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## "And So He Plays His Part:" Theatrical Prejudice and Role-Playing in *As You Like It* and *King Lear*

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“And So He Plays His Part:” Theatrical Prejudice and  
Role-Playing in *As You Like It* and *King Lear*

by

Erin Rutter

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
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## Table of Contents

Abstract	ii
Chapter One	
Introduction	1
Chapter Two	
The Antitheatrical/Protheatrical Debate	5
Historical Background of the Antitheatrical Movement	5
Historical Background of the Protheatrical Movement	12
Chapter Three	
<i>As You Like It</i>	19
Critical History of <i>As You Like It</i>	19
Positive Examples of Role-Playing in <i>As You Like It</i>	22
Negative Examples of Role-Playing in <i>As You Like It</i>	30
Chapter Four	
<i>King Lear</i>	34
Critical History of <i>King Lear</i>	34
Positive Examples of Role-Playing in <i>King Lear</i>	37
Negative Examples of Role-Playing in <i>King Lear</i>	41
Chapter Five	
Conclusion	45
Works Cited	49

“And So He Plays His Part:” Theatrical Prejudice  
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ABSTRACT

Although most critics affirm the importance of interior direction and role-playing in many of Shakespeare’s plays, there is a considerable disagreement concerning the result of this role playing: does it lead to positive growth or to degeneration? Moreover, this debate is often associated with the sixteenth-century controversy about the role of the theater in society. Some moralists insist that the theater can be an instrument for instilling virtue while others view the theater as sinful, debasing, and a catalyst to social breakdown. In this thesis, I will explore the antitheatrical prejudice in the early modern era and show how Shakespeare responds and counters these arguments by creating characters in *As You Like It* and *King Lear* who employ theatrical means to experience identity formation and personal growth.

Using Jonas Barish’s *The Antitheatrical Prejudice* as my central source, I will explore the attacks against the theater, demonstrating how this opposition reverberates throughout the diatribes of early modern moralists, for whom role-playing and “playgoing tend to rank abnormally high in the hierarchy of sins” (Barish 80). Moreover, by expanding the criticism of Jean Howard and Susanne Wofford, I will explore Rosalind’s role-playing as Ganymede in *As You Like It* and its success through the orchestrated marriages between herself and Orlando and Silvius and Phoebe. Also,

throughout *King Lear*, Edgar takes on many different roles, at first to protect himself from Gloucester and later to pursue his own search for identity. Edgar's complete assimilation of guises is a concrete refutation of the antitheatrical prejudices of the period. These impersonations demonstrate how role-playing can be a positive process, subversively suggesting that an individual person, not God, can define identity, that fulfilling a destiny is the province of each man or woman, and that mimicry can be constructive.

In conclusion, therefore, in both of these plays Shakespeare explores the way in which the characters' actions affirm or debunk the antitheatrical prejudice, countering the arguments of the antitheatrical pamphleteers by demonstrating that through drama individuals can explore and elucidate an indifferent world.

## Chapter One

### Introduction

Although most critics affirm the importance of interior direction and role-playing in many of Shakespeare's plays, there is a considerable disagreement concerning the result of this role playing: does it lead to positive growth or to degeneration? Moreover, this debate is often associated with the sixteenth-century controversy about the role of the theater in society. Some moralists insist that the theater can be an instrument for instilling virtue while others view the theater as sinful, debasing, and a catalyst to social breakdown. In this thesis, I will explore the conflict between humanism<sup>i</sup>—which focuses on human beings as independent, responsible individuals-- and the antitheatrical prejudice in the early modern era—which focuses on humanity's position in a divinely ordered hierarchy—and demonstrate how Shakespeare responds to these arguments by creating characters in *As You Like It* and *King Lear* who employ theatrical means to experience identity formation and personal growth.

Role-playing of various sorts is ubiquitous in Shakespeare's plays. Some of his characters actually assume different identities, complete with theatrical paraphernalia such as costumes, props, and titles. Others only hide their true natures under deceptive masks. Sometimes this role-playing is salutary, leading to personal growth and identity formation. Thus, Rosalind, Viola, and Imogene in *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Cymbeline*, use men's apparel not only as a method of self-defense but also as a means of self-discovery; Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* dons the garb of a friar in his attempt to know himself; Prince Florizel in *The Winter's Tale* dresses as a shepherd to

win the love of the beautiful Perdita; and Edgar in *King Lear* assumes a number of diverse parts and costumes in his journey into identity. At other times, this role-playing is deleterious, resulting in degeneration and loss of identity. Thus, Iago in *Othello*, hiding his Machiavellian nature under the guise of an “honest” friend, degenerates from a credible, recognizable human being, who seeks rational reasons for his irrational hatred of Othello, into a type of Morality Play Vice, who loves evil for its own sake. Less drastically, Hamlet, who originally “knows not seems,” degenerates as he takes on the Machiavellian role played by his antagonist Claudius.

Shakespeare’s dramatic worlds are peopled not only by actors playing roles but also by interior directors composing and directing their own interior dramas within Shakespeare’s larger dramas. Again, some of these plays within the play are efficacious and some are detrimental. Hamlet stages perhaps the most famous play within a play in all of drama, and through this dramatic performance is able to test the veracity of his father’s ghost and establish the guilt of his stepfather Claudius. Less formal but equally effective interior dramas are staged by Portia in *The Merchant of Venice* to save the life of Antonio, and later to win Bassanio from the very Antonio whom she has saved; by Don Pedro in *Much Ado About Nothing* to unite Beatrice and Benedict into marriage; by Duke Vincentio in *Measure for Measure* to teach Isabella mercy and Angelo justice, and also to save the life of Claudio; by Cleopatra in *Antony and Cleopatra* to fool Octavius Caesar and facilitate her own triumphant suicide; by Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale* to resurrect Hermione and transform tragedy into comedy; and, finally, by Prospero in *The Tempest* to reclaim his dukedom, arrange an appropriate marriage for his daughter, seek to bring his enemies to repentance, and, like Paulina, achieve a happy ending.

Conversely, some of these plays within plays result in tragedy or near tragedy, not triumph. Thus Borachio's malicious little bedroom drama in *Much Ado About Nothing* almost leads to the total dishonour of Hero; Maria's cruel farce starring Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* causes indefensible cruelty; and Iago's deceptive play within Shakespeare's larger play *Othello* results in the deaths of Desdemona, Emilia, Othello, and Roderigo. In Shakespeare, therefore, for better or worse, all the world is indeed a stage.

However, because of limitations of time and space, this thesis will focus on only two of Shakespeare's metadramatic dramas, what many critics consider to be his greatest comedy and his greatest tragedy: *As You Like It* and *King Lear*. *As You Like It's* Rosalind and *King Lear's* Edgar both assume an affirmative metatheatrical function to illustrate how role-playing can be a positive process towards identity formation, how fulfilling a destiny is the province of each man or woman, and how mimicry can be constructive. Rosalind successfully dons the guise of Ganymede to teach Orlando to love in a more genuine fashion, to cure Phoebe and Silvius of a ridiculous pastoral affectation, to subvert the patriarchal order by deciding her future on her own terms, and, during this process, to develop the traits that the society of Shakespeare's time would have designated as masculine: self-assertion, reason, and wit. Moreover, Edgar takes on many different roles in order to escape Gloucester's wrath, to seek justice from his usurping brother Edmund, to save his father from despair, and to pursue his own search for self-awareness, which leads him to learn compassion through suffering, responsibility through empathy, resourcefulness through dedication, and ultimately to assume his place as king.



Consequently, both Rosalind and Edgar's actions demonstrate a complete refutation of the charges against the theater contained within the diatribes of the antitheatrical writers of the period. Moreover, while Rosalind and Edgar exemplify Shakespeare's affirmation of metamorphosis and identity formation, contrasting characters in the play illustrate how unsuccessful role-playing—a role-playing that leads either to stasis, as in the case of Orlando, or degeneration, as in the case of Edmund—is harmful, hindering, and debasing. In this thesis, I will explore why these negative examples of role-playing fail in their attempts to achieve growth and positive development and thus establish an identity. For example, Orlando is unable to fulfill the role of genuine lover in *As You Like It*. Only through the tutelage of Rosalind's Ganymede does Orlando learn to love Rosalind for herself and not as a preconceived stereotypic ideal lady. In contrast to Edgar's positive metadramatic transformation in *King Lear*, his brother Edmund provides a negative example in his failure to control events and adapt to situations that ultimately bring about his defeat. Thus, as this thesis will show, both *As You Like It* and *King Lear* demonstrate both the positive and negative aspects of role-playing, while stressing how, when properly applied, role-playing can lead to positive self-fashioning, supporting Giovanni Pico della Mirandola's belief that humanity can indeed create itself (5).

