

WOMEN IN SHAKESPEARE : A REREADING

Editors

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Wise and Vivacious Rosalind in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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William Shakespeare as a dramatist is of absolute value to the Literary World. His rays of success keeps accumulating growing deeper, broader and sharper down through the centuries. His plays have succeeded in drawing continuously, generations into endless pursuit. Sure to the core his characters are capable of the loftiest heroism.

As You Like It is one of Shakespeare's sunniest plays. It is said that he wrote it for his own delight. In this play Shakespeare is at play with love. We find love living in many forms. Lovers love one another at first sight. The play is set in idyllic surroundings. The Forest of Arden is the magic landscape where pastoral drama is played. Here we find wit sparkling, imagination glowing softly and delicately. Milton must have had his play and the Forest of Arden in mind when he sang of -

"Sweetest Shakespeare, Nature's child

Warbles his native wood- notes wild"

Shakespeare's Women characters are splendid. His women hold their principles as natural modest and feminine as everything else about them. Shakespeare's women have their own brightness and happiness and fragrance. Rosalind in *As You Like It* out of her brilliance and unbounded vivacity is such a thoroughly fascinating character. She is the life blood of the play because of her balance in character. Henry Douglas Wild remarks, "In her

complete naturalism under all circumstances her love sparkles as wisdom. And her wisdom is radiant with love". Her spirited acceptance of the banishment is affirming.

"Now we go in content
To liberty and not to banishment"

(1.1. 133-134)

Rosalind, the heroine of the play, commands the attraction of all. She is described as 'fair' by everyone. Orlando calls her the fair, the chaste, the inexpressive 'she'. To him 'she is Heavenly Rosalind. There is no jewel like her from the east to western Ind. All portraits are black, compared to Rosalind.

From the east to Western Ind,
No jewel is like Rosalind.
Her worth being mounted on the wind,
Through all the world bears Rosalind.
All the Pictures fairest lin'd
Are but black to Rosalind.
Let no face be kept in mind
But the fair of Rosalind.

(3.2.85-93)

Orlando, however, may not be so impartial a judge as he is head over heels in love with her. It is Phebe who gives us a more reliable estimate of Rosalind's beauty. She calls Ganymede a pretty youth, but not very pretty. By this qualification, she means that Rosalind's beauty is not of the conventional type. Ganymede is tall and proudly dignified. The best thing in 'him' is his complexion. There is a pretty redness in his lips. It is a little riper and more lusty red than that mixed in his cheek. In her love letter Phebe underlines the brightness of Ganymede's eyes. Orlando confirms this impression when he sketches her to his brother. The

inference is that even through her male disguise Rosalind's spotless beauty radiates bewitchingly.

The youthful brightness of Rosalind attracts the extremely tender heart of a woman. In everyone she meets she inspires a feeling of pity and affection. Even the usurping Duke comments on her patience and sympathy. Celia is attached to her affectionately. Rosalind's womanliness and tenderness reveal themselves best in her relations with Orlando. She confesses that he has overthrown more than his enemies. When she learns that Orlando is the author of the verses on the trees, she fires at Celia a volley of questions that takes the cousin's breath away. When Celia protests, Rosalind asks her if she does not know she is a woman. Though Rosalind plays with her lover as a kitten with a ball, she confesses that she will not kill a fly. After Orlando has departed, she declares her love is fathomless like the Bay of Portugal. She faints when she sees the blood-soaked napkin though she pretends it is play-acting. This shows her womanly tenderness. It is again the same womanly tenderness that makes her champion the tame snake Silvius and unite him to Phebe. In few words, Rosalind is a lass unparalleled.

Rosalind is not only intelligent but also beautiful. The successful scheme of disguising herself as a country youth is her own idea. She suggests to Orlando that he pretends to see Ganymede as Rosalind. This pretence permits her to be wooed full-length without having to reveal herself. The hymen masque by means of which the various love entanglements are sorted out and the action of the play brought to a happy conclusion is also her brain-child.

In her verbal duets with Orlando, she dazzles him with her flashing wit and ready repartee. Orlando appreciates her fine wit which could not have been acquired in the forest. Quick-wittedly she invents an old religious uncle who educated her.

