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“Play[ing]” With Gender: Rosalind’s Gender Transformations in *As You Like It*

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If “all the world’s a stage,” Rosalind is both a playwright and a player in the metadrama of Shakespeare’s pastoral comedy *As You Like It*, constantly altering her identity—or “play[ing] many parts”—to command the events of the play (*AYL* 2.7.146-149). Upon her banishment in the Forest of Arden, the male persona Rosalind adopts—a shepherd named Ganymede—not only empowers her to interrogate her own constructs of masculinity and femininity, but her further performance as Ganymede playing Rosalind enables her to acquire agency in her relationship with Orlando, her love interest, by challenging gender binaries. As in a conventional pastoral, the countryside reforms Rosalind, but her reformation parodies the genre: Rosalind’s dynamic performance of varying gender identities frees her from the traditional gender roles of the pastoral, such as the lovesick swain and the impervious shepherdess, enabling her to manipulate the characters in the play who do adhere to those roles, namely Phoebe, Silvius, and Orlando. Ultimately, Rosalind’s dramatized gender transformations in *As You Like It* empower her to assume control over the play’s events by transcending gender binaries to obtain autonomy. Her performance as Ganymede thus satirizes typical pastoral gender roles, demonstrating how adherence to social constructs of gender serves as a barrier to achieving autonomy.

Rosalind’s decision to escape to the Forest of Arden represents a stride toward her obtaining autonomy by defying the limitations of her feminine gender identity in court. Duke Frederick attributes Rosalind’s banishment to her expression of feminine virtues, claiming, “Her very silence, and her patience/Speak to the people, and they pity her” (1.3.80-81). Ironically, Rosalind’s passivity, a trait often celebrated in women of her time, is cited as the reason for her banishment. The arbitrariness of Duke Frederick’s reasoning for Rosalind’s exile exposes her lack of agency as a woman in court and the absolute sovereignty of men in power. Thus, Rosalind cannot initially envision a reality where she can escape the constraints of her feminine

identity beyond the jurisdiction of Duke Frederick. She asks, “Alas, what danger will it be to us,/Maids as we are, to travel forth so far?/Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold” (1.3.114-115). Like Duke Frederick, Rosalind cites her femininity, her “beauty,” as a threat. The questioning unsureness of Rosalind’s tone indicates her lack of agency and consequent subjection to danger, which she attributes to her feminine appearance. However, once Celia suggests the possibility of disguise, Rosalind realizes that she can escape the limitations of her feminine appearance by “suit[ing] [her] all points like a man” in the Forest of Arden (1.3.121). Consistent with the pastoral mode, the countryside offers a possibility for transformation, for magical reformation away from the evils of court. Rosalind thus reforms herself by transforming into the male shepherd Ganymede, liberating her from the iniquities she sustains due to her feminine appearance. When Rosalind orders Celia, “look you call me Ganymede,” her tone shifts as she asserts her male identity; she becomes commanding rather than questioning, indicating her newfound agency (1.3.131). As Rosalind resolves to remake her identity as Ganymede, she embraces her banishment as an opportunity to escape the subjugation she experiences as a female at court and regains the preliminary autonomy necessary to challenge what she believes to be traditional masculinity and femininity.

By inventing the male persona of Ganymede upon her banishment, Rosalind begins to interrogate her understanding of what it means to be masculine or feminine. As Rosalind proposes her disguise, she illustrates her perception of traditional masculinity and parodies it as a performance. Rosalind emphasizes the significance of appearance as a marker for masculinity, suggesting that her height, “more than common tall,” renders her capable of convincingly transforming into a man (1.3.121). Thus, Rosalind characterizes her male persona as a costume, proceeding to convey the accessories that she will wear, which she believes will mark her

