

Rosalind and the embodiment of shakespearian themes



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In the many plays of William Shakespeare there are certain themes woven within the plotlines that are consistently considered, ruminated upon, and revisited. These highly debated subjects focus on the nature of humans and must have been issues that Shakespeare thought extensively about, as they creep into virtually every one of his works. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the topics of wit, love, and gender identity are deeply explored by the play's many characters. From the fool Touchstone's endless repartee, to the many characters navigating the joys and throes of love, to the gender bending exercises that occur throughout, this comedy is rife with the typical Shakespearian issues that have occupied humanity for ages. Amongst the many who participate in the theatrical studies of these ideas, there is one character in particular who wholly embodies the play's central themes. Through her experiences during the play, Rosalind, cross-dresser in extenuating circumstances and daughter to the usurped Duke Senior, embodies a unique section of the spectrum of possibilities inherent in wit, love, and gender identity. Rosalind is one of the play's most prominent sources of wit. She employs her shrewd language and mind for fun and as a means of understanding the world around her. It is Rosalind's playful brainpower that characterizes her as a forceful and entertaining player in this tale. The young woman's first appearance in the play occurs in Act I, scene ii where with plays an important role. Having just learned that her uncle has usurped Duke Senior, Rosalind laments her father's fate while her cousin Celia aims to console her. When Celia implores her cousin to "be merry," Rosalind immediately turns to witty banter to raise her own spirits (I. ii. 22). Rosalind chides the goddess Fortune and says she wishes she would be fair in her dealings, "for her benefits are mightily misplaced, and the

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bountiful blind woman doth most mistake in her gifts to women" (I. ii. 33-35). Rosalind playfully asserts that the goddess bestows fortune in an unjust manner because she is blind. This is the reason, she implies, that good people will sometimes have bad things happen to them. Poking fun at the distributor of luck is not only Rosalind's form of entertainment with Celia. Her exercise in wit also helps her make sense of the world and her current position in it. For Rosalind, cleverly joking about the way things turn out and, presumably, the plight of her father, allows her some sense of order in her unsteady world. Rosalind's use of wit is a constant throughout her scenes in the play; what varies is her motive for being clever and its effect. At times Rosalind exercises her wit in jest, being humorous to entertain herself or others, while in other instances her shrewdness acts as a platform to discover and voice insightful truths. As a theatrical character, Rosalind represents a type of love that Shakespeare's audiences were familiar with—the powerful and all-encompassing but somehow frustrated passion. The unique love story that Rosalind and Orlando play out, however, faces an unusual twist. When they meet at a wrestling match involving Orlando and a formidable foe, the two are both struck by a case of love at first sight that ultimately leads nowhere. While Orlando is smitten to the point of falling virtually mute, Rosalind is a more active player in their exchange and gives her beloved a chain to wear around his neck. Later, when Celia and Rosalind have fled to the Forest of Arden, the love struck cousin learns that Orlando is in the same vicinity and is writing love poetry in her name. A highly enthused Rosalind then exclaims, " Alas the day!...What did he when thou saw'st him? What said he? How looked he? Wherein went he? What makes he her? Did he ask for me?" (III. ii. 217-220). Here Rosalind, effusing excitement, is

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overwhelmed with the mere mention of Orlando. Hungry for details about the man she treasures, she is portrayed as the classic eager lover who would feel pure joy in reuniting with Orlando. Soon Rosalind is granted her wish and spots her lover in the Forest of Arden. The ideal love story does not unfold, though, as Rosalind is disguised as a male shepherd, going by the name Ganymede and therefore cannot truly pursue her feelings. Although her passion is thwarted by the role she must play as Ganymede, Rosalind does manage to have some kind of agency in her new form. Promising to cure Orlando of the heartache he endures, Rosalind (as Ganymede) tells the man he must come to everyday and woo her as if she is his beloved. In this manner, Rosalind is allowed to participate in an intimate exchange with Orlando and get closer to him, even if she is in the guise of a man. Rosalind's role as a lover is, in a way, typical as she is struck by overwhelming emotion for her darling but is complicated and impeded by her male disguise. It is in her transformation into a male identity that Rosalind epitomizes the regular Shakespearian theme of the malleability and murkiness of gender. As her new, feigned masculinity combats her female desires, Rosalind explores a complex internal struggle between the manly and feminine. During her first conversation with Orlando as Ganymede, Rosalind criticizes the nature of woman. She states that they are unstable creatures of mercurial emotion, "...inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles; for every passion something and for no passion truly anything" (III. iii. 402-404). While this is an act on the part of Rosalind, it is curious that she should denigrate women in this way. Her words seem to provide insight into the way in which she believes men perceive and think about women—a sex senselessly ricocheting from one state of mind to the next. To further complicate her part, Rosalind is playing <https://assignbuster.com/rosalind-and-the-embodiment-of-shakespearian-themes/>

the role of Ganymede and now must act like Rosalind in accordance to the love-cure she promises Orlando. After the two exchange lines regarding the sincerity and dedication of Orlando's love, Rosalind warns Orlando that he must not be late to woo her: "...by all pretty oaths that are not dangerous, if you break one jot of your promise or come one minute behind your hour, I will think you the most pathological break-promise, and the most hollow lover, and the most unworthy of her you call Rosalind...Therefore beware my censure and keep your promise" (IV. i. 181-185). In her lines, Rosalind is portraying her actual self in a manner that is far from accurate. Perhaps a consequence of attempting to personify her idea of an actual man, she (Rosalind as Ganymede as Rosalind) depicts "Rosalind," and her fellow females, as an overbearing and insensitive lover. The audience knows this is not true, as Rosalind exclaims how deeply she loves Orlando after he exits. Through acting like a man pretending to act like a woman, Rosalind calls on a basic and caricatured understanding of the genders and how they view each other. While she aims at humor, Rosalind maintains that the genders are at odds with one another, both judging and disliking the supposed essential characteristics of the other. Her behavior illuminates the main issue with gender identity that many Shakespearian characters struggle with—that the genders are unique and complex phenomena that cannot be defined or fabricated by adhering to a checklist of traits. Rosalind's experiences as a woman functioning in a disguised male persona exemplify the complications inherent in gender identity. One explanation for the immense popularity and accessibility of William Shakespeare's plays lies in the recurring themes that the playwright incorporated into his many tales. These motifs that

Shakespeare explores through his characters' words and actions concentrate <https://assignbuster.com/rosalind-and-the-embodiment-of-shakespearian-themes/>

on the nature of humanity and the issues that all humans consider. From playful or biting intelligence in the form of wit, to the shared adoration between a man and woman, to what it means to be of a certain sex, Shakespeare draws on these age-old questions. In his play *As You Like It*, Rosalind embodies these themes of wit, love, and gender identity and develops and explores each in a unique and profound way.