Gender Identity and Relationships in Three Plays

Phyllis Rackin writes, in her essay, “Misogyny is Everywhere,” that “the conceptual categories that shape contemporary scholarly discourse, no less than the historical records of the past, are often man-made and shaped by men’s anxieties, desires, and interests. As such, they constitute instruments of women’s exclusion, and often women’s oppression” (47). Taking this into consideration, it seems difficult to definitively describe women’s place in the Renaissance world as it relates to the performance of their gender, the actual conditions in which they lived, and the activities they pursued. However, looking through the lens of patriarchy, which was the “dominant trope through which social relations were perceived” and “power was embodied and institutionalized” (Newman 18), one may easily conclude not only that women were at least theoretically subject to men, but also that clearly defined ideology concerning gender identity existed.

Chastity, silence (or lack of it), and obedience seem to have been important markers of Renaissance femininity. Women were viewed as “the weaker vessel,” 1 which indicated that not only were they physically weaker than men, but were also supposed to be intellectually and morally weaker as well (Fraser 1-6). The belief in woman’s inability to be guided by reason, or at least to remain firm in reason is made clear through the numerous proverbs of the period concerning female vacillation. Women were “as wavering as the wind” or “wise on the sudden and foolish on deliberation” (cited in Fletcher 71). These are just three of many such similar proverbs common at the time.

Intellectual unsteadiness was viewed as the fount of women’s moral weakness. Women were believed to be unable to make sound moral decisions, a disability that was traced back to

1 A term first used in William Tyndale’s 1526 translation of the NT
Eve’s first transgression in the Garden of Eden (Fraser 1, Fletcher 70). Though they may discern the difference between right and wrong, women could never be counted upon to always make moral choices, especially when they pertained to the expression of their voracious sexuality. Much is made of this idea in Anthony Fletcher’s book, *Gender, Sex & Subordination in England 1500-1800*. He summarizes the axiom as follows: “Women were seen as possessing a powerful and potentially destructive sexuality which made them naturally lascivious, predatory, and most serious of all, once their desire was fully aroused, insatiable” (4-5). Fletcher further points out that this view of female sexuality threatened the very essence of manhood, which was grounded in an ability to both please (sexually) and control one’s wife’s limitless appetites and behaviors (18-19). Thus the early modern preoccupation with chastity, and the fear of being cuckolded, may be explained.

Fletcher also links women’s silence or lack thereof (shrewishness) with chastity by explaining that a woman’s voice, when uttering her own opinions, her own mind, gave her a degree of personal agency that threatened her husband’s total control over her (12). Once this degree of control was lost, the headstrong wife might, if she chose, decide that she was dissatisfied with her lot and boldly seek satisfaction for her indomitable sexual urges elsewhere. Even if this is an extreme interpretation, which it may be, it is still valid that a silent, obedient woman better fit the Renaissance ideal. “Assertiveness was supposedly a male trait, and assertive women were often stigmatized as ‘mankind,’ or masculine” (Woodbridge 214). Certainly, Shakespeare created many brilliantly assertive female characters, and whether he disapproved of their behavior or delighted in it (or both) is not my present concern. Rather, by examining female characters from *Much Ado About Nothing*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and *As You Like It*, using the above concepts of early modern femininity and masculinity (being conceptualized as
the opposite of femininity), I would like to first explore each character’s unique gender identity, and then illustrate how that identity functions in determining the success or failure of her romantic relationship.

In *Much Ado*, Hero and Beatrice are the antithesis of each other. Beatrice is the assertive, shrewish woman, who not only has no father to obey, but might not obey him if she had. Hero, in contrast, is “the silent woman of legend, and the chaste and obedient Renaissance ideal” (Dreher 84). By examining her fate in the play, one can reasonably draw some conclusions about how Shakespeare might have felt about this type of woman, or at least, how he might have felt about the ideology that shaped her. To begin, Hero’s gender identity seems flatly feminine. She fits the big three (chastity, silence, obedience) to a tee. She rarely speaks unless spoken to, particularly in the company of men. Diane Elizabeth Dreher points out that even though Hero “is present during the opening scenes” she “has only 1 line to Beatrice’s 45” (84), and then for another 150 lines she simply stands around silently.

