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DEPARTAMENT DE FILOLOGIA ANGLESA I DE GERMANÍSTICA

**Orlando as an Extension of Nature: A Queer
Ecological Reading of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A
Biography* (1928)**

Treball de Fi de Grau/ BA dissertation

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Statement of Intellectual Honesty

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I declare that this is a totally original piece of work, written by me; all secondary sources have been correctly cited. I also understand that plagiarism is an unacceptable practise which will lead to the automatic failing of this assignment.

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A handwritten signature in black ink, enclosed within a hand-drawn oval. The signature is stylized and appears to read 'F. Oromí Soldevila'.

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Abstract

Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) is set as a biographical retelling of the life of a distinguished nobleman of the same name. The dissident behaviour of the protagonist is evidenced throughout the entire novel through her fluidity in gender expression as well as her extreme fondness of nature. These traits have led to a plethora of studies analysing the character of Orlando, mostly utilising an ecofeminist perspective. While these are undoubtedly insightful, a reading of *Orlando* applying a queer ecological lens is yet to be posited.

With this in mind, this TFG provides a chronological, diachronic analysis of *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) under the emerging framework of queer ecology. I contend that the queer traits of the protagonist can be directly linked to her relationship with nature. Thus, I draw from various concepts from the existing literature such as Haraway's (2003) "naturecultures" and adopt a view of nature that acknowledges its inherent queerness to support my arguments. I seek to provide my very own contribution to the field that is revolutionising both environmental and LGBTQIA+ discourses.

Keywords: *Orlando: A Biography*, Virginia Woolf, queer ecology, naturecultures, ecofeminism, gender.

0. Introduction

0.1. Virginia Woolf's *Orlando: A Biography* (1928)

Orlando: A Biography (1928) is a novel written by Virginia Woolf (1882-1941), published in 1928, and set as a biographical retelling of the life of a distinguished nobleman of the same name. The story begins in Elizabethan England around the year 1588 and follows the protagonist to the “present moment”, ergo 1928. It is immediately evident that Orlando does not follow the usual behavioural canons that society expects from a man of his calibre. Certainly, the fact that he lives for more than three centuries is already a supernatural trait all on its own, setting the mood for a narrative filled with fantastical (and frequently also queer) elements. Moreover, one of the most remarkable moments in the novel sees him undergo a gender transition and identify with the female sex, causing the narrator to suddenly shift their use of masculine pronouns in favour of feminine ones to address the protagonist. This subversion of gender roles would be deemed completely unheard of at the time of the novel; however, Woolf does not give the issue much weight and instead portrays it as a natural occurrence pivotal in Orlando's life.

As a result, this carefree attitude towards the topic allows the reader to think of the fluidity in gender displayed by Orlando as a critique of the traditionally imposed binary gender system. What is more, this showcase of queerness is also paired up with an immense fondness for nature; the latter serving as a safe space for Orlando during the entire story. The naturality with which Woolf introduces elements of the natural world, while at the same time tackling issues related to queer experience, can be detected quite easily in her writing. Indeed, many literary scholars have already spotted this tendency; with the majority of them applying an ecofeminist lens to analyse her texts, as evidenced

by the many articles that were submitted at the 2010 conference named *Virginia Woolf and the Natural World: "The Real World": Virginia Woolf and Ecofeminism* (Swanson, 2011), *Ecofeminism, Holism, and the Search for Natural Order in Woolf* (Scott, 2011). While these are undoubtedly valuable in their field, a proper queer ecological reading of *Orlando* (where both the queer and natural aspects of the novel are contrasted) has yet to be posited.

0.2. Critical framework and state of the art

This TFG will consider *Orlando* (1928) from a queer ecological perspective. It should be noted that queer ecology draws from its neighbouring framework ecofeminism. They both encompass marginalised sides of society which have long been subjugated by patriarchal, heteronormative powers. Even though I will be focussing on queer ecology in this TFG, some occasional interpretations made under an ecofeminist perspective (such as the ones mentioned in the section above) will also necessarily permeate the analysis. For this reason, it is first necessary to tackle ecofeminism before delving into what queer ecology posits.

Ecofeminism tackles the relationship between women and nature, and how the latter translates to deeply rooted power relations and systematic oppression. More importantly, the framework has also been strongly linked to analyses of Virginia Woolf's writings. The author has been openly associated with the feminist movement and its discourses for quite some time and, for that matter, her detailed depictions of nature, often tightly related to concepts of womanhood and sexuality, have allowed her works to permeate into frameworks such as ecofeminism. While this framework has indeed bloomed since its beginnings in the early 1990s, crucial works like Gaard's *Toward a Queer Ecofeminism* (1997) and Sandilands' *Mother Earth, the Cyborg, and the Queer:*

Ecofeminism and (More) Questions of Identity (1997) should not be overlooked. The latter problematise certain concepts like the category of *woman*, aiming to find out what exactly defines it in terms of identity. In doing so, they tap into queer theory and explore the many ways in which these two frameworks intersect. Gaard (1997) even concludes that the insights of queer and ecofeminist theories must be combined, for “ecofeminists must be concerned with queer liberation, just as queers must be concerned with the liberation of women and of nature” (Gaard 132). As a result, these studies motivated the appearance of a new and revolutionary framework, one that not only considers women’s position in nature but also that of other marginalised minorities such as LGBTQIA+ people or people of colour: queer ecology.

