

CHARACTER ANALYSIS OF ROSALIND IN SHAKESPEARE'S 'AS YOU LIKE IT'

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ABSTRACT

The essay aims at analyzing the female character 'Rosalind' in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It'. The essay is divided into two parts: the first part is a description of the life of women in the Elizabethan Age and the second part is a character analysis of Rosalind in 'As You Like It.' The essay aims to provide answers to the following questions: What was the role of women in the Elizabethan Age? How were they treated by men at that time? Did men dominate women? Did the women receive an education? Did the women have the freedom to be independent? What restrictions did they face? What was expected of women living in that era? What happened to those who did not do as expected? Did men respect women who were non-traditional? How well does the character of Rosalind relate to the women living in those times?

The historical sources will be explored in order to understand the role that women had in that era. The influence of the clergy and the political situation prevailing at that time will also be taken into consideration. This will provide a better understanding of the role that Rosalind plays in Shakespeare's 'As You Like It'.

Introduction

Shakespeare wrote thirty-seven plays, two poems and one hundred and fifty four sonnets in an era when England was ruled by Queen Elizabeth. Women lived in a world that was dominated by men. In those days, a woman's primary duty was to do her household chores and have as many children as possible. Society expected her to obey all the male members in her household. Disobedience led to death or life in a nunnery. Elizabethan women who remained single or who became single later were scorned. They were not accepted and many of them looked for refuge in monasteries. Later on this became a problem as many monasteries were dissolved so the single women had no place to go. They had to live solitary lives.

Social and cultural changes were predominant when Shakespeare wrote his plays. It was a period of rapid changes. The Renaissance led to new ways of thinking. Schools were started for boys. Greek and Italian culture was revived and art, theatre, painting and architecture flourished.

The Reformation caused changes in people's outlook towards religion. There was an emphasis on the growth of spiritualism. Many superstitions were discarded. However, women could not hope to vote or get a job. If they did receive an education, it was only up to a certain level and the instruction was the kind that would help them in their duties. They were taught enough for them to manage their household duties and children. Any woman, who did not follow the beaten path, was shunned by society. Women were not expected to be intelligent and take on the kind of jobs that were reserved for men. Women were suppressed, in spite of the fact that England, at that time, was ruled by a woman.

Shakespeare made his heroines intelligent and witty. They were strong and independent. At the same time, they were warm, affectionate and submissive. His heroines were not the perfect culmination of what women in England were meant to be like in that era. But they were interesting. This attracted his audience. Shakespeare probably got his inspiration from Queen Elizabeth. Rosalind, the lead character of 'As You Like It' is a unique and interesting mixture of beauty and intelligence, warmth and affection. Her ready wit can charm everyone around her. She is extraordinarily sensible. She is graceful and lady-like, yet bold and adventurous. Her zest and vitality are fresh and admirable.

1. Life of Women in the Elizabethan Age

The Elizabethan Age was a era of renaissance and many rapid changes. While most of the boys were sent to school and educated, women got only the basic education they needed. Most of the new grammar schools that were being established even had a 'male only' sign on the door. Even the famous universities of Oxford and Cambridge didn't offer degrees to women until around the 20th century. In the upper classes, women were fortunate enough to have private tutors. But even then, their education was centralized around what they needed to know when they did their household chores and lived their roles as wives and mothers. These women could not pursue their education beyond a point. If a few of these women did manage to do something useful with their education, they were welcomed into the world of men. It definitely never occurred to anyone in those days that women could be feminine and yet be wise and intelligent at the same time.

Elizabethan women were expected to spend their days doing household chores and having as many children as possible, as the rate of mortality was high. The ladies in the upper classes were a little luckier as they had a lot of servants to help them with their house work and children.

The women of those times were made to believe that they were inferior to men. The clergy was largely responsible for portraying this image. They used the Bible as an example to show how Eve tempted Adam and led to the downfall of man. Women had to accept the fact that they would be dependent on men all their lives. Also, they were meant to obey all the male members of their families without question. Disobedience was not taken lightly. Women would get beaten until they obeyed. When they got married they lost hold of any property they may have had, jewellery, clothes, etc. The husband could take them and give them away as he pleased. An Elizabethan woman could get married as early as twelve years of age although this was not so common. Women were also meant to bring in a dowry when they got married.

