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When Shakespeare's "Women" Wear the Pants:  
An Examination of Rosalind and the Trouser Role in *As You Like It*

Elizabeth Bulley

FIYS 172

Professor Roberts

In a society where correct grammar seems to be becoming less and less common, the fact that improper word usage goes often unnoticed or uncorrected is not surprising. Using affect instead of effect or illusion in place of allusion may seem harmless enough, but when certain words become interchangeable, situations can quickly become muddled. One such blunder occurs frequently with the usage of the terms gender and sex. Both these words would seem synonymous since they are often used to refer to whether an organism is male or female, but this idea of a shared definition is severely inaccurate. Sex is defined as the biological aspects that make one male or female while gender describes the behavior, feelings, and attitudes that are associated with each sex.<sup>1</sup> This difference in definitions does not appear particularly vital in today's society where the lines that define gender standards are becoming blurred through the gradual acceptance of the homosexual population along with an increase in stay-at-home dads and women that "bring home the bacon"; however, in the time of the Renaissance, a specific performance of gender was expected to be executed by each sex with little to no crossover. One's sex determined whether he or she would be in the public or private realm, in business or with the children, in control or in submission, given power by the law or limited by it, and so on to the point where the words sex and gender may as well have been the same. However, the rigidity of these definitions, while widely accepted, did not go unchallenged or without examination. Through the inclusion of trouser roles in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare argues that it is gender and not sex that defines the difference in social roles between men and women, and that this gender identity can be created or altered by merely changing the performance of one's persona.

In examining Shakespeare's presentation of the roles women are capable of performing, it must be first established that Shakespeare's baseline representation of women coincides with

the life of real women during the time. No matter how much power Shakespeare bestows upon his heroines, the prevailing ideas of womanhood for the time cannot be ignored; otherwise Shakespeare's representations could be dismissed as mere fantasies rather than insightful commentaries. Readers must understand that Renaissance women were undeniably considered the weaker sex prone to falling into temptation. They were perceived as having a wanton nature that must be stifled in order to prevent their corruption. Shakespeare demonstrates his understanding of these views when he has Hamlet declare, "Frailty, thy name is woman,"<sup>2</sup> and with Jacques' explanation of the seven ages of man.<sup>3</sup> With these lines, Shakespeare acknowledges the accepted ideal of women serving as background characters, who are necessary yet troublesome when they go against society, and therefore establishes himself as knowledgeable on the societal roles of men and women during his time. This foundation of credibility is essential for without it his portrayals of women who went against the norm would be cast off as part of a whimsical style rather than critical examinations.

In these portrayals of women who defy the boundaries of their expected roles, the performance of the woman's character must be evaluated before "she" is established as an ideal against which other women should be compared. In a time, such as the Renaissance, when feminine power was so greatly suppressed, strong female characters frequently became representatives of their sex.<sup>4</sup> This generalization could prove powerful in convincing society that women were capable of handling more than for which they were given credit, but these prominent roles could also prove damaging depending on how the woman was portrayed. Often, even the supposed heroines of Shakespeare's time were marked by the traits considered desirable in a wife. With plays written, directed, and performed by men, what audiences were told to see

as an accurate depiction of womanhood was nothing more than “male concerns and male versions of how a woman should or should not behave.”<sup>5</sup>

This male ideal of woman was constructed and further manipulated through costume and performance when Rosalind dons male clothing and takes on the role of a man. Rosalind’s strength, privilege and rights are created just as she creates Ganymede. Through the acquisition of doublet and hose she is able to change the appearance of her sex and “affords her character the combined privilege of gender and class.”<sup>6</sup> Rosalind transforms from a young woman ruled over by a menacing uncle to a respected gentleman. Her disguise allows for her safe travel, enables her to purchase property, and permits her to befriend males. This newfound power alters her entire person as she begins to talk authoritatively to men and exercises control over other women. Even her emotions are dictated by her costume as she declares a “doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat.”<sup>7</sup> Here it is not her strength or ability that influences her attitude but simply her manner of dress. With men’s clothing, she does not only attain greater respect from the community but also increases her confidence in her own abilities, despite the fact that she obviously knows that she is still a woman. It is solely through aesthetics that her role, abilities, and attitude are completely redefined.

