



**‘Misogyny and a fascination with the feminine potential of masculine sexuality are part of the common discourse’.¹
 To what extent are discourses of ‘misogyny’ normalised in
Epicene and *As You Like It*?**

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The anachronistic use of the modern term ‘misogyny’ to Renaissance plays implies an analysis of the discourses of ‘misogyny’ within *Epicene* by Ben Jonson and *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare should be informed by feminist theories and criticism. The prevalent patriarchal ideology that existed at the time of writing is significant but, to apply Barthes’ ‘death of the author’² theory, both plays can allow a feminist interpretation without implying either Jonson or Shakespeare wrote them with that intention. Therefore, although both plays display the ‘misogynistic’ discourse of their Renaissance context, to some extent they can also be interpreted as progressive in their destabilisation of traditional gender boundaries.

Considering the modern weighting of the idea of ‘misogyny’ and the lack of application it would have had in the Renaissance, applying the ideas of French écriture féminine theorist Hélène Cixous can help define the concept of a male dominating discourse. Cixous portrays misogyny in terms of a binary system where the idea of women as ‘other’ divides the world into binary oppositions assigned to gender; she lists examples like ‘Activity/Passivity...Culture/Nature...Logos/Pathos’.³ In Cixous’ concept of the ‘phallogocentric system’⁴ women are confined to the passive side of the binary. This is challenged in *As You Like It*. Rosalind is a representative of female agency, directing the play to actualise the comic resolution of marriage. She demonstrates wit and intelligence when she commands the potential couple Phoebe and Silvius, and Orlando, her own love interest, who is unaware of her identity: ‘(To Phoebe) I will marry you if I ever marry a woman, and I’ll be married tomorrow. (To Orlando) I will satisfy you if ever I satisfy man, and you shall be married tomorrow. (To Silvius) I will content you if what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married tomorrow’.⁵ The repetition of the similarly structured phrases shows her wit; nothing she says is a lie but seems cryptic for the other characters involved. She therefore uses the dramatic irony of her disguise to create the image of her as more knowledgeable and in control than the other characters. In this one speech she easily manages the potentially impossible romantic situation, demonstrating her agency throughout the play, steadily controlling the forthcoming conclusion.

Despite appearing as Ganymede and thus potentially twisting the audience’s perception of gender to attach her image of agency to her male counterpart, the audience is

¹ Richard Dutton, ed., *Epicene* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2003), p. 17

² Roland Barthes, *Image Music Text*, ed., Stephen Heath (London: Fontana, 1977), pp.142-48

³ Hélène Cixous and Catherine Clément, *The Newly Born Woman* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 1996), p. 63

⁴ Hélène Cixous, ‘The Laugh of the Medusa’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 1, 4 (1976), pp. 875-93 (p. 883)

⁵ William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Alan Brissenden (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), V.iii.106-15
 All references to *As You Like It* are from this edition.

always aware of her femininity. She talks of her affection as having 'an unknown bottom, like the Bay of Portugal' (IV.i.190-91), the metaphor conveying the depth of her love for Orlando, and 'faints' when she sees the bloodied napkin (IV.iii.158). This has been problematic for some critics, such as Peter Erickson, who interprets this behaviour as evidence of Rosalind in the 'traditional female role'.⁶ However, in emphasising that her male role is a performance, and through switching back to female Rosalind, the association between female and the agency is made clear. She emphasises her gender to remind the audience of the female agency that lies beneath Ganymede's outward appearance. Rosalind's agency, coupled with the extent of her discourse in the play, which is 'according to the Spevack concordance (1968), 26.744 per cent of the words in the playscript'⁷ demonstrates the necessary qualities for Champion's comic controller. As a character that is 'involved in the action' but also 'abstracts the spectator from emotional commitment',⁸ Rosalind demonstrates through the dramatic irony produced by her disguise as Ganymede that she is in control, and thus the audience can detach from any potentially worrying aspects of *As You Like It*, knowing she will manage a happy ending. Rosalind therefore subverts the dichotomous binary of activity/passivity in becoming the principal controller of *As You Like It*.

There is not just subversion of the gender binary through Rosalind's agency but also in the character of Orlando. Clara Park's suggestion that Orlando is 'merely a nice young man'⁹ overlooks his important role of subverting discourses of misogyny, where he is ironically portrayed as passive to emphasise gender blurring. There is a repetition of his portrayal as 'gentle' (II.iii.2; I.i.155) and despite his masculine fight in the court, upon entry to the forest he becomes a 'doe' (II.vii.128); the feminine image coupled with the maternal instinct of care categorises him as female, according to misogynistic discourse. When he says 'My better parts/Are all thrown down, and that which here stands up/Is but a quintain, a mere lifeless block' (I.ii.232-35), he suggests that in the domain of love, under the eye of Rosalind he is the quintessence of passivity, which seems to continue throughout their courtship. Even in the court, it is Rosalind who uses the excuse 'he calls us back' (I.ii.236) though Orlando did not speak out; he was unable to control the situation. The importance of Rosalind's dialogue of control prior to the forest domain is significant as it implies the blurring of the traditional aspects of femininity and masculinity throughout the play will continue after its conclusion.