masculinity, such as “a gallant curtail-ax” and “a boar-spear,” but indicates that “in [her] heart/Lie there what hidden woman’s fear there will” (1.3.124-126). As such, Rosalind not only suggests the superficiality of her male persona but also implies that masculinity is a construct based heavily on appearances that can be used and discarded at will. She compares her own performance as a female disguised as a male to that of cowardly men attempting to assert their masculinity, proclaiming, “We’ll have a swashing and a martial outside—/As many other mannish cowards have/That do outface it with their semblances” (1.3.127-129). Here, Rosalind strays from iambic pentameter, creating a feminine ending with the unaccented eleventh syllable of “out-side;” this variation emphasizes both the significance and the instability of outward appearances as a distinguisher of gender. Ironically, Rosalind demonstrates that men can possess a “woman’s fear,” implying that fear is neither characteristically male nor female. Rosalind thus interrogates the arbitrariness of gender binaries, suggesting that the sole distinction between herself—a woman—and “many” men is the outward or “outside” appearance of masculinity. Through her persona as Ganymede, Rosalind exposes gender as performative by contradicting the arbitrary boundaries between masculinity and femininity.

Rosalind implements her ability to traverse gender binaries to interrogate her love interest, Orlando, in ways previously unavailable to her as a female, thus acquiring agency in her relationship. Rather than immediately revealing her identity, Rosalind employs her male persona of Ganymede to test both Orlando’s devotion to her and his general attitude toward femininity. She reveals her intent to deceive Orlando with her disguise to Celia, stating, “I will speak to him like a/saucy lackey, and under that habit play the knave/with him” (3.2.299-301). Rosalind thus illustrates she will use a “habit” or costume to mask her true feminine identity. Her utilization of the word “play” also implicates both her “play[ing]” the character of a man, suggesting the

performativeness of her interaction with Orlando and her intention to control their interaction through that very performance by “play[ing] with him.” As Ganymede, Rosalind assumes a position of authority in her exchange with Orlando, taunting him by suggesting that he cannot be a genuine lover because he does not “sigh” or “groan” as regularly as a clock ticks and lecturing him on the movement of time (3.2.308-309). Orlando offers only intermittent questions as Rosalind sermonizes him, and she ceases only when Orlando inquires, “Where dwell you, pretty youth?” (3.2.340) By utilizing the androgynous “youth,” Orlando points to the ambiguousness of Rosalind-as-Ganymede’s gender identity. Rosalind responds by obscuring her gender further; capitalizing on the opportunity to evaluate Orlando’s reactions, she baits him with comments that imply her femininity. She says she lives “here in the skirts/of the forest like fringe upon a petticoat” (3.2.342-343). Rosalind’s simile of an underskirt implies a hidden feminine identity beneath her masculine exterior. She extends a second simile comparing herself to a “cony,” a female rabbit, to indicate her nativity to the forest, also implicating her natural femininity (3.2.345). By contradicting her masculine mien, Rosalind utilizes the malleability of her gender identity to elicit Orlando’s response to her expressions of femininity.

Rosalind further assesses Orlando’s attitude towards femininity by degrading women, asserting her masculinity as Ganymede in an attempt to cultivate camaraderie with Orlando. She states, “I thank God I am not a/woman, to be touched with so many giddy offenses as he/hath generally taxed their whole sex withal” (3.2.354-356). Ironically, Rosalind not only outrightly denies her womanhood but also contradicts her statement. She describes women as passive, without agency, and inflicted with frivolousness. Yet, by upholding her performance as Ganymede and utilizing it strategically to test Orlando, Rosalind exhibits her jurisdiction over her love for Orlando. Even her condemnation of women is deliberate and performative; she

evaluates Orlando's responses to determine whether he sympathizes with her feigned disdain towards women. Having experienced the wrath and despotism of Duke Frederick, Rosalind takes action to ensure her love interest does not possess her uncle's misogynistic attitude. By asserting herself as a man, Rosalind frees herself and Orlando to speak openly with one another, as indicated by their use of prose. She thus not only encourages Orlando to be candid about his attitude towards women but also liberates herself and Orlando from the gender roles of courtship that they would otherwise be subject to in their interactions, enabling them to acquaint themselves with one another without behaving like senseless, dumbstruck lovers. Thus, Rosalind creates the opportunity to evaluate the genuineness of Orlando's love for her and, ultimately, to shape his behavior by establishing herself as an authority on love.