When Hero does speak, as in 1.1 and again in 2.1, she offers only one line observations. “My cousin means Signior Benedick of Padua” (1.1.35), she clarifies, after Leonato has asked Beatrice whom she is referring to as “Signior Mountanto.” Hero cuts in, but her comment is unchallenging, and reflects more the depth of her familiarity and friendship with Beatrice than any opinion of her own concerning Benedick. She seems to take her cues from the men near her, who approve him, while Beatrice buzzes around them, displaying her voluminous wit with a savored vigor. In 2.1, after Beatrice has given her own characteristically colorful opinion of Don John, Hero offers one unthreatening line, “He is of a very melancholy disposition” (2.1.5), and then doesn’t participate in the conversation again until Don Pedro asks her to dance.
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English 252

Hero is not dull, however. Her responses, though rare and often brief, sometimes display a competent wit; she is just reserved around men, fulfilling her role as the ideal woman. When Hero and Margaret trick Beatrice into believing that Benedick has been moping around, secretly in love with her, Hero displays not only verbal wit but also keen psychological instincts, knowing exactly what to say to first arouse Beatrice’s sense of personal pride (by calling her prideful and scornful), and then to unlock her well-fortified heart, softening it to the idea of accepting Benedick’s love. And it works remarkably well (almost too well to be realistic). No one knows the real Hero, except perhaps Beatrice. Certainly readers cannot fully decipher the depth of her personality because she does not display it.

She lets her personality be subsumed in her father’s will. Hero never questions her father when he first instructs her to accept Don Pedro if he should propose marriage to her, and again she never questions Leonato when he agrees to give her to Claudio. She says nothing. Beatrice even calls her out on it. “Speak cousin, or if you cannot, stop his mouth with a kiss and let not him speak neither” (2.1.304-305). Such total submission of mouth, mind and body was seen by the male characters in Much Ado as admirable. Claudio first fell in love with her, not because she was a complex, scintillating woman who challenged him and left him longing to understand her better, but because Hero appeared modest, beautiful, and of course, she would inherit her father’s estate. “By mine eye,” he says in 1.1.183, “she is the sweetest lady that ever I looked on.” But he never speaks to her till after their marriage is arranged.

Certainly Leonato is proud of Hero, and considers her an ornament to his estate, to his pride. In 4.1, after Claudio has publicly shames Hero for her alleged indiscretions, Leonato denounces her also, without so much as a second thought once the prince verbally supports Claudio and their “proof” is presented.
Why ever wast thou lovely in my eyes?  
Why had I not with charitable hand  
Took up a beggar’s issue at my gates,  
Who, smirched thus, and mired with infamy,  
I might have said “No part of it is mine;  
This shame derives itself from unknown loins”?  
But mine, and mine I loved, and mine I praised,  
And mine that I was proud on, (4.1.138-145)

Such an abrupt change of attitude, from pride to shame, disgust, and a desire to disown her, not only causes one to question his loyalty to his child, but also to wonder how strong his love for her could possibly be. If the friar had not intervened and suggested to him that Claudio and Don Pedro may be deceived, how much further might Leonato have gone in reaction to this public shame? Of course, he might have eventually calmed down and realized that Hero could be the victim of slander, but his first reaction to the bogus evidence was one of personal mortification in the face of public shame, rather than that of paternal instinct to protect his child, which suggests that to Leonato Hero is primarily his possession, and an extension of himself (Hays 87). Being treated like a possession, even if a beloved one, it is not unreasonable that Hero should respond by acting like a possession. The very nature of her captivity, her lady-like silence and veiled personality prevents Hero from defending herself with any authority. As Claudio says in 4.1.109-113:

Thou pure impiety and impious purity.  
For thee I’ll lock up all the gates of love  
And on my eyelids shall conjecture hang,  
To turn all beauty into thoughts of harm,  
And never shall it more be gracious.

He did not know her to begin with. He judged her character by evaluating the symbolic meaning of her physical appearance, which in the face of shame and doubt, lost all its weight. If Hero’s true character had been better known to Claudio, he may not have been so quick to
believe Don John’s rouse, and her protestations at the wedding might have had more impact on his judgment.

