

As You Like It, Beards, and Queen Elizabeth: Early Modern England's Construction of National Identity

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Abstract

This paper examines the nature of early modern England's masculinity. Based on early modern England's societal misunderstandings of biological sex, society thought that if one did not perform their given gender correctly, they could potentially change sexes. Men used visible indicators, such as beards, to highlight their male identity lest it should be questioned. Beards became inextricably linked with masculinity, as is evidenced by William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. This paper focuses on the construction of masculinity in *As You Like It* arguing that there are significant links between his heroine, Rosalind, and Queen Elizabeth which illustrate the formation of England's national identity around their female sovereign, Queen Elizabeth. Both these women are portrayed as nurturing the masculinity, of men, rather than permanently adopting a masculine persona.

Shakespeare's comedy, *As You Like It*, was written between 1598 and 1600, at the tail end of Queen Elizabeth's reign, and offers a unique vantage point into the era's concerns with masculinity. Not only does the play complicate the portrayal of gender, it flirts with homoerotic love, and calls into question the process of inheritance – all heated issues to Shakespeare's first audiences. Men were hierarchized over women at every turn, a preference which grows complicated and potentially treasonous when one has a reigning female sovereign. Queen Elizabeth disrupted the “natural” hierarchy of the sexes. Her sex forced England to reconcile the inferior body of their ruler with their sense of national identity. *As You Like It* suggests that women are competent beings who can fill men's roles when necessary, but must return to their proper place at the end of the day. The concept that women are incapable of being inherently masculine is evidenced by the play's discussion of facial hair. In early modern England, beards served as indicators of indisputable masculinity. *As You Like It's* remarks upon facial hair express the era's compromise with regard to female masculinity by presenting a situation in which a woman is forced to temporarily don a transient masculine identity. This mirrors the manner in which Queen Elizabeth remains feminine, fulfilling the masculine role of a ruler by nurturing the masculinity of her male subjects, and informing England's sense of national identity.

The plot of *As You Like It* is essential to understanding its relevance within a study of gender performance. Rosalind's Uncle has usurped her father's throne, and now is attempting to banish her from the kingdom as well, in hopes to clear his daughter Celia's path to the throne by removing Rosalind, whose claim takes precedence. Celia and Rosalind are first cousins and fast friends, so they escape together, journeying to Rosalind's deposed father, who is now living on the outskirts of the Forest of Arden. Wary of the dangers such a journey will entail for two

women and their jester, Touchstone, who has kindly consented to accompany them, Rosalind chooses to cross dress for their safety. While in the forest, she meets her former love, Orlando. Though Orlando is unaware that he is with his Rosalind, she arranges to teach him the art of love so that he may successfully woo his Rosalind. Instead, he finds himself attracted to this young man instructing him. Eventually, Rosalind's father is reinstated as the King, preserving his rightful sovereignty. In the final scene, Rosalind reveals herself as a woman, making clear that she and the young man were one and the same, and then she proceeds to marry Orlando on the spot.

While appearing as a man, Rosalind chooses to go by the name Ganymede, a name which would have conjured up a whole host of homoerotic associations for early modern audiences. In Roman mythology, Ganymede is the young shepherd boy Jove whisked off to Mount Olympus to serve as his page. As represented in the popular imagination of the era, a "Ganymede" would have been a clean-shaven youth, capable of attracting older, more mature men.¹ Men of wealth, status, and age were hierarchized over those of less wealth, little experience, and fewer years.² The portrayal of gender is further complicated when we consider that women were barred from performing on the Elizabethan stage. Therefore, audiences would have seen a boy playing a woman, cross dressing as a man, wooing another man. Such subjects unsettled early modern England's underlying insecurities surrounding the proper performance of masculinity. Yet it is important to note that Rosalind, rather than loving impropriety, feels bound to present herself as a man for safety's sake. Furthermore, she concludes the show as a woman, which reestablishes the "proper" gender dynamic and eases the performance's homoeroticism.

¹ Mario DiGangi, "Queering the Shakespearean Family," *Shakespeare Quarterly* 47, no. 3 (1996): 269-290: 272.

² Mark Breitenberg, *Anxious Masculinity in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 6-7.

As You Like It sheds significant insight into the English construction of masculinity during the reign of Queen Elizabeth. Shakespeare was incredibly well positioned to comment on the culture of early modern England. Prolific in his lifetime, his works reached all members of society, from the groundlings, made up of tavern goers and prostitutes in the seedy London neighborhood surrounding the Globe, to Queen Elizabeth and King James, who had his plays performed at court. *As You Like It* was written between 1598 and 1600, at the end of Elizabeth's reign, which stretched from 1559 to 1603. In a time when woman were deemed incapable of equaling men's mental abilities, her gender constantly jeopardized her place on the throne. Though *As You Like It* deals with issues of sovereignty as well, its main focus remains on gender. *As You Like It* is well positioned to elucidate England's understanding of masculinity, reconciling these images with their female leader.