There was no place in society for single women. They were treated badly. People were suspicious of them and believed that they were witches. In the beginning, single women could

seek refuge in monasteries but later on that became a problem as many monasteries were dissolved.

The Elizabethan woman had to be patient, obedient, humble and virtuous. If she was not silent, docile and dutiful, then she would be labelled as a bad woman.

Queen Elizabeth was privileged to know Greek, Latin, French, Spanish, Italian, Flemish, Mathematics, Astronomy and History by the time she was twelve years old. She proved to the world that she could stay single, not be dominated by any man, and yet be intelligent enough to rule a kingdom. She used her feminism to rule the court. She is known to have flirted with her courtiers but never let it get out of hand. She lived and ruled in a male-dominated world and was careful to keep it male-dominated. All her councilors were male. If she did survive such a time in history, it was probably because the men accepted her as an exception, not because the men admired women who did things differently.

2. Detailed Analysis of Rosalind's Character

Rosalind has the best qualities an Elizabethan Englishwoman could possibly have. She is the heroine of Shakespeare's play 'As You Like It' and dominates almost every scene in it. Her intelligence and witty remarks please her audience immensely. Her brave, adventurous nature is to be admired as it is not common in women of those times. She is confident and outspoken. She is also warm and compassionate. She is prepared to put her own worries aside in order to focus on Celia's happiness.

Rosalind: *'Well, I will forget the condition of my estate to rejoice in yours.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 1, Scene 2. [14 - 15]. Print.

Duke Frederick recognizes these wonderful qualities in Rosalind and banishes her from his kingdom.

Duke Frederick to Celia: *'Her very silence and her patience*

Speak to the people, and they pity her.' Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 1, Scene 3 .[76 & 77]. Print.

Celia decides to go with Rosalind. In the Elizabethan Age, it was not safe for ladies to go around unescorted by men so the only way Rosalind and Celia would be safe when they ran away from home, would be for Rosalind to dress like a man. Rosalind recognizes this danger and knows what she needs to do in order to be safe.

Rosalind to Celia: *'Alas, what danger will it be to us,*

Maids as we are, to travel forth so far?

Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold.' Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977.Act 1, Scene 3 .[106-108]. Print.

Rosalind dresses herself as a man, takes on a new name, and sets forth with Celia, confident that they can face all their problems bravely. However, being a woman, she gets tired soon. She is not ready to accept defeat. She says that she needs to be strong because that's what a man would be expected to do. She has to play her part.

Rosalind: *'I could find in my heart to disgrace my man's apparel and to cry like a woman;*

But I must comfort the weaker vessel, as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to petticoat: therefore, courage, good Aliena.' Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977.Act 2, Scene 4 .[4-8]. Print.

Rosalind is not the kind of person who would give up easily when hard times come her way. She continues to live her role as a young man successfully. However, there are times when she cannot help feeling the way she does but is quick to cover it up as best as she can. When Oliver brings her a blood stained handkerchief and bad news of Orlando, she cannot control herself and she faints. But she tells Oliver that she had faked the fainting spell so as not to appear any less a man.

Oliver: *'Be of good cheer, youth. You a man? You lack a man's heart.'*

Rosalind: *'I do so, I confess it. Ah, Sirrah, a body would think this was well-counterfeited. I pray you tell your brother how well I counterfeited. Heigh-ho.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 4, Scene 3 .[164-168]. Print.

Rosalind is witty and her excellent choice of words amazes her audience. One of her witty remarks to Touchstone proves that she has knowledge of the Medlar trees as well as the process of grafting.

Rosalind: *'I'll graft it with you, and then I shall graft it with a medlar.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 3, Scene 2 .[114-115]. Print.

She uses her wit to make fun of Orlando's poetry and her words show that she is familiar with the structure of poetry.

Rosalind: *'Ay, but the feet were lame and could not bear themselves without the verse, and therefore stood lamely in the verse.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 3, Scene 2 .[165-167]. Print.

Rosalind is a good judge of character and believes Touchstone to be wise. She says that the remarks he makes are actually true. On the other hand, Jaques, does not impress her at all.

Rosalind to Touchstone: *'Thou speak'st wiser than thou art ware of.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 2, Scene 4 .[54]. Print.

Rosalind to Jaques: *'Look you lisp, and wear strange suits, disable all the benefits of your own country, be out of love with your nativity, and almost chide God for making you that countenance you are; or I will scarce think you have swam in a gondola.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 4, Scene 1 .[30-35]. Print.

