

Gender expectations and courtship in as you like it and twelfth night



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Although some Shakespearean plays carve out a more passive, male-defined role for women, such as that which is exemplified through Ophelia's obedience to Polonius in *Hamlet*, the comedies of *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* explore women's potential for unexpected honesty, especially within the dynamics of courtship. In *As You Like It*, the female character Rosalind, who is disguised as a male named Ganymede, is defined by her interactions with Phoebe and Orlando. As a result of contact with each of these characters, Rosalind articulates some variety of truth either about the other character's personality or the societal conception of appropriate behavior for their gender. The character of Countess Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, however, expresses her personal attitude about others less for the purpose of exploring the tendencies of human nature than for the hope of obtaining the favor of those to whom she is attracted. In both of the aforementioned plays, female courtship seems to be primarily centered upon a desire to express a certain truth, either about themselves or other characters with whom they interact. The motivation for expressing this inner thought, however, tends to be dictated by the behavioral expectations for their gender. In the case of Rosalind, honest speech is produced as a result of the newfound social freedom associated with her adoption of a male physical appearance. Within the purely feminine appearance of Olivia, however, courtship seems to be driven by a more emotional concern for her amorous future rather than an attempt to improve those with whom her security is not inextricably linked. This social freedom through the realm of courtship is first illustrated through Rosalind's interaction with the shepherdess Phoebe, who is averse to the advances of a shepherd named Silvius. After the audience experiences Silvius' painful and apparently repeated rejection by the shepherdess, <https://assignbuster.com/gender-expectations-and-courtship-in-as-you-like-it-and-twelfth-night/>

Rosalind urges, ...mistress, know yourself; down on your knees / And thank heaven, fasting, for a goodman's love; / For I must tell you with a friendly ear, / Sell when you can. You are not for all markets." (As You Like It 3. 5. 110-113) Although Rosalind claims that she uses a "friendly ear" to make the shepherdess aware of the negative traits that make her unappealing to any other man, it is rather obvious that these comments are instead of an extremely harsh nature. Though Rosalind is primarily motivated to disguise herself as a male because of the physical safety from danger the gender provides, she is also unknowingly presented with social safety. She now possesses the ability to comment upon others' lack of social success not only without producing animosity but also by ironically eliciting amorous feelings. This concept is exemplified in Phoebe's later assertion that, even though the qualities of her personality have been consistently abused by Rosalind, "... the scorn in your bright eyne / Have power to raise such love in mine, / Alack, in me what strange effect / Would they work in mild aspect?" (As You Like It 4. 3. 50-54). Ultimately, though Rosalind does not intend to invite an intimate relationship with the shepherdess, she represents a form of truth not bestowed upon her by Silvius that she finds attractive. Whereas Silvius usually showers her with innumerable compliments, Rosalind increases Phoebe's awareness of her own ugly personality. Therefore, the honesty this male persona produces is accepted simply because Rosalind presents a different variety of courtship that the shepherdess finds more appealing. If Rosalind were not embodying a male figure, Phoebe would not be attracted to her criticisms and therefore would not react positively to her. This freedom associated with her gender ultimately allows her expression of disapproval of the shepherdess' actions to be positively received. In contrast

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to these conversations with Phoebe which primarily concern a specific critique of her far too selective romantic standards, Rosalind's later interactions with Orlando exemplify a different sort of social analysis: that of general gender characteristics. Although Rosalind's love for Orlando, as well as his overwhelming attraction to her, is made clear after his decisive defeat of the wrestler Charles in the first act, Rosalind displays a different sentiment entirely after her embodiment of Ganymede's persona. When Orlando claims that he cannot be cured of his love attachment, Rosalind asserts that she has previously pretended to be the female that another man powerfully desired and that He was to imagine [her] his love, his mistress; and [she] sent him every day to woo [her]. At which time would [she]...now like him, now loathe him; then entertain him, then forswear him; now weep for him, then spit at him, that [she] drave [her] suitor from his mad humour of love to a living humour of madness..." (As You Like It 3. 2. 364-374) It is within this passage that Rosalind first uses her disguise to comment upon accepted gender roles through her contemplation of the unpredictable nature of women. It is evident that Rosalind believes herself to have significant insight upon certain aspects of gender that can cause a relationship to proliferate or fail. This opinion, when coupled with her aforementioned personal criticism of Phoebe's personality, displays that this character's sense of successful courtship is greatly rooted in what these gender roles deem to be appropriate. If a woman is unreasonable in her action, such as is shown in the above quotation, the amorous emotions of a male can rarely tolerate the strain. This interaction between Rosalind and Orlando, then, is based upon the same premises as her criticism of Phoebe in that, though Phoebe is scrutinized on a more personal level, both situations maintain the same truth

