

Shakespeare's Rosalind in "As You Like It"

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Abstract: William Shakespeare, often called the English national poet, is widely considered the greatest dramatist of all time. Shakespeare has great heroes in all his plays. At the same time, he has portrayed his heroines also in many of his plays like Rosalind, Portia, Desdemona, Beatrice, Bianca, Celia etc. Rosalind is one among the best characters in his play As You Like It. It is a pastoral comedy which follows its heroine Rosalind as she feels persecution in her uncle's court, accompanied by her cousin Celia to find safety and, eventually, love, in the Forest of Arden. In a Renaissance English woman, Rosalind exemplifies the best of virtues to be found. Rosalind's humble spirit is her character trait. She demonstrates her trait through her loyalty to all especially her cousin Celia. Rosalind must have torn between the father she loves and the uncle who cheated him out of his throne, but she didn't show any bitterness. Rosalind's exceptional talent is her way of talk to others. It is demonstrated during the bright flow of her conversation. She is witty in all occasions, and her wordplay is specifically sparkling when she is alone with Celia. She is particularly charming when she is lovingly teasing Orlando.

As You Like It is one of the best plays of William Shakespeare, the greatest dramatist of the ages. Heroes and heroines always play a major role in all his plays. Heroes would be of great warriors, soldiers or kings. Shakespeare has given equal importance to his heroines too. The September 20, 1592 edition of the Stationers' Register includes an article by London playwright Robert Greene that takes a few jabs at William Shakespeare:

"There is an upstart crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger's heart wrapped in a player's hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and being an absolute Johannes factotum, is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country"

As You Like It is a pastoral comedy and a work of great merit. The play is set in a duchy in France, but most of the action takes place in the Forest of Arden. Just as Orlando, the hero of the play, exemplifies the best of the Anglo-Saxon and Elizabethan virtues of a man, Rosalind, the heroine of this comedy, exemplifies the best of virtues to be found in a Renaissance English woman. She is intelligent, witty, warm, strong of character, and she possesses an unshakable integrity. Yet, there is nothing overbearing or pedantic about her intelligence; she intimidates no one. As a result, she remains always gently and wittily human. Rosalind always seems to rise above the failings of fate by using her resourceful, realistic understanding, and she emerges as a human being who is to be admired. "The people praise her for her virtues," Le Beau (291); her goodness and especially her ability to calmly endure misfortune are confirmed by Duke Frederick (79-84).

Rosalind is the daughter of the banished Duke Senior whose brother, Duke Frederick, has usurped his rightful throne. Soon after, Duke Frederick banishes Rosalind, too. However, his own daughter, Celia, escapes with Rosalind to a cottage on the edge of the Forest of Arden. Through her wisdom and wit, Rosalind survives and thrives through her difficulties. Rosalind runs away to the forest to protect her and survive. When Rosalind runs away to the forest, she knows that rape and robbery are very real possibilities on the road, in order to be in comfort zone and to be on the safer side in the forest, she decides to disguise herself as a young man named Ganymede. When our bossy, opinionated, and gutsy girl was ready in her disguise and ventures into Arden, she challenges all kinds of traditional 16th-century assumptions about women being passive, silent, and helpless. She says:

A gallant curtal-ax upon my thigh,
A boar-spear in my hand, and in my heart
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside—
As many other mannish cowards have
That do outface it with their semblances. (1.3.124-129)

Even though Rosalind identifies her hidden "fear" with being a "woman," she also seems to recognize that masculinity can be imitated or faked. If a cowardly man can pretend he's a tough guy by "swashing" around with an axe on his thigh and a boar-spear in his hand, then so can Rosalind. In other words, Rosalind knows that gender is a social role that can be imitated and faked. (After all, Shakespearean actors faked it all the time on a stage that prohibited women from acting in public theaters. In Shakespeare's time, all female roles were performed by men.)