Queer ecology endeavours to understand the workings of nature, sexuality, biology, and gender expression under queer theory. Therefore, it rejects the idea of anthropocentrism and also challenges traditional, oppressive dualisms such as natural/unnatural, heterosexual/queer and white/non-white. Though its origins can be traced back to the mid-1990s, it was actually not until fairly recently (early 2010s) that the framework gained the necessary momentum to become a pioneering field in areas of study like biology, ecology, or literature. Indeed, the growing concerns in recent times about the environmental crisis, as well as the movement in favour of LGBTQIA+ rights, have placed queer ecology in a privileged position; pointing to the importance of further research in the field. The publication of many interesting volumes on the subject has highlighted the general interest that exists in this line of thought, as a queer-ecological lens is often employed to read specific texts by authors and playwrights, or even analyse and/or dissect certain political speeches. Some of these are *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Sandilands & Erickson, 2010), *Queer Environmentality: Ecology, Evolution, and Sexuality in American Literature* (Azzarello, 2012), and *Strange Natures:*

Futurity, Empathy, and the Queer Ecological Imagination (Seymour, 2013). Sandilands & Erickson (2010) provide thirteen different chapters that treat issues as varied as animal sex, environmental justice, lesbian space and "gay" ghettos, AIDS literatures, and queer nationalities; all of which challenge the hegemonic pairing of sex and nature in their own, unique way. Regarding Azzarello (2012), he offers an analysis of the writings of four American authors (Henry David Thoreau, Herman Melville, Willa Cather, and Djuna Barnes) to showcase the interconnectedness between their depictions of the natural, the human, and the sexual. Lastly, Seymour (2013) looks at queer fiction from a post-structuralist, postmodernist perspective and investigates how traditionally "natural" categories, such as gender or sexuality, are translated into the natural, non-human world. She argues that the environment can function as a site not just for establishing such constructs, but for challenging them (Seymour 2). By engaging in discourses of nature and sex, and more importantly, understanding the many ways in which these intersect, queer ecology seeks to i) develop a sexual politics that includes considerations of the natural world; and ii) develop an environmental politics which understands the intricacies of sexual relations and how these influence the material world of nature and, at the same time, our own perception of the latter (Sandilands & Erickson, 2010:5).

With this in mind, this TFG analyses *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) from a queer ecological perspective. By providing this analysis, I aim to contribute to the general endeavour of queer ecology, while also expanding on the topics posited by the already-existing literature on *Orlando: A Biography* (1928); especially the aforementioned ecofeminist analyses. I argue that the queer traits of the protagonist can be linked with the relationship she maintains with nature; a nature that, according to queer ecology, is itself queer. For that matter, I employ concepts such as Haraway's (2003) "naturecultures"

which seek to bridge the gap between the nature/culture divide, as well as assume a vision of nature which is agentic, accepting, and queer in its default state.

This analysis will be organised in three chapters. In Chapter 1, I present several studies that introduce crucial notions (such as naturecultures or queer animals) while arguing in favour of a view of nature that acknowledges its inherent queerness. Following that, Chapters 2 & 3 consider the narrative of *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) in chronological order according to the queer ecological view developed. Chapter 2, Alienation, tackles the novel's first chapters until Orlando's gender transition. I argue that in them we see a version of Orlando which is still naïve and inexperienced, unable, or perhaps even unaware, of the many societal constructs (some in the form of binaries) that permeate society. Consequently, the only place in which he can find solace is in nature, as it embraces his queerness. In Communion, I cover the chapters following Orlando's gender transition. I contend that after the aforementioned event, Orlando enters a state of communion with herself; one that allows her to move past the oppressive man-made constructs of society and finally come to terms with her queerness, and accept her place in society as a queer woman. Thus, I argue that in Orlando's search for "Life and a lover" (Woolf 130), her poem *The Oak Tree* serves as the culmination of Life while her relationship with Shelmerdine acts as the pinnacle of Love. In these chapters, I adapt my use of pronouns to refer to Orlando according to the specifics of the situation, utilising the narrator as a guideline to tell whether Orlando aligns more with masculine or feminine ones. Additionally, I also refer to the different queer-coded characters that are part of Orlando's journey, for they embody the different challenges and accomplishments that she faces. Finally, I give closure to the TFG with some of my final thoughts on the matter, remarking on the importance of carrying out further research.

1. Nature is Queer

In this analysis of *Orlando*, nature itself is assumed to be queer. It may initially seem odd to postulate such a simile, *nature = queerness*, especially considering that binaries such as *natural/unnatural* have been used repeatedly in discourses about LGBTQIA+ matters to deem non-cis¹, non-heterosexual behaviours as unbecoming and uncivilised. Indeed, Hird (2004) spots this historical tendency in Western culture and problematises it:

Nonhuman animals are closely linked with “nature”; thus what animals do is considered to be “natural.” In western cultures, “natural” is often attached to morality—“nature” becomes “natural” becomes “good.” So when animals behave in ways that apparently reinforce normative conceptions, the moral economy runs smoothly. Problems occur when nonhuman animals do not behave in ways that are obviously interpretable within the normative framework. (Hird 117)

Consequently, one of the primary aims of the emerging field of queer ecology is precisely to debunk myths related to queerness and nature and instead advocate for a view in which nature is not hegemonically heterosexual and rigid, but rather fluid in expressions of both gender and sexuality.

To achieve this, tackling the *nature/culture* divide is first necessary. Certainly, the systematic separation between nature and culture has served, historically, as a powerful tool for any political power to establish the accepted (and unaccepted) behaviours and actions of a given society. Nature is seen as a blank slate, the standard, and is strongly tied to the human race and its origins. Meanwhile, culture is man-made and built upon this natural background. Therefore, by juxtaposing one and the other, a given culture can scan its society in search of deviations from the “original” path delineated by this blank and standard nature. What is more, systematic oppressions of marginalised collectives (people of colour, women, LGBTQIA+, people with disability) become justified by seemingly logical, scientific reasoning. Butler (2017) offers a comprehensible summary

¹ The term cisgender is used to describe a person whose gender matches the body they were born with.

of the several harmful societal practices that this heteronormative vision of nature has brought about for queer people:

1. *Heteronormativity*: the positioning of heterosexuality as natural and normal.
2. *Cissexism*: the conflating of gender and sex and positioning of cisgender people as natural and normal.
3. *Reprocentricity*: the positioning of reproduction (or procreation) as being central to all people's lives.

(Butler, 2017: 271)

Furthermore, they highlight how these notions have permeated into our current society and shaped our very own understandings of gender roles and the heterosexual family unit. The solution that allows us to move beyond these binary distinctions lies in the concept of *naturecultures*.

