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“Suit Me All Points Like a Man”: Gender and Performance in As You Like It and Richard III

Keywords
Renaissance court, Gender, As You Like It, Richard III, William Shakespeare
The restricted masculinity of public life and the patriarchal dynamic that dominated the Renaissance courts are considered with candor, self-reflexivity, and mild superciliousness in *As You Like It* and *Richard III*. Archetypal ascension to power, operating through the venue of Machiavellian masculinity, is, in its lack of individual honesty and integrity, defined as a performance—political success depending upon the “putting on” of personage. In much of Shakespeare’s work, performance and the creation
of characters is employed for the purposes of reflection and realism (“to hold the mirror up to nature” as Hamlet claimed). In a comparison of the aforementioned works, however, it becomes clear that acting is not a befitting representation of reality; rather, it is a selfish, normalizing performance specific to the realm of the courts.

As the Renaissance court was an intrinsically patriarchal setting, the assumption of “masculine” roles was necessary if there was to be any plausible embrace of power. Thus, the world of politics and government, as presented through the Machiavellian court, was a façade, exuding an evident theatricality in the political sphere, materialized in the deceptive and ambitious members of the public realm. Power-hungry individuals—almost exclusively men due to the patriarchal dominance of the setting—are then characteristically void; the natural state of man is impossible if success (an infectious ambition) is to be achieved. Gender, and more specifically masculinity, is then almost entirely performative.¹

In these two texts, Shakespeare acknowledges the performative nature of “maleness,” highlighting its malleable nature by characterizing men as closer to androgynous than fundamentally masculine in their a priori state. He employs an egalitarian form of storytelling where all beings (who are inherently equal and without gender conformity) are then defined by their surroundings or stage: the physical or dramatic space where a gender role is performed. The transferable qualities (or “putting on” capabilities) of masculine engendering are contrasted with the masquerade
of public life—the masquerade necessary for success—through a separation of the patriarchal and feminine. In both examples, the courts are the stage for masculine performance while the moments of isolation and privacy (Richard III) and the setting of the Forest of Arden (As You Like It) exist indifferently, allowing men to express their natural, rustic, and innocent character. When, to speak figuratively, the performative stage is separated from the private backstage, the male characters are removed from their attempts to enact the archetypal gender expectations of the court (often the antithesis of their true being) and their inherent qualities that lie beneath the veneer of gender are exposed: man in his apriori form.

In As You Like It the complexities of masculinity (as a gender construct) are appropriated in the geography of the text, which illustrates two contraries through the interplay of the court and forest. The court is the vibrant and surreal stage of patriarchal struggle and ambition, the public realm of Machiavellian ethics; the Forest of Arden is the idyllic garden, the pasture that is associated with the natural male environment, allowing for the expression of intrinsic character—hidden desires and effemination—and the abandon of archetypal performance. Strong gender identity, displayed in the court, is of an entirely performative character. “All the world’s a stage,” (2.7.139) and the male and female, the masculine and feminine, the two gender archetypes, are both projections – insignificant enactments.

The forest, therefore, is fundamentally a world of men—a location that provides sex exclusivity and a
temporary vacation from the masculine identity. Yet it is important to distinguish between gender and sex. The Forest is a location for the male sex; however, it is free from the stereotypical projections of the male gender. Only those who are of the male sex or accompany those who are of the male sex can enter. The performance of masculinity is not required, as we see through the effeminate performance of the young “boy” Ganymede. Instead, the adoption of the sex is necessary, allowing them to freely bear souls, sentiment, and emotion with each other—natural, human interaction that is only achievable in the hidden forest. The forest, as it will be shown, is the natural habitat of men, the setting that unleashes original masculinity or a lack thereof.

The idyllic forest setting is, as previously mentioned, comparable to the geography of original man: the Garden of Eden. As Duke Senior describes, the setting is one that evokes the natural male environment, allowing men to realize their true, atypical character in a non-performative setting despite its unlikely existence in the post-Eden world:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Are not these woods} \\
\text{More free from peril than the envious court?} \\
\text{Here feel we not the penalty of Adam;} \\
\text{The seasons’ difference, as the icy fang} \\
\text{And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind,} \\
\text{Which, when it bites and blows upon my body} \\
\text{Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say} \\
\text{‘This is no flattery; these are counselors}
\end{align*}
\]
That feelingly persuade me what I am.’
(2.1.3-17)
The forest is not ideal, but it is real: an inartificial, although flawed, locality for men that counsels through its natural elements and persuades its populace into uninhibited self-realization. It is closer to the ideal (a culture without archetypal convention) than the courts as a result of its gender deconstruction and, thus, is the final, paradisiacal destination for the male characters. Moreover, the character of Oliver, the stereotypical Machiavellian courtier, is described by Celia, before his conversion to the forest, as “the most unnatural / That lived amongst men” (4.3.122, 123). Subsequently, Oliver describes Orlando’s rescue of him as an act of “kindness, nobler ever than revenge, / And nature, stronger than his just occasion” (4.3.129, 130). Oliver, the representation of the courts, is the most unnatural of men, and Orlando, an enthusiast of the forest, is moved by “nature” to aid his treacherous male sibling, enacting an inherent altruism. Hence, the forest is where intrinsic male benevolence is exercised, and true, “natural” characters function free from the ambitious, Machiavellian, and ‘unnatural’ impulses of Oliver and the courts.

