

WAGS 31: First Essay

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Ungraded

Due: Feb. 12 (Friday) 12:00 noon by e-mail

Length: Up to 1,000 words

Office hours: Tues. 2:00-4:00

Fri. 10:00-11:00

Extra: Wed., Feb. 10, 2:00-4:00

Editorial conferences to return essay
and give feedback
Feb. 13-17

(sign-up in class on Feb. 9 or by e-mail; posted on CMS page):

Orlando: A Biography

Write on one of the following topics. You may also in consultation with me devise your own topic. We'll get to Sappho in the second assignment, on the Greeks.



Virginia Woolf (1932)

One: Re-staging / re-thinking:

The ever-shifting course of Orlando's experiences gains some structure by various repetitions, such as the visits to the oak tree in chapters 1 and 6 and the two seven-day trances. Sometimes the re-staging of the scene explains what was going on in the first place: The reader needs to encounter Archduke Harry to figure out what was

going earlier on with Archduchess Harriet and may see a nice irony in that the female Orlando can get rid of the Archduke, while her male incarnation fled to Constantinople. But, digging deeper, the male/female switches of both Orland and Harriet since their first encounter may send us back to their first encounter with new questions. Less mysteriously, the reappearance of Nick Greene in the 19th century, when he gets “The Oak Tree” published, completes his role in the Renaissance, when he dashed Orlando’s literary ambitions. Orlando finds literary fame only when she doesn’t care about it and can use a fraud like Greene only when she sees through him.

But nothing is ever so simple with sex for Orlando. His mysterious change to her in chapter 3 remains mysterious, and we need to keep referring back to it from later restagings and sequels to figure out what happened and what it means.

>How is the scene of Orlando’s sex change restaged in her courtship and marriage with Shel (chapter 4) or in giving birth (chapter 5). (Don’t try to do both.) How does this later scene lead us to read the baffling sex-change scene differently/ That is, does the marriage or birth explain, revise, queer, parody, or complete the mysterious sex-change?

Or

>How does the relationship with Shel lead us to read the affair with Sasha differently (i.e., explain, queer, or whatever)?

Angles that might be productive: setting (Turkey vs. England; river vs. moor); era; narrator’s involvement; nature; time (historical/clock/natural/psychological); inner experience (i.e., Orlando’s desire, perception, memory); and how the scene works to confine or free Orlando. You can’t begin to cover all of these areas, and there are others.

Two: Egyptian girls

As we have discussed, the processes of stereotyping (or “essentializing”) regularly project the attributes of one dominated category (female, East, racial or ethnic minority, queer) onto another, as for example when the “Orient” is taken as female and sexually disordered. In reference to sexual desire, various forbidden and tabu partners similarly get lumped together: e.g., with Sappho, lesbian = prostitute, or, in the modern era gay male = pedophile.

Orlando, which veils scandalous truths, at least gives the suggestion that one forbidden

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love object might stand for another. We don't know how far Orlando's and Shel's E-Harmony moment on p. 117 got into same-sex desire, but they both understand the attraction of Black women.

>How in Orlando's actions, writing, and stream of consciousness do the desired "others" (i.e., foreigners, "negresses", prostitutes) offer—or not offer— a way to talk about same-sex desire? If this coding is an efficient way to veil same-sex desire, what are the implications for the "others" who are put to this use?

Three: Is *Orlando* a Lesbian Novel?

(Recommended for students with some experience working with theory.)

>Well, is it?

Tell me what you mean by "lesbian novel" and then make a case and be as specific as you can manage, in 1,000 words, about the text. It may be arguable that *Orlando* is queer, not lesbian, or lesbian for some readers and not others (and is that helpful?)

General issues:

Aim:

Take up from where our class discussions leave off and work closely with textual evidence. What I'd like to see in action is your independent mastery of *Orlando*—not of every issue in the text, but of something substantial.

You are writing for me, not the general reader. Tell me what I do not know. That is, this essay is not a book review. Don't feel obliged to spend the first page justifying the project or restating the assumptions behind the assigned topic.

Feel free to work from any theoretical basis you find appropriate, but flag it clearly for me. Don't feel obliged to use TheorySpeak. Just try to keep core concepts, such as sex/gender/sexuality sorted out and try not to pile up too many abstractions in a single sentence.

Organization:

It really helps me to know early in the essay what your argument is going to be or at least how you are going to organize your answer to the question. In other words, give me a map.

Economy:

Waste no space summarizing plots or embedding extensive block quotation, which use a lot of space.

Intellectual honesty:

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments can be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me.

Editorial conferences:

Please sign up in class for a consultation between February 13 and 17 so that I can give you feedback and find out more about your needs as a writer. There will be a sign-up sheet in class, and the times are posted on the CMS page so that you can e-mail me for a time.

Feel free to come to office hours to consult as you are writing the essay, or set up an appointment at another time.

Writing Center:

Another pair of eyes can often be helpful, and sustained, systematic work with a tutor is a great way to become a better writer.