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about amorous relationships as related to cultural constraints. It is only through the freedom that seemingly male-male communication produces that these opinions about females, specifically those which concern the behavior of Orlando's beloved, can be expressed without offense. This decision to aid Orlando in ridding himself of his love for Rosalind further develops a significant relationship which ultimately provides the opportunity for even more direct criticism to be well received. Rosalind later extends her assessment of the social premises of courtship to the general tendencies of men as she states that "...men are April when they woo, December when they wed. May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives" (As You Like It 4. 1. 124-127). Comparable to Rosalind's honest expression of the stereotypical nature of women, she once again freely criticizes Orlando, but this time concentrates upon a female's interactions with the opposite sex. Through this quotation, Rosalind seems to challenge the long term validity of Orlando's love attachment and asserts that, despite the fact that he now claims to be devoted to his love's satisfaction, his later actions will prove to be identical to those of other men. She even continues this generalization of his character as she later declares, "I knew what you would prove; my friends told me as much, and I thought no less. That flattering tongue of yours won me" (As You Like It 4. 1. 156-158). Rosalind's mention of Orlando's "flattering tongue" once again makes reference to the idea of false wooing that ultimately terminates after the woman has been contractually obtained. This criticism of negative male characteristics, as well as those of females mentioned previously, is made possible due to the closer relationship Rosalind forms with Orlando as a result of her altered physical appearance. The male disguise that Rosalind creates results in the <https://assignbuster.com/gender-expectations-and-courtship-in-as-you-like-it-and-twelfth-night/>

development of friendship between the characters. This in turn allows her criticisms of Orlando's nature as well as those of his beloved to be interpreted as playful jest rather than mean-spirited reproach. Although many of Rosalind's judgments maintain a certain level of clarity, they would not be looked upon favorably unless she is able to create, in the case of Orlando, the friendship which serves to validate these claims. Within her interactions both with Phoebe and Orlando, Rosalind provides a refreshing escape from the characters with whom they usually interact and, as a result of their being supplied with what they perceive to be a much desired companion, they accept Rosalind's candid nature. Although the freedom of expression embodied by Rosalind is primarily motivated by her need to comment upon others' social shortcomings, Olivia is more directed by obtaining that which she desires. When she is confronted with yet another female character dressed as a male, Viola, she makes an attempt to seize the opportunity for personal support that seems to be offered her. After a conversation with Viola in which she inquires as to her social stature, she reflects on Viola's answer as well as the nature of her own abrupt change in emotion: 'What is your parentage?' / 'Above my fortunes, yet my state is well. / I am a gentleman.' I'll be sworn thou art. / Thy tongue, thy face, thy limbs, actions and spirit / Do give thee five-fold blazon. Not too fast. Soft, soft / Unless the master were the man. How now? / Even so quickly one may catch the plague? / Methinks I feel this youth's perfections / With an invisible and subtle stealth / To creep in at mine eyes. Well, let it be. (Twelfth Night 1. 5. 259-268) It seems that Viola's revelation of her status solidifies the positive regard that Olivia has developed and that, though she wonders at the

sudden affect that their short conversations have produced, this technicality
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of social privilege more clearly defines the possibility of a successful relationship. Although Olivia is, at this point, able to be internally honest about her emotions, it is not until later in the play that she is able to explicitly express her desires to Viola in an attempt to forcibly create mutual amorous attachment. She confesses that By maidenhood, honor, truth, and everything / I love thee so that, maugre all thy pride, / Nor wit nor reason can my passion hide... / Love sought is good, but given unsought is better... / Yet come again, for thou perhaps mayst move / That heart which now abhors, to like this love. (Twelfth Night 3. 1. 141-155) This evolution from an inner expression of truth to one that is explicitly directed at another character exemplifies the fact that Olivia employs honesty when she feels it is necessary in order to obtain a sort of emotional security, even if the second party is unwilling. It is evident through Olivia's final words to Viola that Olivia is of the opinion that, if Viola would only spend more time with her, the powerful attraction that Olivia feels would eventually become mutual. Ultimately, it seems that Olivia believes that her decision to allow herself to be vulnerable enough to express her emotions should immediately produce the effect which she so desperately desires. Olivia further exercises her autonomy when she essentially demands marriage between herself and Sebastian, whom she thinks to be Viola. This truth of expression that augments in strength throughout the play culminates in a proposal so powerful in its nature that even a male character cannot refuse. She states that "Thou canst not choose but go. / Do not deny. Beshrew his soul for me. / He started one poor heart of mine in thee... / Nay, come, I prithee, would thou'dst be ruled by me." (Twelfth Night 4. 1. 53-60) It is most important to note that, in this particular instance, Olivia is successful in <https://assignbuster.com/gender-expectations-and-courtship-in-as-you-like-it-and-twelfth-night/>

obtaining a man through her own agency that she believes to be the one she has been attempting to court throughout the play. Although she does display the same powerful freedom of expression which is embodied by Rosalind, she is motivated not by a desire to inform others of their personality flaws but rather by the inclination toward forming a more secure future for herself. In fact, Olivia seems to display a form of autonomy that is reminiscent of that which is exhibited by Rosalind in that, though she does not match the physical appearance of a male, she is equally as forthright. It could be suggested by these similarities that Olivia's background, which does not include of any sort of older guiding figure, has allowed her to act like an independent male, due to the fact that there is no one else to make decisions for her. It is shown through Olivia's character that, when a female is forced to create her own positive life circumstances, she may be afforded the right to speak and act more honestly. Despite the fact that only Rosalind personifies the male gender both in personality and in physicality, Olivia also has the ability to seize control of her interactions with other characters through her candor. It seems to be suggested through these different examples of autonomy that a male character, or even the character of Rosalind disguised as a male, is able to interact with others solely upon the basis of a detached criticism which is simultaneously independent of emotion. Despite the fact that Rosalind is in love with Orlando throughout the play, she is able to successfully embody her charade of a well meaning friend without allowing too much of her own feelings to be detected. In the case of Olivia, however, despite the fact that she is able to express herself freely in a way that is suggestive of a male, she is never truly able to separate from her relationships with other characters her desire for obtaining

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a male companion. Ultimately, both plays seem to comment upon the exploration of societal construction of gender and could reiterate that a female character's potential for freedom of expression involves a true separation from desire that they often cannot seem to achieve without the male physicality to accompany it.