

**Other-sexed/Other-gendered:  
Narrating a Spectrum in a Language of Binaries**

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*Orlando remained precisely as he had been. The change of sex, though it altered their future, did nothing whatever to alter their identity*  
(Woolf, Virginia, 2000b).

Let's begin with a story. Orlando, Virginia Woolf's charismatic time-warping, gender-bending protagonist, begins his 400-year long adventure as a young Englishman during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Refusing to grow old, his love affairs with nobility and his obsession with his childhood poem *The Oak Tree* keep him entertained throughout the ageless years. But as the years pass by, Orlando grows tired of such English delights. He decides to flee to Constantinople for more exotic encounters, and he is not to be disappointed. For one morning, after a well-needed hibernation away from the dangers of civil unrest, Orlando wakes to find himself a woman. Completely unperturbed by such an event, Orlando's change in genitalia is as easy and as arbitrary as a change of clothes.

Whilst a change of sex may be simple for Orlando, to narrate such a change is most certainly not. As Woolf's narrator contends, Orlando's identity remains the same despite the change in sex, but yet we cannot easily represent this in the English language: 'his memory – but in future we must, for convention's sake, say 'her' for 'his', and 'she' for 'he' – her memory then, went back though all the events of her past life without encountering any obstacle' (2000b, 133). A change of sex may be simple, but our ability to narrate a genderly-ambiguous character within the confines of the English language is far more complex.

Although a work of literary fiction, *Orlando* embodies a very prevalent, real-world concern, and it is this concern that is the focus of this article. Queer and feminist scholarship may debate notions surrounding gender-binaries, the sex/gender distinction and the gendered bias of language, but these issues still revolve around those who are located within the sex-binary: those who are male or female. But what about those who are not represented in the binary to begin with? For instance, where would Orlando lie in our male/female binary? Orlando represents those very real individuals who are the oft-ignored side of this debate: that of transsexuals, androgynies, intersexuals and other such *others* who truly cross the male/female sex-binary.

In this capacity as a representative of the other, Woolf's gender-ambiguous and time-jumping hero leaps from the borders of fiction and sweeps into a very real arena. During Woolf's time this was the era of early modernism, a time centred around 'the terrain of gender', where 'anxieties about gender, discourses on gender, and gendered discourses of various kinds' (Pykett 1995, 15) were vast. Via fantasy, Woolf subverted the notion of a true identity fixed to a single sex/gender and prophesised future debates within queer and feminist scholarship. But over the years these debates have been well and truly trodden, and so it is not these concerns that are at the heart of this article. Instead, it is the ability to *narrate* these 'others' at all that is our focus: the ability to narrate those who are neither represented in the male/female sex-binary nor within the English language itself.

Opening this discussion from a literary perspective, Orlando's exotic, whirlwind journey through the centuries serves to demonstrate the difficulty in narrating such an other. Then utilising theory from philosophy, critical theory, queer theory and cognitive linguistics, we move beyond fiction to take an interdisciplinary approach towards a larger theoretical discussion regarding the interplay between language, sex and gender. Finally, this article then postulates whether it is possible to narrate those

outside of discourse *into* discourse, in the hope for a future which affords the narration of sex and gender on a spectrum rather than as a binary.

**To narrate the fantastical is to narrate real-world limitations**

*Orlando* may be a fantastic story, but Woolf's work was not penned to be within the realms of science fiction. Entitled *Orlando: A Biography*, Woolf's 1928 fiction was intended to reflect upon the relationship between early twentieth century Britain and gender. Despite being deemed one of her more accessible novels, Woolf uses fantasy in *Orlando* for purposeful, rhetorical effect<sup>1</sup> (Woolf 2000b, xxxiv): to argue for the socially constructed nature of gender, and the inadequate concept of identity being governed by sex. This rhetoric is not one that is surprising for Woolf, as throughout her canon of fiction and critical writing, we are constantly encouraged to draw similar assertions. For instance, in *A Room of One's Own* Woolf clearly argues for creativity being superlative in the androgynous mind: 'it is fatal for anyone who writes to think of their sex. It is fatal to be a man or woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly' (2000a, 94). Although in *Orlando* Woolf goes beyond that of real-world possibilities, this use of fantasy only serves to make a caricatured demonstration of Woolf's rhetorical aims.

