

Sex and gender in sally potter's orlando

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Critically assess Judith Butler's notion that gender is not a primary category, but an attribute, a set of secondary narrative effects. Your answer should make reference to Sally Potter's film *Orlando*. Though Judith Butler asserts that gender is not of any importance, her writings on this notion, understandably, must put a lot of emphasis on the subject of sex. How else could she prove her theory, if not through a discussion of the unimportance of gender? In any case, her hypothesis is one that practically defines Sally Potter's *Orlando*.

Based on the novelette of the same name by Virginia Woolf, the film depicts an androgynous young man's curiously long and forever-youthful life, and his slow transformation from man to woman. It is surely a tale that represents Butler's concern of the eventual unimportance of gender throughout history. *Orlando* opens with the assertion by the narrator (voiced by the eponymous character) that "there can be no doubt about his sex, despite the feminine appearance that every young man of the time aspires to. The young nobleman Orlando acts as messenger for Queen Elizabeth, who, captivated by the young man's beauty, offers him a castle, land and an inheritance for him and his heirs. These possessions will only be his on the condition that he does not "fade", "wither" or "grow old". We see the young Orlando fall deeply in love with a young woman, Princess Sasha, whom he loses to another man. Heartbroken, he decides to travel the world throughout the early stages of his long life. Orlando, having experienced war, violence and other such male endeavours, becomes disenchanted with the way men think and behave.

He returns home to his estate as a woman. Here, she is told that as the estate belongs to Lord Orlando, or to his heirs, she must leave, as neither title applies to her. Rejected by society, Orlando finds acceptance and solace in the arms of the handsome Captain Shelmardine, the first man with whom she is sexually intimate. It is Shelmardine who makes Orlando realise what identity she truly wants – that of a mother. After all, she “ came into this world searching for companionship. ” Centuries later, we see Orlando, still a woman “ for there can be no doubt about her sex... even] with the slightly androgynous appearance that many females of the time aspire to”. She is visiting her old home with a happy young girl – her daughter. Orlando has finally found an identity she is comfortable with. In further commentary on the nature of gender as a secondary narrative, Butler once claimed that “ gender is in no way a stable identity”. This, for all intents and purposes, could be the tagline for Orlando. The titular character is an androgynous being, with no strong convictions about which sex they would rather be. On her transformation into a woman, Orlando commented mildly; “ Same person.

No difference at all. Just a different sex”. Butler also commented that sex is an identity obtained, not through physical attributes, but through a performance. A perception of gender is imitated, “ instituted through bodily styles”. However, the critic does not mention appearance; she is merely referring to the understanding of each gender being conveyed through certain physical gestures, movements or actions. Therefore, one's gender is only as real as our performance of it. The same is true of Orlando, behaves in a comically awkward manner while getting used to her first dress.

Being unfamiliar with the heavy frame and netting of her skirt, she walks down her hallway, bumping into furniture and awkwardly swinging her dress to the left to side-step a maid who passes by. In her first social situation, she stomps self-consciously into the drawing room, and then plonks herself down on a couch, rather ungracefully. She hasn't taken on the grace of a woman, so she still seems to be a man, masquerading as a woman. Butler goes on to describe the gender performance as “one with clearly punitive consequences”.

In short, failing at sufficiently portraying your gender through “bodily styles” will result in punishment, which is often in the form of alienation. The Lady Orlando confuses her society with her transformation. In a way, her failure to be Lord Orlando, a man, sees her cast out of her rightful home, and, in turn, alienated by society. In Orlando's climatic scene, the Lady Orlando and her lover, Shelmdardine, discuss the common perception regarding gender. “If I were a man,” Muses the newly-female Orlando, “might choose not to risk my life for an uncertain cause.

I might think that freedom won by death is not worth having.” Shelmdardine argues that, in the eyes of society, this would be to “choose not to be a real man at all”. He, in turn, mocks the stereotype observations regarding women; “Say if I were a woman; I might choose not to sacrifice my life caring for my children. Or my children's children. Or to drown anonymously in the milk of female kindness. But instead choose to go abroad. Would I then be –”, (here Orlando interrupts him), “A real woman?” Yet it is this conversation, the embodiment of Butler's theories on gender performance,

which bring Orlando to the realisation that she longs for a child. Not to earn back her home through her heir, and not to better portray the behaviour of a woman, but simply to have the companionship and love she always longed for. Orlando's eponymous character is a human, if fictional, personification of Judith Butler's many theses regarding gender. Orlando's gender does not change her character in any way, she is the " same person. No difference at all. " She does not understand that, to be accepted, she must perform the role of ' woman' to avoid confusing her peers. This is something she simply can't do; she is who she is.

Yet she is punished for her failure to be a man, or to behave like a woman. In the end, she ceases to care or worry about her gender identity. She is a mother, happy with the companion she always craved. Her identity is simply: Orlando.

Bibliography * Butler, J. (1988) Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions. In Rivkin, J & Ryan, M ' Literary Theory: An Anthology, Second Edition' (pp. 900 – 911). United Kingdom: Blackwell Publishing. * Butler, J. (2004) Undoing Gender. United States: Routledge. * Potter, S. (Director). 1992. Orlando. [Motion Picture]. United Kingdom.