LESSON TITLE: Women’s Roles in As You Like It

GRADE LEVEL: Grades 9-12

TIME ALLOTMENT: Two 45-minute class periods

OVERVIEW
In this lesson, students will explore the role of women in Shakespeare’s comedy As You Like It. In the Introductory Activity, students will begin with an examination of beliefs about women from texts written during Shakespeare’s day, which will allow students to imagine what women’s lives were like. In the Learning Activity, students will view video segments from the PBS series Shakespeare Uncovered to review the role of Rosalind in As You Like It and learn about the practice of disguise in Shakespearean theater. Students will then turn to Act III, Scene ii of the play and analyze the text to uncover the ways in which Rosalind is both empowered and restricted as a woman within this scene. Viewing additional segments from Shakespeare Uncovered, students will begin to consider how Shakespeare’s views on women compare with modern-day attitudes. In the Culminating Activity, students will produce a paper in which they tackle the question, “Was Shakespeare a feminist?” This lesson is best used during a reading of As You Like It.

SUBJECT MATTER
English/Language Arts

LEARNING OBJECTIVES
After completing this lesson, students will be able to:

- Describe how Shakespeare presented women in his comedies and analyze how he used the theatrical practice of boy actors portraying female characters to enhance his characterizations.
- Compare historical perspectives on women’s place in society with today’s attitudes.
- Interpret a literary text by identifying the characters’ motivations and decisions.
- Analyze plot and character in As You Like It.

STANDARDS
National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE)
http://www.ncte.org/standards/ncte-ira

Standard 1
Students read a wide range of print and non-print texts to build an understanding of texts, of themselves, and of the cultures of the United States and the world; to acquire new information; to respond to the needs and demands of society and the workplace; and for personal fulfillment. Among these texts are fiction and nonfiction, classic and contemporary works.
Standard 2

Students read a wide range of literature from many periods in many genres to build an understanding of the many dimensions (e.g., philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) of human experience.

Standard 3

Students apply a wide range of strategies to comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and appreciate texts. They draw on their prior experience, their interactions with other readers and writers, their knowledge of word meaning and of other texts, their word identification strategies, and their understanding of textual features (e.g., sound-letter correspondence, sentence structure, context, graphics).

Common Core Literature Standards for Grades 11-12
http://www.corestandards.org/ELA-Literacy/RL/11-12

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.CCRA.R.10 Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

CCSS.ELA-Literacy.RH.11-12.9 Integrate information from diverse sources, both primary and secondary, into a coherent understanding of an idea or event, noting discrepancies among sources.

MEDIA COMPONENTS

Video:

Shakespeare Uncovered: The Comedies with Joely Richardson, selected segments

Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.

Segment 1: “Introduction to Rosalind”
An overview of Rosalind's role in the plot of As You Like It and a description of her character.

Segment 2: “Heroines in Disguise”
An exploration of the effect of disguise in both Shakespearean and modern-day theater.

Segment 3: "Superior to Men?"
One scholar's description of Shakespeare's portrayal of the heroines in his comedies.
MATERIALS

For the class:
- Computer, projection screen, and speakers (for class viewing of online video segments)

For each student:
- One copy of “Women in Shakespeare’s World” Student Organizer
- One copy of the text excerpt from As You Like It, Act III, Scene ii
- One copy of “In What Ways Was Shakespeare a Feminist?” Writing Prompts

PREP FOR TEACHERS
Prior to teaching this lesson, you will need to:
Preview all of the video segments used in the lesson. Prepare to watch them using your classroom’s Internet connection.

Print out and make copies of the “Women in Shakespeare’s World” Student Organizer for each student.

Print out and make copies of the text excerpt from As You Like It, Act III, Scene ii for each student.

Print out and make copies of “In What Ways Was Shakespeare a Feminist?” Writing Prompts for each student. (Note: Printing the assignment is optional. See Culminating Activity for details.)

INTRODUCTORY ACTIVITY

1. Tell your students that today they are going to be thinking about the role of women in As You Like It. Note that this play, like all of Shakespeare’s comedies, focuses on courtship. Courtship represented a stage in life when a woman could have more power than she usually might, since the man had to win her favor. Therefore, the comedies generally allow female characters to play a larger role than they would in Shakespeare’s other plays.

2. Ask your students to keep in mind the following questions during your discussion: In what ways are women empowered in this play? In what ways are they restricted?

3. Explain that in Shakespeare’s time, there were very different ideas about the role of women in society, and that they’ll need to think about what a woman’s life was like in Shakespeare’s day in order to fully understand the play.

4. Tell your students that we can learn a lot about what was expected of women by looking at other texts that were written the same time that Shakespeare was writing. Distribute the “Women in Shakespeare’s World” Student Organizer, which contains a variety of passages about women that were written around the time that Shakespeare was writing.
5. Ask for volunteers to read each of the passages aloud. After each passage is read, check comprehension by asking your students to provide a short modern-day translation or synopsis.