The rhetorical nature of Woolf's work is important in our consideration of how *Orlando* functions as an exaggerated manifest of our real world problem. For this we should turn to James Phelan's typological notion of rhetorical narrative, which sees a recursive relationship between the text, author and reader. Phelan argues that the reader makes certain judgements when experiencing fiction: ethical and interpretive judgements concern the actions of the characters, whilst an aesthetic judgement

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<sup>1</sup> Although certain narrative theory will deny any attribution of opinion between a narrator and its author, it would seem imprudent to disregard such strong paratextual evidence in Woolf's case. In taking this rhetorical reading, it is in line with James Phelan's theory of rhetorical narrative: his mantra 'somebody telling somebody else on some occasion and for some purpose(s) that something happened' (Phelan 2007, 3), argues that all fictional narrative has some rhetorical purpose.

considers the aesthetic, formal qualities of the narrative. The latter is made in a readerly presumption that the author wishes for them to react in a certain way, and these rhetorical judgements then develop further categorical responses in the reader: mimetic, thematic and synthetic. A mimetic response refers to the reader's attempt to view both the characters and the story-world as hypothetically real and possible; the thematic response refers to responses regarding the ideology of the characters and the larger issues being addressed by the narrative as a whole; whilst the systematic is in opposition to a reader's mimetic response, regarding their reaction to the characters and the story-world as artificial constructs. Taking a rhetorical account of *Orlando* in accordance with Phelan's theory, it is easy to see then how the 'science-fiction' aspect of Woolf's novel does not detract from the larger rhetorical issues at stake. As readers, we attempt to view Orlando as possibly real. And crucially, we feel empathy towards Orlando's plight of trying to navigate identity in a world of sex and gender binaries.

Considering this rhetorical interpretation of the fantastical *Orlando*, we should consider how the reader is supposed to react to Orlando's nonchalant reaction to his/her<sup>2</sup> sex change. Should an audience consider the quote at the beginning of this article to be pure hyperbole? As a desire for how Orlando *wishes* to feel about identity being separate to sex? Or should the reader consider it to be true within the time-warping story-world in which Orlando resides? Furthermore, if an audience is to accept the latter, then how can they possibly reconcile such an outlandish proclamation? Going against any understanding of societal reality, it seems almost impossible for us to be able to envisage a person and all they convey without any consideration of their sex. This is what Orlando, *Orlando's* narrator and ultimately Woolf, asks of the reader. But yet, how can a reader at all achieve such an objective if

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<sup>2</sup> As if to exemplify this article's discussion further, due to the difficulties in finding a satisfactory pronoun by which to refer to Orlando, different personal pronouns will be used throughout this article, choosing what seems most appropriate in the context of where in the novel Orlando is being referred to.

the language by which they are asked betrays the request? *Orlando's* rhetorical function is almost negated in its very avocation, as Woolf's weapon in the war against gender-binary barriers hinders as much as it liberates: that is, her weapon of language.

With English's three sets of third-person pronouns (the subjectives being *he*, *she* and *it*), the first two terms strictly adhere to a binary-gendered discourse. Whilst the third, *it*, may not contribute to the binary, its gender-neutrality means *its* usage is reserved for objects and occasionally animals, not for *Homo sapiens*. If *it* is used in reference to humans, the usage is predominantly derogatory, used to dehumanise the referent. By lacking a gender marker, *it* automatically dehumanises because its gender-neutral stance is low in animacy. The inference is that without a gender, and more specifically, without belonging to one of two clearly binary-gendered oppositions, your humanity is negated. Therefore, your animacy drops to a low- or non-level, matching that of either a non-human animal or an object.

So how does Woolf deal with narrating Orlando's transformation, who remained 'precisely as he had been' (2000b, 133) despite the change of sex? As noted earlier, Woolf can only work with the tools that the English language affords. In two consecutive sentences Orlando goes from being marked as 'he' to 'their' ('the change of sex, though it altered their future' (133)), with the use of *their*<sup>3</sup> in this context marking Orlando not as singular but a multiple of persons, subsequently with a double identity. Although *they* can be used in the gender-neutral third person singular, this usage is a) often disputed as technically incorrect and b) still not satisfactory in our case of Orlando. *They* should only be used in the singular when the context finds it satisfactory that plurality is not indicated. The epicene pronoun *they* may provide an indeterminate number and gender-neutral reference, but the consequence is that this anaphoric reference is vague and generic.

