

How far do texts
challenge the fixity of
binary gender?



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Gender may be defined as ‘ the personal traits and position in society connected with being male or female’.[1] The binary genders then, are the male and female which John Carl contrasts simply: ‘ wearing high heels is associated with the female gender, while wearing combat boots is associated with the male gender’. Gender differs from sex in the sense that sex refers to one’s biological makeup and reproductive organs, but as Carl states, ‘ that does not necessarily mean that biology creates personality’,[2] and therefore determine the expression of male or female gender. I will address the topic of gender fixity in regard to Virginia Woolf’s Orlando and Jackie Kay’s Trumpet, as both present examples of an individual not belonging characteristically to either binary gender, challenging the fixity of binary gender.

The sex of Joss Moody in Trumpet is biologically female; we learn this in the revelation of his concealed breasts[3]. However, as proposed by Carl, this does not link to the personality of the character, the traits, and therefore the gender. Victoria Arana describes Joss’ habits of ‘ flatten[ing] his torso [...] to conceal his breasts, then stuff[ing] a wad of socks inside his shorts to perfect the costume’[4] (my italics). This provides an instance of binary genders not being fixed, as with these simple alterations to the base of his ‘ costume’, Joss’ gender is convincingly changed from male to female, deceiving all who knew him personally. Although the fixity of Joss’ revealed biological sex is undeniable to those around him: ‘ my father didn’t have a dick. My father had tits. My father had a pussy’[5], this does not affect his perceived gender as male to the outside world, with even Colman, bitter at his father’s deception, acknowledges that Joss’ is in essence, male: ‘ don’t bother with

this him/her bullshit. That's bollocks, man. Just say him'.[6] Here, gender fixity is challenged as although his anatomical sex reveals the opposition of his expressed gender, it does not affect perceptions of him in the slightest, with his peers showing indifference to the concept of Joss' gender in relation to his sex:

“ Were you aware-?” He interrupts her. “ Nope. And you should concern yourself with the music. This guy's a genius.”“ Don't you mean the girl's a genius?” Sophie says.“ Whatever. Christ, do you think I'm bothered? Do you think anybody's bothered? It's the fucking music that matters.”[7]

Kay challenges gender fixity by placing her emphasis on the traits of the individual, such as Joss' musical talent. This is not to say that Joss' does not have what can be considered as stereotypical female traits, connecting him to the female sex, such as the fact ' he is quite squeamish'[8]. Nonetheless, the character and gender of Joss still challenges gender fixity to a great degree, mainly due to the perception of the character to be unchanging once the true sex is revealed. In memory, Joss remains within the performed male gender in which he lived the majority of his life.

In Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, the performance of gender is also present in the titular character. The opposition of Joss' gender performance, Orlando is biologically be male at the beginning of the novel, as ' there could be no doubt of his sex'[9]. Even whilst remaining biologically male, there are also elements of gender performativity; from the outset we understand that his manner of dressing ' did something to disguise [his sex][10]. This performativity also challenges fixed binary genders due to the seamless

transition from male to female in biological form: ‘ He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, [...] we have no choice left to confess – he was a woman’[11]. Similar to the opening line of the text, it is the vague descriptions of ‘ undoubtful’ sex that define the gender of Orlando which seemingly does not challenge gender fixity as his anatomy presents the character as either male or female in this instance. However, Woolf later continues to state that ‘ 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’[12], suggesting the fixity of gender to be indifferent to the identity of the self.

Moslehi and Niazi state that ‘ by using cross dressing and sex change, Woolf reveals the contrast between Orlando’s appearance and his/her essence’[13], the essence here being Orlando’s true self, regardless of the outside gender perceived by others, and simultaneously being the unchanged ‘ identity’ Woolf writes of. Thus, gender binaries are challenged to a great degree in Orlando by affirming the idea that ‘ there is inevitably – even accidentally – a continuous, even planned resistance to the norms of gender’[14] but simply disregarding the difference between them. Whether in a biologically male or female body, one’s identity remains the same, disregarding the use for binary genders. Rognstad sums this point up nicely stating that ‘ it is hence what we do that creates our gender identity, not the other way around: gender does not exist prior to the acts that establish it’[15], and thus Orlando’s interests in nature and poetry cannot be linked

explicitly to either gender independently, as it is the mixture of genders within him that makes him himself.

In both *Trumpet* and *Orlando*, the binary genders of male and female are challenged significantly and to such a degree that the physical anatomical sex has little to no influence on the true identity of one's expressed gender. The gender performativity seen in Joss Moody's character, although an artificial recreation of the male gender and its characteristics, has very little impact on how his identity is received by the other characters in the novel once the initial shock of deception has been overcome. Similarly, the naturalness of Orlando's transition from male to female has no marked impact upon his sense of self identity, ruling binary genders to be insignificant in the expression of true gender identity.