

Call me rosalind:  
gender and gender  
stereotyping in as you  
like it



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

In the epilogue of *As You Like It*, Rosalind discusses the nature of real and performed gender identity in a final bid to resolve the gender confusion extant throughout the play. The events leading up to the epilogue make such resolution necessary, fraught as they are with the disguise of one's "natural" or off-stage gender and with the on-stage confusion of male and female roles. Though such confusion had its basis in theater practice in contemporary Shakespearean theater, the role of Rosalind was taken by a man many other layers of gender transformation exist within the play. For example, the male actor playing Rosalind acts the part of the male Ganymede opposite Orlando; in the role of Ganymede, he "pretends" to be Rosalind to cure Orlando of his love. When these intra-play transformations occur for example, when Rosalind the character dresses as the male Ganymede they shed light on the broader questions raised by gender transformation in the play. As the actors disguise their genders frequently, gender comes to seem arbitrary when performed, able to be shifted at will. As Rosalind says to Orlando, "I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind, and come every day to my cote, and woo me" (III, ii. 1603-4). By suggesting the "cure" of having Orlando act out his love, Rosalind reaffirms her theatrically "real" role as Rosalind, even as she is dressed as a man. This pretending both satisfies Orlando's desire to woo Rosalind, even as she appears absent, and Rosalind's desire to be wooed, even as she appears in the guise of a man. Orlando is able to enact his desires verbally while continuing to idealize and adore the "absent" Rosalind. His desires are thus compartmentalized into love and friendship, and Rosalind, in her role as tutor and absent muse, is able to fulfill both roles. The play's epilogue acts as an explication and compounding of these roles, resolving the paradoxes through <https://assignbuster.com/call-me-rosalind-gender-and-gender-stereotyping-in-as-you-like-it/>

a meta-theatrical understanding of the actor's place in the theater as a whole. Rosalind's suggestion of "curing" Orlando may be perhaps better understood as a wish to have Orlando's desires enacted before her, even though she may not participate. Because of her love for Orlando, Rosalind has good reason to "pretend" a game of love between herself and her love. Such pretend allows her to reveal herself emotionally without compromising her distant status as the "beloved." She is not forced to perform according to traditional gender stereotypes because, at least according to Orlando, she appears as a performing man. She is able to express safely her most honest desires, for instance "Yes faith will I [love thee], Fridays, Saturdays, and all" (IV. i. 2026) while remaining in her role as Orlando's tutor. In the epilogue, Rosalind returns to the issue of traditional gender roles, saying that "It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue" (V. iv. 2776-7). This statement seems ironic, as Rosalind has been dressed in men's clothes and has spoken openly of her desire to love "Fridays, Saturdays, and all." However, because the "fashion" was for men to act women's parts, "Rosalind" is a man offstage, and thus does not "actually" commit any unfashionable acts by dressing male. The lady is "given the epilogue" only within the space of the play; underneath the theatrical performance, it is still the man who says the lines. Yet Rosalind goes further to suggest a woman character should be allowed to speak. Having a woman speak the epilogue, she argues, "is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue" (V. iv. 2777-8). The prologue and epilogue mark the two "bookends" of the play, introducing and concluding the action; it seems each one is equally important to the play as a whole. In either context, a woman or a man is equally fit to speak: the selection, Rosalind implies, is arbitrary, a woman's place "no more

<https://assignbuster.com/call-me-rosalind-gender-and-gender-stereotyping-in-as-you-like-it/>

unhandsome than the lord." Though a male-acted male character may be expected to give the epilogue, it is equally viable that a male-acted female character may speak. Rosalind, through the use of the phrase "to see," not only suggests that the audience must embrace either gender, but also reinforces the visual aspects of performance itself. In "to see...the epilogue," the word "see" means not only "allow," but "watch," as the epilogue is performed by a male actor dressed in drag. Gender here is being performed as spectacle, with the male actor taking on and enacting the woman's part, who then takes on the dress and disguise of a man. The status of "male" becomes blurred for the audience, as a male actor becomes Rosalind who becomes Ganymede. The audience must literally "see" the female character Rosalind give the epilogue, knowing that, outside the theater, the actor is male. Such confusion, resulting in a series of visual transformations male actor, female character, male dress demonstrates the arbitrary nature of gender in this performative context. It did not matter, for instance, that the male actor playing Rosalind had a woman's lines; by the same token, it should not be "unhandsome" to have the female Rosalind speak the traditionally male epilogue. When Rosalind notes that "it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue," she speaks to the audience's likely preconceptions about "male" and "female" speech. However, because so many gender norms have been flouted the acceptable one of males acting in female roles, and the less acceptable one of Rosalind dressing as a man the traditional or "fashionable" gendering of speech becomes less clear.