An essential conversation that exposes the candidness and sincerity of the forest is the comparison of geographical comforts between Touchstone and Corin. When the shepherd inquires about Touchstone’s satisfaction with his change of scenery, the response is lackluster:

Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself it is a good life; but in respect that it is a
shepherd’s life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now, in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. (3.2.13-19)

Being a masculine character whose role is that of a fool (an actor and performer) in the Machiavellian courts, Touchstone finds himself bored by the lack of performance in the forest, expressing an obvious nostalgia for the fictive comforts of the court. The forest is “tedious” and “private,” potentially allowing for the articulation of intimate character traits in a remote environment as opposed to one that is “solitary,” implying unaccompanied moments in a defined setting. Furthermore, their discussion of “good” manners highlights the unacceptable nature of the country’s honest maleness in the courts where they performatively “mock” the integrity of the pastoral: “Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behavior of the country is the most mockable at the court” (3.2.45-48).

As a location, the forest is a male haven; as an entity, the forest is entirely female—hence, the negation of masculinity in its inhabitants. Physically, it has female attributes, described by Rosalind as bearing “skirts,” like “fringe upon a petticoat” (3.2.331, 332). These female characteristics are imbued in the male inhabitants, altering their behavior accordingly. Rosalind further describes the disposition of “women” as “effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full
or tears, full of smiles” (3.2.401-403). Though these qualities are associated with “women” in the text and are, to a certain degree, performed by them, they are, more abrasively and more ironically, manifested in the actions and behavior of the male characters in the female forest. The bipolar Jacques and the love blind, irrational Orlando embody this principle as they oscillate from amorous and affectionate monologues to distressed, morbid soliloquies.

Because the environment is homo-social, there is an evident freedom from the strict gender (and therefore, sexual) definitions of the court. Sexuality, as a necessary aspect of human nature, exists in all environments, and, as a result of the change in gender convention, must be suitably replaced in this self-defining locale. For Orlando, his conventional, female-oriented love is unattainable in the forest, and is subsequently replaced by male “counsel” through the character of Ganymede. Due to the gender reversal involved in this counsel and the underlying love Rosalind has for Orlando, the mentoring is an obvious example of homoerotic role-playing. More significantly, it illustrates the juxtaposition of homoeroticism and archetypal romanticism: a natural substitution for Orlando in this genuine, homo-social environment. Furthermore, archetypal, heterosexual romanticism is trivialized by Rosalind prior to her perusal of the young Orlando: “From henceforth I will, coz, and devise sports. Let me see, what think you of falling in love?” (1.2.23, 24). The hetero-eroticism that will become vital to her character—and more broadly, the play as a whole—is trivialized before it begins. In this regard, the
foundation of the play, the pursuit of hetero-erotic fulfillment (however unconventionally it presents itself), is defined for Rosalind, Orlando, and the remainder of the characters as a “game”—a trivial pursuit. Hence, the distinction between homosexual and heterosexual activity is blurred in this non-gendered space of natural man, illustrating the prevalence of masculine homosexual activity despite the pseudo-reality presented by the rigid behavioral confines of the court.

Richard III presents a similar dichotomy by replacing the geographic appropriation of gender with binaries of public and private. The “stage” is Richard’s court, and his incessant attempts to seize the throne are the public performances of the necessary patriarchal archetypes, while the private, backstage moments are instances of solidarity and isolation (when Richard confronts the audience with his desires, fears, and inner thoughts). The courts of Richard III are dependent on the façade of masculinity for the succession of power. To work his way through the performative society, Richard publicly subscribes to a masculine identity of violence, aggressiveness, and sexual dominance: the necessary facets of male gender construction in this patrilineal court. However, his frequent asides and soliloquies expose the epicene nature of his patriarchal character.