Conversely, Epicene appears to propagate misogynistic discourse. In many respects women are represented as passive, in accordance with patriarchal thought. Morose's obsession with control through silence is the epitome of this, he asks Epicene if she 'think it plausible to answer (him) by silent gestures',¹⁰ and delights in her reply of a curtsy. By denying her a voice he asserts his control over his soon-to-be wife. The collegiates' desires are easily manipulated by Truewit, they all transfer their affection to Dauphine showing their desires to be, as Truewit eloquently suggests: 'in emulation of one another' (III. Vi.61). This denial of female independent thought also seems misogynistic, they are shown as the passive side of the binary while Truewit acts as comic controller and thus he has the real agency. Particular jokes by the male characters are also resonant of misogyny. John Daw's joke that 'female vice should be a virtue male' (II.iii.115) and vice versa accentuates the opposition of male and female, and therefore validates the concept of binary and woman as other. He then

⁶ Peter Erickson, *Patriarchal Structures in Shakespeare's Drama* (Los Angeles: University of California Press), p. 23

⁷ Phyllis Rackin, 'Misogyny Is Everywhere' in *A Feminist Companion*, ed. Dymna Callaghan (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2000), pp. 42-56 (p. 47)

⁸ Larry S. Champion, *Evolution of Shakespeare's Comedy* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1970), p.156

⁹ Clara Claiborne Park, 'As We Like it' in *The Woman's Part*, ed. Lenz, Greene and Neely (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1980), pp. 100-117 (p. 107)

¹⁰ Ben Jonson, *Epicene*, ed. Gordon Campbell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), II.v.37-38
All references to *Epicene* are from this edition.

divides them further in his pun: ‘Why, with increase is, when I court her for the common cause of mankind; and she says nothing, but consentire videtu: and in time is grvida’ (II.iii.118). This implied rape joke excludes the idea of female power in the quintessential example of male control, but the Latin is also essential to this misogyny. Latin, associated with the higher educated classes, would exclude a number of the Renaissance theatre audience, and fewer women would have understood than men. With the rape connotations of the joke obscured by Latin, the traditional and authoritative language acts as the patriarchal oppressor, validating the binary structures and emphasising male control.

The extent of satire within *Epicene* means, unlike *As You Like It*, it is difficult to clearly interpret the depiction of any social group, they are all at the mercy of the gallants. Women are included in this satirical derision where, as Newman writes, the ‘assumptions about behaviour appropriate to women...position the audience to perceive the collegiates’ activities as reprehensible’,¹¹ showing that for a Renaissance audience the behaviour of the women would be abhorrent. However, these same aspects that are probably intended as satirical also show *Epicene*’s women exert independence; the collegiates are in control of their own lives and their bodies. Epicene asks: ‘have you those excellent receipts, madam, to keep yourselves from bearing children?’ (IV.iv.50-51) which, from a modern perspective, subverts the misogynistic norm as women have control over their own bodies. Women also control men within the play; Lady Otter dominates her pathetic husband, ‘he is his wife’s subject, he calls her princess, and at such times as these, follows her up and down the house like a page’ (II.vi.49-51) and Lady Centaure takes the opportunity to mock Morose’s misery: ‘He is a real groom indeed’. The pun implies his marriage signifies a new position of servitude in the household of a soon to be collegiate and thus reveals Morose’s self-perceived control as impossible and ridiculous; women, like noise, are not there to be controlled. Epicene humorously depicts this in her sudden outburst post marriage ceremony: ‘What, did you think you had married a statue?’ (III.iv.34); Morose’s misogynistic view is deemed as ridiculous. Phyllis Rackin suggests that Jonson ‘characterizes the mannish “collegiates” as unnatural, but chiefly because they violate the hierarchal divisions between the sexes’,¹² the focus on subversion of hierarchy and movement towards the destabilisation of activity/passivity is shown in the examples above of women’s independence and control within *Epicene*. Although they never reach the agency of Rosalind’s comic controller, there are however aspects to *Epicene* that certainly question misogynistic norms.