Rosalind, being unusually wise, has a good understanding of what romantic love is like.

Rosalind to 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.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 4, Scene 1. [136-138]. Print.

Rosalind makes fun of love and seems cynical about it.

Rosalind to Orlando: *'I thank God I am not a woman, to be touched with so many giddy offenses as he hath generally taxed their whole sex withal.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 3, Scene 2 .[338-341]. Print.

Rosalind to Orlando: *'Love is merely a madness and, I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do; and the reason why they are not so punished and cured is, that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love, too.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 3, Scene 2 .[387-391]. Print.

In actual fact, Rosalind falls in love with Orlando at first sight.

Rosalind to Celia: *'He calls us back. My pride fell with my fortunes.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977. Act 1, Scene 2 .[241]. Print.

Also, towards the end of the play, she tells Orlando of Oliver and Celia's love for each other, in a way that shows that she approves of it and she believes in love at first sight.

Rosalind to Orlando: *'For your brother and my sister no sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they loved, no sooner loved but they sighed, no sooner sighed but they asked one another the reason, no sooner knew the reason but they sought the remedy; and in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977.Act 5, Scene 2 .[31-37]. Print.

She remains disguised as a boy till the end of the play. This gives her the liberty of knowing exactly what Orlando is like and what his true feelings for her are.

Rosalind: *'But are you so much in love as your rhymes speak?'*

Orlando: *'Neither rhyme nor reason can express how much.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977.Act 3, Scene 2 .[385-386]. Print.

A conventional love affair would have never given her the insight she had into Orlando. At the same time, as Ganymede, she had a chance to teach Orlando what she would like in a partner who had a relationship with her. She would never have been able to do this as a woman.

Rosalind: *'I would cure you, if you would but call me Rosalind, and come every day to my cote and woo me.'* Gill, Roma, ed. *As You Like It*. Oxford School Shakespeare. Oxford University Press.1977.Act 3, Scene 2 .[412-413]. Print.

She took her time to get to know Orlando and when she was truly convinced that he would be perfect for her, she threw off her disguise and emerged as the beautiful Rosalind Orlando had fallen in love with a long time ago.

Rosalind has a chance to live her life different from what would have been expected of her at the palace. She enjoys the adventure and has ample opportunity to be herself without having to worry about society. When she has enjoyed every bit of her adventure, she returns to being the submissive Elizabethan woman, referring to herself as 'your Rosalind' when she speaks to her father. She has had the opportunity to have a taste of both worlds, the one in which she can use her wit and be dominant, independent and harsh when needed, and the other where she is quiet and submissive, accepting her roles of daughter and wife. Rosalind is the star of 'As You Like It' and many believe that, with the combination of her subtle and out-spoken nature, her independence and her submissiveness, her cynicism and her passionate beliefs, she is definitely one of the finest of Shakespeare's heroines.

Conclusion

At a time when women were meant to be feminine, submissive and quiet, Shakespeare managed to make them outstanding characters in his plays. Queen Elizabeth was ruling over England at that time. She was a woman ruler in a male-dominated world. Besides, she never married, proving to the world that a single woman could also be successful. Queen Elizabeth was well educated and encouraged literary development. This era is called 'The Period of Renaissance'. It was the period during which the revival of Greek and Italian culture took place. Theatre, art, painting and architecture also flourished. This was also a period of Reformation. Everyone's religious views were reviewed. Age-old superstitions and rituals were crushed. Great emphasis was placed on the moral and spiritual values of a person. England was just getting reformed at this time, due to the fresh ideas pouring in during the exodus of Greek Scholars from Greece to England. The humanists disseminated their ideas and styles all over Europe.

All the above factors are probably the reason why Shakespeare chose notable women characters in his plays. His heroines disguise themselves as young men, proving that women had limitations in those days and could not perform certain roles in society. This highlights the lack of social liberty. However, this does not stop them from doing what they want. Shakespeare gives them a certain kind of freedom that displays the spirit of the Renaissance. His heroines are independent, smart and intelligent. They go beyond the norms of society to do what is needed of them.

In 'As You Like It', Rosalind's ideas, speech, wit and intelligence are probably a culmination of what the period of Renaissance was doing to the people of England- the change that was gradually coming around!

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