

University Honors Program Research Project

APPROVAL PAGE

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Degree: English

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Full title of project as it should appear in Graduation Program and transcript:

Rosalind: Playing Both Sides of Love and Gender in *As You Like It*

Abstract:

Although some critics claim that Rosalind is a completely understanding character at the beginning of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and that she has temporary control during the middle of the play only to help other characters develop, a close reading of the play shows her growing development and power as a character throughout the play. Through her interactions with other characters under her male disguise as "Ganymede," Rosalind must alter her own perceptions about love and gender, eventually coming to a more balanced understanding of those concepts. Because she has gained this understanding, her active and powerful role grows, and she is able to maintain her authority through the end of the play.

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As You Like It

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Fall 2010

Abstract

Although some critics claim that Rosalind is a completely understanding character at the beginning of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* and that she has temporary control during the middle of the play only to help other characters develop, a close reading of the play shows her growing development and power as a character throughout the play. Through her interactions with other characters under her male disguise as "Ganymede," Rosalind must alter her own perceptions about love and gender, eventually coming to a more balanced understanding of those concepts. Because she has gained this understanding, her active and powerful role grows, and she is able to maintain her authority through the end of the play.

While many critics agree that Rosalind is the center of the action of *As You Like It*,¹ some find that Rosalind's power is temporary, or merely a means to an end that dissolves as it becomes unnecessary at the play's conclusion. As she discusses the lack of action in the play, explaining that the primary struggles are part of an internal journey for many of the characters, Margaret Ranald claims, "Almost from the beginning Rosalind possesses this self-knowledge, and her task is to lead the remaining characters of the play into it"(75). Barbara Bono further argues that Rosalind's performance in her love debates with Orlando serve largely to help Orlando evolve as a hero. She writes that "The Duke's 'kindness' and Rosalind-as-Ganymede's 'play' have allowed Orlando to be a moral rather than merely a physical Hercules..., and thus also a type of Christ", bringing Orlando's development in particular to the center of the play (206). Bono suggests that after Rosalind has controlled the middle acts of *As You Like It* to help Orlando and other characters develop, she "seemingly surrenders the play" in the final act when she reinstates herself into the patriarchal control of her father and Orlando (208).

It is true that Rosalind seems to have a better understanding than most of the characters and that she is central to many characters' growth and improvement. However, to say that she begins the play already possessing the awareness that other characters attain by the end denies that she has any

¹ A few sources that discuss Rosalind's active role include: Juliet Dusinberre, "As *Who Liked It?*" *Shakespeare Survey*, ed. Stanley Wells (New York, Cambridge University press, 1994) 9-21; Angela Pitt, *Shakespeare's Women* (Totowa, New Jersey: Barnes & Noble Books, 1981); and Clara Clairborne Park, "As We Like It: How a Girl Can Be Smart and Still Popular," *The Woman's Part: Feminist Criticism of Shakespeare*, ed. Carol Ruth Swift Lenz, Gayle Greene and Carol Thomas Neely (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980).

development as a character herself. It makes her a static character and, indeed, the only one who does not undergo this internal journey that Ranald identifies as the main action of the play.

Rosalind, too, must go through a degree of change as a character. In the beginning of the play, her battles of wit with Celia and Touchstone may demonstrate how clever she is, but after her love-at-first-sight meeting with Orlando, she reveals herself to be just as foolishly and unrealistically in love as other characters in the play. She demonstrates this before she is exiled to the Forest of Arden, when Celia urges her to “wrestle with thy affections” and she replies, “Oh, they take the part of a better wrestler than myself” (1.3.21-3). In the Forest of Arden, Rosalind encounters other characters who are in love situations that cause them to be foolish as well. She takes an active role in altering and improving these characters’ attitudes as Ranald suggests, but in doing so she must correct her own errors in love.