## Chapter Two

### The Antitheatrical/Protheatrical Debate

#### Historical Background of the Antitheatrical Movement

According to Jonas Barish's *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*, the theater evolved from an accepted social pursuit to one increasingly criticized by conservative moralists. Barish insists that early in the sixteenth century, theater consisted of Protestant didactic school plays used primarily as an ancillary tool to educate young boys. These plays contained moral lessons, patriotic songs, and prayers for the queen aimed at producing devoted Elizabethan citizens. However, Stephen Greenblatt reminds us that Latin was taught in all the schools and that virtually all English schoolmasters agreed that the best way to instill good Latin in their students was to have them read and perform ancient plays by Latin playwrights, such as Terence and Plautus. Since, as Greenblatt notes, it was impossible to expurgate from these plays the subversive elements—disobedient children, sly tricksters, parasites, panders, and whores—the curriculum of virtually all schools contained “recurrent theatrical transgressions, a comic liberation from the oppressive heaviness of the educational system” (27). Moreover, later in the century, with the advent of acting troupes, theater companies, and plays as lucrative entertainment, these subversive elements became more prominent and, according to the opponents of the stage, the theater became a form of recreation not education and a symbol for “pleasure,

for idleness, for the rejection of hard work and thrift as the roads to salvation” (Barish 114).

David Riggs observes that “when the actors took metropolitan residences [within the city of London] they provoked a hostile reaction from the municipal authorities and the Puritan wing of the Church” (196). Some of the most virulent opponents of the theater were the Puritan ministers, John Northbrooke, John Field, and John Stubbes, who thundered against playwrights and actors from the pulpit. In addition, the City of London hired two former playwrights, Stephen Gosson and Anthony Munday, to join the fray by publishing a series of “tell all” pamphlets lambasting the wickedness of the stage from an insider’s point-of-view (196). Thus the battle was on and the antitheatrical and protheatrical factions engaged in a frenzied pamphlet war concerning the positive and negative aspects of the theater. In one of his “tell all” pamphlets, Gosson vilifies the theater as follows:

these things which are neither necessary nore beneficiall vnto man, yet carry in their Foreheaddes a manifest printe of their first condition, as May-games, Stageplaies, & such like, can not be suffred among Christians without Apostacy, because they were suckt from the Deuilles teate, to Nurce vp Idolatrie. (Gosson, “Playes Confuted” 40)

The complaints against the theater were numerous. One important objection was the conviction by the Puritans that “the players were recreating the libertine culture of pagan antiquity on the outskirts of Protestant London” (Riggs 96). John Stubbes reminded his readers that plays “were invented by the devil, practiced by the heathen gentiles and dedicated to their false idols, Gods and Goddesses,” and insisted that “if you

will learn to condemn God and all his laws, to care neither for heaven nor hell . . . you need go to no other school” (qtd. Riggs 196). As an example of this pagan idolatry, the players performed on the Sabbath and thus gave scandal to God. The Puritans were convinced that such disregard for the Sabbath was a form of idolatry that mocked God and that “these performances were bound to bring divine retribution, not only on players and playgoers but on the City and the nation as well” (196-97).

Barish identifies the three other recurrent complaints that the pamphleteers connect with theatricality—hypocrisy, insincerity, and false mimicry—all of which demonstrate their fears of instability, irrationality, and disorder.

According to the Puritans, hypocrisy is especially harmful because plays personate “fables spun from one’s own fancy” and place “oneself in blasphemous rivalry with one’s maker” (Barish 93). The Puritan polemicists believe that God created human beings and the world in a specific image. Anyone – actor or playwright –blurring this image or the identity that God created violates God’s will, thereby implying God’s fallibility (93). As Prynne asserts:

If we seriously consider the very forme of acting Playes, we must needs acknowledge it to be nought else but grosse hypocrisie ... They are alwayes *acting others*, not themselves: they vent notorious lying fables, as undoubted truthes: they put false glosses upon Histories, persons, virtues, vices, all the whole action of Playes is nought else but feining, but counterfeiting, but palpable hypocrisie and dissimulation which God, which men abhorre: therefore it must needs be sinfull. (156)

The Puritans insisted that one of the most consistent and emblematic examples of this supposed hypocrisy is cross-dressing. The polemicists argue that “God requires us ... to live in strict conformity with the self he has bestowed on us, and that in the most minute particulars” (Barish 92). Many pamphlets examine the sin of cross-dressing in explicit terms. Gosson sums up the overall premise:

The Law of God very straightly forbids men to put on womens garments, garments are set downe for signes distinctiue betwene sexe & sexe, to take vnto vs those garments that are manifest signes of another sexe, is to falsifie, forge, and adulterate, contrarie to the expresse rule of the words of God. (“Playes Confuted” 80)

Jyotsyna Singh suggests that these pamphleteers are principally concerned with the subversion of gender boundaries and the way in which the male actors portraying female heroines are subverting natural, God-given boundaries. According to these antitheatrical writers, the wearing of women’s clothes makes men become more effeminate and thus lose their masculine identity – what Singh refers to as “masculine fear of a loss of identity through attraction to the female” (Singh 313, 315).

The polemicists’ second major complaint concerned the idolatry and artificiality resulting from insincerity. The antitheatrical treatises insist that human beings should act in absolute honesty, demonstrating outwardly what is inside. In other words, one’s acts should reveal one’s inwardness. This attitude reflects the Puritan’s notion of the liturgy, in which worship is a spontaneous outpouring of the soul and a direct translation of the inner self, whereas plays are written, planned, and rehearsed, thereby violating the Puritans’ belief in sincerity (Barish 95). Further, to reduce anything to a set form, with

ritualized repetitions of word, gesture, and memorization, produces a sense of insincerity and “a fatal discrepancy between the established gesture and the nuances of feeling” (95). Making this artificiality a public spectacle involves the audience in this affectedness—and thus further sinfulness—and creates a false sense that what the audience is watching is real (95).

The antitheatrical writers further insisted that the public spectacle of the theater can also lead the audience into its own form of mimicry. Gosson insists that the audience is easily seduced into mimicking the actor’s sinful behavior:

As long as we know our selues to be flesh, beholding those exaples in Theaters yt are incidet to flesh, wee are taught by other mens exaples [sic] how to fall. And they that came honest to a play, may depart infected. Lactatius douteth whether any corruptio can be greater, the yt which is daily bred by plaies, because ye expressing of vice by imitation, brings vs by the shadow, to the substance of the same. Whereupon hee affirmeth them necessary to bee banished, least wickednes be learned, or with the custome of pleasure, by little and little we forget God.

(113-4)

Moreover, according to Gosson, the spectators are subject to guilt by association and are tainted by sin through observation. He maintains that plays cannot instruct the audience in virtue, but inevitably teach a corrupted lesson —“no manner of goodnes can bee learned at a play, partly because the best is a mixture of good and eull” (54). The mind is simple and instructions in good behavior must also be simple, “without mingle mangle,” since “the hereditary corruption of our nature taketh ye worst and leaueth the best” (54). This approach is common with most of the antitheatrical pamphleteers and Prynne similarly

asserts that only “the King of heaven, [is able to] *to teach men virtue*; and that not by Stage-players, or lascivious poems, *but by his Word and Spirit onely*, which breathe not in our Theaters” (102).

This mimicry is considered particularly sinful because it arouses universal distrust and a disruption of social order. The antitheatrical writers state that “men should be what they seem,” echoing and expanding the arguments against hypocrisy and insincerity (Barish 94). Moreover, mimicry can lead individuals to attempt to violate their social boundaries. Gosson explains that for an actor to take on the role of someone of a higher social status is to commit a sin. Further, the audience may wish to mimic the actors and themselves perform outside their social rank —“If priuate men be suffered to forsake their calling because they desire to walke gentlemanlike in sattine & veluet, wt a buckler at their heeles, proportion is so broken, vnitie dissolued, harmony confounded” (“Playes Confuted” 119). Prynne agrees: “the very imitation of wicked men, of Pagans, of Idols, of Idolaters, especially in their lewdest wickednesses (the most vsuall subject of Enterludes) is *without all question evill, as the Scriptures plainly teach us*” (157).

In their anxiety over the shifting of social boundaries, the antitheatrical polemicists reject the notion that identity can be defined by outside institutions, a view that, in their opinion, violates the belief that God has a definitive plan for each individual.