An effective way of transgressing binary patriarchal structures is subverting the traditional linear view of time which, according to Cixous, helps ‘shatter the framework of institutions’,¹³ which validate the binary view of woman as other. *As You Like It* shows elements of this in the timeless nature of the forest where ‘there is no clock’ (III.ii.292). Cyclical time can also act as an alternative to the authority of linear time; Cixous explains that in cyclical time ‘the future must no longer be determined by the past’.¹⁴ The ending of the play represents a cyclical process of time; the play starts in the court and ends with a return to the court. Though this may seem a chronologically defined end to the play, Duke Senior concludes with the lines: ‘Proceed, proceed! We’ll begin these rites/As we do trust they’ll end in true delights’ (V.iv.195-96). This implies renewal, a return to the beginning. This is also corroborated in Juliet Dusinberre’s documentation of the court epilogue, which mentions a ‘beginning in the ending’, that the play is a ‘Circular account’.¹⁵ This cyclical nature of time creates a more fluid and ambivalent space where, without misogynistic

¹¹ Cited in James Loxley, *Ben Jonson* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 176

¹² Phyllis Rackin, ‘Androgyny, Mimesis and the marriage of the Boy Heroine on the English Renaissance Stage’, *PMLA*, 102.1 (1987), pp. 29-41, (p. 35)

¹³ Cixous, ‘Medusa’, p. 888

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 875

¹⁵ Juliet Dusinberre, ‘Appendix 1’ in *As You Like It*, (London: Arden Shakespeare, 2006), p. 351

structures ruling the ideology, laws of agency and control can change. The cyclic idea of a 'beginning' which comes at the end of the play also suggests a future for Rosalind and Orlando, giving the audience the impression her agency will continue.

However, *Epicene* cannot allude to this feminist reading of time because time, as a unity, is imperative to Jonson's application of comic conventions. His play also relies on other classical conventions of comedy such as the male orientated plot of Plautus and Terence, where 'resourceful young men and their clever servants must outwit older figures of authority who stand in the way of their happiness'¹⁶ and the use of classical references. Jonson's reference to classical misogynistic views seems to follow the patriarchal norm; Truewit's tirade against marriage in Act II, scene ii is an imitation of Juvenal, Satire VI. However, Kathleen McLuskie reads this as less didactically misogynistic than it seems, arguing the speech is used to torment the hyperbolic noise-hating Morose and thus has a comic tone which 'shifts the balance from Juvenal's misogyny, establishing Truewit as a sophisticate, capable of more multi-layered, and current wit'.¹⁷ The imitation, though potentially misogynistic is, at least, softened, in the comic intention. Jonson also changes the New Comedy plot convention of fixing an 'error about someone's personal identity' which 'often concerns the marriageability of the heroine',¹⁸ taking this tradition and completely inverting it to use identity as the reason marriage is denied. The prevention of a conventional marriage ending, which is sometimes interpreted by feminists as a conformation to patriarchal structure, shows that although Jonson's adherence to the unities prevents the subversion of authoritative time structure, there are other elements which contribute to a feminist reading.

On the other hand, the comic conventions which bind *As You Like It* limit its feminist reading. As a pastoral convention, the Forest of Arden is a symbol of tranquillity, reminiscent of the Golden Age. The forest also acts as Mikhail Bakhtin's temporary festive space. Bakhtin wrote that 'carnival celebrated temporary liberation...it marked the suspension of all hierarchal rank, privileges, norms and prohibitions',¹⁹ the characters move to the forest for the majority of the play but, significantly, they return to court at the end. The inversion and changing of gender roles is thus limited to the festive space, and when this is over, the patriarchal institution of marriage closes the play. The idea of temporality seems to undermine potential feminist interpretation of the breakdown of patriarchal structures, both in the view of Rosalind as the active part of the binary and the disruption of chronology with cyclical time. The concept of Bakhtinian carnival poses the question of whether the Forest of Arden is a device to present alternatives for women or if it acts as simply a frivolity; something fun and meaningless. Bamber suggests the repetitive nature of holiday makes the Saturnalian, or Bakhtinian, space, 'permanent as well as temporary';²⁰ because holiday is expected as a recurrence it becomes a permanent part of ideology. This seems to disrupt the previous contention of a misogynistic authority preventing the feminist readings of *As You Like It*. Even if the portrayal is limited to the festive space within the play, it does not deny the audience a portrayal of female agency, and the Renaissance theatre, as another festive space, therefore seems to dare to subvert norms of misogyny.