Early modern England's masculinity was of precarious construction. Primitive understandings of biology gave rise to the "One sex" medical theory, which hierarchized men over women based on blatant misconceptions about the female body in particular. Rather than recognizing two distinct sexes, early modern England thought that there was only one true body – that of the male body, which was considered perfect in form and function. The female body was thought to be the inverted version of a male body. This theory was used to subjugate women on the basis of scientific knowledge, naturalizing a hierarchy which was simply a social construction. The imperfections of women's bodies were thought to be imbued into their characters as well. The extreme end of this line of reasoning led early modern England to view women as false, scheming creatures devoid of any higher morality who constantly attempted to seduce men. Men were what women were not: noble, truthful people governed by a moral code.³

³ Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus, *Half Human Kind: Context and Text of the Controversy about Women in England 1540-1640* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1985), 47-62.

These gender roles further justified a gender hierarchy, assuming that women needed to be governed and controlled so as not to threaten the prevailing social order.

Despite the ease with which the “One sex” medical theory allowed for the hierarchization of gender, it had one significant caveat; biological sex was viewed as malleable. If one performed their given gender improperly, there was the potential to invert or un-invert, therefore changing sex.⁴ This uncertainty required that both genders validate themselves through outward displays of masculinity or femininity, which in turn, secured their biological sex. Because of men’s proud place on top of the gender hierarchy and their anxiety over retaining this position, men needed a highly visible symbol of their masculinity so no one could call their sex into question. Beards became a defining feature of masculinity as a highly visible indicator of maleness, though a highly convertible one as well. As such, beards had a variety of cultural functions, becoming part and parcel of idealized masculinity and sexual desirability.⁵ Throughout the *As You Like It*, beards figure centrally to characters' perception of proper male identity.

Touchstone, the show’s fool, directly demonstrates an instance in which a man’s masculinity is called into question via insults against his beard. Touchstone explains an encounter with a courtier:

I did dislike the cut of a certain courtier’s beard. He sent me word if I said his beard was not cut well, he was in the mind it was. This is called “the retort courteous.” If I sent him word again it was not well cut, he would send me word he cut it to please himself. This is called “the quip modest.” If again it was not well cut, he disabled my judgment. This is called “the reply churlish.” If again it was not well cut, he would answer I spake not true. This is called “the reproof valiant.” If again it was not well cut, he would say I lie.

⁴ Thomas Laqueur, *Making Sex: Body and Gender from the Greeks to Freud* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990): 1-24.

⁵ Will Fisher, “The Renaissance Beard: Masculinity in Early Modern England,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 54, no. 1 (2001): 156.

This is called “the countercheck quarrelsome,” and so to “the lie circumstantial,” and “the lie direct.”⁶

His listener queries how far Touchstone actually dared to proceed in this game of insults, to which Touchstone replies “I durst go no further than the lie circumstantial, nor he durst not give me the lie direct, and so we measured swords and parted.”⁷ First and foremost, this scene demonstrates how offensive it was considered to insult another man’s beard. Though the scene is attempting to blow the insult and reaction out of proper proportion, it remains indicative of early modern Englishmen’s tender feelings on the subject of their masculinity.

Additionally, Touchstone’s quarrel with the courtier transcribes the language of dueling, another arena for exhibiting masculine honor, onto the interaction. Because a symbol of the courtier’s masculinity has been questioned, he has to resort to actions of a combative nature to reassert his masculinity. Both he and Touchstone know the extent to which they can indulge in their militant language without fighting or losing any honor, so neither dare to outright accuse the other of lying. Society viewed men as the honest, valiant, and noble side of the coin, so to accuse a man of lying was to associate him with the subterfuge and dissembling that was the domain of women.⁸ Though Touchstone has accused the courtier of lacking manliness, with his badly cut beard, he is unwilling to go so far as to tell the courtier he lies, a remark which would more openly assert womanliness. The encounter ends with them measuring swords – standard protocol for a duel – but this is also a not-so-subtle reference to comparing the length of their genitals. By insulting the courtier’s beard, Touchstone directly attacks his manliness. Unable to come to a conclusion by quarreling, they resort to some other demonstration of masculinity. Eventually, they come to a truce when they prove beyond a doubt that they are men on a

⁶ William Shakespeare, “As You Like It,” In *Mr. William Shakespeares Comedies, Histories, & Tragedies* No. 68, 185-207 (London: Issac Jaggard and Ed. Blount, 1623): 5.4.71-85.

⁷ Shakespeare, 5.4.88-90.

⁸ Katherine Henderson and Barbara McManus, 47-62.

fundamental level, inhabiting uninverted bodies. This scene indicates that manliness was liable to be questioned, and indeed, quantified through a number of external markers.