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<sup>3</sup> In reference to footnote two, despite now arguing for *their* as an unsatisfactory gender-neutral pronoun, it is occasionally used in this article when either of the gendered pronouns do not suffice. Once again, this serves to exemplify the issue this article is trying to address.

Although an epicene pronoun has been the agenda for many feminist and queer scholars, *they* is still not satisfactory to many. In our case of Orlando, the language is in complete contradiction to the larger semantic meaning and context. This confusion lies in the preceding and subsequent phrases ‘precisely as he had been’ and ‘did nothing to alter their identity’. These phrases advocate the opposite of the grammatical interpretation of the plural pronouns, that Orlando is still the same singular person. Although we understand that Woolf is asserting Orlando *is* the same person, attributing our real-world knowledge (taking Phelan’s idea of mimetic response) generates a challenge for the reader to believe that Orlando could change sex and still remain the same. So we appear to be witnessing an inconsistency: Woolf asserts meaning that contradicts what the language actually conveys.

This contradiction-in-terms throughout *Orlando* exemplifies for us the much larger, real-world quandary of how it can be possible to talk about a person who sits outside the binary-gendered remit of language. More specifically, it questions how we can talk about this person in *satisfactory* terms that neither rejects their humanity or others them from those who fit into gendered-normative terminology. Whilst feminist scholarship may be unsatisfied with the English language (viewing it as a male-biased discourse), the fact is that women, gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals still have a place within the language. They may dislike the values of the binary, but they still belong to it. But for these others who are not *he* or *she*, they subvert the binary to the point that there is currently no marker for them in the English language: they are othered by exclusion.

One such case is Orlando. Orlando might physically change sex, but by Orlando’s own volition, Orlando’s identity is irrespective of genitalia. Therefore we cannot accept Orlando as either fully male or female, but instead must see Orlando as some *other* point on a spectrum of sex. Although Woolf attempts to narrate such a condition within the sex-binary, the binaried-nature of the English language betrays her rhetoric. So how can this be resolved: how we can narrate this other-sexed, this

other-gendered? Perhaps the creation of an epicene pronoun, a referent that does not contradict itself in its very avocation, would help to solve the puzzle. However, this is a much more complex achievement than first appears, and with many unsuccessful attempts to settle an epicene pronoun in common English vernacular, it is a challenging task. However, before investigating this further, we should first consider the ultimate binary of this arena: that of the sex/gender debate.

### **Disputing the case for a mutually exclusive true sex**

*[Mrs Grimsditch] was overcome with emotion and could do no more than gasp Milord!  
Milady! Milady! Milord!* (Woolf 2000b, 162)

*The body is that which can occupy the norm in myriad ways, exceed the norm, rework the norm, and expose realities to which we thought we were confined as open to transformation* (Butler 2004, 217).

If we were to not take into account the gender/sex debate, our investigation would fall at the first hurdle. Although the terms sex and gender are often interchangeable within popular culture, these are indeed not the same notions. Generally accepted amongst the majority of disciplines and scholars is that whilst sex refers to a biological distinction and the physiological characteristics that define men and women, gender refers to social and cultural categorisation, the masculinity and femininity of Homo sapiens. The implication of this distinction is that sex as a biological construct is seen as a 'natural' aspect of life, an aspect outside of the social and linguistically constructed realms of gender. Put simply, gender is *within* language whilst sex is not. As a biological construct, sex is an extra-linguistic category that predates language and classification within a semiotic sign system.

