

Act III: The Eighteenth Century



START

Scene 1: Orlando Sails Back to England.

Orlando appears on the deck of a ship, wearing a huge, confining, elaborate dress and hat.

The sound of a boat rocking in water.

ORLANDO

Orlando bought herself a complete outfit of such clothes as women then wore, and it was in just such a dress that she now stood on the deck of a ship heading towards England. It is a strange fact, but a true one, that up to this moment she had scarcely given her sex a thought. It was not until she felt the coil of skirts about her legs and the captain offered—

CAPTAIN

May I get a chair for you, madam?

ORLANDO

Oh! Yes, please.

(Orlando rehearses the phrase "Yes, please" in varied tones, from "masculine" to "feminine") Yes, please.

The captain brings her a chair and she stretches out.

ORLANDO

At that moment, she realized with a start the penalties and privileges of her position.

This is a pleasant, lazy way of life to be sure. But could I leap overboard and swim in clothes like these? No!

CAPTAIN

Dinner?

ORLANDO

Yes, please.

The captain drops a napkin on her lap.

CAPTAIN

A little of the fat, madam? Let me cut you just the tiniest little slice the size of your fingernail.

ORLANDO

A delicious tremor ran through Orlando's frame.

CHORUS

Birds sang;
torrents rushed.

ORLANDO

She remembered the feeling of indescribable pleasure with which she had first seen Sasha, hundreds of years ago.

CAPTAIN

Madam?

ORLANDO

(To the captain) Well, if you wish it, I will have the very thinnest, smallest shiver of corned beef in the world.

CAPTAIN

Very good, madam.

ORLANDO

(To the audience) Nothing is more heavenly than to resist and to yield; to yield and to resist.

Orlando begins to eat, taking very small bites.

CHORUS

She was like a child entering into a toy cupboard;
her arguments would not commend themselves to mature women.

CAPTAIN

May I give you more sauce, madam?

*Orlando is struck by a thought and pops up from the table.
The captain remains frozen.*

ORLANDO

(To the audience) How odd! When I was a young man, I insisted that women be obedient, chaste and scented. Now I shall have to pay in my own person for those desires. For women are not—

CHORUS

judging by her short experience of the sex—

ORLANDO

obedient, chaste and scented by nature. They can only attain these graces by tedious discipline. There's the hairdressing . . . that alone will take at least an hour of my morning . . . there's looking in the looking-glass . . . there's being chaste year in and year out . . . Christ Jesus!

When I set foot on English soil, I shall never be able to crack a man over the head, or draw my sword and run him through the body, or lead an army . . . All I can do is to pour out tea and ask my lords how they like it.

(To the frozen captain)

D'you take sugar? D'you take cream?

CHORUS

And here she seemed to criticize both sexes
equally, as if she belonged to neither.

ORLANDO

She was a man, she was a woman—

She knew the secrets and shared the weaknesses of each.

The figure of Sasha walks past.

ORLANDO

Oh! At last I know Sasha as she really was!

CHORUS

For, though Orlando herself was a woman, it was still a woman
that she loved.

ORLANDO

And now a thousand mysteries became plain to her.

CHORUS

Her affection gained in beauty what it lost in falsity.

ORLANDO

Sasha! On legs like beech trees, grape clustered, pearl hung!
Which is the greater ecstasy? The man's or the woman's?

Sasha retreats.

ORLANDO

Don't go! I have much to tell you! And much to ask!

Sasha disappears. The captain puts his arm around Orlando.

CAPTAIN

I would like to point out to you, madam, on the horizon, gleaming
. . . the cliffs of England, madam.

ORLANDO

Christ Jesus!

CAPTAIN

The sight of her native land after so
long an absence excused her strong language.

Orlando cranes forward, looking through a telescope.

CHORUS

Ladies in flowered silk walked on footpaths.
Citizens in embroidered coats took snuff.

CAPTAIN

There you will see the Houses of Parliament—

ORLANDO

There—there had been the great carnival.

CAPTAIN

The Tower of London—

ORLANDO

There—she had first met Sasha. About here—
she had seen the frozen dolphins. All was changed.

CAPTAIN

Ah, and there, on the right, Westminster Abbey—

ORLANDO

How to tell the captain that she—

who now trembled on his arm—

✦ SARAH RUHL ✦

had once been a duke and an ambassador . . . had hacked heads off, had lain with loose women . . .

CAPTAIN

And finally, just there, the dome of St. Paul's—

ORLANDO

Do what she would to restrain them, the tears came to Orlando's eyes, until, remembering that it is becoming in a woman to weep, she let them flow.

CAPTAIN

Dear old London. Will you need an escort, madam?

ORLANDO

No thank you, sir.

And, without anyone's assistance, she set her foot upon her native shore.

END