The Transforming Power of Breeches: the Merging of Rosalind's Two Selves in As You Like It

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The Transforming Power of Breeches: the Merging of Rosalind’s Two Selves in As You Like It

Keywords
William Shakespeare, As You Like It, Juxtaposition
One cannot be bored in the world of Shakespeare. Whatever is soon becomes transformed into something new and different. His worlds are never static, and neither are his characters. The varying points of view that Shakespeare presents to his audience cause us to examine what we think we know, what we simply assume, what we've always been taught. Shakespeare delights in juxtaposing passion with reason, law with compassion, might with divine right, societal rules with individual freedom. But these conflicts are all abstractions. In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare sets up a juxtaposition with which we are all unavoidably and most concretely connected—our masculine with feminine identities. The character
Rosalind, because of her double identity and her journey from powerlessness to self-determination, causes us to examine the roles, along with their benefits and limitations, that society forces us into because of our gender. And, although Rosalind ultimately re-enters society in a role deemed “proper” for a woman, a portion of the liberty she experienced while playing the role of a man remains with her.

Rosalind, as we first meet her, is in a totally powerless position. Her precarious situation in society is regulated solely by her relationship to men and their status in that society. Because her father is “banish’d” (1.2.5), she is totally dependent upon the mercies of “her usurping uncle” (1.2.274), the new Duke. Rosalind recognizes her loss of prestige and position in society, and this is evidenced by how she gives in, defers to, and beseeches those around her. Celia’s father, rather than Rosalind’s, is now the one in a position of authority, and this places Rosalind below Celia on the social scale. Because of this, Rosalind tries to “forget the condition of [her] estate” (1.2.15) as Celia requests. When Rosalind suggests “falling in love” as a choice of “sport” (1.2.26), Celia limits her with “I prithee thee do . . . but” (1.2.26-27, emphasis mine) and goes on to suggest a new form of sport, “mock[ing] the good huswife” (1.2.31), which Rosalind defers to. Duke Frederick, though a usurper, is addressed by Rosalind as “my liege” (1.2.157), “dear uncle” (1.3.50), and “your Highness” (1.3.52). She asks him “leave” (1.2.157) and says she will make Orlando’s safety her “suit to the Duke” (1.2.181-82). Speaking to Orlando before the wrestling match, Rosalind sums up the state of her might: “The little strength that I have, I would it were with you” (1.2.194-95). At this point, her strength is limited to well-wishes only.

Even though Rosalind is physically and politically powerless at the beginning of As You Like It, we see early evidence of her inner, mental strength. An interesting example of this combination of outer physical weakness and inner mental strength can be seen in Roberta Maxwell’s portrayal of Rosalind in John Hirsch’s 1983 production of As You Like It. When Duke Frederick banishes Rosalind, she physically crumples to the ground, weeping (a stage direction not found in the text, of course). Yet, even as she is prostrate and weeping, she verbally defends herself against the new Duke’s charge of treason, which he supports by the statement: “Thou art thy father’s daughter” (1.3.58). Rosalind boldly replies: “So was I when your Highness took his dukedom, / So was I when your Highness banish’d him” (1.3.59-60), certainly a brave but risky act on Rosalind’s part. Her anger in response to his accusations seems to awaken a hidden inner strength that we, and perhaps even Rosalind herself, have
Rosalind, because of her double identity and her journey from powerlessness to self-determination, causes us to examine the roles, along with their benefits and limitations, that society forces us into because of our gender. And, although Rosalind ultimately re-enters society in a role deemed “proper” for a woman, a portion of the liberty she experienced while playing the role of a man remains with her.

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Another clue to the extent of Rosalind’s inner resources is the wonderful power of her imagination. After deciding that she and Celia will go into the woods of Arden together, Rosalind worries about their safety: “Alas, what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far! / Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold” (1.3.108-10). They decide to disguise themselves, but Celia’s imagination goes only so far as “poor and mean attire” and “smirch[ed] face” (1.3.111-12). Rosalind, however, lets her imagination soar:

Were it not better,
Because that I am more than common tall,
That I did suit me all points like a man?
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand . . .
We’ll have a swashing and a martial outside.

Rosalind is not limited by thoughts of gender, and her imagination even goes so far as to transform her, not into just any man, but a “swashing” and “martial” one.

