

Gender in as you like
it



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Present day conceptions of gender would appear to be different to what they were in Shakespeares day. Clear cut divisions of male, female and neuter are apparent. One would need to look back to the time of Shakespeare to try and see the different view of gender identity. Using the play As You Like It and the characters portrayed within it one might be able to see how our concept of gender may well be challenged. Gender role in this play does appear to be confusing at first glance. Men playing women who fall in love with men and these women acting within an act to be men. Men wooing women played by and then wooing the men portrayed by these acting women. By carefully going through the text of As You Like It (Greenblatt, ed., PP1591-1657) one can try to dig in to the characters portrayed and discover any challenge to our views of gender identity. During this essay I will point out some of the texts and criticisms that I would suggest lead to the Shakespearean gender identity and this will show how it has altered over time.

I would suggest that Shakespeare explores homoerotic possibilities in several characters. A good example of this is the relationship shown between Rosalind and Celia. Rosalind is called a traitor by Duke Frederick (Greenblatt, ed., p1610) and Celia is very quick to respond to try and help her. The deeper implication of their friendship appears to be pointed out when Celia says (Greenblatt, ed., p1610, lines 66-70):

But now I know her. If she be a traitor,

Why, so am I. We still have slept together,

Rose at an instant, learned, played, eat together,

And wheresoeer we went, like Junos swans

Still we went coupled and inseparable.

This would appear to suggest that their friendship is more intimate than is apparent and Juliet Dusinberre in *As WHO liked it* says that the play rewrites the record of female desire so that women want to read it. I will return to Rosalind and Celia later in this essay.

Gender conception is also challenged with the scene at Duke Seniors forest home (Greenblatt, ed., pp1612-1613). There are no woman in the forest retreat and there appears to be no desire for them either. This seems to be an all men together lifestyle which is described as being sweet. Duke Senior says (Greenblatt, ed., p1612, line 5) Here we feel not the penalty of Adam and this line alone really points to the no women feelings amongst the men.

One needs to look at the relationship of Rosalind and Orlando and Rosalinds disguise as Ganymede. To do this one needs to discover the meaning behind the name Ganymede.

The name Ganymede has social and literary connotations and suggests male to male desire. Ganymede was a young boy from mythology that Jove fell in love with. The boy replaced Joves wife as his lover. In Shakespearean times the name Ganymede was used to describe a male prostitute and more specifically the name given to a young male lover of an older man. The term was fully understood at the time and I would suspect that Shakespeare used it to implicate a homoerotic overture between Orlando and Ganymede. The idea of a homoerotic relationship between these two would also be backed

by the speedy acceptance by Orlando of the situation. Orlando describes Ganymede as fair and good and woos and flirts with him as he would have with Rosalind.

Returning to Rosalind and Celia one can find more evidence of their deep relationship when they are discussing Orlando (Greenblatt, ed., pp 1634-1635). They are in deep conversation about Orlando and Rosalind is singing his praises to Celia. Rosalind says she loves his hair, his and his love. Celia replies that his hair is the same as Judass, his kisses cold as ice and that his love is hollow. So here one can see that Celia is jealous of Orlando.

Celia is not the only woman in love with Rosalind. When Phoebe first discovers Rosalind as Ganymede she falls in love. She would appear to be attracted to Ganymedes femininity and goes on to describe his physical attributes (Greenblatt, ed., p1638, lines 120-125):

His leg is so-so; and yet tis well.

There was a pretty redness in his lip,

Than that mixed in his cheek. Twas just the difference

Betwixt the constant red and mingled damask.

Whether or not Rosalind feels romantic towards Phoebe it is apparent that she is pleased that another woman is erotically and physically attracted to her. Rosalind seems to confirm this in the line (Greenblatt, ed., p 1654, line 113) to Phoebe, Nor neer wed woman if you not be she.

Shakespeare has, I would suggest, deliberately woven in homoerotic potential throughout this play. From the hints of homosexuality of Duke Senior and his friends in the forest to Orlando wooing a boy whose name is associated with male to male lovers. He has pointed to female homosexuality in Rosalind and Celia and even brought in the character of Phoebe to back this up. It should be noted, however, that at the end of the play all the characters end up in heterosexual relationships.

Where does this leave one with the original question and does this evidence point towards a challenge to ones conception of gender identity? One should realise that at the time that Shakespeare was writing there was great social change. The period of enlightenment was well under way. Attitudes to urinating and defecating

in public view were altering. In a patriarchal society women were viewed in a different light to what they are now. I would suggest that there was basically only one gender during this period. Women were considered to be the same as males, but because they had no male organs they were lesser males and treated accordingly.

Ann Thompson (Stanley Wells, ed., p4) puts forward a previously suggested idea that Shakespeares own sexual identity may have been in doubt. This may well be part of the reason for him including the multi-gender eroticism in this play. She goes on to point out that transvestism was widespread in this period as it was in the Renaissance. It would appear that homoerotic themes in *As You Like It* (Greenblatt, ed., pp1591-1657) may well have been a reflection of how Shakespeare perceived the society of the day.

Victor L. Cahn takes a slightly different look at gender identity in his book. He tends to perceive the romantic side of the play showing how different critics have widely varying ideas. However, he does say that (Cahn, p. 651): the combination of masculine boldness and feminine sensitivity that makes her [Rosalind] so alluring to Orlando. So even in a romantic look at the play the double gender identity of Rosalind still pushes through.

Mario DiGangi gives one a final vision. He refers to the line (Greenblatt, ed., p1602, line 102-103) as they did in the golden world. He suggests that this line refers back to the renaissance myth of Orpheus who established an all male community. This community was established to avoid the dangers of female seduction and sexuality. This compares with Duke Seniors lifestyle and the homosexual implications of this would appear to be almost undeniable.

In concluding this essay I would suggest that Shakespeares vision of gender identity is a challenge to ones own. The point I have already made about women being lesser forms of men may have been acceptable in his day. In our enlightened society this would not be acceptable.

The main point of gender identity in Shakespeares day was that it would appear that for men cross-dressing, homosexuality and casual affairs would have been more acceptable than now. The thought of willy-nilly cross-dressing and the general wooing of the same sex would definitely challenge modern day views on gender.