Beatrice, on the other hand, fares better in her romantic adventures. She is no one’s possession, and as a result of her volubility, is impossible not to know, at least a little (although she hides her vulnerability behind a mask of wit and mirth.) Beatrice is an assertive woman, overly assertive even. She never withholds her opinion. She says it, and much more. In many of her scenes she dominates the conversation, especially when speaking with men. Sometimes, it seems like the male characters do not know how to respond to her. One gets the sense that while Leonato likes Beatrice, for he always treats her kindly, he finds her “shrewd” nature bewildering. In 2.1, after having already listened to several speeches concerning Beatrice’s aversion to marriage, Leonato simply says to her, “Well niece, I hope to see you one day fitted with a husband” (2.1.57). Beatrice responds with yet another tirade, and instead of replying, Leonato simply turns to his daughter and changes the subject.

Compared with Hero, Beatrice definitely appears “mankind.” Linda Woodbridge points out that due to the predominant attitudes of the period, “however arresting, however delightful,” a character like Beatrice would have been considered “not quite feminine” (Woodbridge 216). “By my throth, niece, thou wilt never get thee a husband if thou be so shrewd of thy tongue” (2.1.18-19), Leonato says to her in 2.1. “In faith, she’s too curst” (2.1.20), his brother adds. Benedick refers to Beatrice as “my Lady Tongue” in 2.1.270, and slips away because he cannot “endure” her. Since the primary role women played in society was that of being wives (Newman 16), Beatrice’s ineligibility for that role automatically calls her female identity into question. If she is not a wife, what is she? She is abnormal.
Thankfully, however, Shakespeare turns this abnormality into an advantage. When, after the successful schemes of their friends and family, Beatrice and Benedick finally decide that they can “endure” each other, and that in fact they would like nothing better, their relationship is much more multi-faceted and full of mutuality than Hero and Claudio’s had been, and possibly will ever be. Although their relationship is contentious, it is also honest. Benedick knows her flaws, but he is also very aware of Beatrice’s merits, and seems to accept and love both her good and bad “parts.” Beatrice, in return, possesses the same awareness of Benedick’s qualities. Because of their “masculine” identities, they are able to enter into a true love relationship and to accept each other as husband and wife, not only because it may seem like a logical, pretty match on the outside (like Hero and Claudio), but because they have a genuine, time-tested emotional attachment.

In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, Anne Page in like kind refuses to submit to the will of either father or mother and chooses her own husband. Although she has only a few speeches, and her plot line is backgrounded in the play, Shakespeare again creates in Anne a woman who, like Beatrice, is smart enough and daring enough to direct her own life. Yet, her appearance of femininity and desirability as a wife is never really questioned by the other characters, possibly because she publicly upholds the standard of submission. In her opening scene, she is politely entreating Slender to join her father’s party for dinner. All of her lines are formal and simple, uncharacterized by any whiff of rebellion. She uses the word “sir” seven times, and the expression “I pray you” or “pray you” four times, and she only has nine lines in the scene.

Despite the appearance of propriety, however, Anne is no push-over like Hero. She possesses a strong and certain intelligence, which she utilizes to safely wade through the pile of nonsense heaped at her feet by her many suitors. She does not want to throw herself away by
making an imprudent match. Anne questions these men with exacting cleverness. When Fenton tells her that her father disapproves of him because he suspects that Fenton is a gold-digger, Anne immediately replies, “Maybe he tells you true” (3.4.13), thereby forcing him to react, and giving her the opportunity to evaluate his intentions for herself. When Slender attempts to woo her, she exposes the absurdity of his attempt, and uncovers his motives in only two lines.

Anne: What is your will?
Slender: My will? ‘Od’s heartlings, that’s a pretty jest indeed! I ne’er made my will yet, I thank heaven. I am not such a sickly creature, I give heaven praise.
Anne: I mean, Master Slender, what would you with me?
Slender: Truly, for mine own part, I would little or nothing with you. Your father and my uncle hath made motions. If it be my luck, so; if not, happy man be his dole. They can tell you how things go better than I can. You may ask your father. (3.4.57-67)

In the end, she tricks both her father and mother, rejecting their preferred suitors, Caius and Slender respectively, and elopes with Fenton, her choice. Considering Anne’s cautious behavior throughout the play, one may assume that in the end she decided that Fenton was in love with her after all, or at least that he was the pick of the litter. Her quiet deception possibly saved her from a life of marital misery, and although Fenton reveals their tale to the others in the end, one gets the sense that Anne will always be too smart for him to properly control.