This fictitious uncle, she later exploits to perform the magic in the final scene. Again, when she faints seeing the bloody napkin, she pretends that it is superb acting. Rosalind is a shrewd judge of character. She sees through the affectation of Jaques. She tells, Phebe that she is not for all markets. She understands the wisdom behind Touchstone's clowning. By her many-sided intelligence, Rosalind outshines everyone else in the play. Rosalind's buoyancy of spirit is intimately associated with her sprightly wit.

In the first Act, Rosalind is a little sad because of her father's exile and her uncle's jealousy.

Unless you could teach me to forget a
banished father, you must not learn me
how to remember any extra ordinary pleasure

(1.2.3-5)

But this transient gloom is lifted in a flash when Celia proposes flight to the forest. Its summer illumines her temper. Gay delight in life, enraptured girlhood made tender by love, are at their height in her. The bubbling spring is not happier than Ganymede sporting with Orlando and Phebe, Celia and Touchstone. Orlando is often bewildered by her wildness and apparent capriciousness. Celia is surprised and shocked by her sauciness to her lover.

It is with school-girlish delight that she lays bare the egoism and pretense of Jaques. We almost hear her laughter as she casts her parting shaft at him. The charm of her sunny humour is best seen in her "curing" Orlando. She is literally radiant with youth, imagination and joy of loving passionately and being passionately beloved. Rosalind is a girl par excellence. Every grace of mind and virtue with which a girl's character can be adorned is seen in her.

When the play opens we see the dutiful daughter, sad on account of the exile of her father. She shows royal dignity in

repudiating the allegations made by her uncle. But when she moves with a doublet and hose and is wandering at her own sweet will in the open air and the greenwood, she becomes radiant with gaiety and roguish merriment flows from her lips.

Rosalind slips into love with delight, entering the forest with a curtle-axe upon her thigh and the boar spear in her hand, she opens up like a bright flower in the sun. With her love for Orlando develops her wit and charm. She is essentially a woman with a deep capacity for love. But her sunny humour enjoys the comedy of 'curing' Orlando.

Rosalind by nature is sweet and hilarious. She is banished into the forest because Duke Frederick starts doubting the wisdom of keeping Rosalind and Celia his daughter together. The people who praise Rosalind's Virtues pity her father the senior Duke. Rosalind takes this banishment as a spirit of adventure and enthusiastically discusses the plan of escape with Celia. Rosalind will be under the guise of a younger country man named Ganymede with an axe and a spear and Celia will be 'his' sister Aliena. By the time they reach the forest they are almost exhausted they settle there as sheep farmers in Arden, after purchasing a farm.

Rosalind is amused to see her being extolled as the fairest girl in all the world in verse pinned to a tree. When she comes to learn that Orlando is the person, she is highly thrilled. Between Rosalind and Orlando it is a case of love at first sight. Orlando and Rosalind become 'love shaken' face to face. When Rosalind meets Orlando disguised as Ganymede, Orlando is unable to see through his beloved's disguise. She gaily banters him about time, women and a love-sick young man who spoils the trees carving Rosalind on the trunks.

Hang there my verse, in witness of my love,
And thou thrice crowned queen of night Survey

With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above,
 Thy huntress' name, that my full life doth sway.
 O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,
 And in their barks my thoughts I'll character,
 That every eye which in this forest
 Shall see thy virtue witness looks everywhere.
 Run, run Orlando, Carve on every tree
 The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive She.

(3.21-10)

Orlando confesses happily that he is the unfortunate poet. Rosalind suggests a curative method. She asks Orlando to pretend to look upon Ganymede as Rosalind. She invites Orlando to her cottage daily to express his love. Orlando's mock-wooing is widely enjoyed by Rosalind. When Rosalind says that she will not accept Orlando's love, Orlando very faithfully to his role declares that he will die. Rosalind brims with love. Her love is fathomless. She never expresses her heart which she keeps under control. She teases him about his love and says that it is poetic nonsense to reason of a heart broken through love.

A discerning judge of character, Rosalind sees through the pretensions of Jaques and Phebe. She is supreme in the play, but not tyrannically. A touch from her makes all the other characters shine all the brighter. Her youth and beauty, intelligence and wit, gaiety and depth of feeling make Rosalind one of the warmest and most lovable romantic heroines on the stage.

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