To further strengthen her identity as a male, Rosalind finds herself adjusting her attitudes and actions to perform her new part. She struggles to overcome her womanly nature as she says, “I could find in my heart to disgrace my man’s apparel and to cry like a woman; but I must comfort the weaker vessel.”<sup>8</sup> Here, Rosalind separates herself from the more feminine Celia declaring women to be the weaker vessel. This statement exposes Rosalind’s thought that her persona has been altered due to her change in costume and performance. As a man, she is strong and will not cry, but as a woman, crying is to be expected. Later, however, her performance

falters as she faints, and her manhood is called into question with, “You a man? You lack a man’s heart.” Rosalind regains her composure and is able to reestablish her act with, “I do so, I confess it. Ah, sirrah, a body would think this was well counterfeited!”<sup>9</sup> This slight flaw in her act may seem trivial, but it serves to remind the audience that the young boy is actually supposed to be a woman dressed as a young man bringing out the more flippant side of Ganymede’s portrayal. It is this varying portrayal of characteristics that weakens the argument for trouser roles as a method for displaying women’s true potential. Trouser roles call into question whether or not a woman portrayed as a man “destabilizes sexual boundaries by engendering cross-dressed heroines who expose the ‘constructedness’ of gender,”<sup>10</sup> or whether they serve a strictly comedic purpose that focuses on the absurdity of a weak-hearted woman trying to exhibit the bravery of a man.

The absurdity of the play would seem to be further amplified through the fantastical setting that serves as a backdrop to Rosalind’s performance of Ganymede, but instead, this fairytale world is the very thing that allows Shakespeare to safely criticize society’s view of women. The magical “green world” of Arden represents a clean slate where the typical societal standards can become null and void. Again the fantasy and comedy tied to the reversal of gender roles would seem to discount Shakespeare as a supporter of women’s equality, but readers must remember that Shakespeare was limited by his time. If a woman in man’s clothing was portrayed in a more serious light, it is highly probable that the play would not have been so widely accepted and highly praised, but by portraying all that happens with a touch of jest, the audience was more receptive to what would have otherwise been an offensive idea. In the forest that could not possibly exist, or if it did it was a safe distance away, the viewers of the play could watch

Rosalind transition from a weak female to a strong male to a strong female with open minds rather than defensive judgments.

From niece, to lover, to wooer, to daughter, and wife, Rosalind's quest can be broken down by changes in her relationships with men. This is in accordance with the practices of the Renaissance since, "throughout this period, women continued to be defined primarily by their social standing and in terms of their gendered relationships to men."<sup>11</sup> She starts off as an oppressed girl who meets Orlando and becomes a lover. She is then forced into the role of a man as she flees her uncle in search of her father. Her later encounter with Orlando turns her into a teacher, and then, when she is reunited with her father and marries Orlando, she becomes a daughter and wife. When viewing Rosalind's character journey from this perspective, it can be argued that it is the men in her life, rather than her own acquired independence and bravery, who serve as the catalysts that spur her forward. If she had not been exiled by her uncle, or if her uncle never removed her father from power, then she never would have left her home and would have remained a proper young woman who would have eventually become a proper young wife. Supporters of this conclusion would claim that Rosalind's accomplishments are not even her own since all her actions were brought about by men. As a woman, whether dressed as a man or not, she is simply a pawn that is pushed from one stage of life to another by the men in her life, but when in men's clothing, she is able to push back.

By taking up the part of an authoritative male, Rosalind is in a way proving, or attempting to prove, that while a weak woman such as Phoebe must not expect to marry someone she likes, a strong woman, who is able to take on the role of a man and therefore has the rights of a man, is qualified to choose her own husband. In this way, Rosalind is justifying her desire to marry Orlando, and, in the end, her character earns that very right. While a love match is far

from uncommon in western civilization, in the time of the Renaissance, marriages were transactions based on advancing a family's political and economic station. A young woman would often have little to no say over whom she married, while Rosalind not only loves her husband, but, through her costume, is able to experience his friendship rather than being established as a submissive wife. As Ganymede, Rosalind works with Orlando and even teaches him, a practice that would rarely, if ever, occur in a Renaissance household. The woman was supposed to be subservient to the males in her life, but Rosalind has the opportunity to establish her wit and value to the man that would become her husband. Readers and audience members can only be assumed that the equality in their relationship remains, despite Rosalind reclaiming the dress.