In this light, the opening soliloquy may be seen to function in the same fashion as a thesis—defining the “true,” ambiguous Richard before the dramatics of his ascension to power ensue. These solitary asides, the quintessential articulations of private character, prominently feature the
use of puns and demonstrate a considerable diminishment in the sexual rapaciousness of Richard’s public speech -- the loss of a definitive characteristic of patriarchal masculinity. With clever language play, such as the iconic “Now is the winter of our discontent / Made glorious summer by this sun of York” (1.2.1, 2), Richard is ostensibly performing in the manner of a Shakespearean fool: witty in poetic language, effeminate, and asexual. Though also a fool, Touchstone in *As You Like It*, is, as previously discussed, portrayed as categorically masculine through his pursuit of Audrey. Richard, however, considers these sexual pursuits to be banal and repulsive (save for when they are deemed useful for political purposes): “I cannot prove a lover […] And hate the idle pleasures of these days” (1.1.28, 31). Furthermore, he, like Rosalind, views hetero-eroticism as a game in which he will not participate: “He capers nimbly in a lady’s chamber […] But I, that am not shap’d for sportive tricks […] I, that am rudely stamp’d” (1.1.12-16). There is a fundamental duality in Richard’s presentation as a male: a meek, effeminate, asexual, and cunning characterization in his moments of solitude that is contrasted with an ambitious, heteronormative, violent, and sexually driven public persona. The former operates as a dramatic placebo, not furthering the plot but providing internal exposition, while the latter is the plot-driving force, the theatric catalyst. The performance of the masculine persona is necessary for the plot and the play’s patrilineal dynamic to be furthered.

Furthermore, in his wooing of Anne, Richard utilizes the vocabulary of sexual desire, masculine affection, and
heterosexual obsession (a diction he so adamantly rejects in his opening soliloquy) for the purposes of obtaining power. His sword, the perpetually phallic symbol of dominant masculinity, is offered to Anne, reversing the masculine power dynamic in the scene and rendering its performance as fundamentally interchangeable. This is a succinct example of the transferrable (and therefore, artificial) nature of masculine idealism: the fundamental physical representation of patriarchy carelessly discarded. Through her potential possession of the sword, Anne partakes in the role playing “game” of Rosalind in *As You Like It*—the juxtaposition of masculine power and the feminine form.

In the fourth scene of Act 4, we see, for the first time, Richard’s public acknowledgement of the flaws of the masculine persona—a moment where, speaking figuratively, he steps “out of character” in a reversal of archetypical gender power, articulating a weakness that has, thus far, been illustrated only through moments of solitude. He interacts with Queen Elizabeth in a seemingly self-deprecating fashion, relying on reason (though ultimately outwitted by his female counterpart) in an attempt to ensure power—a strategy that was successfully repeated in the plot through the employment of masculine audacity, not honest discussion:

Look, what is done cannot be now amended:
Men shall deal unadvisedly sometimes,
Which after-hours gives leisure to repent.
(4.4.291-293)
I cannot make you what amends I would, 
Therefore accept such kindness as I can. 
(4.4.310, 311)

Richard’s fatal flaw is assuming the infallibility of gender archetypes, leading him to presume that Queen Elizabeth will act in a subordinate manner and subsequently to let down his façade. He ascends to the throne through the performance of the masculine archetype and ultimately falls through his failure to continue this enactment.

Idealized masculinity is a façade in both Richard III and As You Like It, replaced by an original ‘maleness’ that is closer to the androgynous. In both plays, gender is performative, put on as an instrument to grasp Machiavellian power. Nevertheless, this reading does not imply that men are naturally effeminate; there is a balance, a more evident androgyny in the male sex. What this reading attempts to demonstrate is the way in which the public sphere of the Renaissance world (or any world where these conventions exist) demanded the suppression of the effeminate, self-defining, or androgynous side of men, forcing a choice of identity that was and is, if public success ranks as an ambition, limited to the quintessentially masculine.
Notes

1 The word performative, when used in the context of gender, is a concept most frequently attributed to Judith Butler and its influence must be acknowledged. Butler’s criticism, although not resourced for this article, does provide a very general grounding.

2 In the framing of this discussion, through its consideration of the Forest of Arden as akin to the inner, original being of man, the parallels with the Garden of Eden become evident. This concept will not be pursued due to the broad nature of its claims (with a pre-requisite for close biblical reading if it is to be correctly explained). However, the idea that the Forest, like the Garden, is an abode of innocence analogous to a time before the corruption of man is essential. This corruption is broadly defined as original sin. Therefore, in this specific argument, this sin is the thirst for ambition and power (shown in the courts or the post-garden world) that transforms man from his natural, original being.

3 The conclusion of the play is an embrace of the forest, with Duke Frederick and Oliver succumbing to the wisdom and philosophy of this pastoral realm (although only one physically enters the forest). The courts combine with the forest as the imagined ideal: where politics and conventional behavior interact with the abolishment of gender archetypes.

4 Although Shakespeare often creates his fools as ostensibly effeminate and asexual, Touchstone is an anomaly. Through his occasionally vulgar seduction of Audrey, he presents
himself as a quintessential display of the “foul weather” (5.4.136) of the masculine character, always caught in the performance of gender due to his occupation and therefore uncomfortable in the more androgynous (or feminine) setting of the Forest.
Works Cited
