

## **Discuss the effects of cross-dressing on the depiction of gender identity in Early Modern drama**

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Cross-dressing within William Shakespeare's *As You Like It* serves both to subvert societal norms of gender identity and escape the limits of Elizabethan gender roles. The malleability of gender identity within the play succeeds in loosening cultural bonds, allowing characters to act, interact and be perceived, as they otherwise would not.

Theatrical cross-dressing was widely viewed in Elizabethan England as a 'moral danger' (Fudge, 2002 p. 61) to spectators, especially at a time when women were 'not allowed onto the public stage' (p. 61). Viewed as a 'disruptive element' (Garber, 1992 p. 32), transvestism and gender identity were frequently conflated with, and seen as an indicator for, social class. To suggest movement in either of these categories was terrifying to society at the time (p. 32). Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, however, portrays cross-dressing as a fluid medium in which its characters ignore this stigma. With Elizabethan law enforcing strict dress codes for men and women, the stage itself performs the almost anarchic role of a '[safe] space' (p. 35) wherein characters were effectively 'allowed to violate the sumptuary laws' (p. 35). Though women were barred from performing on the Elizabethan stage, women's roles were given to young boys. Jean E. Howard argues that young males playing women's roles on stage was likely 'accepted in performance as a convention' (Howard, 1988 p. 352), suggesting that cross-dressing was accepted in this sense, maintaining the veneer of conformity whilst subverting societal norms.

When examining Rosalind and Celia's gender identity within *As You Like It*, the socio-historical context must be taken into account. Varholý (2008, p. 9) explains that the image of the cross-dresser was intrinsically linked with the bawdy, performative world of England's early modern prostitute. In her examination of the cross-dress and the cross-class, Varholý identifies the association of a fluid, performative gender identity as a 'telltale sign of whoredom' (p. 8). Elizabethan society, ostensibly a creature of comfort and conformity, distinguished between the performative and real with a certain degree of leniency. Rosalind's epilogue acknowledges her character's male portrayal on stage, stating that 'If [she] were a woman' (*As You Like It*, 5. 4. 13-14), a clear disclaimer and an acknowledgement of the suspension of gender within the play. Subversive gender identity was not exclusive to the stage however, many aspects of cross-dressing, as a function of transgression, were present in the culture of the Carnival (Howard, 1988 p. 349). Carnavalesque culture celebrated the loosening of societal restrictions such as social class and gender, typically celebrated with revelry and feasting, with cross-dressing '[having enormous symbolic significance]' (p. 350). Given the established freedom of the Carnival, Garber argues cross-dressing on stage was a socially acceptable transgression, and that 'all of the figures onstage are impersonators' (Garber, 1992 p. 40); this is a plausible conclusion in *As You Like It*, as the two main female characters are cross-dressers.

In her book 'Gender Trouble' Judith Butler explains the duality of both sex and gender in relation to a masculine or feminine body, dismissing the belief that 'gender mirrors sex or is otherwise restricted by it' (Butler, 2006 p. 9) Butler's perspectives on modern gender identity can likewise be attributed to the characters of Rosalind and Celia within *As You Like It*. Introduced first as two courtly ladies '[devising] sports' (*As You Like It*, 1. 2. 19) such as 'falling in love' (1. 2. 20) Rosalind and Celia do not initially appear to embody many typically masculine qualities. Their response to hearing of Charles injuring a contender during the wrestling is disdainful, with Rosalind crying 'Alas!' (1. 2. 106), a clear initial separation between the masculine and feminine worlds. Upon speaking with Orlando, Rosalind offers him 'the little strength that [she has]' (1. 2. 155) with Celia echoing her sentiments, praying her strength 'eke out [Rosalind's]' (1. 2. 156). Such lengthy displays of female characters as weak vessels that must offer their strength to their male counterparts speaks to the historical views of women as demure. Rosalind and Celia's feminine gender identity and decorum exist during these first few acts to emphasise their later subversion of these norms when cross-dressing.