By resuming her place as a woman, Rosalind cements her female identity and draws all conflict to a close. This "happy ending" would at first seem to celebrate a powerful woman who is able to attain everything she has hoped for, but upon a second examination, readers must question if powerful womanhood is truly what is being celebrated. Instead, Rosalind's marriage to Orlando can be seen as a restoration of proper order. From one perspective, *As You Like It* appears to be the story of a brave young woman who is able to take up the part of a man and accomplish her goals while from a Renaissance perspective, it shows the unacceptable actions of a woman being eventually righted through her taking up her proper role as a dutiful wife. These varying viewpoints illustrate the dilemma of a breeches heroine, who despite her strength and exercised power, usually falls victim to a patriarchal attempt to contain and neutralize the assertive woman by passing off her rebellion as a temporary state that is characterized by comedy and remedied through marriage.<sup>12</sup> From this viewpoint, Shakespeare allows Rosalind to have her fun as a way of exercising her desire for freedom only to later force her into the

traditional role of the ideal woman, submissive and breeches free, but while Ganymede gives up her hose and relinquishes her authoritative status as a respected male by submitting to her father and future husband, all her power is not lost, and her work is not undone. As Ganymede, she was able to strengthen Orlando's confidence in his own male authority proving that the power of man is derived from women.

Regardless of how well Rosalind performs the role of a man or what she is able to accomplish throughout the play, her power will always remain in question due to the fact that "she" was never a "she" to begin with. As a statute of the Renaissance time period, all the women's parts were played by boys. This is a fact that could not be ignored by audiences. Viewers would have seen Rosalind as the character being performed through costume and actions and Ganymede being portrayed as the natural representation. This view compromises the strength of Rosalind's character since it is no longer a woman doing a man's work but a man doing man's work, which is worthy of little note. Even the performance of Rosalind must be questioned since "the male performer, whose loyalty to concepts of female competence or for that matter androgyny cannot be assumed."<sup>13</sup> So many centuries from when the play was first enacted, we cannot know whether the boys playing Rosalind sincerely tried to capture the essence of a woman, or whether, since the play was a comedy, they carried out their performance in jest.

The presence of boy actors brings further confusion to the interpretation of Shakespeare's intentions for the trouser role as another possible purpose for placing female characters in pants could have been to provide the boys, who were normally confined to playing women until their voices changed, with the opportunity to express their true selves through their acting. In this sense, plays with trouser roles reveal more about the life of boys during the time period than they

do about the lives of women because while the part of the women is written and performed by males, the part of the boy is written for and performed by boys.<sup>14</sup> This would seem to be another source of opposition against proving that trouser roles support women's power, but it does not completely undermine the tale of the strong heroine. All plays at the time consisted of all male casts and so female parts played by males were to be expected and were not always portrayed in a comedic light. For example, Shakespeare's Gertrude and Ophelia's characters were portrayed in a serious manner. If their parts had been played in jest, then the integrity of the tragic play would have been dissolved. There is undeniably some further complexity in Rosalind's character as the male actor is playing a "she" acting the part of a "he," but this is not immediate grounds for discrediting all of Rosalind's actions and deeds. Today, it may be hard to take a man in women's clothing seriously, but, in the Renaissance, it was just part of the show.

Since all female parts were performed by men, it can be imagined that all the women, no matter how fair they were supposed to be, looked a little manly, but Rosalind declares herself to have manly characteristics allowing for her nearly seamless transition into manhood. She believes herself to be capable of portraying the part of a man saying, "Because I am more than common tall/ That I did suit me all points like a man?"<sup>15</sup> This emphasis on traits and later emphasis on Rosalind's strong nature supports the theory that if she had not possessed these qualities she could not have executed the performance of the male gender. It supports the idea that not just any woman can play a man but only the rare manly woman. This is further proven by Rosalind's very idea that she dress up as a man. Tranvestism was prohibited, especially among women, as wearing men's clothing not only went against the natural order but was also seen as a type of rebellion since it would involve a woman attempting to claim a position not allowed to her.<sup>16</sup> Needless to say, it would not be a practice that would casually come to mind.