Perhaps the most notable mirror of Rosalind’s love folly is her own love interest, Orlando. In the forest, Rosalind finds Orlando’s verses posted on the trees, in which he cites many classical female figures in order to idealize Rosalind. One troubling aspect of these allusions is that each reference is to a woman who had bad qualities or experiences as well as admirable ones, so Orlando has to edit, declaring that Rosalind has:

Helen’s cheek, but not her heart,

Cleopatra’s majesty,

Atalanta’s better part,

Sad Lucretia's modesty. (3.2.143-146)

In order to construct Rosalind as a perfect woman figure, he has to declare her the sum of several women's "better halves," thus limiting her to a very strict gendered stereotype of the good woman. Initially, while the poems' author is unknown to her, Rosalind finds them contemptible, claiming, "some of them had in them more feet than the verses could bear" (3.2.163-4). Because she views the exaggerated adulation in this poetry from a distance, she is able to recognize how unrealistic and ridiculous that kind of behavior is.

However, as Celia teases her and hints at who the pathetic love poet might be, Rosalind changes from a scornful poetry critic to an impatient and equally overwhelmed lover, assaulting Celia with a torrent of rapid inquiries. When Celia reveals that Orlando is behind the poetic praises of her, Rosalind seems to want to throw away caution and her disguise (and thus the safety and the protection that she had adopted the disguise for) so she can meet Orlando as a woman when she cries, "Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose?" (3.2.216-17). As Celia explains to Rosalind how she had discovered that Orlando is also taking refuge in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind keeps interrupting her with various Petrarchan love phrases. For instance, she once claims that the tree Celia spied Orlando sitting under "may well be called Jove's tree, when it drops forth such fruit" (3.2.233-34), and she reacts to Celia's description of Orlando as a hunter with "Oh, ominous! He comes to kill my heart" (3.2.243). When Celia attempts to get Rosalind to rein in her emotions, Rosalind responds, "Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak" (3.2.246-47).

Thus, she marks these excess displays of love and the inability to suppress them as a trait of a very limited and stereotypical kind of femininity.

After overhearing Orlando's debate with Jaques, Rosalind decides to keep her own feelings in check and maintain her masculine disguise, and ultimately she uses it to help Orlando come to a more balanced understanding of love, and in doing so *she* gains a clearer and more balanced understanding of love and gender. At first, it seems like she intends this practice as a joke when she tells Celia that she will "speak to him like a saucy lackey and under that habit play the knave with him" (3.2.291-3). However, as she first talks to Orlando under the guise of "Ganymede," she gives her disguise an educational purpose by proposing to cure Orlando of his love for her by demonstrating all of the "giddy offences" (3.2.342) that make up the strictly negative depiction of women (the composition of the "bad halves" of the female figures that Orlando previously ignores). At their next meeting, she seems to undertake that task with fervor.

Previously she has been feigning her role as a young man, but now she must perform her own gender, but from a male perspective. Thus, despite her slyly honest assurances that "I am your Rosalind" (4.1.61) and that "she will do as I do" (4.1.151), she is not simply being herself as a woman. In order to hide her "feminine" passions, she gives Orlando a masculine portrayal of women, which seems to be informed by many of the typical antifeminist arguments of the Renaissance. Many of the vices "Ganymede" attributes to women are described in many misogynist publications of the time, such as Joseph Swetnam's popular pamphlet *The Arraignment of Lewde, idle, froward, and unconstant women: Or*

the vanitie of them, choose you whether. Swetnam lays out a number of charges against women, including calling them “ungrateful, perjured, full of fraud, flouting and deceit, unconstant, waspish, toyish, light, sullen, proud, discourteous and cruel” (1516).² Rosalind plays up the capriciousness and faithlessness that are two of men’s main accusations against women by playing “herself” as transitioning rapidly from one temperament to another and assuring Orlando that his Rosalind, like any other woman, is likely to make a cuckold of him. There may be a sense here that Rosalind has gone too far in her criticism of women just as Orlando had gone too far in idealizing women. Indeed, Celia seems to think so when she scolds, “You have simply misused our sex in your love prate” (194-5), and she seems to be trying to pull Rosalind back from this unreasonable gender stereotyping.