In her insightful article, Haraway (2003) introduces the concept of naturecultures, a term used to emphasise the impossibility of separating nature from culture and, perhaps more importantly, the necessity of moving away from discourses that utilise nature “as an uncontested realm of sexual truth”. (Bell, 2010: 134) Certainly, they argue that the very concept of nature itself is cultural, that is to say, that our notions of nature “are formed through a cultural lens, shaped by our perspectives, held beliefs, and positionalities.” (Butler: 272) As a means to support such claims, Haraway (2003) draws on the pioneering works of Bagemihl (1999) and Roughgarden (2004) on *queer animals* (as the topic is now popularly referred to). Those scholars seek to demonstrate the primordial queerness of nature empirically by providing solid evidence of instances in which non-human animals engage in diverse types of non-heterosexual, non-reproductive sexual acts. Bruce Bagemihl's book *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (1999) gives examples of animal same-sex relationships, like male

bottlenose dolphins, whose sexual life is characterised by both periods of extensive bisexuality and periods of exclusive homosexuality (Bagemihl, 1999: 751). Moreover, he also presents instances of non-reproductive sex, such as grizzly bears forming non-sexual partnerships or female bonobos using different tools for masturbation. In Joan Roughgarden's *Evolution's Rainbow: Diversity, Gender and Sexuality in Nature and People* (2004), she expands on the topic by providing evidence of different gender expressions within the natural world as well as multiple-gender family organisations. For instance, she brings about the case of bluehead wrasse fish, which have a third gender (apart from the binary male-female) consisting of individuals who begin as females and later change into males. With all this data, both authors criticise the blatant homophobia that has endured in the world of natural sciences (especially when dealing with nonhuman animal behaviour) which has led scientists to ignore, or even dismiss, non-heterosexual and non-cisgender tendencies of animals. Subsequently, these ideologies have served to feed the harmful and false narrative that queerness is a uniquely human feature, not to be found in nature (Butler: 272).

Provided that the default position of nature is one of diversity, of open queerness as portrayed in recent queer ecological accounts, it is now necessary to tackle how this affects our reading of *Orlando* (1928), including both the characters and its particular depiction of nature. Due to the novel's biographical style, the latter retells Orlando's life in chronological order, from his childhood and early years as a boy to her seemingly unending life as a thirty-six-year-old lady. The world in which the story is set, though it refers to various locations pertaining to the real world, is clearly fictional. Hence, following up on the previously stated concept of *naturecultures*, one may perceive upon further inspection that we are presented with a setting where the divide between nature and culture is undoubtedly palpable. Beginning towards the end of the 16th century up

until the early 20th century, the culture of reference throughout the novel is that of British society, a society which is built by, and for, humans (though one could also argue, much more narrowly, by and for men). What is more, this culture is constantly portrayed in the narrative as alienated from nature, and instead secluded in man-made environments which are plagued with man-made constructions, such as gender roles and social classes. Nature is, therefore, no more than a vehicle, a blank slate on which to build and mould at one's pleasure, always according to human ideals. Nevertheless, as suggested by Liu (2021), Woolf introduces a compelling twist in *Orlando: A Biography* (1928) which is already common in her writings. Her depiction of nature is not one of underlying passivity and subservience but of power and authority. Indeed, the most ruthless side of nature is shown from time to time, in instances where all human activity is interrupted, as in the great frost followed by its subsequent catastrophic thaw. These events, I propose, serve not only as acts of rebelliousness against human dominion, nature being no longer "the backyard of humanity" (Liu, 2021: 164); but also as further proof that nature is queer and fluid in its default state, and does not therefore yield to human rules and constructions.

Meanwhile, the main protagonist, Orlando, stands in the very middle of this divide. As the title of the following section implies, I argue that Orlando can in fact be considered a queer individual; a claim which should not be surprising considering modern understandings of queerness and LGBTQIA+ people. What is most interesting, though, is the process the protagonist undergoes to finally accept her true self as a queer, non-heterosexual, non-cis individual. I defend the view that during the early stages of the novel (and thus, her life), Orlando is found in a state of alienation from herself. We observe an Orlando who is constantly overwhelmed and oppressed by society's heteronormative dominance, as well as the expectations that come from a family as noble as hers. However, through her persistent contact with nature and her encounters with other

queer-coded characters (the Archduke Harry, Shelmerdine, or even Sasha), she is able to break free from these tight shackles that bind her and instead embrace her queerness; a queerness which is, following Haraway's (2003) train of thought, her natureculture. She is thus able to strike a balance between nature and culture and realises, eventually, that they are actually two sides of the same coin. Certainly, towards the middle end of the novel, we begin to see an Orlando much more in communion with the inherently queer natural world, and who is less and less troubled by society's affairs since she has found her own culture. Bearing this in mind, one may already see some of these notions teased in the very first passages of the book.

2. Orlando is Queer: Alienation

“He—for there could be no doubt of his sex, though the fashion of the time did something to disguise it—was in the act of slicing at the head of a Moor which swung from the rafters”
(Woolf 11).

The novel opens with the presentation (and questioning) of various queer-ecological binaries. We are introduced to Orlando as a male, with an unambiguous third-person masculine pronoun that leaves no room for doubt. Nevertheless, the reaffirmation in terms of gender alignment that follows afterwards “for there could be no doubt of his sex” could confuse the modern reader since at the time the novel is set the concept of *transness* or *gender fluidity* that would justify a possible shift had not been yet formulated. Moreover, he is introduced as a young boy who is deeply enamoured of the stories about his family's victories, and dreams of being as heroic and manly as the great men of those tales. This apparent dedication and appreciation of societal and family values is then directly juxtaposed with his secret passion for nature and writing poetry, practices which are described as intimate and secluded. Isolation is a state that Orlando welcomes, as it allows

him to be in total communion and peace with nature; a nature which in turn accepts and embraces him: “and he lay so still that by degrees the deer stepped nearer and the rooks wheeled round him and the swallows dipped and circled and the dragon-flies shot past, as if all the fertility and amorous activity of a summer’s evening were woven web-like about his body” (Woolf 15). As for writing, it is a form of escapism and self-expression, allowing Orlando to channel his frustrations with society and further his communion with nature by expressing his love towards it. Thus, both of these practices can be taken to reinforce the nature/culture divide that permeates the narrative.