Rosalind’s subsequent change of attire transforms more than just her outer physical appearance; her decision to become a man also transforms her from one who is acted upon to one who acts. Even before donning “doublet and hose” (2.4.6), she performs her first act of self-determination, renaming herself: “I’ll have no worse a name than Jove’s own page, / And therefore look you call me Ganymed” (1.3.124-25). She goes on to suggest to Celia that they “steal/The clownish fool out of[CELIA’S] father’s court” (1.3.129-30); thus we see her gradually stepping into the role of the decision maker and leader of the pair. This leadership role continues as, entering the woods of Arden, we see Rosalind attempting to be brave and comfort Celia, “the weaker vessel” (2.4.6), and purchasing a “cottage, pasture, and . . . flock” (2.4.92) without consulting her traveling companions.

It is interesting to note that, although Rosalind becomes more assertive and self-determined after taking on the role of a man, the extent to which she exhibits that power is dependent upon her audience. Even though she becomes a leader and a decision maker, she still reveals her weaker side to those who know she is a woman masquerading as a man. When Celia withholds from Rosalind the identity of a certain young man she has spotted in Arden, Rosalind vehemently asks, “[D]ost thou think, though I am caparison’d like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?” (3.2.194-96). In her excitement her banter grows almost frantic, and she makes a response that stereotypes women: “Do you not know I am a woman? when I think I must speak” (3.2.249-50). Rosalind, for a moment, seems to forget her newfound...
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sense of confidence and strength.

This seeming return to her earlier feminine weakness, though, is balanced by the change in her body language while wearing men's clothing. Roberta Maxwell, as Rosalind, once more provides an interesting illustration. In the excitement of hearing about Orlando's arrival in Arden, Rosalind again falls to the ground. But instead of her fall suggesting physical weakness, this time she falls backwards from a sitting position with arms spread and legs askew—a position that, besides suggesting a sexual confidence usually limited to males, also shows her to be at home in her body, comfortable, and sure of herself. Actress Sophie Thompson, who played Rosalind in John Caird's production of *As You Like It* at the Royal Shakespeare Theatre in 1989, sums up Rosalind's newfound sense of liberty: "I was in a dress at the beginning, then I found a new kind of freedom—if there had been a tree on the set I could have climbed it" (83). Rosalind's male attire gives her a physical freedom unknown in the earlier restrictive dress of the female at court.

When we see Rosalind with those who are not aware of her masquerade, we observe her at the peak of her self-confidence and assertiveness. After Jacques informs her that he loves being melancholy "better than laughing" (4.1.4), Rosalind sets him straight, saying "Those that are in extremity of either are abominable fellows, and betray themselves to every modern censure worse than drunkards" (4.1.5-7). Rosalind is extremely harsh with the "proud and pitiless" (3.5.40) Phebe: "Sell when you can, you are not for all markets" (3.5.60). "You foolish shepherd" (3.5.49), Rosalind chides the love-struck, but blinded, Silvius, "'Tis such fools as you / that makes the world full of ill-favor'd children" (3.5.52-53).

But Rosalind's emancipation and dual nature are most evidenced in her encounters as Ganymed with Orlando. On one hand, she decides to "play the knave" (3.2.296), "give him some good counsel" (3.2.364), and "cure" (3.2.426) him. She leaves behind the feelings of inferiority and submission that being female entailed in the world of the court and becomes his teacher, his inquisitor. Rosalind lectures Orlando on the nature of Time and "how to know a man in love" (3.2.370), which she asserts he is not. She teaches him the true nature of love when she mockingly counsels Orlando to "die by attorney" (4.1.94), reprimanding him for his extravagant words and reminding him that "men have died from time to time . . . but not for love" (4.1.106-08). She characterizes women as "changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something, and for no passions truly anything" (3.2.411-14), testing Orlando's conception of
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women. But on the other hand, Rosalind also becomes Orlando’s playmate and lover. We must not forget that she is not really Ganymed, but Rosalind playing at being Ganymed playing at being Rosalind. Rosalind’s disguise gives her, as Ganymed playing at being Rosalind, the liberty to request of Orlando what society would never allow her to utter as Rosalind: “Come, woo me, woo me” (4.1.68). Not only does she command Orlando’s romantic attentions, she also, though mockingly, gives to Celia the role of priest and proposes to Orlando: “Give me your hand, Orlando” (4.1.125).