However, this definition is not without its doubters. There are scholars that dispute this concrete placement of sex as outside cultural definition. Delphy argues that it is not sex that is the foundation for gender, but it is gender that creates

anatomical sex (cited in Hird 2000, 348). Judith Butler also refutes the biological/natural notion, instead arguing that sex is still within the affordances of linguistic categorisation. Although criticised over her lack of writing about the body and admitting herself that ‘I confess, however, that I am not a very good materialist. Every time I try to write about the body, the writing ends up being about language’ (Butler 2004, 198), Butler’s argument has grounds for justification. Although Butler may only write about the body as it materialises through language, she highlights the important point that it is all too easy to start with the *a priori* assumption that sex is a natural and fixed (binary) biological construct. This also matches with the thoughts of Hird, who herself argues that much of feminist theory still operates within the *a priori* assumption of the two-sex binary. Queer, feminist and gender theory may wish to do away with the gender binary, but they still assume that this is foregrounded by the two-*sex* binary (Hird 2000).

However, Butler refuses to see the body as a precursor to language, and therefore refuses the two-sex model an *a priori* assumption: ‘The body posited as prior to the sign is always *posited* or *signified* as prior’<sup>4</sup> (1993: 30). Butler uses Beauvoir’s theory of gender (matching with the previous notion that sex is natural whilst gender is social) as the catalyst to her argument that we should not automatically conceive of sex as ‘natural’. Butler argues that we cannot have access to the body, and therefore to sex, without the linguistic construction of discourse. Taking a re-reading to support Butler’s theories whilst challenging some of her reading of Foucault, Chambers points out that whilst this may be correct, we cannot then automatically reduce the body to discourse either. He argues that, whilst the body *surpasses* discourse in terms of creation, Butler is right that it can only be materialised *through* it (Chambers 2007, 48-49).

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel A. Chambers provides a thought-provoking deconstruction of how Butler writes about sex and the body (Chambers 2007).



Sex should not be thought (as de Beauvoir suggests) as the natural cause of gender; rather, we should consider how we have no unmediated access to sex beyond discourse. Even if we think of sex as the foundation of gender, we are still *thinking* about it. And therefore we are likely to think it, to see it and to understand it through the already culturally produced frame of gender. It may precede language, but it is still produced through a socially constructed discourse (Chambers 2007, 57-58). To Butler, this lack of direct access means that she cannot accept sex as the root of gender. In fact, her claim could be interpreted as a reversal of the role. Like Delphy, it is possible to read that Butler sees sex as caused *by* gender, going towards the notion of even denying the existence of sex.

If we need a language by which to talk about sex outside of the two-sex model (to take from Hird), this rethinking of the sex/gender definition debate is a solid starting point. As Delphy argues, it seems that the entire biological and natural construct of the sex argument has hinged upon the singular aspect of sexual reproduction. Under this concept, biological facts are then brought in to support the notion of natural biological sex differences: hormones, chromosomes and genitalia have been ‘constituted as embodying the *essence* of sex’ (cited in Hird 2004, 348). It seems a difficult notion to deny physical bodily attributes as a precursor for sex. However, as we shall see, the assignment of gender to intersexuals as neonates and children by the medical profession demonstrates that this is not the solid position from which to base sex as once was thought.

Nevertheless, we should not, and cannot, ignore the body entirely. As Chambers reads in his interpretation of Butler, he argues that Butler does not ignore the body but instead posits it as intentional. Alike to some branches of cognitive science, Butler denies the Cartesian mind/body dualism and instead embraces an embodied mind stance. It is possible to read Butler’s view as just an existentialist theory of embodiment, acknowledging that we have top-down cognitive processes that do not

require conscious processing. In this case, it would be this embodiment that grounds both sex and gender.

Kessler and McKenna (1978) take a related but different approach to the task of understanding the sex/gender binary by denying sex in their theory. Preferring to use 'gender' to cover both gender and sex as concepts, their refusal to name sex as a distinct category (preferring to talk about 'gender differences') is to highlight the social construction in all aspects of being male and female. They support the notion that gender is a social construct and refer to gender (what others would term sex) attribution as the foundation for the other aspects of gender. They see gender as a *categorisation* process that forms the basis for gender as a system for social construction (1978, vii). As Paul McIlvenny points out, although their refusal to use the term sex is rightly problematising the culture/biology distinction, their refusal unfortunately loses them the means by which to account for how discourses of gender *produce* sex, an important crux in their argument. Interestingly, for our investigation of prohibition constituted by a lack of discourse, by refusing to name sex Kessler and McKenna deny themselves the option to discuss or conceptualise the concept properly in their dialogue (McIlvenny 2002, 127).