6. When the class is done reading the passages, tell them you want to compile a list of how women were expected or perceived to be based on these texts. Solicit suggestions and record them on the blackboard. Your list should include:
   - Silent (Women talk too much, but they should be silent)
   - Obedient
   - Modest or chaste (Women tend to be lustful, but they should be chaste)
   - Should not have their own feelings or opinions (They should reflect their husband’s feelings)
   - Inconstant or fickle
   - Not to be trusted (Their tears and smiles are fake)
   - Demanding
   - Overly emotional (They should be serious and sober)

7. Your students may notice that these passages include two kinds of information: What a “good” woman is like (i.e., her exemplary behavior) and what a woman is “really” like (i.e., her bad tendencies that should be curbed by correct, acceptable behavior). The rules about what women should be are often presented as a way to curb these negative traits, which some thought were proof of women’s "inferior" nature.

8. Ask your students to think about how these beliefs would have impacted women’s lives. Invite them to think about what a woman’s life would be like during Shakespeare’s day. They may have some prior knowledge; if not, ask them to imagine, based on what they learned on the Student Organizer, what a woman’s life would have been like during this period. To get them thinking, ask the following questions, and provide the answers after they’ve responded.
   - What kind of education do you think women received? (Most did not receive much education. Upper-class women might have been taught to read and write at home, but they never went to school. Lower-class girls often received no education. For most women, education focused on learning how to sew, cook, and manage a house. Women did not go to college.)
   - Do you think a woman could have pursued a career? (Not in the way we think of it. A woman might have worked on her family’s farm, acted as a servant in a rich family’s house, or possibly worked in a family shop. Some women made money by spinning cloth, as embroiderers, as washerwomen, and in other jobs that required them to do the kinds of work women usually did in the home. But careers such as doctor or lawyer were completely closed to them.)
   - Do you think a woman could have owned property? (Typically, no. Women were barred from inheriting property. When a woman was married, her property became her husband’s.)
   - What kinds of roles do you think women could play in society? (Typically, a woman was defined by her relationship to the men in her life - in other words, she was known as a daughter, a wife, or a widow.)
What do you think a woman’s relationship was to her husband? (She was considered her husband’s property.)

9. Ask students: What impact would these restrictions and expectations have had on women? (Accept all answers. Students should note that since women could not own property or pursue a career, they would not likely feel they could be independent of men. Since they could not take a position in government, they were likely to believe they had no right to control their own lives. The prohibitions against women’s speech meant that women had to contend with judgments against them if they spoke out against the men or other authorities in their lives. These ideas about women discouraged them from expressing themselves, or even thinking their own thoughts—for to do so would be to demonstrate the worst “natural” traits of the female sex.)

10. Tell your students you would like them to keep these restrictions in mind as you discuss As You Like It and consider how these beliefs influence the decisions the characters make.

LEARNING ACTIVITY

1. Introduce the first two video segments by telling your students they’ll be viewing two segments from PBS’s Shakespeare Uncovered. The first talks about the character of Rosalind in As You Like It. The second examines how the roles of women would be handled in Shakespeare’s theater and it looks at another of Shakespeare’s heroines in disguise - Viola from Twelfth Night. Ask them to think about the following questions as they watch the two segments: Why would Shakespeare want to create a role for a woman who dresses as a boy? How does that disguise relate to the restrictions placed on women in Shakespeare’s day? How does that disguise empower her?

2. Play the segment “Introduction to Rosalind.” Then play the segment “Heroines in Disguise.” (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

3. After showing the segments, pose the questions you asked earlier: Why would Shakespeare want to create a role for a woman who dresses as a boy? How does that disguise relate to the restrictions placed on women in Shakespeare’s day? How does that disguise empower her? (Answers should include: In Shakespeare’s day, female roles were played by male actors, so a woman dressed like a boy would be easier for the actor to play. In dressing as women, the boy players created a lot of opportunities for jokes and comments about gender, which the audience enjoyed. A female character is freed by her disguise, because she doesn’t have to restrict herself to fit her society’s expectations for women. Audiences are willing to watch a female character dressed as a boy being bold and “cheeky,” so the character is freer. The disguise also reflects the restrictions on women, though, because the woman can only speak freely when she’s in disguise.)

4. Next, tell your students you’d like them to keep these ideas in mind as you examine the first meeting between Rosalind and Orlando in the Forest of Arden.

5. Distribute the text excerpt from Act III, Scene ii. Ask for two volunteers to read the scene aloud. Alternately, you may wish to break the class into two groups,
and have one group read Rosalind’s part and the other group read Orlando’s part. Remind your students that there are two characters in this scene. Ask for brief descriptions of them, including the events that have brought them together in this scene. Responses should include the following information:

- **Rosalind:** She is a young noblewoman who is banished from her home. She decides that while she is in exile, she will disguise herself as a boy because she will be safer as a boy than she would be as a woman. She learns that the man she loves is also in the forest, and decides to stay in costume so she can test his love. She is acting like a boy in this scene.