Not only does *As You Like It* present a scene in which masculinity is evaluated, but it presents beards as a feature of an idealized man, tracing his maturation. In the play's most famous monologue, "All the world's a stage," Jacques ponders the various stages in a man's life. He characterizes young manhood as "...a soldier, / Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard⁹, / Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel."¹⁰ This quote associates beards with the ideal masculine qualities of virility and athleticism. These martial qualities are reminiscent of Touchstone's duel. Early modern England, a burgeoning country under significant military threat from the continent, prized combativeness in their men – evidenced by the wild and taciturn nature of the bearded soldier. England's sense of nationalism was predicated on the notion that men were the heroic preservers of their nation. Valor and the protection of one's honor were to be fought for because they asserted masculinity. The quick, hot, passionate nature of this soldier, who is ready to fight, falls directly in line with many of early modern England's bodily assumptions about masculinity. This sense of national identity was juxtaposed with a female monarch, her non-combativeness being part of her innately feminine character.

Jacques goes on to portray a middle aged man as "... the justice, / In fair round belly with good capon lined, / With eyes severe and beard of formal cut."¹¹ The soldier has transformed into a middle aged patriarch, replete with a more pristine beard. No longer of a fighting fit age, the man is now a stately professional, able to groom his most important and characteristic appendage. The state of this man's beard attests to his success in life. Not only is he in a good

⁹ Leopard

¹⁰ Shakespeare, 2.7.56-58.

¹¹ Shakespeare, 2.7.160-162.

profession and can eat well, but his beard is well-trimmed, cut fittingly by a barber. Strikingly, beards are used to symbolize male archetypes, holding up both the soldier and the justice as men worth aspiring to, with distinct beards, each demonstrating their state in life.

Much as beards were used to draw distinctions between masculinity and femininity, they were also used to divide men from boys.¹² Young men, unable to produce proper beards due to their young age, were hierarchized below older men. Rosalind would not have donned a beard while appearing as Ganymede because she is treated in a manner befitting a teenager, rather than a grown man. Ganymede is discussed as a young shepherd boy, remarkably thoughtful for his age, rather than a man of any real wisdom or importance. Shakespeare's use of beards to relay the type of manhood attained, attests facial hair's importance in the popular imagination.

Jacques is not the only one to take notice of men's beards. Rosalind and Celia have a discussion evaluating a man's beard, establishing that beard's function as an emblem of desire. The scene in question is important because it shows women evaluating a man's desirableness as a partner based on his facial hair. Rosalind, curious as to who has been writing love poetry about her, demands information of Celia, her cousin and fellow outcast:

ROSALIND: Is he of God's making? What manner of man? Is his head worth a hat, or his chin worth a beard?

CELIA: Nay, he hath but a little beard.¹³

By denying the good quality of his beard, Celia is negating his masculinity, attempting to depict him as an undesirable partner. Rosalind counters "Why, God will send more, if the man will be thankful."¹⁴ In doing so, she reaffirms Celia's indication that beards make the man and represent a kind of desirable manhood. This is a notion reasserted in the closing lines of the play when

¹² Will Fisher, *Materializing Gender in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 87.

¹³ Shakespeare, 3.2.209-212.

¹⁴ Shakespeare, 3.2.213-214.

Rosalind, returned to her female form, addresses the audience saying “I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not.”¹⁵

This places beards on the list of desirable features, necessary to be kissed by our fair Rosalind. Not only does it assert the sexual desirability of a man’s beard, but it reaffirms the notion that Rosalind can return to being a woman because those around her are proper, masculine men as evidenced by their beards.

As You Like It’s attention to facial hair reinforces early modern England’s gender hierarchy in many ways. Yet it features a strong capable woman, in command of an altogether unideal situation. With a father banished and her life imperiled, she sets out to create herself anew. *As You Like It* masculinizes Rosalind in a very similar manner to the way in which early modern England masculinized Queen Elizabeth I. Elizabeth’s reign was in constant jeopardy. Her claim to the throne hung on England’s continued attachment to the protestant Anglican Church. Elizabeth’s mother, Anne Boleyn, was the second wife of Henry VIII, who created the Anglican Church, parting with Catholicism, in order to annul his marriage to his first wife, Catherine of Aragon. Were England to renounce Anglicanism in favor of Catholicism – an ever present threat despite England’s determined persecution of Catholics – Elizabeth would be considered an illegitimate child, ineligible to reign. Her saving grace was that her contender for the crown was Mary, Queen of Scots, both a Catholic and a woman.¹⁶ England was beset on all sides by powerful continental regimes, often Catholic, which wished to depose Elizabeth for their own ends. This created a sort of crisis in early modern England’s nationalism. The figurehead they presented to the world was a mere woman, and women were associated with the

¹⁵ Shakespeare, Epilogue.17-20.

