day, 1998: 117].

Tristessa is another feminine character that is devoid of all power in the novel. He used to be a famous Hollywood star who played women characters. The way he constructed his identity as a woman was based on 'the predilections of the masculine gaze', the exact same principles by which Mother constructs Eve [Day, 1998: 120]. As Sarah Gamble points out, through her roles and position as a public figure, Tristessa makes female suffering legitimate, which, as a result, leads to the creation of 'a stereotype of masochistic femininity to which real women are educated to aspire and men to desire' [Gamble, 1997: 126]. The actor embodies one of the strongest pillars that Bourdieu affirms support masculine domination: *libido dominantis* or the desire for the dominant and his domination, which entails Tristessa's abdication of the *libido dominandi* or the desire to dominate [Bourdieu, 2001: 80]. It is through the actor and his movies that Evelyn has partly learned how to treat women, but it is also through the type of films he was in that Eve is taught how to behave like a proper woman. Hence, Carter shows how the power relationships that comprise masculine domination can be established by the use of the media through which men are encouraged to be sadist agents and women masochistic objects. The novel's focus on the way women are perceived by a masculine gaze is developed further when it is discovered that Tristessa was a man all along without any idea

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of what actual women are like—he is even surprised by female genitalia when he sees them for the first time—all of which constitutes a critique of feminine ideals based on passivity as creations of androcentric, patriarchal structures [Makinen, 1997: 157], as it is Tristessa—a man and one of the creators of such femininity – who manages to become the perfect woman in the eyes of the patriarchal system.

In order to overcome constructed models of femininity that subordinate women to men, both *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve* discuss and offer alternatives in terms of new understandings of gender and gender relations. Once Orlando understands how gender roles work, she automatically rejects both prescriptive masculinity and femininity:

> "To fall from a mast-head", she thought, "because you see a woman's ankle; to dress up like a Guy Fawkes and parade the streets, so that women may praise you; to deny a woman teaching lest she may laugh at you; to be the slave of the frailest chit in petticoats, and yet to go about as if you were the Lords of creation. — Heavens!" she thought, "what fools they make of us—what fools we are!" And here it would seem from some ambiguity in her terms that she was censuring both sexes equally, 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 [Woolf, 2004: 100].

Orlando thus stands in between genders, she mixes them, but does not show a smooth combination of opposites, rather, Woolf advocates for a gender identity based on fluidity that allows people elude gender and sexual codes [Kaivola, 1999: 235-236]. As Makiko Minow-Pinkney argues, '[a]ndrogyny in *Orlando* is not a resolution of oppositions, but the throwing of both sexes into a metonymic confusion of genders' [Minow-Pinkney, 2010: 122]. Part of this fluidity is related to Orlando changing clothes, which equates to her changing gender, depending on the occasion [Sanyal, 2014: 83]. This interchangeability is not perfect, as Orlando's experiences and sexual differences remain quite stereotypical:

> Orlando's manliness involves nonchalance about clothes, impatience with household matters, bold and reckless activity. Her womanly disposition involves lack of male formality and desire for power, 'tears on slight provocation', weakness in mathematics. Androgyny itself is 'non-conceptual' and unrealistic, but its components are presented in terms of naturalistic stereotypes [Minow-Pinkney, 2010: 131].

However, what this argument fails to notice is that Orlando's cross-dressing does not aim at reproducing stereotypes as much as at imitating them in a theatrical way, liberating herself from gender boundaries while at the same time she proves them to be socially constructed through her parody [Sanyal, 2014: 84]. Woolf, through androgyny and cross-dressing, shows the way constructions of gender work and how they can be bent and suspended, evoking the ideas Butler would later develop of gender identity as performative and constituted 'by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results' [Butler, 1990: 25].

Carter, on the other hand, seems to be a bit more ambiguous about the future of the subject in terms of gender. While it is easy to deduce from the novel her opposition to social and mythological constructions of gender, the alternative she proposes is not that explicit. At the end of the novel, when Eve meets Mother again—this time as a decrepit old woman—Carter arguably makes a critique of 'old symbols of womanhood [as] [t]he old lady can also be read as, in part, a representation of Mother, now demythologized, secularized and near extinction' [Day, 1998: 129]. By this time, Eve is pregnant with Tristessa's child, which, along with her departure into the ocean at the end of the novel—

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'Ocean, ocean, mother of mysteries, bear me to the place of birth' [Carter: 1982, 187]—can be interpreted as a promise of a new and more hopeful beginning for humanity [Cavallaro, 2011: 91]. The author presents the reader with a future where it is possible to escape from a reality where gender is no longer performed and where 'male' and 'female' are recognized as mere constructed roles that do not exercise any power or domination over the subject. For Carter, love stands as the ultimate tool to overcome the subordination of the feminine to the masculine. As she writes in the ending of *The Sadeain Woman*, 'only the possibility of love could awake the libertine to perfect, immaculate terror. It is in this holy terror of love that we find, in both men and women themselves, the source of all opposition to the emancipation of women' [Carter, 1979: 176]. The love that Tristessa and Eve finally share is where the future awaits. Once she decides to leave the world she knows and ventures into the unknown ocean, her child, the descendant of the masculine woman and the feminine man, will grow up in a world where a new understanding of gender and/or its suspension are possible. This child yet to be born represents the promise of a new future where myths no longer exist.

Both Virginia Woolf and Angela Carter are concerned with the way gender affects and limits people's lives. Through their novels they undermine social constructs that perpetuate androcentric domination. Through their critiques of womanhood, they demonstrate the artificial mechanisms that regulate gender roles. By turning male characters into female ones, both authors manage to criticize power relationships as well as women's subordination by men. They showcase the masculine domination structures that rule society in order to subvert them afterwards and offer alternatives to it. The accurate portrayal of the loss of power as a part of the process of entering womanhood highlights the need to reinvent the way we interact with each other and perceive ourselves within society. The solutions that Woolf and Carter suggest may appear different and unrelated, but their defense of fluidity and freedom as core to any sort of gender identification stands as the most valuable element in both *Orlando* and *The Passion of New Eve*. Either by commenting on those limitations and absurd expectations, or by creating a mythological monster, both authors put forward their rejection of restrictive gender identities. Leaving aside the differences between the texts, it can be argued that both Woolf and Carter promote the existence of subjects that can put social constraints on hold and that can live in a fluid state that changes as life goes on. Just like the ocean that Eve decides to sail at the end of Carter's novel, the future of gender, according to these two authors, should be versatile and changing, avoiding structures to become static and turn into new myths.

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