Rosalind demonstrates both wit and ingenuity when she decides to disguise herself as Ganymede, a young gentleman. She escapes with Celia, who is disguised as a shepherdess. Rosalind's disguise is so good, that she even fools her father, who she meets later in the forest. The foremost character trait Rosalind displays is her obvious humble spirit. She demonstrates this through her loyalty to her cousin Celia. Her father has just been exiled, and yet Rosalind is willing to stay in order to be a companion to her cousin. Rosalind must have felt torn between the father she loves and the uncle who cheated him out of his throne, but she doesn't show any bitterness.

Rosalind and Celia have been inseparable since they were very young. Rosalind accepts this role, regardless of her own deep sadness over her father's banishment. As soon as they reached the forest, Rosalind decisively buys the cottage at the edge of the woods. Banishment may have disillusioned someone of lesser strength, but Rosalind takes charge and makes the best of a very difficult situation. She finds shelter and food for herself and her companions. With a many-sided intelligence that is verbal, practical, and imaginative, Rosalind outshines everyone else, male and female, in the play. Her bright humor and ready wit are so much in evidence that her deeper feelings are too often overlooked. At first, she is depressed about her father's being exiled, but then in a revealing passage, she promises to make a conscious effort to forget her sorrows and appear happy: Surface gaiety is not always to be taken at face value. She appears to be quiet and unaware but resolves everything at the earliest.

Rosalind's wit is sharp. She proves herself to be a fun companion, cousin, and friend to Celia. In the beginning of the play before the banishment, both girls tease about the enigma that women are either beautiful and loose, or unattractive and honest, and wonder why women can't be both honest and beautiful. In addition, both girls have great fun finding and reading the love notes to Rosalind hanging from tree branches in the Forest of Arden, not to mention the 'schooling' Rosalind gives to Orlando. Selfless nature of the girls and Touchstone (the court jester) can be seen during their journey towards the Forest of Arden. Rosalind is extremely weary, but her new role as Ganymede helps her keep her focus off her own problems.

She says, "I could find in disgrace my man's apparel and to cry like a woman; but I ought to comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose to show itself courageous to petticoat: therefore courage, my heart to good Aliena!" (2.4).

Rosalind's patience is not without limits. She is no saint, and she can assert herself with an authority appropriate to her status as the daughter of a duke. Falsely charged with treason and condemned to exile, she is nevertheless secure in her integrity, and she is able to defend herself with courteous. Rosalind's exceptional mental gifts are most strikingly demonstrated during the bright flow of her conversation. She can seemingly be witty on all occasions, and her repartee is especially sparkling when she is alone with Celia, when she's drawing out the philosophical Touchstone, or when she is caricaturing Jaques, and it must also be admitted that she is particularly charming when she is lovingly teasing Orlando. Regardless of her own weary discomfort, Rosalind takes her eyes off of her own feelings and focuses on the needs of others.

Rosalind is a discerning judge of character. Jaques, for all of his "Continental" pretensions, does not impress her at all; in contrast, she appreciates the wisdom, as well as the occasional witty foolishness, of Touchstone — a wisdom that the clown is not always fully aware of. That is, being a fool, Touchstone cannot be aware, she thinks, of how profoundly true his statements are. "Thou speakest wiser than thou art ware of," she says, in response to Touchstone's speech about his courting with a "peascod" (57-58).

Later Rosalind is rashly impatient for Celia to identify the forester who has been decking the trees with verses in praise of Rosalind; when she is told that it is Orlando, she questions her cousin breathlessly and becomes concerned about her appearance — forgetting momentarily that she is in disguise as a man and shouldn't worry about such things. This sudden weakness is humorous; yet it is very human and girlish, and it receives understanding sympathy from the audience.