This and Rosalind's identification with male characteristics along with her choice of the name Ganymede, the name of Zeus' cupbearer who has been associated with homosexuality, could lead one to deduce that Rosalind associated herself with the male gender even before she put on male clothing.

The source of Rosalind's ambivalence could stem from attempts to define herself in terms of Ganymede, who is also herself, creating confusion between actor, character, and reality. From taking on the persona of Ganymede, Rosalind becomes consumed by the part. Even after her return to being Rosalind, she declares, "if I were a woman..."<sup>17</sup> to the audience hinting that the effects of her drawn out performance are lingering, and she has yet to release her identity as a man. It is this confusion that illustrates Rosalind's refusal "to choose between actor and character, male and female."<sup>18</sup> This instability would seem to arise from Rosalind's own attempts to define her role. As a woman, she must define herself through man, but, as a man, she must define herself as herself. It would seem that this "gender confusion" is rectified through marriage, but as the audience sees nothing of Rosalind's married life, this cannot be determined with any certainty.

While it appears that Shakespeare restores his masculine woman to her "rightful place" in society, his heroine still undeniably took up the role of a man with little transition besides the donning of doublet and hose. It would be easy to "mis-categorize" *As You Like It* as yet another enjoyable play with a happy ending in which "the patriarch is restored to his family, the king to his kingdom, the heroine to her woman's weeds,"<sup>19</sup> but that is only the surface-level interpretation. Despite everything appearing to go on as it should, an undeniable change has occurred in the heroine that would not be commonly found in the heart of the ideal Renaissance woman. Rosalind tasted her freedom and chose to resume her role, but she did not forget her

experiences as a male, nor did her audience. Regardless of the sex of the actor that portrayed her, a woman, represented as powerful in a time where women were powerless, was bound to move the hearts of the watching public. Whether or not *As You Like It* had the potential to change Renaissance views of women is debatable, but it most certainly caused viewers to question what defines the masculine and feminine and what really prevents someone from crossing over from one to the other. For if “All the world’s a stage/ And all the men and women merely players,”<sup>20</sup> who is left to determine who plays which role?

## Notes

1. "Definition of Terms: Sex, Gender, Gender Identity, and Sexual Orientation," American Psychological Society, last modified February 18-20, 2011, <http://www.apa.org/pi/lgbt/resources/sexuality-definitions>
2. William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, ed. David Bevington ( New York: Scott, Foresman and Company, 1980), 14.
3. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine ( New York: Washington Square Press, 1997), 81.
4. David Mann, *Shakespeare's Women: Performance and Conception* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge UP, 2008) 17.
5. Ibid., 51.
6. Theresa Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare* ( California: Greenwood, 2010)71.
7. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 61.
8. Ibid., 61.
- 9 . Ibid., 167.
10. Shannon Hegen and Nancy A. Walker, *Performing Gender and Comedy: Theories, Texts and Contexts* ( Amsterdam, Netherlands: Gordon and Breach, 1998) 21.
11. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*, 30.
12. Mann, *Shakespeare's Women*, 231.
13. Ibid.,226.
14. Miles, Groth, "Shakespeare's "Boys," *Thymos: Journal of Boyhood Studies* 2, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 93, doi: 10.3149/thy.0201.91.
15. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 43.
16. Ann Roberts, "Joan of Arc."(lecture, Lake Forest College, IL, 10 November 2011).
17. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 205.
18. Kemp, *Women in the Age of Shakespeare*, 51.
29. Shirley F. Staton, "Female Transvestism in Renaissance Comedy: 'A Natural Perspective, That Is and Is Not'," *Iowa State Journal Of Research* 56, no. 1 (August 1981): 87.

20. Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, 83.

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