Commenting on *Histriomastix*, Barish explains that, according to Prynne, “Plays, like players, threaten God’s primacy by challenging his uniqueness; they attempt to wrest from him his most inimitable attribute, his demiurgy” (Barish 93). Thus Prynne and other antitheatrical writers insisted that only God has the ultimate power to choose a human

being's identity and it is sinful for humanity to challenge that power by tampering with God's creative force for each individual. Prynne states:

Now this counterfeiting of persons, affections, manners, vices, sexes, and the like, which is inseparably incident to the acting of Playes; as it transformes the Actors into what they are not; *so it insuseth falshood into every part of soule and body, as all hypocrisie doth*; in causing them to seeme that in outward appearance which they are not in truth ... *because it sophisticates and perverts the workes of God, in putting a false glosse upon his creatures.* (159)

Moreover, "self-transformation, in all cases, seems conceived as a negative process, a shifting about from one undesirable state to another, and a refusal to maintain one's proper identity" (Barish 102).

Personal transformation occurs throughout *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, and, as this thesis will seek to demonstrate, these positive transformations suggest that Shakespeare is not only working within a long literary tradition of role-playing but is also reacting against the conservative notions of a God-defined identity, order, and stability stressed by the antitheatrical pamphleteers. Furthermore, Barish suggests that this objection to the hypocrisy, insincerity, and mimicry associated with role-playing is deeply rooted in Western thought since the antitheatrical prejudice is a phenomenon present throughout Western history and in all sections of Europe. Although there are hints of a growing fear of social breakdown among the conservative Puritans of the early modern period, Barish argues that the antitheatrical movement was concerned with issues that went beyond the shifting social and economic conditions of the time period. This



more comprehensive argument against the theater derives from its association with mutability, inconstancy, versatility, and the creation of disorder, all connected with, but not necessarily stemming from, the shifting social order (Barish 117).

### Historical Background of the Protheatrical Movement

According to Barish, the antitheatrical movement does not necessarily seek to disband acting troupes, close theaters, or prevent an audience from being “*sunke downe to hell*” (Prynne). Rather, it is an expression of a conservative dogma and a reaction against “a more existentialist emphasis that prizes growth, process, exploration, flexibility, variety, and versatility of response” (Barish 117). The response of the antitheatrical movement to these growing existential values—which deny an essentialist view of humanity and see human beings as capable of creating themselves through their actions and decisions—can be examined in light of the philosophical viewpoints being introduced from Europe by thinkers such as Machiavelli and Montaigne and the growing belief in the cultural value of the theater. These new philosophical viewpoints were a direct attack on the traditional, highly structured philosophical system that had dominated English thought for centuries, which included the earth-centered Ptolemaic system, the macrocosm and microcosm, the great chain of being, the body politic, and the hierarchical family structure. Significantly, in each of these paradigms the human being was firmly situated in the center of a hierarchical religious and social system. In the early modern era, however, the human being’s unique significance in the universe was being directly challenged by Galileo’s and Copernicus’s argument for a sun centered universe.

Montaigne was interrogating the human being's unique position on the great chain of being. Machiavelli was attacking the belief in the divine right of kings and the Doctrine of Conscience questioned the absolute authority of the king or magistrate in the state and even the patriarch in the family. And, most important for my discussion, the question of the stable identity of the individual (the microcosm) was also being interrogated. Indeed, every hierarchy within this highly structured system, which has become known as the Elizabethan World Picture, was being assailed: the macrocosm (or universe), the great chain of being, the political and familial hierarchies, and the microcosm (or human being). The existential values endorsed by Montaigne and Machiavelli and other European thinkers were simply another attack on the Elizabethan World Picture. Moreover, this period also experienced the emergence of the modern concept of human subjectivity, the beginning of capitalism, and the rise of the middle classes in trade and mercantilism. This period was indeed the beginning of the modern world.

The most significant challenge to the pamphleteers' conservative ethos is *On the Dignity of Man* by Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, which, although written around 1487, nevertheless expresses a much more liberal view of humanity than that endorsed by his own contemporaries and even the pamphleteers of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. This work argues that there is "nothing more wonderful than man," "worthy of all wonder," and "capable of arousing envy not only in the brutes but also in the stars and even in minds beyond the world" (3). Unlike the Puritanical polemicists, Mirandola insists that the human being is a great animal and, most importantly, a molder willing to sculpt himself (or herself) into whatever "shape it doth prefer" (5). According to Mirandola, God has not put the human being at the center of the

world to assume superiority over lesser creatures. Rather, it is so “that from there thou mayest more conveniently look around and see whatsoever is in the world” (5). God wants the human being to fix his or her own boundaries and judgments according to individual experiences. Moreover, the human being is capable of greater or lower things, whichever he or she chooses. This notion of the human being as a free individual reacts against the idea that humanity is fixed in one social or religious state. Mirandola believes that human beings have the choice to do whatever they desire in life – whether they want to achieve a virtuous or a sinful existence: “Man fashions, fabricates, transforms himself into the shape of all flesh, into the character of every creature ... that is, man is an animal of diverse, multiform, and destructible nature” (6). Whereas the majority of the antitheatrical texts state that human beings are capable of only sin and abomination, Mirandola presents a much more positive image of the human being.

Phillip Stubbes’ overall condemnation of humanity in *The Anatomie of Abuse* contrasts sharply with Mirandola’s admiration. Stubbes affirms that the human being is made in the likeness of God and above all other living creatures, correlating with the philosophical viewpoint of Mirandola (2, 3). However, although the opening passages in *Anatomie* illustrate Stubbes’ elevated view of humanity, these passages also maintain that human beings can only live in one sphere and “learn that it is the will of GOD, that we bend all force to the aduancing of his glorious Name, the edification of his People, and the building vp of his Church, which he hath redeemed with the bloud of his deare Sonne” (3). This attitude contrasts vividly with Mirandola’s view, since, according to Stubbes, the aim of humanity is not to seek out its own form but to live strictly according to the form that God proposes. Gosson agrees:

Man is enriched with reason and knowledge: with knowledge, to serue his maker and gouerne himselfe; with reason to distinguish good and il, & chose the best, neither referring the one to the glory of God, nor vsing the other to his owne profite ... But we which haue both sense, reason, wit, and vnderstading, are euer ouerlashing, passing our boundes, going beyonde our limites, neuer keeping our selues within compasse, nor once loking after the place from whence we came, and whither we muste in spighte of our hartes. (“School” 60-1)

Thus Gosson insists that although human beings are tempted to live beyond the restrictions established by God, they must live virtuously and within a certain set of limits. He considers exploration outside this preordained plan or shifting identities to be dishonest.

Conversely, Mirandola stresses that the way to a perfect and divine life is by imitation and the study of life – “Let us see what they [the divine] are doing, what life they are living. If we too live that life – for if we can – we shall equal their lot” (7). To illustrate this point, Mirandola adapts Plato’s famous “ladder of love” to presents an allegory of the “ladder of the Lord,” in which the human being can climb either up or down

by means of speaking or reasoning art, then, besouled by a cherub’s spirit, philosophizing along the rungs of a ladder of nature, and penetrating through everything from center to center ... until finally we come to the rest in the bosom of the Father, who is at the top of the ladder. (10)

Therefore, Mirandolo asserts, the achievements of study and imitation lead to “theological happiness,” not condemnation and a life of wickedness (10). Mirandola further discusses the positive attributes of catharsis through theater:

the theology of the ancients show the advantages for us and the dignity of these liberal arts about which I have come here to dispute. For what else is meant by the degree of initiation that are customary in the secret rites of the Greeks? First, to those who had been purified by moral and dialectic arts, which we have called, as it were, purgative, befell the reception of the mysteries. And what else can this reception be but the interpretation of more hidden nature by means of philosophy? (13)

Thus, the purgative effect of theater is a way of learning and exploring hidden truths about nature and individuals. This, in turn, can lead to a fuller awareness and understanding of people who are greater or lower than oneself. Whether viewing Lear’s complete despair at Cordelia’s death in *King Lear* or Orlando’s excessive infatuation with Rosalind in *As You Like It*, the spectator is capable of empathy with either character through observation. This outlook contrasts sharply with the antitheatrical pamphleteers who remark that spectators are capable primarily of guilt through association and sin by mere observation.

Unfortunately, most of the protheatrical polemicists among Shakespeare’s contemporaries do not write as eloquently or persuasively as the fifteenth-century Mirandola. As Barish relates, the defenses of the stage written in England that “survive from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries tend to be feebler than the attacks on it” (117). Although most of them certainly do not contain the vociferous, rambling fury of

Prynne, Stubbes, or Gosson, in the opinion of Barish, “the defenders still share too many of the prejudices of their opponents to conduct an effective rebuttal” (121). The lack of wide-ranging protheatrical pamphlets also leads to the assumption that no one took the antitheatrical writers too seriously. The growing popularity of the theater, the support of the theater by Queen Elizabeth and later James I, and the cropping of Prynnes’ ears as a “seditious libeler” upon the publication of *Histrionomastix* make it clear that the theater was a tolerable social pastime.

