Creating Identity In As You Like It

One of the best playwriters of all time is considered to be William Shakespeare. Most of his scripts and plays have been well known for hundreds of years after they were written. All of his plays a divided into four categories, comedy, history, tragedy, and romance however, all of his plays include elements from each category. As You Like It is one of his most popular plays, other than Romeo and Juliet, that is considered to be a classic piece of literature, written in 1599 and published in 1623. It seamlessly includes change of identity for multiple characters, for some it was a change of physical identity, going from female to male like Rosalind and for others it is a change in social status like Duke Senior. Shakespeare has delved into the issue of identity in the Early Modern period or Renaissance period, he switched gender roles and defies the expectation of the higher class, which is reflected by society in that era, under the reign of Queen Elizabeth I. Rosalind had to change her identity and become Ganymede when she escapes to the forest and decided to choose her own destiny and defy all gender roles. After Duke Frederick claimed the throne over his older brother, he exiled Duke Senior to the Forest of Arden, Duke Senior's identity was taken from him, everything he was, came from being of the upper class and when he was exiled, he lost everything.

When Rosalind became Ganymede the first statement was:

This quote focuses on masculine traits that Rosalind, as Ganymede has to portray to keep her identity secret. She doesn't have to just pretend to be someone else, she has to become the new identity for that short period of time. 'A galliant curtal- ax upon my thigh…. boar- spear in my hand…many other mannish cowards that do outface it with their semblances', these parts of the previous quote show the stereotypical masculine traits that have to be adopted by Rosalind to be convincing man. They have to be the embodiment of strength, mentally, emotionally and physically, which is shown by the statements weapon upon her thigh and the mannish cowards. In other plays written by Shakespeare they show men with femanine qualities however, to be convincing she has to play the stereotypical male to avoid detection. Some say that Rosalind's gender-bending is progressive whilst resisting the unnatural elements of gender roles. With Rosalind's escape to the forest she uncovered that she not only escapes the limitations of being a woman in that era but also the social expectations for a woman of her status, which she also sheds when she changes her identity (Segal 5). Others have noticed that as Ganymede her false persona was very brief while she is around Orlando. When they are together her true and original identity is very quick to make a reappearance before she has to backtrack, making it even more suspicious that she is hiding something (Leonard 54). Bracher discovered that Shakespeare's plays often integrate character disguises in order to create new perspectives for the audience, it is no different in As You Like It (Bracher). Although she chose to be in this situation, she is still a woman mentally, physically, and emotionally however, her situation helps influence her to become Ganymede and change her character whiel she is in the forest of Arden (Ikeda 75). With this character alone Shakespeare has explored identity, gender roles and defying the socially accepted expectations.

The second character who had to change his identity, unwillingly is Duke Senior. His exile forces him to adapt to his surroundings in the forest of Arden, shedding his upper-class identity, this is shown through the first scene in act 2:

This is the first statement from Duke senior after his exile, this quote starts off with dislike of the forest but then going on to how it's better than the court life. There are a few phrases and word choices that shows his displeasure like, "painted pomp… peril", the letter 'P' is a hard consonant helping the audience understand his displeasure of being away from the court. The name Adam is biblical meaning humanity, stating that "we don't feel the penalty of humanity", this ties in with the part "… no flattery; these are counselors" this is personification as the counselors are the trees and nature, eluding to the idea that nature is honest, unlike the court which is considered fake. Other word choices help support the idea that the court is fake and artificial with the use of the words, "Churlish chiding … Winter's wind, Bites… Blows…. Body". This paragraph alone shows the transformation of Duke Senior form a person of the court to someone who prefers the forest lifestyle of the forest, away from the expectation of the court life, therefore changing his identity from nobility to someone of the lower class.

As You Like It focuses on the change of identity through betrayal, exile and the need to escape and create your own path. This is no different in the Early Modern period or Renaissance period, while Queen Elizabeth I was in reign she had thoroughly enjoyed watching plays, specifically Shakespeare. During this era every character was played by a man, even Rosalind, this may be part of the reason why Shakespeare decided to create a female character who had to change her identity and become male to hide. This was incorporated because if they changed identities, from a woman to a man, it meant they had more opportunities in real life and freedom to create their own path in the play. Women during that time were inferior to men as there were no women allowed to perform on stage in this period of time, they had to work behind the scenes while men took most of the glory through the performance. Shakespeare often incorporated topics and themes that reflected life in his time, most of the time it reflected the monarchy and the person in reign. There were many parallels between As You Like It and court during the Renaissance period, there was a corrupt and unhappy court, exile to new mysterious lands and a charming but unconventional young noble. The exile of Duke Senior reflected that of another exile in the court at that time. This background knowledge of the parallels and information of the court provides insight to what was happening at the time As You Like It was written, and perhaps providing the inspiration needed to write this play. This inspiration helped Shakespeare fashion and deeply show the identities and characteristics of the people created in As You Like It.

William Shakespeare is considered one of the best playwriters of all time, with most of his works considered classics, As You Like It was no exception. Shakespeare has delved into the issue of identity in the Early Modern period or Renaissance period, as he switched gender roles and defied the expectation of the higher class, which is reflected upon by society in that era. Rosalind had to disguise herself and become a man to take charge of her destiny and find her love Orlando, she presented herself like a stereo typical man, strong mentally, physically, and emotionally, although she had a hard time keeping in character around her love interest. Whereas, Duke Senior changed his identity unintentionally, after his exile he was stripped of his title and social standing, making his new identity similar to that of Robin Hood. These changes in identity are implemented seamlessly into the play so it can reflects the monarchy of Queen Elizabeth I with empowerment of women and exile.