Of all the heroines discussed above, Rosalind in *As You Like It* has the most complicated relationship to her gender identity. She is a very smart, assertive woman, possessing many masculine and feminine qualities that she attempts to control and experience separately for most of the play. In the beginning scenes, Rosalind is living in her uncle’s house after he has usurped the dukedom from her father, Duke Senior, and banished him from the realm. She has stayed at her uncle’s request because he and his daughter Celia value her company too much to be without it (which is made clear in Celia’s speech at 1.3.67-68). During this time, Rosalind is verbally submissive to the duke and even somewhat to Celia. In 1.2, Celia presses her to “be merry”
(1.2.1); Rosalind is understandably depressed about her father’s banishment. She says in response, “Dear Celia, I show more mirth than I am mistress of, and would you yet I were merrier?” (1.2.2-3). Celia affirms that she would, that if Rosalind truly loved her, she would at least find some joy in her (Celia’s) own good fortune, as she would do if their roles were reversed. Instead of defending herself in the face of this completely insensitive and unrealistic expectation, as would be natural, Rosalind lets the matter drop, saying “Well, I will forget the condition of my estate, to rejoice in yours” (1.2.14). Even if her response carried a twinge of sarcasm, it was still passive. She did not assert her true feelings to Celia.

With Duke Frederick, also, Rosalind behaves submissively until he decides to banish her because her very “smoothness,” “silence,” and “patience” (1.3.75-76), all feminine virtues, excite from other members of the court too much pity for her father’s wronged state and her own suffering. The Duke banishes Rosalind because the pity she excites places him in a villain’s light to others, which threatens his power, but he could also be reacting subconsciously to the unnaturalness of Rosalind’s behavior. To remain in the house of a tyrant, a family member no less, who has just banished one’s father and stripped him of his financial security, and to behave unquestionably respectful toward this tyrant day after day, requires one to completely suppress and invert one’s natural emotions and reactions. That she did this is a testament to Rosalind’s strong sense of self-control.

When the Duke accuses her of being a traitor, Rosalind finally drops her submissive demeanor and capably defends herself and her father:

Rosalind: Yet your mistrust cannot make me a traitor
Duke Frederick: Thou art thy father’s daughter, there’s enough.
Rosalind: So was I when Your Highness took his dukedom;
So was I when Your Highness banished him
Treason is not inherited, my lord;
Or, if we did derive it from our friends,
What’s that to me: My father was no traitor. (1.3.54-60)

While certainly Rosalind behaves assertively in this scene, it is under constrained circumstances, where undoubtedly, she loses hold of her previously carefully controlled behavior. After this confrontation, the women decide to flee the court together (with Touchstone) in the night, Rosalind disguised as a man she calls Ganymede, and Celia as his sister, Aliena. They travel to the Forest of Arden to seek out Duke Senior.

Rosalind’s choice to flee disguised as Ganymede has both practical and symbolic implications. In 1.3 she says, “Alas, what danger will it be to us, Maids as we are, to travel forth so far? Beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold” (1.3.106-108). She realizes that it will be physically safer for her and Celia to travel on foot if they go with the protection and authority of at least one “man” (apparently Touchstone is irrelevant as a means of protection). Ganymede not only ensures that they arrive at and travel through the forest safely, but he also enables them to easily purchase the sheep cote through Corin, without question of their right to do so. Through Ganymede, Rosalind practically participates in the male sphere, but on a more personal level, she is also able to express her own “maleness” more easily.

However, being disguised as a man causes her to become more aware of her femaleness, as well. In 2.4 she says, “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 (Celia), as doublet and hose ought to show itself courageous to a petticoat” (2.4.4-7). Rosalind is taking her role as a man very seriously. Though it is just a disguise, it enables her to express strengths and qualities that she may not have shown dressed as “Rosalind.” While discussing her plan to cross-dress with Celia, Rosalind tellingly 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. (13.115-120).