These experiences, though they already allow him to explore his queerness to some degree, are only fleeting at this point in the narrative. Indeed, the novel’s first chapter stresses that Orlando is born into an extremely noble family that provides him with a thorough education from a very young age. Therefore, we as readers are immediately informed that Orlando is introduced into society and culture with all the tools and advantages available provided by class and gender; however, as is the case with powerful families of that time, there are certain expectations he must fulfil. He thus becomes a member of Queen Elizabeth’s court (and in fact, her *protégé*), a position which secures him a comfortable spot within the international nobility. In these initial passages, Orlando is completely absorbed by the patriarchal influence of Elizabethan society. He gives up all contact with nature (and writing) in favour of carrying out his duties and fulfilling the fixed role that the human culture has decided for him. However, this does not make him feel happy or accomplished, as evidenced by the secret double-life he lived where he would often retire to beer gardens to mix in with the common people.

Shortly thereafter, Woolf indicates Orlando’s dissident sexuality and desire, already implying his queerness, challenging the assumption of his heterosexuality: “He was young; he was boyish; he did but as nature bade him do. [...] For Orlando’s taste was

broad; he was no lover of garden flowers only; the wild and the weeds even had always a fascination for him.” (Woolf 20) Certainly, I contend that his fascination for the “wild and the weeds” is representative of those who transcend the boundaries of what is normative (being a garden flower in this case) and instead choose to live and grow free, like weeds. This is quite a Romantic idea, for weeds are typically associated with wilderness, being untamed, resistance and yet inevitability of nature. Society disregards weeds and tends to eliminate them in favour of a homogeneous landscape. Nevertheless, it is thanks to weeds that we have a rich biodiversity, which is otherwise destroyed in domesticated grass fields. In other words, domesticated beauty (heteronormativity) is seen as the normative while the wild sublime is portrayed as the other, the queer, the fullest expression of identity and desire; both man-made concepts intended for control and repression of identity and desire. It is also curious to note the naturalisation of this behaviour. The biographer (and by extension, Woolf herself) deems these actions as natural, “as nature bade him do”, thus subscribing to queer ecological views such as Alaimo (2010), where nature is seen as inherently queer. Nevertheless, as non-normative as his tendencies may appear, Orlando is still in a state of alienation from his true self, unable to unravel his true identity due to society’s pressure; that is, until nature interferes in a burst of power and agency and brings with it a character so queer in nature as Orlando himself: the Russian princess Sasha.

I contend that this subplot in the story can be interpreted as nature’s call to Orlando, a desperate cry so that he will finally face his true feelings. Nature is portrayed as showing its most ruthless and authoritative side, following on Liu’s (2021) ideas once more, as it is capable of bringing forth a massive frost that freezes birds mid-air, turns people into dust, and transforms rivers into road-like pavements (Woolf 24). In so doing, nature expresses its rebelliousness towards humanity’s attempts at control and effectively

stops all human activity; all the while providing Orlando with a queer-friendly, natural environment in which to discover himself. More importantly, the Great Frost enables the sudden appearance of Princess Marousha Stanilovska Dagmar Natasha Iliana Romanovitch (known as “Sasha”), a character who changes Orlando’s life in a 360-degree fashion. In her introductory passage, Sasha is quickly established as a peculiar, queer individual dressed in Russian clothing, which “served to disguise the sex” (Woolf 26). In turn, Orlando is immediately intrigued by this individual of dubious gender, as it embodies one of those “wild weeds”. However, assuming Sasha to be a man, he dreads the fact that a romance between them is out of bounds:

When the boy, for alas, a boy it must be — no woman could skate with such speed and vigour — swept almost on tiptoe past him, Orlando was ready to tear his hair with vexation that the person was of his own sex, and thus all embraces were out of the question. (Woolf 26).

It can be observed, therefore, that Orlando displays a sentiment of internalised homophobia (arguably maybe even unconsciously) fed to him by the hegemonic, heteronormative Elizabethan society. Nevertheless, Sasha reveals herself to be of the female sex, and thus a passionate love sparks between them; a love which, in line with the queer ecological lens applied in this analysis, is reminiscent of the first non-normative love that is part of the queer experience. Indeed, Sasha is not only *queered* through her clothing, but also because of her ethnicity. It is worth noting that, while I acknowledge that there are certain juxtapositions, tinged with racist undertones, of the English culture with those of more eastern origins (such as the Russians or later on the Romani people), tackling them here would simply be beyond the scope of this TFG. For that matter, I will only consider these comparisons as empirical ways of establishing certain characters or environments as queer and non-hegemonic. Sasha’s Russian Muscovite descent renders her as an outsider from the hegemonic culture, a fact that is emphasised through her inability to communicate in English (thus communicating in French), and her limited

understanding and repeated criticism of English customs: “She could stand it no longer. It was full of prying old women, she said, who stared in one’s face, and of bumptious young men who trod on one’s toes. They smelt bad. Their dogs ran between her legs. It was like being in a cage.” (Woolf 30). Moreover, Orlando appears to be the only individual in the court who is fluid in French (and so understands her) as well as the only person who does not judge Sasha for coming from a different, queer culture where “women wear beards and men are covered with fur from the waist down” (Woolf 33).