Although Thomas Heywood’s *An Apology for Actors* is based on a series of extremely weak arguments, it is important to understand its protheatrical perspective. Using historical anecdotes and the same type of insubstantial evidence as the antitheatrical pamphleteers, Heywood debates the theater in three sections: “An Apology for Actors, and first touching their Antiquity,” “OF ACTORS, and their ancient Dignitie,” and “OF ACTORS, AND the true vse of their quality.” In the final section, Heywood explains that plays and writers have continually refined the English language: “euery writer striuing in himselfe to adde a new florish vnto it; so that in processe, from the most rude and vnpolisht tongue, it is growne to a most perfect and composed language” (48). Moreover, he counters the antitheatrical writers by asserting that plays can instruct the lesser classes. These plays “teach the subjects obedience to their King, to shew the people the vntimely ends of such as haue moued tumults, commotions, insurrections” (49). Heywood maintains that the theatrical audience can learn not only obedience to their King, but also the proper response to problems involving honor, rashness, rage, and strength. However, Barish judges this defense to be “bungling” because Heywood “is constantly thrusting weapons into the hands of his adversaries” by

continually advocating “the assumption that plays should be ethically wholesome and respectable” (Barish 120-1). And, of course, many of the greatest plays of the period do not necessarily teach a moral lesson.

Although Heywood’s protheatrical argument fails to champion the positive features of role-playing, Mirandola’s celebration of the humanist values of growth, process, and exploration greatly influenced the early modern era. Moreover, Mirandola’s belief that everyone should have an empirical viewpoint of life and should examine everything and strive to choose the good from the bad and act accordingly had an immense influence on Shakespeare and thus on the characters that he created. For example, through role-playing Rosalind in *As You Like It* and Edgar in *King Lear* both experience identity formation, learning to make both pragmatic and moral choices and control their environment, thereby overcoming their precarious circumstances and growing and developing as human beings. Unlike the Puritan pamphleteers who believe that any alteration in one’s character is deleterious, the overall, frequently reinforced message from Shakespeare is that self-development and growth are the only way to live authentically and successfully. As Barish states, “The metamorphic versatility of all of them [Shakespeares’ protagonists] adds a cubit to their stature, enables them to encompass aspects of life that the rest of us seek to suppress” (130).

## Chapter Three

### *As You Like It*

#### Critical History of *As You Like It*

Criticism of *As You Like It* relies heavily on the implications of gender and social mores that transform each character and that further presents the Forest of Arden as a safe haven for exploration and growth. Jean E. Howard's "Crossdressing, The Theatre, and Gender Struggle in Early Modern England," focuses on how

contradictions within the social formation enabled opposition to and modification of certain forms of patriarchal domination, and that struggle, resistance, and subversive masquerade are terms as important as recuperation and containment in analyzing Renaissance gender relations and female crossdressing in particular.

(419)

In this essay, Howard analyzes the female-male hierarchical system that operated within the early modern period, pointing out that in this system women must be subordinate to men in order to sustain an ordered society and maintain male associations of power.

Howard also explores the implications of male actors portraying and dressing as female characters, commenting on the antitheatrical pamphlets that condemn the practice because it blurred the boundaries of nature. Howard argues that Rosalind "uses her disguise to redefine (albeit in a limited way) the position of woman in a patriarchal



society” (434-5). Moreover, she asserts that Rosalind poses in several stereotypical roles and in doing so deliberately orchestrates events to achieve her own interests (435).

Susanne L. Wofford’s “‘To You I Give Myself, for I am Yours’: Erotic Performance and Theatrical Performatives in *As You Like It*,” examines the way that language bestows upon the theatrical performatives in the play several different meanings. By “performatives,” Wofford means Rosalind’s various performances of different characters and their characteristics within the play (153). Rosalind’s performance as Ganymede is constructed to diminish the subversive aspects of a female taking control of her own destiny by giving the speeches to a male character (Ganymede). Thus the play allows the subversive qualities of role-playing to emerge unchallenged. Wofford argues that the audience will always consider that there is a male actor playing the role of Rosalind playing the role of Ganymede “since all identities onstage are proxy identities, and yet the gender of the actor – the actor’s body – as well as the gender of the character remain crucial determinant of this proxy self” (163). In other words, the audience will accept the actions of Rosalind, a female character, taking control of her destiny because they realize that not only does the action revolve around the male character of Ganymede, but also that there is a male actor underneath the double disguise. The action of the play continually validates Wofford’s argument by allowing the cross-dressed Rosalind to successfully choose her own partner in such a way as to raise no objections by the male authority figure, her father.

In relation to Orlando’s position, Louis Adrian Montrose’s essay, “‘The Place of a Brother’: In *As You Like It*: Social Process and Comic Form,” explores the theatrical aspects of the social consequences of primogeniture and the effects that it has on the

familial breakdown between Orlando and Oliver. This breakdown becomes “both a theatrical *reflection* of social conflict and a theatrical *source* of social conciliation” (54).

Additionally, Montrose focuses on

the difficulty or impossibility of establishing or authenticating a self in a rigorously hierarchical and patriarchal society, a society in which full social identity tends to be limited to propertied adult males who are the heads of households. (35)

Since Orlando is not the eldest male, he is unable to determine his role in Oliver’s home and Duke Frederick’s kingdom. In order to become a fully realized member of society, Orlando must come to terms with his inheritance and prove that he is worthy not only of Rosalind’s love, but also of his social position as her husband and the heir to Duke Senior’s kingdom. In regards to the performative theatrical aspects of the play and its characters, Montrose emphasizes how the audience, filled with young men who share Orlando’s circumstances, might undergo a cathartic experience and wish-fulfillment: “the forest sojourn conducts Orlando and Rosalind from an initial situation of oppression and frustration to the threshold of interdependent new identities” (40).

Clearly *As You Like It* concentrates on contradictory worlds where subversive qualities of gender, identity, and role-playing are allowed to go unchallenged. The criticism by Howard, Wofford, and Montrose explores how Shakespeare “underscores the artificial and unrepresentable nature of what is being represented, emphasizing the impossibility of that which seems theatrically most obvious (what one sees) and the vividness of that which one cannot see” (Ronk 255). In other words, through the creation of a theatrical world and the use of role-playing, the play is able to express and applaud

certain subversive qualities that normally would be silenced. As Montrose states, “*As You Like It* expresses, contains, and discharges a measure of the strife between men and the women ... It is by the conjurer’s art that Shakespeare manages to reconcile the social imperatives of hierarchy and difference with the festive urges toward leveling and atonement” (54) . Moreover, the play contributes to the “fact that saying and seeing are often in opposition to one another, one undoing the other, contributes not only to the gap between them but to the instability of representation itself” (Ronk 275).

### Positive Examples of Role-Playing in *As You Like It*

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind’s cross-dressing Ganymede assumes the positive metatheatrical function of instilling a lesson in love, subverting the patriarchal order, and deciding Rosalind’s future on her own terms. By expanding the criticism of Jean Howard and Wofford, I will explore Rosalind’s role-playing as Ganymede and its success through the orchestrated marriages between herself and Orlando and Silvius and Phoebe. Role-playing gives Rosalind the power of a magician, which she herself acknowledges, “By my life, I do, which I tender dearly, / though I say I am a magician” (5.2.68-69).<sup>ii</sup> While in the forest, Rosalind orchestrates the situation so that she can select her own husband, successfully defy the patriarchal system, and convert a flawed Petrarchan lover into a rational one.<sup>iii</sup>

In the beginning of the play, Rosalind and Celia argue over the merits of women and marriage within the kingdom. Rosalind comments that women’s special qualities are often underutilized: Fortune’s “benefits are / mightily misplaced, and the bountiful blind

woman / doth most mistake in her gifts to women” (1.2.34-5). Moreover, Rosalind suggests, Fortune favors those who are graced with riches and power, not good qualities of wisdom, love, or honesty –“Fortune reigns in gifts of the world, not in the lineaments of Nature” (1.2.40-41)—thereby suggesting that she (Rosalind) doesn’t enjoy her appropriate status because the only quality that other people value is financial worth, of which she has been stripped by her uncle, Duke Frederick.

When Rosalind is exiled from Duke Frederick’s home, she and Celia decide to enter the forest of Arden. Celia suggests that they change their attires so as not to be threatened or attacked by bandits; Rosalind announces to Celia, “I will put myself in poor and mean attire / And with a kind of umber smirch my face; / The like do you” (1.3.109-111). Rosalind immediately chooses to dress like a man, being “more than common tall” (1.3.113). To enter into the role of Ganymede she will obtain:

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. (1.3.115-120)

Both Celia and Rosalind seem to relish their disguise and their escape into the forest, as Celia exclaims: “Now go we in content / To liberty, and not to banishment” (1.3.135-6). Although clearly Celia is happy to enter into the green world of the forest to escape her tyrannical father, Duke Frederick, these words also illustrate how Celia and Rosalind will reinvent themselves using their own contrivances, creating their own independence, establishing their own identities, and escaping the patriarchal order.

When Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone enter the forest, Rosalind laments: “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” (2.4.4-7). In this passage, Rosalind admits that she initially finds it difficult to hide her true female nature and take on stereotypical masculine characteristics. Yet at the same time, Rosalind insists on remaining in her garb and behaving as men ought. Moreover, she continually reminds Celia that her masculine attire and characteristics do not represent her true nature and that there is still a woman underneath her masculine garb: “Dost thou think, though I am caparisoned like a man, I have a doublet and hose in my disposition?” and “Do you not know I am a woman? When I think, I must speak” (3.2.191-3, 246-7). Howard argues that Rosalind’s insistence on remaining a woman and not suppressing her feminine gender works continually to reinforce her role as a powerful identity, a woman who is very much in charge of her future albeit dressed as a man. However, I would argue that despite the fact that Rosalind never loses her feminine personality underneath her male garb, her assumption of male attire allows her the freedom to develop characteristics that the early modern society would have identified as masculine: primarily autonomy, assertiveness, wit, and rationality.

Throughout the play, Rosalind has a freedom of movement and action rarely experienced by a well-brought up Elizabethan lady. In act three, scene two, Orlando hangs verses dedicated to Rosalind all over the forest. Upon discovering the poems, Rosalind immediately questions what she should do with her male attire, desiring to change back into her natural female identity. In this same scene, Jacques queries the nature of Orlando’s love, inquiring whether Orlando’s love is serious or not. He even

labels Orlando “Seigneur Love,” equating him with the lover from a romantic tale.

When Rosalind understands that the verses have an empty meaning based not on genuine love for her but on infatuation for the ideal Courtly or Petrarchan lady, she decides to confront Orlando and teach him the real meaning of love, taking on another identity – one of a “saucy lackey,” who “under that habit [will] play the knave with him” (3.2.292-93). Moreover, like Edgar in the later play, Rosalind immediately affects a different voice and identity to fit her new role.

Furthermore, not only can Rosalind be assertive in her schooling of Orlando as she could never have been as a lady in the court, but she can also be bawdy and witty in her banter with Orlando, as we see in act 4, scene 1:

Rosalind: Come, woo me, woo me, for now I am in a holiday humor and like  
enough to consent. What would you say to me now, an I were your very,  
very Rosalind?

Orlando: I would kiss before I spoke.

Rosalind: Nay, you were better speak first, and when you were graveled for lack  
of matter, you might take occasion to kiss. Very good orators, when they  
are out, they will spit; and for lovers lacking – God warrant us! –  
matter, the cleanliest shift is to kiss.

Orlando: How if the kiss be denied?

Rosalind: Then she puts you to entreaty, and there begins new matter.

Orlando: Who could be out, being before his beloved mistress?

Rosalind: Marry, that should you, if I were your mistress, or I should think my  
honesty ranker than my wit.

Orlando: What, of my suit?

Rosalind: Not out of your apparel, and yet out of your suit. Am not I your

Rosalind?

Orlando: I take some joy to say you are, because I would be talking of her.

Rosalind: Well, in her person I say I will not have you.

Orlando: Then in mine own person, I die. (4.1.64-88)

Here Rosalind puns impishly on “out of your suit” to imply that not only is the lover at a loss of words in his wooing but that he is also undressed. The term “out” also suggests that the lover is not admitted in a sexual sense (Bevington 174).

Finally, as Ganymede, not only can Rosalind be assertive and bawdy, but she can also express a clear -sighted skepticism toward romantic love that might have been considered very unfeminine at that time, as she reveals in the following speech:

No, faith, die by attorney. The poor world is almost six thousand years old, and in all this time there was not any man died in his own person, *videlicet*, in a love cause. Troilus had his brains dashed out with a Grecian club, yet he did what he could to die before, and he is one of the patterns of love. Leander, he would have lived many a fair year though Hero had turned nun, if it had not been for a hot midsummer night; for, good youth, he went but forth to wash him in the Hellespont and being taken with the cramp was drowned; and the foolish chroniclers of that age found it was – Hero of Sestos. But these are all lies. Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.  
(4.4.89-102)

Nevertheless, this Touchstone-like skepticism never lessens her own very feminine passion for Orlando, as she gushes to Celia later in the same scene: “O coz, coz, coz, my pretty little coz, that thou / didst know how many fathom deep I am in love!” (4.1.197-98).

Thus, in the role of Ganymede, Rosalind achieves a rare balance of the traits constructed by society at this period as feminine and masculine.

Throughout the rest of the play, Rosalind’s identity is ever changing as she reminds the audience and herself, “I’ll prove a busy actor in their play” (3.4.57). One moment she is Rosalind, in love with Orlando and distraught at his late arrival; the next, she is fooling Duke Senior into believing that she is a mere shepherd when having “much question with him” (3.4.34); and, after that, she is enacting the role of Ganymede, an angry man incapable of love for Phoebe (3.5). Phoebe even acknowledges Rosalind/Ganymede’s success at her role-playing with the praise, “He’ll make a proper man” (3.5.115). Then, of course, she is also Rosalind, played by Ganymede, who assumes a skeptical, even misogynistic attitude toward women in order to rectify Orlando’s excessive sentimentality. In all of these roles she is highly successful; indeed each character confronted by Ganymede is convinced by Rosalind’s portrayals.

However, even as several characters comment positively on Rosalind’s portrayal as Ganymede, some question his/her manliness, observing that, “There was a pretty redness in his lip, / A little riper and more lusty red / Than that mixed in his cheek” (3.5.120-22). Although initially Duke Senior does not realize that Ganymede is Rosalind, he later admits, “I do remember in this shepherd boy / Some lively touches of my daughter’s favor” (5.4.26-7). Also, in act four, scene three, when Oliver confronts



Rosalind with the bloody napkin and narrates Orlando's attack by the lion, she faints and Oliver exhorts, "Be of good cheer, youth. You a man? You lack a man's heart ... Well then, take a good heart and counterfeit to be a man" (4.3.165-6, 173-4), which, of course, is exactly what Rosalind is doing. However, Oliver never questions whether or not Rosalind is physically a man but only whether or not she has a man's heart. This also supports Wofford and Howard's argument that Rosalind's insistence on remaining a woman, and not suppressing her feminine gender, works continually to reinforce her role as a powerful female personality, while, I would add, she also expands her personality to include traits that would, at this time, be gendered masculine. Thus, through role-playing Rosalind learns to counterpoise feminine and masculine attributes—passion and reason, sentiment and skepticism—in a dazzling androgynous balance<sup>iv</sup>.

Rosalind's success is illustrated when she teaches Orlando a lesson in love, orchestrates the marriages between herself and Orlando and between Silvius and Phoebe, and chooses her own destiny and partner without any objections from her father. Each of these actions allows Rosalind to decide her future in her own terms and, in doing so, remain in control in a way very rare for a woman in the early modern period. Rosalind, alone among Shakespeare's female characters, is even allowed to speak the epilogue of the play. In the ending epilogue, Rosalind once again states how "it is not the fashion to see the lady the epilogue: but it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue" (Epi. 1-2). As Howard argues, here we see that Rosalind is acting subordinate to men while, at the same time, subverting male/female relations. According to Howard, the "play has achieved closure in part by reinscribing everyone into his or her 'proper' social position" (435). Furthermore, in the epilogue the male actor portraying Rosalind reminds

the audience that “If I were a / woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards / that pleased me, complexions that like me, and / breaths that I defied not” (Epi.16-19). Since Rosalind is actually portrayed by a male actor “the neat convergence of biological sex and culturally constructed gender is once more severed” and gender differences, if not dissolved, are at least interrogated (Howard 435).

Critics have responded diversely to Shakespeare’s sexually ambiguous transvestite heroines, particularly Rosalind. Juliet Dusinberre approvingly affirms these doubly cross-dressed characters (boy actors playing female characters disguised as boys) as exemplars of androgynous wholeness, in which the male disguise “makes a woman not a man but a more developed woman” (233). Seeking to rebut Dusinberre’s reading, Lisa Jardine insists that the “androgyny” of these cross-dressed actors serves to stress their maleness rather than their femaleness and thus to titillate homoerotic fantasies in the audience (20). Linda Woodbridge presents the counterargument that the transvestite disguise of Shakespeare’s cross-dressed heroines accentuates their femaleness rather than their androgyny (154-55). However, no matter how we interpret these transvestite figures, I would insist that the doubly cross-dressed Rosalind accentuated the fluidity of gender in its separation from sex. Indeed, the entire play, which dramatizes a boy actor playing a girl (Rosalind) playing a boy (Ganymede) playing a girl (Rosalind) dissolves gender boundaries and interrogates conventional gender binaries. Moreover, Rosalind, though role-playing, achieves the freedom to expand what at this time would have been considered both the feminine and masculine aspects of her nature in order to fashion herself into one of the most empowered and androgynous women in all of Shakespeare’s plays.