¹⁶ Anne McLaren, “Gender, Religion, and Early Modern Nationalism: Elizabeth I, Mary Queen of Scots, and the Genesis of English Anti-Catholicism” *American Historical Review* 107, no. 3 (2002): 740.

imperfect qualities of society. Men were strong and women were weak. Men were noble and women were cowardly. Men were honest and women were liars. Men were virile, but they were tempted to sex by the wiles of women.¹⁷ Early modern England had many qualms with claiming a woman as their symbol of nationalism.

From all these social insecurities, Queen Elizabeth I crafted an image of nationalism which was pragmatically masculine, yet relentlessly feminine. As Rosalind dons men's demeanor and attire for her benefit, only to retire her male disguise to marry and take on wifely duties, so too did the Queen temporarily take on masculine qualities for the defense of national identity. In her Tilbury speech, so famous it has taken on mythic proportions, Elizabeth is said to have addressed 18,000 of her soldiers after the defeat of the Armada. In this speech, it was reported that she claimed she had "the heart and stomach of a King."¹⁸ These phrases were said to be uttered while she wore military attire, with one of her retinue bearing a sword. This image and these words have been deemed the product of overblown rhetoric, recorded a few decades after the actual event. Her entire time at Tilbury looked far different than it was reported. There were only 9000 troops on the day in question and she was not entirely secure that the nation was out of all danger from the Armada. She very likely wore no military garb, and her speech may not have mentioned her gender what so ever. But the image of Elizabeth at the head of her troops on the fields of Tilbury proved an enduring one.

The image of Queen Elizabeth inspiring her troops at Tilbury associated her with the ideal masculine qualities of combat, warlike zeal, and the successful vanquishing of foes. Yet such a demeanor was only temporarily donned. In the same speech she terms herself a "weak

¹⁷ Henderson and McManus, 47-62.

¹⁸ Susan Frye, "The Myth of Elizabeth at Tilbury." *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 23, No. 1 (1992): 96.

woman,”¹⁹ careful to distinguish her femininity. She was never depicted in a fully masculine way, always returning to her femininity. Queen Elizabeth’s ultimate function as the figurehead of the nation was to nurture the masculinity of England’s men. Much as Ganymede’s role is to teach Orlando how to be a lover, Elizabeth attempted to instill masculine qualities in her subjects who would then serve to defend the nation. This nurturing demeanor was perfectly in keeping with England’s proper gender roles, and did not require her to assume the masculine qualities herself, leading by example.

Similarly, the iconography surrounding Queen Elizabeth’s portraits and depictions often pictured her in a singularly feminine manner, portraying her as Diana, the maiden goddess of the hunt. By likening her to such a militant and unrelenting figure, she gained the male virtues of military capacity, honor, and bravery in battle. Both she and Diana were seen as an “impregnable force,”²⁰ capable of protecting their kind. Though it was considered a female trait to lure men in, tempting them with sex, the ideal woman was chaste and honest. Diana stands for these attributes, swearing off men, and for this quality she was highly praised. Queen Elizabeth was known as the Virgin Queen because she never took a husband or produced an heir. In many respects, Elizabeth was viewed as the spouse of all England, nurturing the masculinity of her male subjects while preserving her femininity. This notion of rewarding proper masculinity is mirrored by Rosalind’s offer to kiss anyone with a good beard. Much as Rosalind is considered a strong capable, ultimately feminine woman, so too were Diana and Queen Elizabeth. While virginity preserves Diana’s femininity and marriage preserves Rosalind’s.

¹⁹ Frye, 96.

²⁰ Louis A. Montrose, “Idols of the Queen: Policy, Gender, and the Picturing of Elizabeth I,” *Representations* 68, (1999): 122-138.

Queen Elizabeth's chaste devotion to her nation secured her womanliness despite the masculine overtones of her role as a ruler.

Beards symbolized innate masculinity, a highly prized quality in a society that valued men over women, yet believed sex was transient. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* remarks upon facial hair a number of times, associating it with quantifiable manliness, ideal masculinity, and sexual desirability. *As You Like It* complicates the performance of gender in a number of ways, imbuing the heroine with several masculine qualities, yet returning her to a state of femininity by the end of the show. Shakespeare was well positioned to reflect on Queen Elizabeth's reign. *As You Like It* was written in the final years of her life and considered themes pertinent to her tenure on the throne. Though a female ruler, her gender did not undermine England's sense of national identity. Rather than possessing masculine qualities herself, Queen Elizabeth tended to the masculinity of her subjects. The parallels drawn between the plot of *As You Like It* and the Queen's reign stress their ultimate femininity, despite being forced temporarily into masculine roles. While highlighting her military prowess and valor, society retained Queen Elizabeth's femininity by depicting her as the Virgin Queen with a singular – almost marital – devotion to her male subject's masculinity.

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