If we were just to accept sex *a priori* as a natural biological construct with no cultural afflictions, then we would have to confine ourselves to discussing the language binary issue in regards to gender only. Conversely though, it seems that the two concepts are no longer considered as mutually exclusive as they once were. This is in no doubt due in part to the increasing evidence we see in regards to those who go beyond the two-sex binary. Without presuming that we can at least *consider* sex as a non-fixed, biological construct with room for cultural manoeuvre, we would have to consider how the *other* is conceived in purely gender terms. Whilst this is relevant, it would not fully cover the spectrum that we are trying to narrate in this world of binaries.

It seems that we have found ourselves in a position where, despite the embodiment of the body, sex and gender are still limited by our linguistic capabilities. And more importantly, we can interpret Butler's argument that sex is somewhat gendered and less natural than what is often posed in any gender studies class. But we still have a body, and we still have anatomy and biology to contend with. Rather than doing away with sex entirely, we should be considering that there is a *spectrum* rather than a set of fixed categories. Thus, we should consider that the gendering of sex means our concept of the natural is not as natural as we first assume. The case in point is to turn to those minorities in queer and other such scholarly studies, that do not conform to this sex-binary: intersexuals, transsexuals, androgynies, genderqueers and so on. They demonstrate that sex is not all in the body: that genitalia does not necessarily maketh the man.

Foucault asks this exact question about the sex-binary at the beginning to *Herculine Barbin*, the memoirs of a nineteenth century French hermaphrodite. Assigned as a woman at birth but then reclassified as a man in adulthood, Herculine documented his story before eventually committing suicide. Finding these memoirs many years later, Foucault brought them towards the fore of the gender and sexualities canon, publishing them with his own commentary regarding hermaphroditism. Foucault's answer to his own introductory rhetorical question, 'Do we truly need a true sex?' is that 'modern Western societies have answered in the affirmative. They have obstinately brought into play this question of a "true sex" in an order of things where one might have imagined that all that counted was the *reality* of the body and the intensity of its pleasures' (emphasis added) (Foucault 1980, vii).

Once again, we find ourselves in a dichotomy; a disparity between the Modern Western Society and the 'reality' of the body. The implication is that modern society needs such a binary distinction of sex and gender in order for a clear and distinctive categorisation of humans and their attributes. However, Foucault argues that this is not how the embodied body knows itself and its environment. Categorisation fights

against the reality of human nature and the body, a reality that does not concede to such binary opposition. Foucault takes his argument to be one specifically with modern Western society. He argues that during the Middle Ages hermaphrodites were seen as simply having two sexes and over time it was determined that everyone ‘was to have his or her primary, profound, determined and determining sexual identity; as for the elements that might appear, they could only be accidental, superficial, or even simply quite illusory’ (1980, viii). Whilst this is all well and good, it still does not benefit our cause for a language beyond gender binaries. Hermaphrodites in the Middle Ages may have been given the freedom to have both sexes, but they still had *both* sexes. Their choice (in the loosest sense of the word) still revolved around the binary, but just included the capacity to claim both sides. No concept of spectrum was tolerated. Impossible to move beyond this gender-binary concept, the passing of time just solidified this opposition, eventually denying hermaphrodites the opportunity to own both sexes. In facilitation of this binary, a doctor was brought in to designate what a person’s true sex was – any extra genitalia or gendered body parts were ‘anatomical deceptions’, ‘organs that had *put on* the forms of the opposite sex’ (viii).

Current reports regarding the medical profession’s treatment of intersex<sup>5</sup> individuals demonstrates a continuing conflation when assigning an intersexed individual a true, binary sex. Immediate decisions are often taken with neonates with regard to their physical anatomy (i.e. a phallogocentric bias in regards to sex-reassignment surgery and a case of *size really does matter*); basic culturally constructed notions regarding gender when they are older (what sort of toys a child plays with; the clothes they choose to wear); and so on. Some practitioners will use a purely medical basis (based on chromosomes) whilst others will take into account very generic, disputed notions of masculinity and femininity<sup>6</sup>. However medical

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<sup>5</sup> This is now the modern day term which covers individuals such as hermaphrodites and those with an indeterminate sex when born.