Valerie Traub argues that Shakespeare 'perpetuates defensive structures of dominance' (Traub, 1992), yet *As You Like It* creates a contrast between such masculine boundaries and gender subversion through the act of cross-dressing throughout the play. Rosalind faces banishment by Duke Frederick during Act one Scene three, stating that 'Thou art thy father's daughter' (*As You Like It*, 1. 3. 50) depicting Rosalind as merely a possession of the patriarch. Rosalind's later adoption of male garb and having 'hidden woman's fear' (1. 3. 111) is a declarative statement. Further promising that she'll present 'a martial outside' (1. 3. 112), Rosalind's clear duality of the feminine body and a masculine identity subverts gender perceptions and allows a drastic shift in her character. Rosalind ceases to be Rosalind; taking on the identity of Ganymede, grasping a 'boar-spear' (1. 3. 110), Jean E. Howard writes that Rosalind's newfound identity allows her to '[redefine the] position of woman.' (Howard, 1988 p. 351)

Structurally, Rosalind embarks on a character arc that sees her temporarily suspend gender norms; the transience of gender fluidity is used as a tool to escape societal gender conventions. Rosalind, assuming the role of Ganymede, adopts a male garb and masculine semblances to escape from patriarchal oppression, yet ultimately is married by the play's denouement. Evidently, cross-dressing allows more for a brief respite from gender roles than a permanent 'destabilization' of societal norms (Garber, 1992 p. 36). Marjorie Garber further explains that the act of cross-dressing was a function of Orlando and Rosalind falling in love, but that 'Ganymede' was never the specific object of desire, merely a subversive tool used to initiate their relations (pp. 36-37). Rosalind's use of the female façade in her interactions with Orlando, who has now embodied the Petrarchan lover, betrays her as 'the not-man' (Howard, 1988 p. 350) to the audience in a twist of dramatic irony. In a reversal of contextual norms, Rosalind wields authority over Orlando, instructing him on the 'madness' (*As You Like It*, 1. 3. 346) of love. Orlando's role as the student of wooing, and Rosalind as a mentor figure reveals how gender roles have been subverted, with Orlando naming Rosalind 'Fair youth' (1. 3. 336) alluding to both her cross-dressing

and possession of both masculine and feminine features. Rosalind's traditional courtly femininity seen in Act 1 is a blatant contrast with the commanding masquerade of Ganymede. It is clear that Rosalind's cross-dressing has allowed her to adopt the aspect of an Elizabethan man along with his attire. Orlando's masculine wrestling in Act 1 is now likewise contrasted with his almost submissive adherence to Ganymede's advice, portraying the change in gender roles over the play's course. Whilst the act of cross-dressing appears to convince most characters within *As You Like It*, the dramatic irony is palpable. Rosalind's determination not to 'cry like a woman' (*As You Like It*, 2. 4. 4.) and to 'comfort the weaker vessel' (2. 4. 4-5) acknowledges this faith in the fragility, if not malleability, of the female identity and of gender as a whole. In admitting the nominally apparent nature of gender, Rosalind emphasises the role of 'man's apparel' (2. 4. 3.) in subverting this female identity, more for her own sake than any ideal of wooing Orlando. Inevitably, gender identity's subversion is 'restored' to its natural binary by the play's conclusion. Both Rosalind's marriage to Orlando and Celia's marriage to Oliver symbolise the joining of masculine and feminine in a culturally familiar process, contrasted with Rosalind and Celia's cross-dressing in order to appropriate this marriage. Additionally, Rosalind's discarding of her 'counterfeit' (5. 1. 167.) persona restores her to a somewhat less powerful role, with Duke Senior declaring her 'my daughter' (5. 4. 104) in affirmation of her return to Elizabethan society.

In *As You Like It*, cross-dressing is portrayed as used as a tool in order to escape restrictive Elizabethan gender roles, thereby subverting the societal norms that govern gender-appropriate behaviour and limit freedom. Contemporary criticisms of Shakespeare's use of cross-dressing argue that the employment of young males to act in women's roles enabled a subversion of sumptuary laws, this despite the prohibition against women actors during the Elizabethan period. Rosalind's adoption of her male identity within the play suggests not only a freedom to act as a man would, but freedom from acting as a woman might, evidenced by her constant repression of the 'weaker vessel' (*As You Like It*, 2. 4. 4.). Overall, the repression of female gender identity in favour of a masculine appearance works to emphasise the play's dramatic irony. Subtle nods to this dichotomy are seen in Rosalind's use of prose and verse to highlight Ganymede's presence. Cross-dressing is a tool by which a character avoids perceived limitations and expectations of their sex, altering the outward appearance to precede the manifestation of a new gender identity. The transient nature of *As You Like It's* gender fluidity preserves conventional identities, exhibited in Rosalind's eventual marriage, yet serves as a temporary escape from Elizabethan class and gender restrictions.

## Bibliography

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