Even in the midst of telling Orlando that his wife is likely to commit adultery, a more reasonable awareness seems to be emerging. When Orlando defends his Rosalind against Ganymede’s accusations by arguing, “Oh, but she is wise” (4.1.152), Rosalind replies:

Or else she could not have the wit to do this. The wiser, the waywarder.
 Make the doors upon a woman’s wit, and it will out at the casement; shut that, and ‘twill out at the keyhole; stop that, ‘twill fly with the smoke out at the chimney. (4.1.153-57)

² Some other misogynist or antifeminist publications of the period, with particular emphasis on women’s inferiority (especially moral) as justification for their submission to men’s authority include John Knox, *The First Blast of the Trumpet Against the Monstrous Regiment of Women* (Geneva, 1558); *Hic Mulier; or, The man-woman* (London: printed for I.E., 1620); *Haec-Vir; or, The womanish-man* (London: printed for I.E., 1620); *Muld Sacke; or, The apologie of hic mulier* (London: printed for R. Meighen, 1620).

In other words, she is warning Orlando that if he wants to have a wife who has a great virtue of wit, then he has to accept that she might also be out of his control. An intelligent woman is not necessarily just intelligent as long as it is no inconvenience to him. She is more likely to have a will of her own, and she is more likely to be more of an equal. Rosalind is pointing out a contradiction in the idealized womanly virtues Orlando had prescribed to her—her great wisdom and wit may come at the cost of her modesty and submissiveness, as Rosalind points out: “You shall never take her without her answer unless / you take her without her tongue” (4.1.164-5).

At this point, she seems to have mentally emended the excesses of love that both she and Orlando had suffered from. Orlando claims that he would die if Rosalind will not accept him, but she responds:

No, faith, die by attorney. The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, videlicet, in a love cause...Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love. (4.1.89-92,101-02)

Rosalind is appealing to Orlando (and perhaps reminding herself) to be more reasonable. Though this demonstrates that she has gained some control over her emotions, she is still slightly irrational in love. After Orlando leaves and Celia chides her for her negative portrayal of women, Rosalind is still giddy with love, exclaiming to Celia, “that thou didst know how many fathom deep I am in love! But it cannot be sounded” (4.1.198-199). So even though Rosalind has made

steps herself towards being more reasonable in love, it seems that she has not yet fully transitioned to a full realization of it.

Rosalind becomes entangled in another love pairing and, though she enters the situation to teach the couple a lesson, this is a learning experience for her as well. She decides to involve herself in the arrangement of another pair of lovers, believing she can rely on her authority as a more objective figure to manipulate the situation towards a happy ending. She intends to control the affair between Phoebe and Silvius as she promises to Corin and Celia that she will “prove a busy actor in their play” (3.4.57). The young shepherd Silvius reflects the same foolishness as Rosalind and Orlando in his overwhelming praises of Phoebe. The situation differs, however, in that Phoebe seems to be much less worthy of these praises than Rosalind is. Phoebe, in some ways, exemplifies a negative model of femininity, one that is fickle, disdainful, and proud. At her first encounter with the couple, Rosalind (still disguised as Ganymede) berates Phoebe for being so unjustifiably proud and scornful of Silvius, and she also criticizes Silvius for feeding Phoebe’s vanity.

Rosalind learns that she does not have a complete understanding of how relationships necessarily work, for, despite her intentions, the situation with Silvius and Phoebe does escape her power. Rosalind’s reprimand of Phoebe is effective in that Phoebe is at least able to sympathize with Silvius’s love for her, but in an ironic way. Her lectures to Phoebe, instead of succeeding in making her accept and appreciate Silvius, cause Phoebe to fall in love with “Ganymede.” Phoebe has previously been the only young character in the play who has not

been vulnerable to some foolish idealism of love, but as soon as “Ganymede” leaves she reveals that “now I find [Silvius’s] saw of might; ‘Who ever loved that loved not at first sight?’” (3.5.87-88). Phoebe is quoting a line from Christopher Marlowe’s poem “Hero and Leander,” and the allusion to this tragic couple indicates that her new discovery of love is far from balanced.³ Rosalind also alludes to that story of when she scorns Orlando’s proposed death by love. She, however, marks this idealized tragic romance as ridiculous, claiming that:

Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turned nun; for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont and being taken with the cramp was drowned; and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was—Hero of Sestos. But these are all lies. (4.1.95-101)

Rosalind has inadvertently taught Phoebe how to love, but Phoebe seems only to have fallen into the same kind of classically-modeled foolish love that Rosalind, Orlando, and Silvius are suffering from initially. Furthermore, Phoebe only loves “Ganymede” for the wrong reasons, for “his” derision of her, and she still fails to learn to love the faithful Silvius. This ironic result of Rosalind’s interference shows that Rosalind does not yet have a complete grasp of how relationships function.

Rosalind’s attitude is different and more balanced in her next lesson on women to a man (Silvius), perhaps because of Celia’s rebuke and her frustration with Orlando’s absence and tardiness. When, as Ganymede, Rosalind tries to demonstrate the negative version of femininity to Orlando, the depiction she

³ See line 176 in Christopher Marlowe, “Hero and Leander,” *The Complete Works of Christopher Marlowe* 1 (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1987), 189-209.

offers is much closer to Phoebe's character than to her own, and Celia accuses her of being unfair to depict all of women that way. Rosalind seems to have dropped the attempt to show Silvius what a woman is from a male's perspective, for she rejects this negative notion of women when she inquires "Wilt thou love such a woman? What, to make thee an instrument and play false strains upon thee?" (4.3.68-69). She demands that Silvius recognize that most women are better than that—in other words, that while women may not be like the flowery and idealized verses that Orlando initially spouts and that Silvius sees in Phoebe, neither are they necessarily the kind of woman that Phoebe is or that Ganymede demonstrates Rosalind to be. Both those extremely positive and extremely negative portrayals are constructions of women from a masculine perspective.

Rosalind's impatience with accepting and expecting those negative qualities in all women reflects the sentiments of some early feminists in the Renaissance. In the Elizabethan and Jacobean eras (particularly in the latter), there were some published defenses of woman, often in response to anti-woman publications like Swetnam's.⁴ In Ester Sowernam's response, *Ester hath hang'd Haman*, she introduces her pamphlet with her first of many complaints about Swetnam's *The Arraignement of Women*:

When I had superficially runne over [it], I found the discourse as far off
from performing what the Title promised, as I found it scandalous and

⁴ Other feminist publications specifically responding to Swetnam include Rachel Speght, *A Mouzell for Melastomus* (London: Nicholas Okes for Thomas Archer, 1617) and Constantia Munda, *The Worming of a Mad Dogge* (London: G. Purslowe for Laurence Hayes, 1617). Some other feminist counter-arguments during Elizabeth's and James' reigns include Jane Anger, *A Protection for Women* (London: Richard Jones and Thomas Orwin, 1589) and Aemilia Lanyer, *Salve Deus Rex Judaeorum* (London, Valentine Simmes for Richard Bonian, 1611).

blasphemous : for where the Authour pretended to write against lewd, idle, froward, and unconstant women, hee doth most impudently rage and rayle generally against all the whole sex of women. (A2^r)

It seems that Sovernam would not have minded a criticism of the women who make the rest of the sex look bad, but Swetnam's generalizations about all women inspired her to write her defense. As Sovernam addresses young men considering marriage, she says, "There can be no love betwixt man and wife, but where there is a respective estimate the one towards the other. How could you love? nay, how would you loath such a monster, to whom Joseph Swetnam poynteth?" (A4^r) This echoes Rosalind's critique of Silvius for supposedly loving a woman like Phoebe.