<sup>6</sup> See Hird (2000) for further details as to the medical profession and how they deal with intersex individuals.

practitioners are choosing to deal with intersex individuals, the point is clear; they are inscribing, or re-inscribing, sex onto the body (Hird 2000, 352), and it seems that Mother Nature is not naturally inclined to such binary distinctions. What we should therefore argue for is a continuum, a spectrum of sex and of gender and a discourse from which this can be addressed. As Butler argues, ‘sex is the norm by which the “one” becomes viable at all’ (Butler 1993, 2). Those not conforming to the binary are without a language and are therefore *othered* by their lack of definable sex. The other becomes unviable as they are unable to be placed within the discourse, therefore losing their recognition within the social world.

### **Categorisation reinforces the binary**

*There was pure terror in the idea that someone might be born neither male nor female. So central to my understanding of the world was the natural bipolar division of human being by gender that it was as if gravity had stopped working.*

*Male-to-female transsexual*<sup>7</sup>

(Livia 2000, 166).

The otherness of those outside the binary comes back to both Kessler and McKenna’s and Foucault’s arguments that gender is categorisation. Language as a communicative tool reflects this categorisation process: the sex/gender binary is unable to remove itself from the ineffable chains of categorisation in language. We lack the discourse to represent a spectrum. Consequently, our next question should be: how can we break those chains? Turning to theories that straddle cognitive linguistics, cognitive science and the philosophy of mind may provide us with further clues. Charles Fillmore’s notion of framing and frame semantics argues that we cannot know the meaning of a single word without accessing all the knowledge that surrounds it (Fillmore 1985). A

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<sup>7</sup> This was taken from an article about Kate Bornstein’s book *Gender Outlaw* (1994) which is then cited in Livia.

word is less a *word* than it is a concept: a catalyst for knowledge surrounding its understanding. So for example, taking the word *restaurant*, according to frame semantics, we cannot have an understanding of the concept of the word *restaurant* without the concept of eating, of paying for food, the relationship between a customer and a waiter, and so on almost *ad infinitum*.<sup>8</sup> This notion is therefore just as relevant for our sex/gender binary issue. As any word is a concept that brings with it an essential encyclopaedic knowledge of itself, then the concept of sex, or of man/woman, is going to be framed within its binary. Any of the words related to the concepts of gender, sex and the *other* cannot but reinforce the binary-opposition notion. The very crux of its conceptual knowledge comes from the fact that it is opposed against the *other* sex of the binary.

Lakoff's, and Lakoff and Johnson's theories, add to Fillmore's notion of framing and conceptual knowledge. Lakoff and Johnson brought to light the groundbreaking notion that metaphors are not just a part of figurative language but are a part of everyday vernacular. Furthermore, they argue that we actually *think* and conceive of many notions metaphorically, and only, metaphorically. They argue for schemas in our understanding of language, and that these come from our embodied, real experiences of the world. Lakoff's work in *Women, Fire and Dangerous Things* extends this argument and focuses on categorisation specifically. Arguing that categorisation is a sense-making tool of our experience, once again these categories are constructed through the embodied mind. As Lakoff asserts: '[c]ategorization is not a matter to be taken lightly. There is nothing more basic than categorization to our thought, perception, action, and speech [...] An understanding of how we categorize is central to any understanding of how we think and how we function and therefore central to an understanding of what makes us human' (Lakoff 1987, 5-6).

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<sup>8</sup> For further explanation, Croft and Cruse provide an excellent if rather heavily detailed account of Fillmore's notion of framing and frame semantics (Croft and Cruse 2004, 7-39).

In particular, Lakoff highlights the notion of the Idealised Cognitive Model (ICM), a prototype theory that argues that we have culturally entrenched notions of what the ICM is for any concept. This ICM shares the most aspects with all the other concepts within the category combined, and is seen to be the best, the most idealised manifestation of the concept. So ICMs also hinder us in our case for a spectrum of sex if we are always placing our linguistic concepts in an appraisal of where they belong within a category, and an ideal within the category at that.