## Negative Examples of Role-Playing in *As You Like It*

Perhaps the most significant example of negative role-playing in *As You Like It* is Orlando's inability to establish an identity within Duke Frederick's kingdom and his immature infatuation towards Rosalind. In his debut, Orlando tries to make Oliver understand that he has inherited as much of his father's nobility as Oliver and should be treated as such. Unfortunately, Orlando is not able to establish his role in Oliver's home because of the rule of primogeniture. As Orlando states, "The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you are the firstborn, but the same tradition takes not away my blood ... I have as much of my father in me as you" (1.1.44-48). Oliver's failure to recognize Orlando's true worth is demonstrated by Oliver's encouraging Charles to destroy his brother during the wrestling match and by Oliver's later attempt to kill his brother, which motivates Orlando's flight into Arden. Furthermore, the play, through the cruelty of the tyrannical Duke Frederick and the vindictiveness of Oliver, demonstrates the potentially "destructive consequences of a younger brothers' deprivation and discontent, in the family and in society at large" and illustrates the danger of Orlando's position (Montrose 42).

After his triumphant wrestling match with Charles, Orlando meets Rosalind and Celia for the first time, and Rosalind, in direct contradistinction to the normal protocols of courting, makes the first advances to Orlando, giving him as a talisman a gold chain from around her neck with the words: "Gentleman, / Wear this for me, one out of suits with fortune, / That could give more, but that her hand lacks means" (1.2.235-237).

Orlando, who has had no schooling in courtly graces and presumably no experience with women, is tongue-tied with shyness and is unable to respond to any of Rosalind's questions and overtures. Seeking some way to express his turbulent emotions, Orlando latches on to the conventional role of the Petrarchan lover. Originally, Orlando was totally silenced by shyness; later, when Orlando places love notes all over Arden, he shifts to the other end of the spectrum and becomes an infatuated naïf and a prolific, if mediocre, poet. However, even though he strives to play the traditional romantic lover, when she first meets him in the forest, Rosalind/Ganymede jestingly questions the depth of Orlando's love, observing that he shows none of the marks of the traditional romantic lover, such as:

A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken, which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have not; a beard neglected, which you have not ... Then you hose should be ungartered, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbuttoned, your show untied, and, everything about you demonstrating a careless desolation. But you are no such man. You are rather point-device in your accoutrements, as loving yourself, than seeming the lover of any other. (3.2.364-374)

Here Rosalind describes the insomniac, anorexic, disheveled lover of romantic convention, and if Orlando were indeed the lover reflected in his insipid verses then he would be everything that Rosalind here depicts. Fortunately, however, he is never the incapacitated lover described by Rosalind or illustrated in the rather vapid verses that he hangs on the trees in Arden. Of course, he never expects Rosalind to read any of these verses since he has no knowledge of her presence in the forest. Thus the notes have

meaning for no one but himself; he performs these actions not to woo Rosalind but to find some outlet to express his frustrated love for her. However, as the play makes clear, the role of the Petrarchan lover that Orlando has selected leads not to growth and development but to stasis, since this role consists of a series of conventional behaviors, the behaviors described by Rosalind in the passage quoted above.

The play demonstrates Orlando's conversion from the Petrarchan swain into the rational lover more appropriate for a consensual, companionate marriage to Rosalind when Orlando questions Oliver's love for Celia: "Is 't possible that on so little acquaintance you should like her? That but seeing, you should love her?" (5.2.1-3). This is exactly how Orlando felt on his first meeting with Rosalind, although, unlike Oliver, Orlando could not even respond to Rosalind's questions. However, after his sojourn in the forest, Orlando's love for Rosalind, tested by and developed through conversations with Ganymede, grows to be much more stable than the immediate infatuation of Oliver for Celia. Orlando even admits to the Duke that he secretly suspected that Ganymede might be Rosalind, "My lord, the first time that I ever saw him / Methought he was a brother to your daughter" (5.4.28-9). As David Bevington observes, Orlando must learn to understand and appreciate the true qualities of women, and rid himself of idealized and unrealistic expectations of love and the view of Rosalind as an infallible person (149). While assuming the static role of the conventional Petrarchan lover, Orlando is incapable of achieving the understanding and realistic tolerance described by Bevington. Only through the teaching of the cross-dressed Rosalind does Orlando grow and develop from the shy naïf of the early acts to the bold young man who finally pronounces that "I can live no longer by thinking," and thus at last wins Rosalind for his wife. Rosalind's

tutelage of Orlando, and also of Silvius and Pheobe, thus becomes an example of the power of role-playing not only to mould the individual actor but to influence the development of others.

## Chapter Four

### *King Lear*

#### Critical History of *King Lear*

In exploring specific theatricality in *King Lear*, I have two concerns – first, the art of role-playing and, second, the emphasis on non-language that becomes central in the shaping of Edgar’s development and identity formation. Thomas F. Van Laan’s *Role-Playing in Shakespeare* investigates how losing oneself to find oneself serves as a basis for action (252). In applying this to *Lear*, I note that Edgar becomes Poor Tom to defend himself; he must hide or else be imprisoned for treason and possibly killed. So at the beginning, disguise, or role-playing, becomes a means of defense as in *As You Like It*. After becoming Poor Tom, Edgar reflects that he had been “proud in heart and mind,” “false of heart, light of ear, bloody of hand,” and “hog in sloth, fox in stealth, wolf in greediness, dog in madness, lion in prey” (3.4.84, 91, 92). Whether Edgar has ever displayed these qualities is problematic but these lines demonstrate how Edgar’s role-playing invokes an inner reflection and a desire for positive change. Moreover, Tom O’Bedlam is an identity alien to Edgar and he uses this role to find reason within the madness of the world around him. By seeking this solace, living in another personality completely different from his own, and understanding the interrelation between other characters, Edgar becomes an active hero experimenting with different identities in order to achieve the appropriate one for himself.

Van Laan also describes how characters are able to maintain “a sharp awareness of the identity behind the mask” (28). Throughout his performance, Edgar is able to communicate to the audience what he is thinking through the use of asides, all the time maintaining his identity as Edgar while thoroughly enveloping himself in role-playing and speaking for all humanity as an emblematic character. He has the capacity to “undergo important transformations of one kind or another, though without experiencing ... a complete shift from one ‘personality’ to a totally different one” (Van Laan 28). Edgar demonstrates this by effectively shifting into five different identities—Tom O’Bedlam, a peasant, a messenger, a knight, and his final realized identity. When taking on another role, he does so slowly, figuring out exactly what will work for that particular character. For instance, in assuming the part of the peasant, Edgar slowly fits into the role through a change of clothing and voice. Gloucester even observes, “Methinks thy voice is altered / ... Methinks you’re better spoken” (4.6.7, 10). In addition, Van Laan emphasizes “thickening,” taking on excess traits as with Edgar’s dialect as the peasant, as a means for improvisation and further role development (41-42).

Marvin Rosenberg’s “*Lear’s Theatre of Poetry*” observes how often “language is non-verbal, designed for the actor’s face and body rather than his tongue” (90). In *Lear*, this physical acting is best exemplified in the trial scene of Goneril and Regan. During this scene, Edgar confides to the audience, “My tears begin to take his part so much / They mar my counterfeiting” (3.6.59-60). Several times in the play, he has trouble keeping up this pretence as Tom O’Bedlam and almost comes out of character. However, Edgar successfully uses this underlying emotion to convey feigned emotion as Poor Tom, thereby anticipating modern theories of method acting,<sup>v</sup> whereby actors recall emotional



traumas from their own lives to help them portray these same feelings on the stage. When Gloucester survives the supposed fall from the cliff, Edgar utilizes his own previous pain and sadness to pour out his love towards his father in the guise of the peasant. This also confirms the play's recurrent motif of seeing through empathy – e.g. Gloucester's "I see it feelingly" (4.6.149) – which Rosenberg points out is central to learning within the play. Edgar actually begins to feel Gloucester's and Lear's pain, expressing their pain and frustration when he kills Oswald.