Ganymede not only allows her to be more active and display more strength, she seems to be saying here that because of the power of costume she simply will be more masculine. The costume enables her to overcome her feminine handicaps, like fear; it challenges her to become the strongest version of herself possible. In turn it also makes her label her physical weakness female, and thus creates for herself a separate feminine identity that she repeatedly attempts to suppress. There are several other instances of this type of compartmentalization throughout the play, and I interpret these moments as Rosalind’s immediate refusal to view herself as both male and female (figuratively). The instinct to separate suggests that she has not consciously accepted that men and women can or should be a mixture of genders. And by remaining in the guise of Ganymede she is allowing herself to safely express her strength, without any sense of shock.

Of course, as the play progresses and Rosalind becomes increasingly in love with Orlando, she loses some of her careful control over her female aspect. After she and Celia discover Orlando’s love letters in the woods, Celia draws out answering Rosalind when she begs her to reveal the identity of the author. Rosalind loses her male demeanor and becomes positively giddy with impatience and curiosity. When Celia finally reveals that Orlando is her admirer, Rosalind exclaims, “Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose?” (3.2.16). Her heterosexual love for Orlando has symbolically silenced Ganymede, and broken through Rosalind’s two identities. Later in the scene she even proclaims to Celia, “Do you not know that I am a woman?” (3.2.246). Throughout the rest of the play, Rosalind and Ganymede continue to blend together.
But before she can dispose of him entirely, Rosalind uses Ganymede in order learn whether or not Orlando truly is a good match for her. When she and Celia first discover Orlando’s love poems, they criticize them for their ridiculousness and technical inferiority, but the poems also describe Rosalind in unrealistic, idealized terms, that undoubtedly leave her wondering if Orlando could really love her, or if he loves an image created in his mind.

Therefore heaven Nature charged
That one body should be filled
With all graces wide-enlarged.
Nature presently distilled
Helen’s cheek, but not her heart,
Cleopatra’s majesty,
Atalanta’s better part,
Sad Lucretia’s modesty.
Thus Rosalind of many parts
By heavenly synod was devised,
Of many faces, eyes, and hearts,
To have the touches dearest prized.
Heaven would that she these gifts should have,
And I to live and die her slave. (3.2.139-152)

Surely this is not the picture of a mature love. Rather, it recalls ideas of courtly love closer to Claudio’s initial attachment to Hero. Rosalind, undoubtedly, does not wish to be anyone’s ethereal goddess, and by playing Ganymede playing Rosalind she is able to determine not only how strong Orlando’s love for her really is, but also to educate his idea of love, turning the image of herself in his mind into something more realistic and loveable. After all, one cannot really love an illusion. In this way, Rosalind takes steps to ensure her own future happiness with Orlando, and gains greater personal acceptance and understanding of her own multi-faceted gender identity.

Thus far I’ve shown how assertive women (Beatrice, Anne, and Rosalind) are able, by rebelling against the conventional expectations of femininity, to achieve more satisfying
romantic relationships with their husbands-to-be, and how the traditional model of femininity, when never transgressed (Hero), poorly prepares the woman to achieve a satisfying mutual relationship with her spouse. In each of these plays, the male protagonist’s gender identity approximates his lady’s. Benedick, Orlando and possibly Fenton (although his character is hardly fleshed out) must all discard their traditionally male personas of being only active, achieving, controlling and commanding men, and incorporate more empathetic qualities in order to please their ladies. Both parties must give up part of themselves in order to achieve harmony in the relationship. Janice Hays states that “empathy is a necessary component of the mutuality that is the condition of mature love, since it is empathy that enables one to be receptive and responsive to the feelings and needs of others, temporarily setting aside one’s own aims and desires in order to understand the emotions of another human being” (Hays 90). Certainly, looking through the lens of Renaissance patriarchy, this idea may look a little outlandish, since it was scripted that woman submit her very life and will to her husband or father; obviously, however, that is an extremely unrealistic demand, and through these relationships, Shakespeare has illustrated two things: 1.) that real relationships and people are too complicated to fit perfectly into a gender hierarchy, and 2.) that when it is tried, it’s more likely to fail. Instead of confining his characters to the ideology of the time, Shakespeare used romantic relationships to free his characters from the labels of man and woman; instead he made them human, (within reason, or course.)
Works Cited