Despite the potential limitations caused by the authority of the comic conventions which govern both plays, the gender blurring which occurs in both is the most relevant argument to the idea of resisting the normality of misogyny. Stephen Orgel reads the

¹⁶ David Bevington, 'The Major Comedies' in *The Cambridge companion to Ben Jonson*, ed. Harp and Stewart (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 72-90 (p. 79)

¹⁷ Kathleen McLuskie, *Renaissance Dramatists* (Hertfordshire: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1989), p. 166

¹⁸ Leo Salinger, *Shakespeare and the traditions of comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), p. 126

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, extract from 'Rabelais and his World', in *Performance Analysis: an introductory Coursebook*, eds. Colin Counsell and Laurie Wolf, (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 216-22 (p. 218)

²⁰ Linda Bamber, *Comic Women, Tragic Men* (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1982), p.37

construct of boy actor as ‘a middle term between men and women’; they ‘destabilize the categories, and question what it means to be a man or a woman’.²¹ Therefore, boy actors help blur gender boundaries, which is particularly relevant to these two plays, where the convention is highlighted. *Epicene* highlights the convention in the gender reveal scene, while the character of Rosalind in *As You Like It* inverts the audience’s perception of her in her epilogue: ‘If I were a woman I would kiss as many of you as had beards that pleased me, complexions that liked me, and breaths that I defied not’ (Epilogue, 16-19). These tricks completely subvert the accepted convention of boy actors playing women, which a Renaissance audience would consider the norm, and this deviation away from institution also links both plays back to Cixous and the idea of subverting patriarchal institutions.

However, this perception of gender blurring is contentious in both plays. Douglas Lanier sees *Epicene*’s revelation as an ‘Amazon’ as ‘transposing the masculinized woman of *The Masque of Queens*, from the feminine discursive realm, where he/she embodies female power, to the masculine discursive realm, where he/she serves the ends of Dauphine’.²² He thus suggests that *Epicene*’s revelation is little more than an extension of the previous masculine control over women. However, Lanier’s use of ‘he/she’ seems poignant, showing that the audience’s perception of the character retains the female gender as well as the newly revealed male. The audience have framed its opinions based on knowing the female gender and these ideas which have been formed as female will not automatically disappear in this gender revelation. The character of *Epicene* therefore seems to exist as both male and female, with his/her name framing this concept.

Rosalind similarly appears as multiple genders: man (Ganymede), woman and boy (in the epilogue). Some critics read the epilogue as misogynistic; Erickson sees it as a ‘denial of female presence’²³ which simply emphasises the patriarchal system. However, the use of the conditional tense in Rosalind’s epilogue seems to show the further destabilisation of gender boundaries rather than a reversion back to dichotomous male/female. Jean Howard reads in the epilogue that ‘the neat convergence of biological sex and culturally constructed gender is once more severed’,²⁴ which is taken further when the boy actor elicits an implied sexual interest through his division of the audience, desiring to kiss those ‘with beards’ (Epilogue, 18). This separation of the audience confronts them with the newly destabilised gender of a boy actor seeming to express desire for men. With Rosalind’s character, there is therefore no longer a defined binary, she literally moves between genders and thus transcends them all.

Through eliciting both genders Rosalind and *Epicene* reach such a point of destabilisation that they almost become Donna Haraway’s ‘post-gender’ cyborg.²⁵ In being both genders they become something truly transcendent and unknown. In this way, both plays, despite any previous contradictory evidence, have aspects within them that have the potential of a feminist reading. Whether this surpassing of gender actually succeeds to the extent of Haraway’s cyborg, as an eradication of gender boundaries, is doubtful, but it definitely acts as an anti-misogynistic portrayal of gender, where the fluidity between the sexes reduces the hierarchal binary of man and woman to create something ambivalent.

Although *Epicene* and *As You Like It* cannot fully escape the misogynistic discourse in which they were written, to deny the feminist potential of both plays is reductive and presumptuous; with too much concentrating on the authors’ intention rather than the potential analysis allowed by the text. While both plays show elements of gender destabilisation, *As*

²¹ Stephen Orgel, *Impersonations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 63

²² Douglas Lanier, ‘Masculine Silence: *Epicene* and Jonsonian Stylistics’, *College Literature*, 21.2 (1994), pp. 1-18 (p. 14)

²³ Erickson, p. 9

²⁴ Jean E. Howard, ‘Crossdressing, the Theatre and Gender Struggle in Modern England’, *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 39.4 (1988), pp. 418-40 (p. 435)

²⁵ Donna J. Haraway, ‘A Cyborg Manifesto’ in *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (London: Free Association Books, 1991), pp. 149-81 (p. 150)

You Like It in its portrayal of Rosalind, and particularly her role as comic controller, offers some very progressive elements. Conversely, while *Epicene* certainly questions gender, particularly in its powerful revelation of Epicene as a boy, the satiric tone and misogynistic jokes make it significantly harder to interpret from a feminist viewpoint. Therefore, although a Renaissance audience may not have seen these plays in the way this essay has argued, both *Epicene* and *As You Like It*, to differing extents, resist the normalisation of discourses of misogyny, and are thus sympathetic to feminist interpretation.

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