Rosalind falls in love with Orlando at first sight. Impulsively, she declares her feelings by giving him her necklace and confessing her love for him. Although Rosalind laughs at love in her later bantering with Orlando ("Love is merely a madness"), she assures him that her cynicism is not to be taken literally. Later, for example, she is anxious and depressed when Orlando is late for their meeting in to cure his love-sickness. "Never talk to me!" she pleads with Celia, "I will weep." Rosalind's commitment to Orlando is total. Rosalind/Ganymede yells at him for being late and tells him to go away—an hour late is as good as not coming at all. She says she might as well be wooed by a snail. After laying the abuse on thick, she decides to stop being mean and asks him to woo her again. She refuses him a kiss and warns that lovers only kiss when they run short of stuff to talk about. While Orlando swears he will die if she won't love him, Rosalind goes back to being cynical.

People die of all sorts of things, she says, like drowning, spears, and having their brains dashed out with a club, but never from love. Again, she delivers more abuse, and then she demands he marry her. After the fake marriage, she points out that women are awful once you've married them, and you can't love them forever, as they only get nastier with old age. Finally, she says a woman's wit becomes so awful that she can convince you that it's sensible for her to be in neighbor's bed, as perhaps she had gone there to look for him. Shockingly, Orlando says he had better go now, as he's supposed to have dinner with the Duke. Rosalind throws a fit, telling him if he's a minute late for their next meeting that she'll be out of love with him. Remember, of course, she's having these histrionic fits while in the guise of a pretty young boy. When it comes to love, Rosalind is just as romantic as the next girl. After all, she is willing to disguise herself as a boy (who pretends to be a girl), so that Orlando can practice his moves on "Ganymede." At the same time, Rosalind has also got a pretty good head on her shoulders. When lovesick Orlando goes around claiming that he will die if Rosalind won't have him, she points out that "men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love".

At other times, Rosalind sounds downright cynical about love. When Orlando declares that he will love "Rosalind" forever, our girl says "No, no, Orlando, men are April when they woo, December when they wed maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives". In other words, Rosalind worries that Orlando will lose interest in her after he married her and spent the night in her bed. The great thing about Rosalind is that she doesn't let any of this get her down. She knows that love isn't all chocolates and roses, but she is still willing to take a chance on loving Orlando.

On the other hand, Rosalind's relationship with her father presents a possible stumbling block to the modern readers' appreciation of her warmly emotional nature. She chooses, for example, to remain with Celia rather than join Duke Senior in exile; this decision, however, could have been based on a decision to obey her father, who could hardly expect his daughter to withstand the churlish chiding of the winter's wind in the Forest of Arden. Celia is always hand in hand with Rosalind throughout the play, who is also responsible for the success of Rosalind. Significantly, it is Celia, rather than Rosalind, who proposes that they go into the Forest of Arden to seek the Duke. Rosalind's agreement is partly explained by the fact that she has just given her heart to Orlando; he occupies her every thought. Such a state of affairs is entirely natural in a romantic play, and Rosalind's final reunion with her father, Duke Senior, is as affectionate as could be wished.

Favored with youth, beauty, intelligence, wit, and depth of feeling, Rosalind is one of Shakespeare's most appealing creations. She has, indeed, been frequently regarded as the ideal romantic heroine - very warm and very human, and in any good production, she dominates the stage.

Yale professor and literary critic Harold Bloom credits Rosalind with being the first real lover in all of modern literature. She is the first to make fun of love and also the first to let herself be fully embraced by all its frivolity and pure joy. Bloom says "Rosalind is unique in Western drama, because it is so difficult to achieve a perspective upon her that she herself does not anticipate and share. Basically, this girl is incredibly self-aware, especially when it comes to matters of the heart. Literary critic Anne Barton says that "Rosalind is extraordinarily important in *As You Like It*, as central and

dominating a figure in her fashion as Hamlet in his own, very different play." That's quite a compliment.

Thus in the play, Rosalind gets trouble from her uncle's court but, instead of boo-hooing about her lousy circumstances, she puts on a brave face and runs away to the Forest of Arden in search of freedom. Our girl is not only adventurous, but she's also gutsy.

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