The queer, non-normative nature of this romance thus ignites a rush of criticism and comments from the other noblemen of the court. To avoid this backlash, the couple often retire to the furthest reaches of the frozen river to find solace and be alone with each other, surrounded only by the inherent queerness of nature and far from the man-made constructs of gender and sexuality. This linking of queer love acts with natural spaces is a tendency that was already spotted and widely discussed by Sandilands and Erickson (2010) in their queer ecological analysis of *Brokeback Mountain*. They argue that nature can be viewed as “a vast field of homoerotic possibility”; a place that, though not entirely devoid of heteronormative surveillance, works as a safe environment for non-normative, non-heterosexual affection. (Sandilands & Erickson 3) These notions can certainly be applied to Orlando and Sasha’s situation. Their love is seen as scandalous and outside the norm, hence, they must retire to the wilderness to rid themselves of the oppression. Nevertheless, in those occasions Orlando always enters a state of melancholy, stating that “All ends in death” (Woolf 32), and sobbing uncontrollably; an act that would only see Sasha stare at him and remain silent, thinking of him as a child throwing a tantrum. Certainly, this behaviour from Orlando evidences a discomfort, a particular source of unhappiness in his life that he has still to identify. While these lines are undoubtedly written from the perspective of Woolf, a queer woman herself, they may have further

implications for the modern eye. Bearing in mind the transition Orlando will undergo, the contemporary reader may associate these feelings as possible indicators of gender dysphoria², a common symptom displayed by transgender people which is commonly linked to repeated episodes of stress, isolation, and anxiety (Davidson 2012). Sasha notices this and senses that “the ice grew cold beneath them” (Woolf 32), and knows she has to leave. She does not seem to understand his feelings exactly, which makes sense considering her own concept of natureculture (and thus of the Russian society in general) is one where indeed, nature and culture are the same, and queer traits of identity are fully accepted (Woolf 33). Hence, comes the cathartic scene where the Great Frost turns into the Great Thaw. Nature once more makes its will manifest through a demonstration of sheer power, causing the frozen Thames to thaw without previous notice and trapping the ungrateful humans who dared build a parade upon it in its waters: “But what was the most awful and inspiring of terror was the sight of the human creatures who had been trapped in the night and now paced their twisting and precarious islands in the utmost agony of spirit. Whether they jumped into the flood or stayed on the ice their doom was certain.” (Woolf 44). At the same time, nature frees the Muscovite ship from its frozen tomb and allows Sasha to part, leaving Orlando alone again with much to think about.

The following years of Orlando’s life are thus spent in solitude, with just a great number of dogs to keep him company. “Two things alone remained to him in which he now put any trust: dogs and nature; an elk-hound and a rose bush.” (Woolf 67). In time, he attempts to re-enter society again through his passion for poetry, inviting Nicholas

² Gender dysphoria is defined as the very deep feeling of extreme anxiety and unhappiness that some people have when their body or other people's treatment of them does not match their gender identity.

Greene (a renowned writer whom Orlando admires very much) to spend some time in his mansion. Nevertheless, Orlando is met with a man who is extremely scorned for his time spent in society and only has mean words to share. Afterwards, the appearance of the Archduchess Harriet reminds our protagonist of the process of self-discovery he still has to undergo. She is a character of implied queerness, for she shows a wide knowledge of topics such as wine, firearms, or men's sports. Though she is high class and unmarried (therefore she is allowed eccentricities), these activities are traditionally considered rare in a lady, ergo totally out of bounds for her gender. Furthermore, the Archduchess expresses her wish to be by Orlando's side as his partner, an act which triggers Orlando's anxiety and memories of Sasha, and makes him determined to leave England. Feeling that his own culture has failed him time and time again, he embarks on a journey to Constantinople as King Charles' Ambassador Extraordinary, in hopes of finally living in a society which accepts him.

3. Orlando is Queer: Communion

Once in Constantinople, Orlando realises that his newfound life in Turkey is not so different (if not worse) than his life back in England. He fled from his preoccupations in England (a perceived ruthless English society, his possible love affair with the Archduchess) just to find himself trapped in a different culture filled with the same man-made constructions he escaped from. He quickly becomes fatigued of his duties as an Ambassador, as they reproduce the performativity of the English high society he sought to escape. Moreover, these leave him with only very little time for himself, which he spends alone either with his elk-hounds "to whom he could talk in his own tongue", or writing and reciting poetry "chanting something in an odd, sing-song voice when he was alone" (Woolf 89). These instances showcase that Orlando did not find the solace he was

looking for and is consequently still stuck in a life of alienation and denial. Moreover, the aforementioned quotation also suggests that Orlando now feels alone and alienated not only because of the things that made him feel alienated in England, but also, the cultural gap and language barrier that he is experiencing in Constantinople. At the point where Orlando is at his lowest, a “miracle” occurs: Orlando’s gender transition takes place.

The metamorphosis begins on the night when he is awarded the title of Duke, which would increase his rank, and with it, also his responsibilities and duties. Orlando spends the following seven days sleeping, a phenomenon which parallels that which he underwent when Sasha abandoned him (pointing towards the inevitability of the event). On the seventh day, the transition is unveiled; the scene depicted in a fantastical way. The human incarnations of Purity, Chastity and Modesty, human-made constructs all portrayed as women, appear in Orlando’s room as he still sleeps. They attempt to prevent the discovery of her “indecent” change in her body (I shall use feminine pronouns to refer to Orlando from this point on), however, they are driven away by Truth, who sends them back from whence they came. The sisters then give quite a speech:

For there, not 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 97)

The sisters describe a section of society as the “respectable”, those who believe in purity, chastity, and modesty (among others), and honour them solely because doing so endows them with wealth, comfort, and ease. This allegory can be directly linked to the heteronormative, Christian powers of oppression that Gaard (1997) claims continue to enact their power and influence to suppress women and queers alike. This group holds influential positions, such as that of doctors or lawyers, which bestows them with the

power to prohibit and deny the existence of individuals whose identities do not fit within the norm and therefore present a threat to the status quo. Nevertheless, Orlando can finally escape this fate of oppression and denial thanks to Truth “He stretched himself. He rose. He stood upright in complete nakedness before us, and while the trumpets pealed Truth! Truth! Truth! We have no choice left but confess— he was a woman” (Woolf 97). The transition is portrayed as smooth and painless, Orlando retains the same identity she had before, only now with a different sex “The change seemed to have been accomplished painlessly and completely and in such a way that Orlando herself showed no surprise at it.” (Woolf 98). The naturalness with which this gender transition is portrayed, without any need for hormone medication or gender affirmation surgery, can be juxtaposed with the harsh reality that trans people experience during their transition nowadays. In most countries (including England), they have to undergo overly long processes of medical exams, often being interviewed by professionals who get to decide whether their gender identity and body dysmorphia are valid, gatekeeping their access to medication and/or surgery (Thorn, 2022). Therefore, Woolf’s portrayal of transness is one of naturalness, effortlessness, and normality; an idealised version of gender transitioning. Moreover, no character in the novel ever questions Orlando’s gender, or comments on whether her change of sex is acceptable. Lastly, one could also argue that this “miracle” has been orchestrated by nature, drawing once more from Liu’s (2021) argument of an authoritative nature.