These models for cognitively processing experience and the conceptual nature of language happily complement each other. Although our contemporary Western society may be more accepting of those “others” that do not conform strictly to the gender-binary (such as transsexuals, genderqueers and intersex individuals), this is no longer the issue. The difficulty lies in the fact that the concepts of sex and gender are still framed within this conceptual knowledge that promotes the binary. We conceptualise those others as *others*: we frame them as opposites. In essence, it seems that our language both limits and reflects our cognitive conceptualisation; but if that conceptualisation remains within a framework of the two-sex, gender-binary model, then can we ever navigate our way out with language?

Even those terms such as *genderqueer*, which were created to place a non-binary individual within the discourse, are overall still trapped by the binary. Coined within youth culture at the turn of the twenty-first century, *genderqueer* refers to those who feel that their identity does not correspond to that which they were assigned at birth, but yet do not want to transition to the opposite gender either. Although the concept wishes to place sex out of the binary and onto a spectrum, it cannot. *Genderqueer* is conceptualised by its very essence as being non-conformist to the two-sex model. Its very heart conceptualises the binary by fighting to destroy it. Just as we saw with Woolf narrating Orlando’s sex change at the beginning of this article, the weapon of choice is the downfall of the avocation. We cannot remove ourselves from the concept of sex/gender because we need the concept in order to

fight against it. Yet without it, we would have nothing to fight against. Therefore to have a single identity whilst not owning either sex, or treading between the two on a spectrum, is not a fully satisfactory linguistic option because it is not a conceptual option.

### **The allusive success of the epicene pronoun**

Is this then our answer? Has our quest for narrating a spectrum of sex and gender been foiled by the trappings of its saviour: that is, language? It seems that the problem is one of circularity: we need a new conceptualisation of sex that encompasses a spectrum. In turn, we need a language that supports this conceptualisation. But how do we ever get to that spectrum if, as Butler asserts, we can only experience ourselves through our body and therefore through discourse? And how can we narrate those others if they are *outside* the discourse?

In this spirit of circularity, we should briefly go back to Woolf. Restricted by discourse, Woolf uses context to contend that Orlando keeps the same identity and remains the same person, regardless of their sex. Yet linguistically, Woolf continues to reinforce the binary for as soon as Orlando has undergone their transformation of sex, Woolf refers to Orlando from then on with the female pronoun. ‘It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought [...] it was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs [...] that she realised with a start the penalties and the privileges of her position’ (2000b, 147). As we have already established, it is impossible to represent Orlando’s transsexuality, or ambiguousness, in conventional language.

Orlando throughout the rest of the novel, although anatomically a woman, continues to act out the varying sexes of her persona via drag.<sup>9</sup> Whether or not we take Orlando’s escapades as a drag king as a metaphorical demonstration of

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<sup>9</sup> It would be possible here to draw conclusions regarding the performativity of gender as Butler has asserted in her various writings.



Orlando's genderqueer status, it does not seem to suffice to place Orlando in the pronoun binary. As discussed, *it* and *they* are not satisfactory. *They* does not warrant Orlando the same amount of animacy that *he* or *she* does. So we need to see if there is a better way to narrate the spectrum of sex that Orlando goes through.

Of course, one of the tasks of feminist scholars and general theorists throughout the years has been to invent a successful epicene pronoun in English. Despite other languages that do not have gendered pronouns (such as the Uralic), this has never been a successful endeavour in English. Within transsexual and genderqueer writing you find those who attempt to use terms such as *ze*, *hir*, *hirs*; *ne nir nirs* and so on. However, these pronouns have not found themselves anywhere close to mainstream usage; they are generally used only in a handful of fiction that has a gender-neutral-narration agenda or in specific genderqueer writings amongst other genderqueers. The only possible mainstream use outside of the genderqueer community is *yo*, *yo*, *yos*, which has been documented within a certain inner city school in Baltimore, Maryland<sup>10</sup>. However, this has very much come out of a youth culture trend and has not spread beyond its origins.

As Anna Livia discusses in her extensive work *Pronoun Envy*, narrating a sexless subject in the first person is much simpler than narrating them in the third, but neither is an easy task. Whilst choosing a homodiegetic narrator with internalised focalisation (to take from Genette's theory of narrative discourse (Genette, 1980)) allows for a reliance on the subjective personal pronoun *I* in certain novels such as Jeanette Winterson's *Written on the Body*, a heterodiegetic narrator without the appropriate focalisation really struggles to narrate a genderless person. This narration obviously does not allow for the use of *I* and the avoidance of third person gendered pronouns results in a) low empathy for the character and b) low cohesion in the work

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<sup>10</sup> See Stotko and Troyer's 2007 study for more details. Whilst the acquisition of the pronouns *yo*, *yo* and *yos* was not done with a conscious desire for gender-neutrality, it does demonstrate how different pronouns can be used successfully in the English language, although in rather specific circumstances.