By the second scene of the fifth act, it seems that Rosalind and most of the other characters have come to a slightly better understanding of love and relationships. The first relationship discussed in this scene is new to the plot: the love-at-first-sight encounter of Orlando's brother Oliver and Celia (disguised as the shepherdess Aliena). Though the immediacy with which these two characters fall in love is a cause of wonder to Orlando and Rosalind, there is an overall sense that it is a legitimate relationship. Through her discussion of the justification of Oliver and Celia's relationship, Rosalind reveals that she understands the necessary steps leading to a healthy marriage:

For your brother and my sister no sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they loved, no sooner loved but they sighed, no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason, no sooner knew the reason but

they sought the remedy: and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage. (5.2.31-37)

According to this sequence, Rosalind and Orlando had “met” and “looked” at the wrestling match in the first act and had subsequently loved, and they were to the sighing stage when they met each other in the forest. Thus, the love debates between Orlando and “Ganymede” served as the step about gaining understanding of “the reason.” Rosalind gives her evaluation of Orlando’s state in that pathway to marriage as she tells him, “Know of me then—for now I speak to some purpose—that I know you are a gentleman of good conceit” (5.2.51-53). In other words, she now finds that he has gained understanding as she had when she evaluated Celia and Oliver’s relationship. It is also interesting to note that, though Orlando still perceives these words as coming from “Ganymede,” Rosalind seems to be speaking to him sincerely (as she specifies when she says, “for now I speak to some purpose”). Orlando seems to have progressed to the next phase, of searching of the “remedy,” when he claims, “I can no longer live by thinking” (5.2.50). At this point Rosalind proposes that remedy by promising that she can arrange for Orlando and Rosalind to be married the next day along with Oliver and Celia.

As Silvius and Phoebe enter that scene, their discussion of love seems to confirm this sense that all of the characters have made the proper steps towards loving companionate marriages. Phoebe is still in love with Ganymede, though she has become much more sympathetic towards Silvius. When Rosalind rebuffs Phoebe’s protestations of love, Phoebe directs Silvius to tell Ganymede

what it means to love someone. Originally, Silvius gives a very traditional Petrarchan kind of account of love: “It is to be all made of sighs and tears” (5.2.81). However, he then brings up the demands of love: “It is to be all made of faith and service” (5.2.86). From there he expands to a wider definition of love:

It is to be all made of fantasy,
 All made of passion and all made of wishes,
 All adoration, duty, and observance,
 All humbleness, all patience and impatience,
 All purity, all trial, all observance; (5.2.91-95)

His depiction of love is more balanced than before, because he includes both the passion and the duty of relationships. Each character claims that each article of Silvius’s definition of love applies to how they feel about one of the other characters: Silvius for Phoebe, Phoebe for Ganymede, Orlando for Rosalind, and Ganymede for no woman (although one might just as well interpret that as Rosalind for Orlando).

After Rosalind has come to this understanding of love and brought other characters to it, Barbara Bono claims that she “seemingly surrenders the play” in the final act by reinstating herself into patriarchal control through marriage (208). Indeed, when Rosalind reappears in women’s dress towards the end of the play, she may seem to be resuming her submissive role as a woman and returning to the men’s control as she tells both her father and Orlando, “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.115 & 116). This submission at the end may be evident in other Shakespearean comedies.

Many other female characters in Shakespeare's comedies are notably strong-willed women who defy ascribed feminine traits. For instance, Katharina, from *The Taming of the Shrew* is willful and rebellious. However, by the end of the play there is a sense that her willfulness is broken. Marriage for her means she must refute her stubborn ways and adhere to the philosophy that, "Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper, / Thy head, thy sovereign" (*Taming* 5.2.146-147). It is possible to read and perform that final speech as ironic, with a hint that through marriage she must simply maintain control in a subtler way. However, since her change is so extreme and, because it is the result of Petruchio's extreme measures to subdue her, it seems more likely that she has learned to accept male authority. Because she is radical to begin with, she has to be forced into submission, and Katharina's development in the play is from a wild shrew to a submissive wife. Even Beatrice of *Much Ado About Nothing*, who is more likeable and admirable than Katharina, has to learn to be subdued. Her sharp wit makes her uncle concerned about her ability to secure a husband, and she herself starts out opposed to the idea of marriage for herself. She, too, must alter her harsh views on men and turn wife to Benedick