Orlando is now free and unshackled, she no longer feels alienated and thus, she will begin a process of communion with herself, her natureculture, and her queerness. She immediately leaves all her past duties behind and joins a community of Romani people far off in the mountains. There, she can be in direct contact with nature, away from the impositions of the “civilised” world that alienates her. Despite that, she still does not fit

in. She shares her love of nature with the Romani people; perhaps a bit too much, as they believe she had been ensnared by Nature, the cruellest of their gods: “They began to suspect that she had other beliefs than their own, and the older men and women thought it probable that she had fallen into the clutches of the vilest and cruellest among all the Gods, which is Nature” (Woolf, 101). What is more, Orlando finds that they have no interest in writing, or discussing deep topics; two activities she misses very much. This passage then begs the question of what Orlando’s goal is, and in what setting may she finally achieve happiness. So far it has been hinted that Orlando is unhappy in societies such as the English or the Turkish which are plagued by multiple cultural binaries like gender or sexuality. Therefore, one would expect that she should instead find solace with the Romani people, who value nature just as much as she does and whose culture is much more accepting and less strict with stereotypes; though this is discovered not to be the case. I contend that this feeling of non-conformity reinforces the idea of Orlando as a fluid character, one with a unique and queer understanding of culture and nature that diverges very much from that of the general population of her time. For Orlando, nature and culture end up being equally important, as she understands they are both deeply connected. She knows this is not her place, and displaying her newfound confidence, she decides to return to England and face the society that has so much scarred her, now as a woman.

Upon her return, the many problems she had left behind await her, namely the issue of love and her place as a member of the English society. However, something is different, for she has now undergone her transition and discovered herself as a woman. Orlando herself seems to be aware of this transformation, as she admits during one of her usual perambulations around her mansion, after reading from Queen Mary’s prayer book, that she feels she is growing up, “losing my illusions, perhaps to acquire new ones.”

(Woolf 124). The fact that these words are uttered right after reading from a bible is no coincidence. As mentioned in Gaard (1997), Christianity (along with the imperialist drives of militarist nation-states), has been used to authorise the exploitation of women, indigenous cultures, animals, the natural world, and queers for nearly two thousand years; all the while portraying heterosexuality, sexism, racism, and classism as divinely ordained (Gaard 122). Consequently, Orlando acknowledges the oppression that she is now bound to suffer as a queer woman and still chooses to face life head-on, standing as a proud individual and remaining true to her identity. What is more, I argue that Orlando has adopted a view very similar to Haraway's (2003) concept of naturecultures, one where culture and nature are intrinsically linked. As a result, situations which would have caused her anxiety in the past (such as actively engaging in society or being romantically involved with women) are no longer problematic.

Regarding the matter of love, the reappearance of the Archduchess Harriet shortly after Orlando arrives in England serves to rekindle the flame. To Orlando's surprise, the Archduchess reveals herself to have been a man in disguise all this time (from this point forward referred to as Archduke Harry, using masculine pronouns), explaining that he had fallen in love with Orlando as soon as he had seen him (at that time Orlando was still a male), and began to cross-dress in order to approach him. However, now that Orlando was a woman, there was no need to pretend any more, they could finally be together. The figure of the Archduke is thus presented as fully queer; a man who is capable of cross-dressing to be in a romantic relationship with another man. Not only does this confession imply his homosexual (or even bisexual) tendencies, but it also hints at his willingness to bend the binaries of gender. Nevertheless, while the Archduke gender bends at will, using it for his purposes to love Orlando within the norm (heterosexuality), Orlando is "fully" transitioned by the will of the universe, like some natural event, something inevitable and

wonderful. Taking this into account, the Archduke should be instantly set as one of the “wild weeds” Orlando is so interested in. Nevertheless, their conversations would always derive to “playing the part of man and the part of woman”, a ritual which Orlando found tiresome (hinting at her fluid and dissident understanding of culture). Thus, she forces the Archduke to leave her and leaves for London, searching once again for “Life and a lover” (Woolf 130). This line she writes after dealing with the Archduke can be understood as a reinforcer of Orlando’s will. Now that she is in a position of acceptance and communion with herself, she can find her place in society (Life) and also find a partner who sees the world just as she does (a Lover).

In London, Orlando gives society another try as she surrounds herself with the most “influential” and “elite” people of her time: Mr. Pope, Mr. Addison, and Mr. Swift; all of them male successful poets. This exposure is first described as an “intoxication”, provoking Orlando to find herself in a state of ecstasy. However, this feeling quickly turns to disgust, for she realises that the discussions that take place in Lady R’s assemblies are no more than trifles of aristocratic men with no substance “As for what they said — nothing more tedious and trivial could be imagined” (Woolf 141). As a result, she begins inviting the three men to her mansion individually, so they will teach her different ways of writing and approaching literature. This evidences the progress and the change Orlando has undergone. Indeed, she can now tell apart which aspects of society she likes, such as the conversations about literature with the three illustrious men, and engage with them under her own terms, discarding the bits that make her feel miserable. Therefore, we observe an Orlando who is thriving in the English society, she has found her place in it as a queer woman. Whereas before nature was the only place in which she could express herself freely and comfortably (for nature is, in its essence, queer), now she can do the

same in society without any fear of judgement due to her newfound confidence. Thus begins her Life.