Rosalind manipulates her gender identity further to test Orlando's love for her by professing, disguised as Ganymede, that she can cure Orlando's lovesickness by pretending to be his beloved, herself, Rosalind. To convince Orlando she is an authority on love, Rosalind claims she remedied another man's lovesickness; she illustrates, "[the man] was to imagine me his love, his mistress, and I set him every day to woo me at which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable..." (3.2.415-418) By pretending to be herself as Ganymede, Rosalind creates the opportunity to evaluate how Orlando would behave with her before committing to a relationship with him. Again, she attempts to test Orlando's response to her femininity (her "effemina[cy]"), but also her variability (her "changeab[ility]"), both in gender and mood. Alone with Celia, Rosalind expresses the emotion she restrains when interacting with Orlando as Ganymede. Overwhelmed with her love for Orlando, Rosalind threatens to cry if Celia speaks to her, and Celia responds, "Have the grace to consider that tears do not become a man" (3.4.2). Celia thus stipulates the contradiction of Rosalind's masculine

appearance with her “effeminate” behavior. Rosalind is neither wholly masculine nor feminine but androgynous and “changeable.” Her moods, along with her gender identity, shift from rational and commanding to intensely emotional. Through her nuanced gender performances with Orlando, Rosalind tests the durability of his love for her despite these constant shifts.

By playing Rosalind as Ganymede, Rosalind also formulates Orlando into a desirable suitor, an ability she would not have if she were constrained to her feminine identity. When Orlando arrives tardy for his first lesson on love, Ganymede, pretending to be Rosalind, reprimands, “You a lover? An you serve me such another trick, never come in my sight more” (4.1.43-44). With her rhetorical question, Rosalind asserts her masculine authority by undermining Orlando’s dedication to her, forcing his apology. However, her subsequent ultimatum also insists on her expectations as a female in courtship. Throughout their interaction, Orlando adheres to the pastoral character of the lovelorn swain, whereas Rosalind, unbound to any gendered role, maintains control of her love for Orlando. As Rosalind commands their interaction, instructing Orlando to “woo” her as if she were his “very, very Rosalind,” he simply responds, “I would kiss before I spoke” (4.1.72-76). Driven by his characteristic lovesickness, Orlando possesses no agency. His powerlessness renders Rosalind capable of influencing him by manipulating her disguise. Orlando’s use of the auxiliary verb “would” indicates both his intention to kiss Rosalind rather than speak to her and his unwillingness to stage that interaction with Ganymede. Thus, Orlando unconsciously obeys Rosalind-as-Ganymede’s rebuttal: “Nay you were better speak first” (4.1.77-78). Ironically, because Orlando does not realize Ganymede is Rosalind, he does not kiss her before he speaks but does the opposite. Rosalind’s performance as Ganymede enables her to preemptively reform Orlando’s behavior as a suitor, which she would not have had the space to do in a traditional courtship situation.

Rosalind achieves autonomy by remaking herself into a parody of the traditional gendered characters associated with the pastoral genre. Her performance as Ganymede satirizes the typical roles of the lovestruck shepherd, suffering from unrequited love, and the unmoved shepherdess. Orlando, the subject of Rosalind's—and therefore, Ganymede's—love, does not recognize Ganymede as Rosalind and thus does not return Ganymede's affections, unknowingly pining for Rosalind. Distraught that Orlando did not meet with her as Ganymede as he promised, Rosalind laments that Orlando's "very hair is of the dissembling color" (3.4.7). She alludes that Orlando, like Judas, betrays her love, though he does not recognize her as Rosalind.

Overwhelmed by emotion, Rosalind oscillates between mourning her perceived unrequited love and exalting excessive praises of her Orlando. As such, Rosalind-as-Ganymede mimics the lovesick swain. However, Rosalind-as-Ganymede also spoofs the impervious shepherdess with Orlando. Ganymede pretends to deny Orlando as Rosalind, stating, "Well, in her person I say I will not have you," to which Orlando responds, "Then, in mine own person I die" (4.1.96-98). Rosalind's outright denial and Orlando's fatalistic response caricature the typical gendered pastoral characters, with Orlando now assuming the role of the lovesick swain. By parodying these typical pastoral characters, Rosalind demonstrates her liberation from the genders associated with them. Unlike the gendered characters in the play, such as Orlando, Phoebe, and Silvius, Rosalind achieves autonomy by transgressing gender binaries.

