

As We Like It

In his play, *As You Like It*, William Shakespeare slyly conveys an underlying theme that addresses the social convention of placing people into categories of fixed identities. This period in history demanded acceptance of one's personal, social and economic status. Those who dared to protest or attempted to step outside the parameters set by social convention were harshly punished. Shakespeare observed and recorded these rigid categories that limited self-definition and individual freedoms. Exposing this system of thinking was subversive and dangerous. Carefully, Shakespeare infuses the play with skits, songs, and superfluous side stories, comic wordplay, and layers of themes dealing with love, faithfulness and goodwill toward everyone. In this way, his statement lies hidden, planting the seed that one has the freedom to experience life in a manner that provides the most meaning and potential for natural growth. Rosalind brings this perspective to the surface as she successfully defies social, sexual and personal boundaries. She, along with the other major characters, provide Shakespeare with a framework upon which role models resist fixed identities, offering a world of transformational possibilities in the social, sexual and personal realms of self-actualization. In the play, *As You Like It*, Shakespeare's characters and plotline offer multiple examples of social conventions turned upside down.

As the play opens, Oliver, the eldest son of Sir Rowland de Bois mistreats his younger brother, Orlando, denying him the education due a gentleman, instead raising him as a peasant. A gentleman raised as a peasant is the first of many customs that Shakespeare turns upside down. As the youngest in the family, Orlando has fewer rights and yet, he is the first to take a stand against injustice. Forcing his brother's hand, he demands his inheritance and sets off to

make his own fortune. When his brother attempts to have him killed, although he is no match for his opponent, Orlando defeats Duke Frederick's wrestler, Charles, providing another example of the assumption that physical prowess will always defeat the weaker opponent. Banished by his younger brother, Duke Ferdinand, Duke Sr. lives in the forest with his followers, like Robin Hood and his merry band. Touchstone, the clown, gives up his opulent life at court to marry Audrey, a commoner. Rosalind, however, stands out as Shakespeare's major character when she defies her place as a princess and a woman by putting on the appearance of an adolescent boy (1.3. 108-115).

Rosalind immediately breaks the easily manipulated and victimized female stereotype. Her intelligence is defined by her extraordinary wit. Her choices are limited while at court but as soon as she banished, she rises to the challenge set before her. She insists that she will play the part of a male in order to assure her and Celia's safety into the forest. She soon finds out that her role as an adolescent boy allows her to act on her intelligence in ways in which she was unable before her new gender status. She empowers herself, not only with manly weapons but also with a new perspective. For example, as an adolescent youth, she is able to converse with Orlando in ways that would otherwise be deemed inappropriate. In so doing, she unearths Orlando's true feelings for her and guides him into marriage. At a time when women had no rights and no say, whatsoever, in whom they married, Shakespeare artfully displays an example of a woman who outsmarts the system and successfully manipulates circumstances in her favor. At the conclusion of *As You Like It*, Rosalind remains on stage to end the play with an epilogue. In Elizabethan times, boys played the parts of women in Shakespeare's plays. A boy playing the part of a woman who plays the part of a boy further confuses the issues of social boundaries.

Even on a personal level, Shakespeare creates disorder in the Elizabethan audience thought processes with his characters, Silvius and Phoebe. Silvius, who dotes upon Phoebe, is willing to endure her abuse and ridicule for the chance to be with her. Rosalind shakes up his perceptions by suggesting that the letter written by Phoebe to Ganymede must have been written by a man because it is so coarse. Rosalind questions Silvius: “Women’s gentle brain could not drop forth such giant-rude invention (4.3.33-34). Rosalind reframes the image that Silvius has of Phoebe and adjusts his opinion of himself. She demeans him; “Warr’st thou with a woman’s heart?” and charges him to go to Phoebe and demand her love (4.3.45). Rosalind shatters Silvius’ low opinion of himself and his high regard for Phoebe. Phoebe, who pines for Ganymede, cruelly disregards Silvius’ love. Rosalind diminishes Phoebe’s illusions of grandeur by telling her she is ordinary and calling Silvius foolish for following her for he is:

a thousand times a properer man
 Than she a woman. 'Tis such fools as you
 That makes the world full of ill-favour'd children:
 'Tis not her glass, but you, that flatters her;
 And out of you she sees herself more proper
 Than any of her lineaments can show her;--
 But, mistress, know yourself; down on your knees,
 And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love:
 For I must tell you friendly in your ear,--
 Sell when you can; you are not for all markets:
 Cry the man mercy; love him; take his offer;
 Foul is most foul, being foul to be a scoffer.” (3.5. 52).

William Shakespeare gives us a snapshot of a world rich with options: A magical, theatrical world that plants the seeds of change by disorganizing common beliefs and restructuring them, as we might like them. Shakespeare's characters shift social status, sex and personal views of themselves. In so doing, he transforms his characters before our eyes. In this way, Shakespeare challenges and expands one's personal and social paradigms, encouraging his audience to imagine life As You Like It.

Works Cited

Greenblatt, Stephen. "As You Like It." 1997. *The Norton Shakespeare*. New York: W.W.

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