Despite the fact that Edgar offers one of the most positive examples in Shakespeare of the salutary effects of role-playing on the development of the individual, there has been a paucity of criticism on this topic. Many critics who do focus on Edgar's roles find his "succession of emblematic disguises grounds for suspicion that he has no self; despite the prominence accorded him by the text, they tend to consider him not as a major character but as a whole host of minor characters, choric in function" (Adelman 12). Many commentators also fail to recognize that Edgar's use of non-language for character development, range of disguises, and psychological realism serves to develop his identity throughout the play. However, Janet Adelman, concurring with Rosenberg and Van Laan, develops the concept that the audience identifies with Edgar in the catharsis of the theater:

to see this play at all, we must be willing to open ourselves to feeling ... The play thus demands from us not only insight or understanding (with the suggestion of a measure of distance from the events we witness) but the willingness to make ourselves vulnerable to feeling. (5)

## Positive Examples of Role-Playing in *King Lear*

Throughout *King Lear*, Edgar assumes many different roles, at first to protect himself from Gloucester and later to pursue his own search for identity. Further, Edgar's complete assimilation of guises is a concrete refutation of the accusations of the antitheatrical writers of the period since these impersonations demonstrate how role-playing can be a positive process. To demonstrate Shakespeare's reaction against the antitheatrical prejudice, I will examine each of Edgar's roles to illustrate how role-playing contributes to this ideal of growth and self-development. I will further build upon the work of Thomas Van Laan and Marvin Rosenberg to show how the art of performance and the physical attributes of disguise contribute to Edgar's success.

Initially Edgar is presented as a relatively flat character, Edmund's credulous brother and Gloucester's best-loved son, but as the play progresses he is revealed to be a more rounded, complex individual. His debut in act one, scene two introduces someone very different from the "fop" described by his brother Edmund (1.2.14). In his opening scene, in which he enters pat upon Edmund's "catastrophe of the old comedy" (1.2.137-8), Edgar shows himself to care deeply about his brother and father. In the following episode of the supposed sword fight (2.1.), Edgar demonstrates that he is willing to do whatever his brother recommends in order to cool Gloucester's anger, even picking up the sword without question, which seals his fate. Edgar does this blindly, illustrating his complete trust in Edmund and exemplifying his fundamental innocence and goodness. However, like Orlando in *As You Like It*, he is something of a naïf and has much to learn.

Two scenes later, after his escape, Edmund states “Whiles I may scrape / I will preserve myself” and seeks to assume an identity in hiding (2.3.5-6). This soliloquy is important because it details how Edgar will begin his role as Tom O’Bedlam, taking the “basest and most poorest shape / That ever penury, in contempt of man, / Brought near to beast” (2.3.7-9). He will adorn himself with proper makeup and go without clothing in order to look and feel the part, physically and emotionally becoming a beggar. He totally eschews his former existence as Edgar; Poor Tom will now be his sole identity, as he proclaims, “Edgar I nothing am” (2.3.21). Throughout the speech, Edgar even speaks in third person, revealing how he transports himself outside the character of Edgar and into Poor Tom. As Edgar, he has no existence but provides a positive model as someone willing to continue to struggle against adversity by taking on the role of one of the basest members of society’s hierarchy—a mad beggar.

Edgar’s role-playing also endows him with empathy, prompting an inner change, and serves as a role model for others. In his first soliloquy he states how “When we our betters see bearing our woes, / We scarcely think our miseries our foes” (3.6.102-3). Seeing a better man’s (Lear’s) pain and comparing their mutual circumstances makes Edgar’s own pain seem endurable. Here Edgar also provides the rejected child’s point of view and serves as a stand-in for Cordelia. Moreover, Lear and Edgar are closely aligned; Edgar could possibly function as a younger version of Lear. Regan states how Edgar is Lear’s godson, whom he named and who often associates with Lear and his knights (2.1.91-92). Moreover, Edgar’s life has been as easy as Lear’s – living with all advantages but without any responsibility. Edgar is also gullible, like Lear, and unable to distinguish between appearance and reality. Although certainly not as proud, arrogant, or

wrathful as Lear, Edgar admits to many sins and lapses in character, listing them all one after the other when he meets Lear for the first time as Poor Tom. Although the Edgar presented to the audience appears innocent and good, under the guise of poor Tom, he admits that, like all humanity, he is sometimes proud of heart and mind, has served his own pleasures through the pain of others, and is guilty of other vices and foibles (3.4.84-99). He confesses all his sins, like one ready to become someone else, one ready to give up his past and move forward, even as Lear, in act 3, scene 4, will acknowledge his lack of responsibility as king. Lastly, like Lear, and also like Gloucester, Edgar will go on a journey into identity in the storm and will discover much about himself and much about the human condition. Lear seems aware of Poor Tom's mobile identity and continually bestows upon him different identities – philosopher, learned Theban, noble philosopher, Athenian. Obviously, to Lear, Edgar is a philosopher; one from whom he can learn. In particular, Lear can learn from Edgar how to lose his identity in madness, feigned or real, and how to become something else, something better. Later Lear refers to Edgar as a “robed man of justice” (Edgar with his blanket), and a “learned justicer” (3.5.36, 21) and, indeed, Edgar serves as one of the judges in the mock trial against Goneril and Regan (3.5.36).

Edgar also learns to control events by experimentation and improvisation. This is exemplified when he takes Gloucester to the cliff near Dover. In the description of the cliff, Edgar demonstrates his complete success at extemporization. He describes people, birds and beetles, fishermen on the beach, boats in the water, and buoys off the coast—all of which are not present. When Edgar warns, “I’ll look no more, / Lest my brain turn, and the deficient sight / Topple down headlong” (4.6.22-24), he is again practicing method

acting by mentally placing himself on top of a cliff, and recalling past feelings of vertigo. Even though Gloucester openly questions whether they are really near a cliff, Edgar convinces him so completely that Gloucester jumps off the imaginary cliff to commit suicide. Moreover, this improvisation and experimentation also allow Edgar to transform into a new identity. Edgar craftily and slowly takes on the role of the peasant, learning certain traits to enable him to develop the character fully.

From this point on Edgar easily assumes three more roles –messenger, knight, and a new, more fully realized self. This role-playing demonstrates Edgar’s ease and skill at shifting identities and empowers him with a sense of self-knowledge as he figures out his own limitations in order successfully to take Lear’s place as king at the end of the play. Moreover, the grace and quick thinking that Edgar applies in assuming these roles comments directly on the importance of metadrama within the play; as Edgar transforms into each role, he does so as if completing his own drama. When Edgar adopts the Somerset dialect (a stage convention illustrating a peasant) in his confrontation with Oswald, he is able to kill his father’s enemy and steal the letters affirming his innocence. Only then does he reveal his true identity to Gloucester, making sure that no one will ever question his loyalties in the future. With everything in the kingdom so inverted, he wants concrete proof of his innocence before revealing himself, thereby demonstrating an understanding of the unstable nature of the kingdom. His role as messenger to Albany also confirms his ability to come in and out of events on cue, serving his own needs when demanded. When he finally assumes his own identity and confronts Edmund, Edgar proclaims: “Know my name is lost, / By treason’s tooth bare-gnawn and canker-bit” (5.3.124-5), thereby acknowledging Edmund’s role in forcing him to relinquish his

identity in order to survive. And Edgar is so successful in this confrontation that Edmund does not even realize it is his brother as he remarks: “In wisdom I should ask thy name. / But since thy outside looks so fair and warlike ... I disdain and spurn” (5.3.144-5, 148). Edgar then asserts his identity and reassumes his rightful place, proclaiming: “My name is Edgar, and thy father’s son” (5.3.172).

Thus, through role-playing Edgar develops from one of the flattest figures in the play—naïve, credulous, trusting—into the most resourceful character in the tragedy. From the naïf so easily manipulated by his evil brother, Edgar becomes the compassionate, inventive, and courageous son who saves his father from despair by improvising a mock-miracle and defends his father’s life against Oswald. He also becomes the shrewd contriver who reveals Goneril’s treachery to her husband Albany; the stalwart knight who defeats his brother Edmund in a trial by ordeal; and the man who ultimately will become king. Whatever hope resides in the turbulent *King Lear* universe at the end of the play rests in the wisdom and resourcefulness that Edgar has learned through role-playing.

#### Negative Examples of Role-Playing in *King Lear*

If Edgar demonstrates the positive attributes of metadrama and role-playing, Edmund provides a negative example. Like Iago before him, he brilliantly equivocates: “I am no honest man if there be any good meaning toward you” (1.2.176-7). Moreover, like Iago with Othello, he believes that “noble” Edgar and “credulous” Gloucester are inherently good and exploits these worthy qualities to plot against them. One example of

Edmund's tenuous internal direction occurs when he fakes the fight with Edgar to gain his father's favor. However, Gloucester is more concerned with Edgar's supposed treachery than with Edmund's manufactured physical suffering, and Edmund must attempt twice to get his father to look at the wound. Although Gloucester does finally turn his attention to the wounded Edmund, this episode demonstrates Edmund's failure to control the action completely. However, Edmund exploits Gloucester's fear of Lear's fate – that his children will overthrow him now that he is getting old—and Gloucester quickly establishes Edmund as his inheritor: “and of my land, / Loyal and natural boy, I'll work the means / To make thee capable. (1.83-85).

