As society likes it: a heteronormative ending to a homosexual play

From the viewpoint of our world today, Shakespeare’s era seems about as conservatively-minded as a society could get. Shakespeare completely demolishes this notion, with his progressive suggestions of a normalcy in homosexuality and transgenderism in his comedy, As You Like It. He first introduces these differing sexualities in depicting a homosexual love between Celia and Rosalind, followed by Orlando and Ganymede—Rosalind’s male disguise. In doing so, Shakespeare also brings about the question of Rosalind as an independent character, or if she is truly independent at all. More important, though, is the epilogue. Just as Shakespeare forces the audience and the characters into a realm of heteronormativity, Rosalind’s epilogue reminds us of the homosexuality that we had previously accepted, before it was overshadowed by the relationships that society had deemed to be correct. Rosalind’s epilogue leaves us wondering if the patriarchal, heteronormative society that Shakespeare presents by the end of the play is the ideal one, or if, rather, a society in which all sexualities and genders are accepted is ideal—we are left yearning for a transgendered Rosalind and the homosexual relationships presented previously.

This conflict of genders and sexualities that the epilogue refers to is brought into question in both Celia’s and Orlando’s loves of Rosalind and Ganymede, respectively. Celia, in the first act, is suggested to have some quasi-lesbian feelings towards Rosalind. Not only does she declare to Rosalind that “ thou and I am one,” but when Rosalind asks Celia her thoughts on love, Celia says to “ love no man in earnest” (1. 3. 97, 1. 2. 26). This latter statement raises the question of whether or not Celia means to only love women “ in good earnest,” if she will not love men this way, explaining her seemingly-

romantic love for Rosalind. Through our prior love of Rosalind and Celia, and their close bond, Shakespeare makes us keen on the idea of a lesbian relationship between them, or at least homosexual feelings on Celia's part. This then leads us to a better acceptance of homosexuality for the entirety of the play. Similarly, Rosalind's epilogue is reminiscent of an acceptance of homosexual love. This is evidenced in the male actor (playing Rosalind) saying that if he were a woman, he would " kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased [him]," suggesting an acceptance of transgender or homosexual feelings on the part of Shakespeare, through the actor (Epilogue, line 17). The actor's homoerotic feelings being paralleled to Rosalind's are there intentionally—they reinforce the idea of a normalcy in homosexuality and transgenderism. In turn, the epilogue leaves us dissatisfied at the rather heteronormative ending, in which Shakespeare gives the ending that society wants, not what is best for the characters, or even what society should be openly accepting of. Shakespeare, rather, is touching on the character's having to hide their homosexual feelings—here, Celia hiding her lesbian feelings toward Rosalind—much like homosexual tendencies were forced to be hidden from society. Although Shakespeare rightly suggests a normalcy in homoerotic and transgender feelings, he seems to only allow these feelings to be openly shown through men—in this case, Orlando and Rosalind's actor. Perhaps Shakespeare is suggesting, once again, not only the disparity in power between hetero- and homosexual sexualities, but also between men and women. Parallel to Rosalind's submissiveness to men in the epilogue, women in this play are not openly allowed to share their homoerotic and transgender feelings like their male

counterparts. To this extent, Shakespeare reiterates homosexuality in Orlando’s romantic interest in Ganymede.

Although he is initially enchanted by Rosalind, his love for “ Rosalind” transcends to his later love for Ganymede. Perhaps the most revealing instance in the play is the scene in which Rosalind and Celia openly discuss Orlando’s kissing. Rosalind, crying to Celia, says that Orlando’s “ kisses are Judas’s own children” and that “ his kissing is as full of sanctity as the touch of holy bread” (3. 4. 9-14). Because Orlando and Rosalind were not shown kissing at court, it can be justly assumed that Orlando and Ganymede had just kissed. This implies a side of Orlando not plainly known to us before, one in which Orlando harbors same-sex feelings, and, moreover, is allowed to act on them. This leaves us with the question of why, unlike Celia, he’s allowed more freedom in acting upon his homosexual feelings. Also brought into question is why Shakespeare only allows the male actor to allude to homosexual feelings, rather than having Rosalind say that she would kiss every woman in the audience. Instead, she is obliged to almost apologize for being there, as it “ is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue” (Epilogue, ll. 1-2). In this regard, Shakespeare seems to be critiquing the lack of power that women have, doubly so as both a woman and as a woman with homosexual feelings. If it’s assumed to be correct that the audience is somewhat disappointed in the ending, then the epilogue is the key part in which we truly feel for both the characters’ lack of power in their sexuality, and also the lack of female power. The epilogue leaves us yearning for the power that Rosalind had as Ganymede, and envious of the liberty that the men in the play easily and openly enjoy. If the relationships between

Rosalind/Celia and Orlando/Ganymede are the cause of our acceptance of varying sexualities, then it is the ending and the epilogue which create our cause for concern. Rosalind, throughout the play and epilogue, plays a critical, yet versatile role. Not only is she the crux for non-heteronormativity in the play, but she is also the character through which the others can express their less-than-heterosexual feelings throughout the play. It is Rosalind, though, who is not able to govern herself how she wants. In the end, she is obliged to take the heteronormative role that society wants her to take, once again conveying the lack of power that women, homosexuals, and transgenders have.

The epilogue, too, leaves open for interpretation the character that Rosalind is embodying at that time. There is no satisfying answer to this question, though: dressed as Rosalind, we would be disappointed in the character not having the freedom to identify as Ganymede; dressed as Ganymede, she would still be demeaned to a status below men. The epilogue, in its allowance of the reader to interpret how Rosalind is dressed, serves to show the lack of power that women have, and leaves us desiring for Rosalind to have more power, to fully be Ganymede, as Ganymede afforded her such liberties. Rosalind admits in the epilogue that “ It is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue,” demeaning herself to a status below men (Epilogue, 1). This attitude of Rosalind’s starkly contrasts the Ganymede side of her, who had “ a swashing and martial outside,” but yet now is meek and inferior (1. 3. 118). Perhaps Shakespeare, in showing this dynamic, wants us to be disappointed, and somewhat off-put, by the character we see before us, so different from the Ganymede from before. The epilogue depicts the lack of

power that the people other than the non-heterosexual males in Shakespeare’s time actually had. The audience is left wondering at this, hungry for the powerful Rosalind that we had seen before.

Though the play acts upon our willingness to love the characters through whichever gender or sexuality they (or the play) offer to the audience, it begs the question of whether or not this was actually effective. Did the audience view this play the way it seems he has intended it, or did they simply take it as a joke about differing sexualities, rather than a critique on our heteronormative society? Being that this play was performed hundreds of years ago, it seems more accurate that the audience could have misconstrued Shakespeare’s meaning. Perhaps rather than the ending being a critique, they saw it as the “ correct” ending. If so, Shakespeare’s words and suggestions were lost on a generation which could have been the starting point of a new, more progressive England.