Rosalind suggests she can give the epilogue as well as any man; indeed, the audience has already seen her in a male disguise. The visual example of

Rosalind dressed as a man suggests that genders may be put on or taken off  
<https://assignbuster.com/call-me-rosalind-gender-and-gender-stereotyping-in-as-you-like-it/>

at will; it should then be easier to allow Rosalind a traditionally male speech. Rosalind confirms the beguiling, even magical nature of performative gender when she says in the epilogue that “to beg will not become me. My way is to conjure you” (V. iv. 2785). As she has already enacted so many transformations, Rosalind has established herself as a “conjurer” rather than a beggar. Through theatrical disguises, the male actor has convinced the audience that he is female; further, that female character has, through an additional disguise, convinced Orlando that she is male. The act of conjuring has become familiar to Rosalind and has proven itself effective within the context of the play. Begging or arguing rhetorically is not necessary for her to effect change; rather, she has only to act either a male or a female part. Rosalind lays out her strategy clearly when she says she will “conjure you,” implying her use of disguise and acting as nearly magical techniques. Her reason for not begging is theatrical as well: she notes that “I am not furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg will not become me” (V. iv. 2784-5). Examining this sentence, one realizes the causal relationship between being “furnished like” a character and playing that character’s role. Rosalind does not have the disguise of a beggar, “therefore” she cannot act the beggar’s part. Of all possible reasons for preferring conjuring to begging, Rosalind picks the one that has to do with being “furnished” or disguised. The causal relationship she sees between disguise and role-playing suggests the inevitability of her current position; as adept as she is in disguises, she may “conjure” up whatever character she likes. Not used simply to begging, she suggests that the beggar’s role would “not become [her]” and avoids that role. Finally, the character Rosalind reveals the fundamentally acted nature of her role when she says, “If I were a woman, I would kiss as many of

<https://assignbuster.com/call-me-rosalind-gender-and-gender-stereotyping-in-as-you-like-it/>

you..." (V. iv. 2791-2). Though her character has been constructed as female, here Rosalind uses the conditional "if," suggesting that she is not or may not be female. Such a conditional may refer to one of two potential alternatives, either that of the male Ganymede or that of the male actor behind Rosalind's disguises. Because some critics have suggested Rosalind has not yet changed out of her male Ganymede disguise, it is possible that she is speaking as Ganymede even in the epilogue. However, such a view seems contested by Rosalind's first statement, that "it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue." Through that initial statement, Rosalind suggests that she is the "lady" giving the epilogue; in the later "if I were a woman," she implies she is not female at all. Such a strong contradiction of gender identification suggests that Rosalind must be referring to two different characters, or even two different sets of convention, in the lines. Perhaps the two terms "lady" and "woman" distinguish between the character and the actor of her role. Though the actor of Rosalind plays the "lady" in *As You Like It*, he is still male beneath the disguise and thus may say "if I were a woman" without contradicting himself. Such theories gesture towards the meta-theatrical nature of Rosalind's speech: she seems here to suggest that any time an actor goes onstage, he is playing a non-intuitive, arbitrarily-gendered role. The actor must have the ability to "conjure" any character desired, putting on the clothes and mannerisms of that character in order to be convincing in that role. At the end of the epilogue, the sudden turn to the future indicative "will...bid me farewell" (V. iv. 2795-6) suggests that it is more appropriate for "Rosalind" to be bid farewell than to be kissed by men. In applauding, it is appropriate for the audience to recognize the gender of the actor outside of the stage, to bid farewell rather than to kiss. Though the <https://assignbuster.com/call-me-rosalind-gender-and-gender-stereotyping-in-as-you-like-it/>

actor is a conjurer, putting on a female disguise to play Rosalind, the audience must recognize that his off-stage presence is male. In playing multiple roles as Rosalind and Ganymede, the actor demonstrates to the audience the flexibility of gender as it is performed. Rosalind's own performance enacts that flexible nature, suggesting that though "it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue," it is contextually appropriate. Rosalind's ability as an actor is highlighted when she discusses how she will "conjure" the audience members, putting a spell over them through the convincing quality of her disguise. However, in the end, Rosalind says she would kiss men only "if [she] were a woman," thus revealing the conditional nature of her acting in a role. Though the entire play is built on gender disguises of Rosalind as Ganymede, of the male actor as Rosalind the characters seem finally conscious of the way these genders are performed. Rosalind does not want to be kissed because she is neither Rosalind nor female; rather, it is more appropriate to bid "him" farewell. The play ends with the realization that the actor underneath all the disguises is male an appropriate gesture, as the actor will soon be rid of his theater clothes<sup>2E</sup> In the epilogue, the play's performing of gender is heightened, discussed, and finally, through meta-theatrical comments, resolved.