Portia is perhaps closest to Rosalind because she manages to control portions of *The Merchant of Venice* as Rosalind does *As You Like It*, even using a male disguise as Rosalind does (though she takes on the disguise for very different reasons). One key difference which sets Portia and Rosalind apart from characters like Katharina and Beatrice is that their cleverness, authority, and control are in pursuit of attaining and improving marriages, not against marriage

altogether. Portia, however, does not go through the same personal development that Rosalind does in that pursuit. She is clever in the court scene, and she teaches Bassanio a lesson about loyalty, but she never shows any change in her own understanding of those situations. Portia is also still controlled at least partially by her father, even after his death through his will. Rosalind must take control of her own life while her father is exiled, and even when she does reunite with him in her marriage scene with Orlando, she still maintains control of the situation.

In fact, Rosalind asserts her authority throughout the marriage scene. She uses that same possessive language with which she “gave” herself to her father and Orlando in the other direction. In her last speech of the act, she tells Duke Senior and Orlando “I’ll have no father, if you be not he. / I’ll have no husband, if you be not he” (5.4.121-22). In other words, just as they have her, she has them. In an even further demonstration of her power, Rosalind takes her father’s role when she, as Ganymede, promises Orlando her hand in marriage, both in 5.2 and 5.4. In both scenes, she demands oaths from Orlando, Silvius, and Phoebe, to honor their promises of marriage. She even takes Orlando’s role when she (still as Ganymede) asks her father for permission for Orlando to marry her. She may deliver herself into marriage, but it does not seem that this is necessarily a loss of power, since the marriage was completely of her own orchestration.

The fact that Rosalind delivers the epilogue emphasizes her active role. She points out the significance of her position when she begins, “It is not the

fashion to see the lady the epilogue” (Epilogue: 1). The epilogue is an honor she shares with characters like Puck and Prospero, who have the vital roles in controlling the action of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*, and who are also the characters who seem to have the most understanding of the concepts and situations of their plays.

When Rosalind states, “I am not furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg will not become me” (Epilogue: 9-10), she sets up the epilogue as a performance of a particular social role. The boy actor who would be playing Rosalind during the Renaissance is no more a woman than he is a beggar, but as he is “furnished” as a woman, he is to perform the epilogue as a woman would, or at least as Rosalind would. Rosalind declares that “My way is to conjure you” (10), and in her addresses to the men and women of the audience, she begins with the phrase “I charge you.” The use of the assertive words “conjure” and “charge” demonstrate that, even as a woman in woman’s clothing, Rosalind still has a measure of power and authority at the end of the play.

The fact that she directs the epilogue to women and men reemphasizes the preoccupation with gender in the play. The phrase “If I were a woman” (Epilogue: 16-17) obviously hints at the fact that the character of Rosalind, like any other female character in a Renaissance play, was in fact a boy actor in the original performances. However, the allusion to this custom in the epilogue of *this* play seems particularly significant. It serves as a reminder of the many layers of gender that this actor and character have performed, and the boy actor’s description of how his behavior should be if he was actually a woman echoes

“Ganymede’s” words to Orlando explaining how he would act if “he” were a woman.

In conclusion, Rosalind does evolve throughout *As You Like It*, becoming a more understanding and powerful character by the end of the play. She progresses through many different ways of approaching love, ultimately arriving at a balance between purely emotional and rational understandings of relationships. As her understanding grows, she becomes a more influential and in-control character by the end of the play. In the process of this growth, Rosalind plays with different interpretations and constructs of gender, especially femininity, which reflect contemporary debates concerning women. Because these debates indicate a transition to a more modern viewpoint on women and relationships, there might be some justification in referring to the Renaissance as the “early modern” period and in understanding *As You Like It* as an “early modern” play. Therefore, Rosalind’s engagement with these issues is a fundamental reason that Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* maintains its relevance even at the present time.

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