(Livia 2000, 193). Avoiding pronouns altogether does not work because they are required for anaphoric referencing, creating cohesion and demonstrating the focalisation of the narrator. Without these pronouns the essential tools of narrative are lost; consequently, we cannot regard those works which avoid pronouns as having successfully narrated outside the binary.

Livia does note, however, that possible successes in narrating outside the sex-binary may be found within the genre of science fiction. These works tend to entail the creation of intersexed characters alongside a neologism of epicene pronouns. It is therefore possible that narrating outside the binary is successful within the realm of science fiction, because these new constructs are just read as one of the many things that are made up in this 'impossible world'. The problem then with that readerly interpretation is that these pronouns do not translate into our actual reality.

In comparison with *Orlando* (which of course also transcends real-world possibilities), the difference lies in that the rhetorical function of Woolf's work is more of a general over-arching critique of gender-binaries and sex as a precursor for identity. Furthermore, it is only Orlando him/herself that transcends reality: the centuries in which Orlando resides are real. However, these works within science fiction go way beyond any real-world resemblance, and perhaps they go too far in order to have the same rhetorical function as *Orlando*. Furthermore, if they are written with an entertainment rhetoric in mind rather than attempting to make a treatise on the interplay between language, sex and gender (which is quite likely), then their employment of epicene pronouns is just part of a larger aesthetic, and should be not read as a thematic part of the rhetoric. Ergo, the genre in which these neologisms and intersexed characters are most successful in, is, unfortunately, the one that limits our mimetic response, our empathy (aka Phelan) whilst exaggerating the synthetic, our appreciation for artificial construction.

So have we truly now hit a dead end? Our investigation into how we can narrate the other out of the two-sex model and gender-binariated nature of language has not

generated any definitive answers. In fact, we only seem to have confirmed that it is an impossible task. Although it may seem bleak, perhaps the answer lies in *why* the epicene pronoun has not been successful in English. On the surface, it seems a valuable endeavour. Although it would seem unnatural at first, other languages cope with gender-neutral pronouns, and terms like *ze* and *zis* do not seem too far removed from the pronouns we are already familiar with. So why have they failed? One possible answer is to look again towards the categorisation and conceptualisation of our knowledge and experiences of the world as purported by Lakoff and Johnson, and Fillmore. The epicene pronoun, thrown into the lion's den that is English, is set-up to fail from the very beginning. As a tool to provide a gender-neutral reference, it is unable to perform this function whilst framed in our current language of binaries. The epicene pronoun, whilst we continue to have gendered pronouns, is always going to be *othered* itself: it is that which sits outside of discourse. So any use of the pronoun, unless in a completely gender-free pronoun situation, will only serve to highlight its otherness. In order for the epicene pronoun to be successful, it needs to not be framed with its gendered siblings: it needs to be an only child. It seems that the epicene pronoun can only ever work from the inside, as contrasting between high and low animacy: not between sexed and non-sexed. It is particularly difficult that, as things stand, the epicene is positioned as neutral against other sexed pronouns. Therefore, not only is it *othered*, but perhaps it reinforces the binary by just placing itself on the fence. In this case it does not provide a glimmer of a spectrum, but just stands as a fixed point between the two binaries. This is certainly not satisfactory either.

We need an epicene pronoun not to highlight gender-neutrality (suggesting that someone is without sex/gender) but one that does not *other itself*. Thus perhaps we need many new pronouns to demonstrate the spectrum, to normalise the current "other". Or perhaps we need only one that acts as a referent but makes no gender-judgements towards the subject. Whatever the answer, it will take some time. And it seems an impossible task to suggest the only way to achieve the required result is to

remove the other pronouns. However, as things stand, it seems that until we can conceptualise outside the boundary and onto a spectrum, then we will continue to be trapped within the confines of a two-sex, binary language.

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