The final marriage scene demonstrates the control Rosalind possesses over the other characters in the play who, unlike her, succumb to traditional pastoral gender roles. Rosalind orchestrates the marriages of both herself and Orlando, as well as Silvius and Phoebe, by manipulating her gender identity and ultimately shedding her disguise as Ganymede. As Ganymede, she questions Orlando whether he will "have her [Rosalind]" when she "bring[s]



her,” to which Orlando responds, “That would I” (5.4.9-10). After training Orlando into her ideal suitor as Ganymede, Rosalind chooses to unearth her true identity only after ensuring that Orlando will marry her once she does. Rosalind also manipulates her disguise to orchestrate the marriage between Silvius and Phoebe, who embody the typical pastoral gender roles of the lovesick swain and the impervious shepherdess: the shepherd, Silvius, pines after the shepherdess Phoebe, who forcefully rejects him. Ironically, Phoebe unknowingly falls in love with Rosalind-as-Ganymede, exacerbating her rejection of Silvius. Rosalind knows that Phoebe, constrained to her gendered role as a shepherdess, will no longer desire to marry her once she realizes that Ganymede is a female in disguise. Thus, as Ganymede, Rosalind asks Phoebe, “But if you do refuse to marry me,/You’ll give yourself to this most faithful shepherd [Silvius]?” and Phoebe agrees (5.4.13-14). Rosalind’s ultimatum proves successful; when Rosalind reveals her true feminine identity, Phoebe responds, “If sight and shape be true,/Why then, my love adieu” (5.4.124-125). Phoebe’s reaction demonstrates both the significance of appearance in determining gender and the capacity of gender roles to limit autonomy. Though Phoebe likes Ganymede—Rosalind—from their initial meeting, she immediately rejects Rosalind solely because of the shift in her appearance from masculine to feminine. Phoebe’s cultural assumptions about which genders can be romantically involved compromise her freedom to choose her love interest. Through her performance as Ganymede, Rosalind stages the wedding scene, wielding the surrounding characters’ compliance to their gendered roles to secure her marriage to Orlando and Phoebe’s to Silvius. Rosalind thus employs her gender fluidity to control the characters around her who do comply with gender roles, demonstrating how their adherence to social constructs of gender limits their autonomy.

Rosalind not only satirizes typical pastoral gender roles through her performance as Ganymede, but her ability to transcend gender binaries also enables her to act as a pseudo-playwright within *As You Like It*, directing the characters in the play who do comply with typical pastoral gender roles, such as Orlando and Phoebe. Rosalind thus achieves autonomy by defying social constructs of gender and, by controlling the other characters in the play, demonstrates how their compliance with those constructs inhibits their agency. Though many assume Rosalind surrenders her autonomy in the final scene when she marries Orlando, telling him, “I am yours,” her ultimate undertaking of the epilogue calls into question whether that is indeed the case (5.4.121). As Rosalind claims, it is “not the fashion” for a woman to deliver the epilogue; thus, her delivery of it introduces multiple possibilities (5.EPI.1). For instance, Rosalind’s epilogue might imply that despite being feminine—no longer Ganymede—when she marries Orlando, Rosalind retains her autonomy. Yet, Rosalind’s utilization of the conditional “If I were a woman” also suggests that she may maintain her autonomy by remaining androgynous (5.EPI.17). The purpose of the epilogue might also be to simply satirize the play by highlighting that the actor who plays Rosalind is a male, like all actors of Shakespeare’s era. An extrapolation of this paper would explore these distinct possibilities by examining the epilogue of *As You Like It* to hypothesize whether Rosalind maintains her autonomy after her marriage to Orlando.

Works Cited

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