

Virginia Woolf, Orlando

Monthly Discussion Sections, ch. 3-4, pp. 119-226

1. In the episodes of Orlando's service as ambassador to Constantinople, followed by her sojourn with the "gipsies,"* how does the novel represent the British imperial project?
2. Why does Woolf have Orlando's "biographer" foreground his/her difficulties (the dependence on fragmentary diaries, letters, and gazettes) when s/he tries to construct a narrative about the celebration of Orlando's receiving the Order of the Bath and a dukedom?
3. Perhaps the most obviously fantastic episode in the novel is Orlando's gender transformation?
 - What happened?
 - Does the transformation have anything to do with his marriage to Rosina Pepita, the "gipsy" dancer? with the bloody and incendiary insurrection of the Turks against the Sultan? If so, why is this part of the story so brief?
 - Why does "the biographer" reveal the transformation through a much longer allegorical masque in which "Our Lady of Purity," "Our Lady of Chastity," and "Our Lady of Modesty" must be banished by the trumpet blasts of "Truth"? (See "Useful Background for Virginia Woolf, Orlando" for information about masques.)
4. Why can't Orlando stay with the "gipsies"? Why is her view of "Nature" insupportable to her hosts, and does her view of "Nature" have anything to do with her Englishness?
5. Orlando had not seen London since she retreated to her estate after Sasha's betrayal (during the reign of James I, d. 1625). During the reigns of William and Mary, Queen Anne, and the three Georges (1688-the end of the 18th century), what changes does Orlando note in the city of London? (We might remember the important role the city of London plays in Mrs. Dalloway).
6. After Orlando's miraculous transformation into a woman, what does s/he learn about gender?
 - About the limitations and privileges of being a woman?
 - About feminine sexuality?
 - About performing gender?
 - About the relationship between clothes and identity, whether experienced by the wearer or perceived by the observer?
 - About androgyny?
7. After Orlando's return from his/her exotic adventures as the Turkish ambassador and then a member of a "gipsy" band, what does s/he learn about eighteenth-century London "Society"?
 - About the high society of balls, card parties, and soirees?
 - About the salon society of tea and witty conversation?
 - About the low society of Nell, Prue, Prue Kitty, and Kitty Rose around a Punch bowl?

8. Despite the betrayal of Nick Greene, the poet, Orlando has constructed a religion based on good writing (173), and s/he positively worships great writers (197-98). Then she meets several (see “Useful Background”). How does her actual acquaintance with Addison, Pope, and Swift affect her view of “great men” of letters?

* “Gypsy is a word used to indicate Roma people, a traditionally itinerant ethnic group that lives in Europe and has branches in the Americas, Asia and North Africa. The word *Gypsy* has negative connotations and many Roma people see it as a racial slur. In general, it’s best to use *Roma people* when referring to the ethnic group unless people self-identify as Gypsies, in which case the term should be capitalized. Avoid casual use such as “they lived like gypsies, traveling from place to place” and the pejorative term *gyp*, (e.g. “I got gyped,”) which is likely derived from Gypsy and a negative stereotype of Roma people as swindlers and thieves.” (The Diversity Style Guide, <https://www.diversitystyleguide.com/glossary/gypsy-gypsy-gipsy/>)