As for a Lover, London gives Orlando the liberty to freely explore her sexuality and gender expression now that she has finally redefined herself as a queer woman. She begins to engage in nighttime escapades, where she adopts the identity of a man once again and goes out in search of “adventure” (Woolf 153). What is more, the passage emphasises that Orlando cross-dresses quite often during the day and also engages in sexual encounters with both men and women:

She had, it seems, no difficulty in sustaining the different parts, for her sex changed far more frequently than those who have worn only one set of clothing can conceive; nor can there be any doubt that she reaped a twofold harvest by this device; the pleasures of life were increased and its experiences multiplied. From the probity of breeches she turned to the seductiveness of petticoats and enjoyed the love of both sexes equally. (Woolf 153)

This duality in gender expression ties quite well with Butler’s (1988) concept of gender as a “performative act”. This theory proposes that gender is not a fixed role, but rather a performance; an identity which is negotiated between speakers through a set of acts dictated by one’s behaviour. More importantly, these acts may evolve with time due to different behaviours and thus, lead to different expressions of gender identity. Indeed, Orlando’s journey has supported this idea quite well, as we have observed her gender identity shift according to certain behaviours, namely alienation and communion. Furthermore, the figure of the Archduke also serves as an example, for the performativity of his gender identity (openly cross-dressing at will) ties perfectly with Butler’s (1988) ideas. As for Orlando’s sexuality, this display of bisexual tendencies underpins her further exploring her queerness, being it part of her process of communion. Hence, the fluidity in her performativity of gender and sexuality, as well as her ability to enter and exit society, point towards her final achieving communion within herself.

Lastly, the coming of the 19th century serves to put all of Orlando's progress to the test, for the latter is much more aggressive and oppressive than the 18th century. The change of century is heralded by another display of nature's overwhelming power, this time in the form of an all-encompassing damp, which serves to signal not only a change in the weather but also in society as a whole.

But the change did not stop at outward things. The damp struck within. Men felt the chill in their hearts; the damp in their minds. [...] The sexes drew further and further apart. No open conversation was tolerated. Evasions and concealments were sedulously practised on both sides. And just as the ivy and the evergreen rioted in the damp earth outside, so did the same fertility show itself within. The life of the average woman was a succession of childbirths. She married at nineteen and had fifteen or eighteen children by the time she was thirty; for twins abounded. (Woolf 158)

Thus, the Victorian age comes along and with it, stricter forms of oppression like the ideology of "The Angel in the House", which claims that women and men are naturally predisposed to excel in entirely different spheres of society. Men are considered the only sex available to engage in the public sphere, therefore, they are the only ones allowed to leave the home for work and civic obligations. Meanwhile, women are left secluded in the domestic sphere, caring for the house and children. As a result, previously existing constructs like marriage are now imposed on the population (especially on women), the differences between both sexes are given much more relevance, and women are reduced to their biology in their role within the pro-natalist state as mothers and domestic managers. Seeing all of this unfold puts Orlando in a very gloomy state, for the life that she had built for herself (with a fluid expression of gender, sexuality, and engagement with society) is no longer possible. She retires to her home in the countryside for privacy, away from the public eye that would put her in danger not only as a threat to her fortune and position but also her life. Woolf offers us the image of a fantasy novel: a single woman moving on her own to her countryside estate and depending on no man. As pointed out by Lanser (1999), this portrayal of a single woman with homoerotic

tendencies challenges traditional 19th century ideologies, for it gets rid of pre-existing stereotypes that tie a woman's misery to her obsession with heterosexual desire (Lanser, 315). Orlando tries to forget it all, however, the persistent sight of wedding rings in everybody's fingers keeps on tormenting her.

She went in to dinner. Wedding rings abounded. She went to church. Wedding rings were everywhere. [...] Orlando could only suppose that some new discovery had been made about the race; they were somehow stuck together, couple after couple, but who had made it, and when, she could not guess. It did not seem to be Nature. She looked at the doves and the rabbits and the elk hounds and she could not see that Nature had changed her ways or mended them, since the time of Elizabeth at least. There was no indissoluble alliance among the brutes that she could see. (Woolf 166)

The mention of nature in this passage shows that Orlando is aware of something being amiss in society; for in nature, one that is queer and free from man-made constructions, things are simpler and more fluid.

It is thus at the moment where she is at her lowest, lying in the middle of the woods with her ankle broken that she utters "I have found my mate [...] It is the moor. I am nature's bride" (Woolf, 170) and, as if nature itself had listened to her words, Shelmerdine appears directly from nature's heart. Shelmerdine is a sailor at Cape Horn who jumps right from one adventure to the next. From a queer ecological perspective, I contend he represents a character whose own queerness serves to enlighten Orlando's path, much like Sasha and the Archduke. However, unlike Sasha, who comes at a time when Orlando is still lost and alienated, or the Archduke, who does not share the same naturecultural view as Orlando, Shelmerdine meets all the necessary conditions to stay by her side. Indeed, he arrives at a time when Orlando's process of communion with herself is already in full force, as demonstrated by her time spent in the 18th-century London society. Moreover, the societal expectations established in the 19th century are almost forcing her to get a husband. Shelmerdine is quickly established as a character of a fluid gender expression (much like Orlando) "'You're a woman, Shel!' she cried. [...] 'You're a man, Orlando!' he cried." (Woolf 174-175) who also practices the same naturecultural views

as her. The latter is portrayed by their constant escapades to the woods, which are heavily romanticised and involve a secret code between them, using their various names and surnames, to signal in which mood each of them is ““Bonthrop,” she would say, “I’m off,” and when she called him by his second name, “Bonthrop,” it should signify to the reader that she was in a solitary mood, felt them both as specks on a desert, was desirous only of meeting death by herself, [...]” (Woolf 179). It is important to note that the lovers’ relationship with nature is also quite different from the one Sasha and Orlando had when they spent time alone in the frozen Thames. Certainly, back then nature only served as their hideaway, to quote Sandilands and Erickson (2010) again, “a “safe” place for outlaw sex” (Sandilands and Erickson 3) where they could escape to no longer be criticised because of Sasha’s otherness (queered because of her race) or Orlando’s infidelity to his fiancée. However, Orlando and Shelmerdine’s relationship with nature is now much more than that. It no longer serves as a spot alienated from culture and society but, since they both regard nature as an intrinsic part of their culture, it becomes the place where they actively choose to be together; an environment that allows them to grow by being in communion with themselves. This display of preference is exemplified when the result of Orlando’s lawsuits (most of them stemming from her gender transition) becomes known. The whole of London is in celebration of Orlando’s victory however, she is only concerned with being in nature with her husband “She skipped it, to get on with the text. For when the bonfires were blazing in the market-place, she was in the dark woods with Shelmerdine alone.” (Woolf 177) Thus, Shelmerdine signals Orlando’s final triumph in her process of coming to terms with love and also life. Referencing once more her quote “Life and a lover” (Woolf 130), Orlando has now not only found “a lover”, but also a husband. This signals Orlando’s adherence to the societal pressures of the 19th century in

order to feel validated as a woman: “‘I am a woman,’ she thought, ‘a real woman, at last.’” (Woolf 175).