At this point Edmund quickly assumes a series of roles, moving from bastard to Gloucester's heir to Earl to potential king. First Edmund plays the good son, telling Gloucester about his brother, even pretending to defend Gloucester physically in the attack. His next role consists of being a loyal subject to Regan and Cornwall, eventually working with them to conspire against his father and steal the letter from Cordelia. Edmund then assumes the role of the victim by depicting Edgar and Gloucester as traitorous villains (3.5.10-11). Cornwall explains how Gloucester, a traitor, has bequeathed Edgar an innate evil and this is the reason, not the raucous knights, for Edgar's deplorable behavior. Also in this scene Edmund becomes the Earl of Gloucester, usurping his father's place. He moves from bastard to true son and inheritor to Earl, thereby replacing first his older brother and finally his father. Van Laan argues that Edgar and Edmund switch places throughout the play; as one rises, the other falls in both the first and second halves of the play: “Edgar's progress parallels the similar rise of Edmund

in the first half of the play, and just as Edmund's rise betokened increasing disorder, Edgar's symbolizes its elimination" (208).

Like Edmund, Iago is another fully formed negative example of an interior director and provides an early anticipation of Edmund's villainous role in *Lear*. Lawrence Danson discusses the struggle between the fictive reality of the play, Desdemona and Othello's world, and Iago's illusion of this reality. According to Danson, the play essentially becomes a battleground between these two realities until Iago's world triumphs, completely winning over Othello through manipulation of language. Significantly, in *King Lear*, written a year after *Othello*, these two worlds collide again, yet this time a positive form of metadrama succeeds. Although *Lear* is a tragedy, Edgar, the drama's most successful role-playing animal, to borrow Van Laan's term, is fully capable of an upward journey (like the one described by *Mirandola*) -- adapting, understanding the positive and negatives of experience, and building on them to successfully achieve the throne. For Edmund, however, role-playing is totally negative. First, of course, Edmund's role-playing is totally different from that of Edgar. He never assumes the role of a different character, complete with a different costume, a different name, a different dialect. Instead, he maintains his own name and attire but disguises his true nature under the Machiavellian cloak of a different personality, playing the role of the loving brother, the devoted son, the patriotic subject. Ironically, he takes on the role of the very person that Edgar becomes. Also, Edmund's role-playing provides no growth; in fact, it could be argued that because his role-playing is controlled totally by egotism and desire for self-advancement, it leads to degeneration as he becomes a brutalized brother and son and a traitor to his country. Thus, Edmund becomes a foil to



Edgar, through contrast accentuating the growth and development that is possible through acting, while providing a cautionary example of the possible negative effects of role-playing.

## Chapter Five

### Conclusion

According to the antitheatrical conservatives, “God had allocated the roles and written out the script in advance. From birth all men are ‘separated,’ marked out for some station to which they are to be confined” (Barish 112-3). Although these stations were considered final, some conservative moralists acknowledge that there was a remote possibility of change if absolutely necessary. However, conservative polemicists believed that any form of diversion from one’s preordained station was a mark of human frailty (Barish 113). In both *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, change is considered a positive step, at least for the majority of the characters.

But, in considering the salutary effect of role-playing in *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, the question arises: How can we be certain that Shakespeare is actually responding to the topical antitheatrical debate and not simply working within the tradition of role-playing? Role-playing has a venerable heritage as a time-honored dramatic strategy, dating back to the Roman dramas of Terence and Plautus and the native tradition of the medieval mystery plays (such as Mak in *The Second Shepherd’s Play*). Many of Shakespeare’s predecessors employ role-playing in their dramas, sometimes with positive, sometimes with negative results. I would argue, however, that rarely in pre-Shakespearean drama, and indeed in Shakespeare’s own plays, is role-playing presented so consistently positive as in the dramatic journeys of Rosalind and Edgar. And in both *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, change is consistently presented as positive, in direct contradistinction to the claims of the antitheatrical polemicists.

Throughout *As You Like It* almost everyone who attempts to remain static undergoes a change anyway, always for the better. At the end of the play, Duke Frederick begins a transformation into a monastic life. In addition, after being rescued by Orlando, Oliver repents and changes for the better. He understands the consequences of his ill-treatment towards Orlando, confirmed “upon an expansion of opportunities for mastery and possession” and finds true love with Celia (Montrose 47). Celia changes as well, developing from a scorner of love to its advocate. Even Touchstone abandons the idea of a fraudulent marriage to Audrey and is wed by Hymen, the god of marriage. Finally, Phoebe, through her own suffering, learns to value Silvius’s love and loyalty. Moreover, many characters develop different techniques by which to discover their inner qualities. Rosalind subversively acts as a male in order to control her environment and develop an androgynous personality, while Orlando, tutored by the role-playing Rosalind, develops by physically saving his brother’s life and learning to love Rosalind genuinely, and is rewarded by becoming heir to Duke Senior. Only Jacques and Silvius never really change, and, as such, they become the targets of the play’s satire.

In *King Lear*, Shakespeare further explores and compares the experiences achieved through metadrama, role-playing, and physical and emotional transformations. While Edmund’s interior direction relies completely on his will to succeed, his greed, and his lust for power, Edgar seeks to reestablish his identity as a worthy son and future king, to act as a role model for others, to experience compassion and insight, and to use metamorphosis as a means of survival. Fortunately, it is Edgar’s performance that triumphs in the play, since he is solely motivated by love for others and innate goodness and achieves compassion, commitment, and self-knowledge through role-playing. Edgar,

like Rosalind, also develops an androgynous personality through role-playing, becoming compassionate and courageous, nurturing and resolute. Edgar's enlightenment even causes Edmund to experience one virtuous moment as he lies dying and tries (too late) to prevent Cordelia's execution, pledging "Some good I mean to do, / Despite mine own nature" (5.3.249-250). Thus, as in *As You Like It*, the role-player not only achieves self-development but also acts as a role model for others.

In *As You Like It*, Jacques affirms the belief in the necessity of change in his famous "All the world's a stage" speech, by establishing a life cycle for every man (although significantly not for the malleable female persona). In this speech, Jacques states how each schoolboy, lover, soldier, and justice has his stereotypic identities, and how life ends as "mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything" (2.7.164-5). However, Jacques chooses to set himself apart without accepting any of the established identities that society has selected for him. Through him, Shakespeare may be suggesting that there is nothing beyond society's preordained cycle unless individuals learn to act for themselves and, as Miranda insists, create their own identity.

As Miranda states, "I have said these things because I know there are many people who, as dogs always bark to strangers, so also often condemn and hate what they do not understand" (29). Thus, the antitheatrical pamphleteers, unable to understand the positive results of mutability and change, denounced the theater in angry and barking prose. In conclusion, I would suggest that in *As You Like It* and *King Lear*, Shakespeare explores the way in which the characters' actions affirm or debunk the antitheatrical prejudice, countering the arguments of the troubled antitheatrical pamphleteers by

demonstrating that through drama, individuals can explore and elucidate a mysterious world.

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<sup>i</sup> Humanism is a system of thought that centers on humans and their values, capacities, and worth. It is also a cultural and intellectual movement of the Renaissance that emphasized secular concerns as a result of the rediscovery and study of the literature, art, and civilization of ancient Greece and Rome (Webster's New Millennium Dictionary of English, Preview Edition, 2004 by Lexico Publishing Group, LLC).

<sup>ii</sup> All citations are from David Bevington's edition and will hereafter be included within the text.

<sup>iii</sup> "The Italian sonneteer Francis Petrarch has given to the language a name for the stereotypical literary mannerisms that we associate with courtly love: the sighing and self-abasement of the young man, the chaste denial of love by the woman whom he worships, and the like" (Bevington 148). A Petrarchan lover

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is also one who exhibits unrequited, melancholic, and unrealized love to an idealized and often unattainable woman (Bevington 148-9).

<sup>iv</sup> Androgynous is defined as “not clearly male or female; exhibiting the appearance or attributes of both sexes” (*Oxford Dictionary and Thesaurus*, Oxford University Press, 1996). Also, “Feminists have traditionally used this term, adapted from Plato’s *Symposium*, to describe individuals who combine the socially constructed attributes or qualities that societies have associated with the feminine or masculine personality.” For a full discussion of the derivation and feminist use of this term, see Sara Munson Deats (13-15).

<sup>v</sup> Method acting is a dramatic technique created by Konstantin Stanislavsky in which actors identify as closely as possible with the character played by correlating experiences from their personal lives to the character (*Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary of English, Preview Edition*, Lexico Publishing Group, LLC, 2004).