Later Rosalind, like Theseus in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, is the authority figure who pairs off the couples correctly, consenting to the unions of Oliver with Celia and Touchstone with Audrey, tricking Phebe into a union with Silvius, and revealing her identity and presenting herself to Orlando. Although she defers to her father’s position, according to their society’s rules of feminine submission, and states to him “To you I give myself, for I am yours” (5.4.116), her submissive words are undermined by her declaration to Orlando: “I’ll have no husband, if you be not he” (5.4.123). Here we see that, although Rosalind verbally assents to the role of women in society, she is actually rebelling against it in practice.

When Rosalind decides to reveal herself to Orlando and become his wife, she sheds her identity as Ganymed along with her men’s apparel, and she also gives up some of the freedoms she enjoyed as a man. The physical and mental liberties of Arden are cast off for restrictive female garments and the submissive role of wife. Upon Rosalind’s revelation of herself as a woman to Phebe, Hymen comments: “You to his [Silvius’] love must accord, / Or have a woman for your lord” (5.4.133-34). This comment, coupled with Rosalind’s earlier “I would love you if I could” (5.2.111-12) illustrates that, although Rosalind has gained some freedom and advancement of thought, she has not completely thrown off the constraints of society, if she still, even half seriously, sees the idea of a woman as lord as an unnatural thing. Indeed, once Rosalind presents herself to Orlando as bride, she does not speak another word in the last act of the play!

In the epilogue we see the final result of the merging of Rosalind’s two selves. As Rosalind submits to the role of wife, her hard-won freedoms are challenged and seem to be slipping away. She again reacts with an inner strength. She no longer blindly follows the rules that society sets forth for women; now she exhibits a knowledge of what those rules are and then challenges them. “[i]t is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue: but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue” (1-3). Her dual role has prepared her to identify with both the women and the men of the audience. She charges the
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women, “for the love you bear to men, to like as much of this play as please you” (13-14); and then charges the men, “for the love you bear to women (as I perceive by your simp’ring, none of you hates them), that between you and the women the play may please” (15-17). Rosalind’s charges to the men and the women are essentially the same. This suggestion of equality underscores her earlier assessment of the suitability of a woman performing the epilogue and puts women and men on equal ground—at least in Rosalind’s eyes. It is also interesting to note that although Rosalind earlier was limited by her audience’s awareness of her gender, while delivering the epilogue to an audience even more intimately aware of who she is than her previous audiences, she is able confidently to overstep accepted boundaries, challenge them verbally, and then act according to her personal inclinations—regardless of gender. Rosalind even seems to draw energy from the audience and interacts with them, as we can see from Roberta Maxwell’s performance, in a playful and confident manner.

By allowing Rosalind’s transformation from powerlessness to self-determination and freedom to be triggered by her assuming a male identity, Shakespeare causes us, if we are not careful, to assume that it is the male identity—the breeches—that empowers Rosalind. Yet, as we have seen, her transformation begins even before she dons doublet and hose. Her strength was there all along, but it was constrained by the role society forced her to play. The unusual and precarious circumstance Rosalind finds herself in, her own banishment, causes her to reach down deep into her inner resources and become what she already had the potential to be. Thus, we see Shakespeare blurring gender lines to make us question how much of the roles we play are natural or biological and how much of them are self- or society-imposed. As Rosalind earlier commented to Celia, “now thou goest from Fortune’s office to Nature’s” (1.2.40-41). Through Rosalind’s growth, Shakespeare illustrates that the potential for self-determination is in us all, waiting to be unleashed—if we like it.
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Works Cited


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**Flight of the Imagination**

Laura M. Tomashek  
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Thomas Bewick, an ornithological illustrator and nature writer, provided artistic inspiration for the imagination of the Victorian writer, Charlotte Brontë. Bewick captured the essence of nature in art and poetry. In his poem titled “Newcastle Upon Tyne,” Bewick wrote:

*O Nature! How in every charm supreme;  
Thy votaries feast on raptures ever new!  
O for the voice and fire of seraphim  
To sing thy glories with devotion due!  
Blest be the day I ’scap’d the wrangling crew,*

*From Pyrrho ’s maze, and Epicurus ’ sty;  
And held high converse with the godlike few,*