When it comes to “Life”, ergo Orlando’s place in society, I argue that the completion of her intimate poem *The Oak Tree* can be viewed as the culmination of her contributions to society. It is a work that expresses both her love for nature and for herself. Other authors have also pointed out the cathartic nature of her poem, Scott (2011) for instance considering it “her long-term and final challenge as a writer.” (Scott 8). Orlando re-enters London’s society to get her manuscript published and, as if fate bid it, reencounters Nicholas Greene. The man who had so much scarred Orlando back when she was still a young man seems to have changed too, for he is now a knight and one of the most acclaimed literary critics of the Victorian era. More importantly, the fact that Greene shares this supernatural ability to resist the passing of time (just like Orlando) hints at his function within the narrative, which is being a reflection of society. He tells Orlando about the sorry state of literature (and by extension, society) “We live in degenerate times” (Woolf 194) and thus, in an act of rebelliousness, the manuscript bursts from Orlando’s bosom and into the table. Upon reading it, Greene senses there is something revolutionary in its lines “It was composed with a regard to truth, to nature, to the dictates of the human heart, which was rare indeed, in these days of unscrupulous eccentricity.” (Woolf 195) and argues that it must be published immediately. Certainly, if *The Oak Tree* tackles topics of truth and nature, which I have so far argued to be aligned with queer tropes such as gender transition or homosexual tendencies, then the manuscript can be considered a recollection of the queer experience that Orlando herself has lived. Later on, it is revealed that the poem causes quite a stir amongst the population, for Orlando is awarded a prize and *The Oak Tree* gets reprinted in seven different editions. Thus, these events can be taken as proof of the non-normative contents of her work.

With the issues of love and society resolved, the answer to the meaning of “Life and a lover” (Woolf 130) that Orlando sought for so long seems to finally make sense. She ascends one last time to the top of the hill where her favourite oak tree lies and decides to bury the poem underneath it as a tribute, “a return to the land of what the land has given me.” (Woolf 225). I argue that in this scene Orlando is openly recognising nature as queer, as an ally in her journey towards self-discovery. In return, she offers it the fruit of all these centuries of experience and learning, *The Oak Tree*, a manuscript which could not have been written without nature’s constant support and inspiration. As a result, the union between nature and Orlando’s work from her time spent in society provides one last powerful image that serves to reiterate the message about one of the main themes in the novel: that nature and culture are unmistakably linked.

4. Conclusions and Further Research

This TFG has examined *Orlando* (1928) from a queer ecological perspective. By taking a closer look at the queer traits of the protagonist, a link has been established between her queerness and her relationship with nature. Concepts like Haraway’s (2003) naturecultures have been crucial to describe Orlando’s revolutionary view of the world. Queer ecology is an emerging framework that combines queer studies and ecology to evidence the interconnectedness of both fields, as well as to debunk certain oppressive myths associated with the LGBTQIA+ community. Therefore, the first section of this TFG has been devoted to reviewing the existing literature to argue in favour of a view of nature that acknowledges its inherent queerness. I have drawn several examples from influential works on *queer animals* such as Bagemihl (1999) and Roughgarden (2004), who provide an overview of different instances where the natural world is not as hegemonically heterosexual and cisgender. What is more, Haraway’s (2003) concept of

naturecultures has also been taken into account, for it posits an interesting point of analysis of the archetypical nature/culture divide.

Bearing all of this in mind, the results obtained from such a diachronic, chronological reading have proven to be quite fruitful. The assumption that nature is queer immediately helps to justify certain tendencies observed in the text such as i) The portrayal of nature as agentive and authoritative; and ii) The appearance of specific queer-coded characters like the Archduke, Sasha, or Shelmerdine who all emerge from nature itself. On the other hand, the adoption of naturecultures has proven to be useful as a vehicle to explain Orlando's transition from a state of alienation to one of communion. Indeed, during the novel's first chapters, we see an Orlando who dreads the time he spends in society, for he is deeply affected by the many oppressive binaries (gender, sexuality) that permeate it. By contrast, he finds solace in the simplicity and queerness of nature, a place where he can explore his identity without fear of judgment. Thus, nature and culture are first presented as complete opposites, one being a place of oppression, the other of liberty. Nevertheless, as the story progresses and Orlando enters a state of communion with herself and her identity, she begins to bridge the gap between this divide and realises that both environments are irrevocably linked. Though she may never come to understand society completely, she knows her place in it as a queer woman and, by the end of the novel, can enter and exit it without feeling hurt. When it comes to nature, Orlando reaches a state of complete communion with it, which is exemplified by her relationship with Shelmerdine.

As a conclusive thought, I would like to remark on the relevance of a framework like queer ecology. The latter has become increasingly relevant in the last two decades, where discourses about ecology and queerness have abounded in the mainstream media, both utilising concepts of natural/unnatural to justify their claims. However, analyses

such as the one in this TFG shed light on an often ignored truth: these discourses are nothing new. Already existing literature on queer and/or natural topics can serve as evidence to prove that concepts such as Haraway's (2003) naturecultures, or the arguments in Erickson & Sandilands (2010) about a queer nature, have existed along with humanity for as long as one can count. If this can be proven, then the importance of queer ecological notions can no longer be denied. Thus, I find it crucial that more research is carried out in fields like biology, literature, and sociology to further enrich this framework. A framework that seeks to embrace and preserve something as precious and unique as the environment, as well as all the queer and marginalised individuals (women, people of colour, LGBTQIA+, disabled people) that are an integral part of it.

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