



**'London and the Globe', Senate House, 6–8 July 2016:  
Conference Review**

Reviewed by

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To give a truthful account of London society at that or indeed at any other time, is beyond the powers of the biographer or the historian. Only those who have little need of the truth, and no respect for it – the poets and the novelists – can be trusted to do it, for this is one of the cases where truth does not exist.<sup>1</sup>

How can we write about London when its history is jumbled, tangled, and contested? Scholars and literary enthusiasts from around the *globe* gathered at Senate House on July 6–8 to explore this complex query at 'London and the Globe', the 2016 conference of the Literary London Society. We were privy to literature from a wide range of genres and eras which owe a debt to London and its multi-faceted influence, not only as a place, but as a home where writers find their voice. The heart of the Society – the Literary London Reading Group – hosted a panel dedicated to a roundtable discussion on the 'Eras and Areas of Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*', which scrutinised Woolf's abstract depiction of London. Chairs Eliza Cubitt and Lisa Robertson selected *Orlando* as a text that draws upon the strengths of the conference, with reading group participants noting that Woolf symbolises London as an inconstant object, mirroring the mood of the novel. The iconic imagery of the Thames in *Orlando* suggests the transient nature of the city, rendering it inherently difficult to write about in a way that is true.

Patricia Phillippy also addressed the concept of elusiveness and memory in her plenary address, "'The Grave is but a Cabinet": Remembrance and Recreation in Post-Reformation London'. Here, Phillippy considered the concept of material culture and commemoration and examined cabinets and their ability to craft narratives of the past

and embody memory. Phillippy revealed that cabinets not only capture the past, but provide a memorial strategy of collecting, and, therefore, promoting, memory in perpetuity.

Departing from this concept of memorial containment, scholars such as Beth Gaskell, Martin Kindermann, and Hannah Lewis-Bill were interested in ideas of mobility and movement. Gaskell examined late Victorian invasion fictions, highlighting anxieties about new technology and its vulnerability to attack and failure. Indeed, London – emblematic of Britain’s place in the world – was at the heart of this empire which was so vehemently protected against assault. Kindermann explored the macabre world of the undead in his paper on *Dracula*, examining the destabilising gender boundaries of the novel’s myth. He unpacked the interwoven relationship between space and motion which Harker and Dracula traverse, both projecting their own space into an encounter with the ‘other’. Similarly, Lewis-Bill traced the movement of Chinese people and Chinese commodities in Dickens’s novels, highlighting the contrast in globalisation from his early to his later works.

The 2016 conference holds a remarkable memorial place, as we celebrated the four hundredth anniversary of Shakespeare’s birth. The legacy and identity of one of our most treasured playwrights is deeply entwined with the city, as London is where Shakespeare became visible to us; his influence, legendary. Attendees had the pleasure of watching Christopher Smith’s documentary *Shoreditch: Shakespeare’s Hidden London* which probed the integral relationship between the theatre history of East London and the rise of Shakespeare as a playwright. Plenary speakers Hannah Crawforth, Sarah Dustagheer, and Jennifer Young placed Shakespeare as living and working in London by 1592, spending the most active years of his professional life here, and leaving a literary and historical imprint that is deeply imbedded in the identity of London. His legacy has permeated the realm of myth, as we imagine the token structure synonymous with his name – the globe – as being magical, with dismantled timbers that were carried across the Thames and rebuilt.

The concept of London, and in a broader sense, England, was a concern for many of the panellists in both a local and a global context, questioning the aesthetic, cultural, and psychological implications that flow from displacement. Andrea Davis delved into the writings of two black British writers originally from the Caribbean: Beryl Gilroy and Joan Riley, examining the tenuous relationship between identity and migration and the culture of female literary exclusion that Gilroy and Riley endured. In other papers, Nadia Valman examined the Jewish ethnography of Spitalfields, and Duncan Hay demonstrated the link amongst place, memory, and history in the ‘Survey of London Whitechapel Online’. East London, according to Adrian Chapman, was home to R. D. Laing’s Philadelphia Clinic at Kingsley Hall in the 1960s, which provided an antipsychiatric approach to treating schizophrenia, thereby rendering the hall a ‘working utopia’. It is these individual and collective narratives, from both immigrants and Londoners, that comprise the tangled and cacophonous literary history of this city – a place, according to Brian Chikwava in the annual lecture – where ‘our memories become what they are only when they are organised by a story’.

The conference was uniquely punctuated with 'CITY RATS', an exhibition by Isabelle Gressel which explored urban mobility and migration in London. The Illumination Chamber Choir, under the direction of Alexander Campkin, brought the proceedings to a close with a selection of choral Renaissance music.

Congratulations and thanks to Peter Jones for organising such a thought-provoking and delightful conference celebrating London and its literature.

## Notes

1. Virginia Woolf, *Orlando* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1995), p. 94.

## Works Cited

Woolf, Virginia, *Orlando* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1995).

## Note on Contributor

**Heather Scott** is a PhD candidate at University College London. Her research interests centre on literature and material culture, and she is currently completing her thesis on the rise of the Victorian garden cemetery in London.

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