- **Orlando:** He is a young man who is virtuous and love-sick for Rosalind. He has also fled to the forest to escape his older brother. He has been writing love poems to Rosalind and pinning them to the trees.

6. Ask all the students to follow along and to pay attention to Rosalind’s behavior in this scene. How is she empowered by her disguise? That is, what sorts of things does her disguise let her do? How does it free her from the social restrictions on women they learned about earlier?

7. After the reading, ask the students to write a short synopsis of what happens in the scene. Alternately, to shorten this activity, you may wish to have a brief discussion in which students recount what happened in the scene.

8. When everyone is done writing, ask a few students to read their synopses. Since the language in this scene is very dense, you may wish to break the scene down into sections and review any difficult phrases. The key points will be:

   - **Lines 1-8:** Orlando asks Rosalind where she lives, and she says she lives in the forest. Orlando says she speaks well for someone who grew up in such a remote area.

   - **Lines 8-20:** Rosalind says she had a religious uncle who grew up at court and taught her to speak. He also preached against falling in love and described women’s many faults. Orlando asks what women’s main faults are, and Rosalind replies that there were no main ones: they’re all equally horrible.

   - **Lines 20-45:** Rosalind notes there has been a man in the woods who has carved “Rosalind” in the trees and has hung up poems about her. She says if she could meet this love-sick man, she would counsel him with the list of woman’s many faults. Orlando says he is the lovesick man who hangs the poems on the trees. Rosalind replies that he can’t be because he has none of the signs of lovesickness. She outlines what those signs are.

   - **Lines 46-54:** Orlando says he will make Rosalind believe he loves. She replies that he would be better off making the woman he loves believe that he loves her. She explains that the woman is more likely to actually love him than to admit to it, as women tend to lie about their inner thoughts.

   - **Lines 55-63:** She asks whether he’s really the man who has been writing poems, and when he says neither rhymes nor reason can express his love, she tells him love is madness. She says she can cure this madness by giving him guidance.
• **Lines 64-81**: Rosalind says she has done so once before, by playacting as a man's mistress and acting out all the bad traits of women in love. Finally, her behavior drove the love out of him and he became a monk. Rosalind says she will cure Orlando in the same way.

• **Lines 82-91**: Rosalind directs Orlando to come to her cottage every day and she will cure him.

9. Now ask your students the questions you posed before they read the scene: How is Rosalind empowered by her disguise? That is, what sorts of things does her disguise let her do? How does it free her from her society’s restrictions you learned about earlier? **Guide them to notice that:**

- Rosalind does most of the talking in the scene. (She is not quiet and modest.)
- Rosalind makes fun of Orlando. (She is not submissive to him.)
- Rosalind challenges his claim that he is in love. (That is, she disagrees with him and states her own opinion.)
- Rosalind refuses (at first, at least) to describe women's faults. (She does not obey him.)
- Rosalind tells Orlando what to do (come visit her every day). (She is not dependent or subservient.)
- Rosalind seeks to teach Orlando how to do something (how to overcome his lovesickness). (She does not take an inferior position, but instead acts as an authority.)

10. Ask your students whether this behavior fits with the expectations for women that you discussed earlier. **(Students should note that Rosalind breaks just about every "rule" for feminine behavior.)**

11. Ask them whether they think Shakespeare "approves" of her behavior. Does this scene seem to criticize Rosalind's behavior? **(Accept all answers. Most students will note that Rosalind is a positive character and is not condemned for this behavior. You may also want to point out Celia's line in Act IV, Scene i, lines 201-204, where she says that Rosalind, in her characterization of Ganymede playing Rosalind, has "misus'd our sex." )**

12. Once you have determined how the students perceive Rosalind's behavior, ask them to review the scene for ideas about women that are similar to the ideas you covered in the Introductory Activity. Suggest they look at Rosalind's speech at lines 65-81, where Rosalind describes her behavior as a "moonish youth." **(Students should identify the description as saying women are effeminate, changeable, inconstant, and given to emotional extremes.)**

13. Ask your students: How is Shakespeare using his society’s beliefs about women? Are we supposed to agree with them? Or does the play call these beliefs into question? **(Answers will vary. Guide students to recognize how complex this use of female stereotypes is. By invoking these stereotypes, Rosalind relies on them as part of an act that licenses her to behave in a way they typically weren't permitted. But she also uses them to make her impersonation of a boy more believable; that is, she says the kinds of things that a boy might say, and she says things that a lot of people in her time would agree with. And, of course, the
fact that Rosalind invokes all these negative stereotypes while acting intelligently and rationally calls the beliefs into question.)

**CULMINATING ACTIVITY**

1. Once you are done discussing Rosalind's behavior in Act III, Scene ii, tell students that you’d like them to draw their own conclusions about what Shakespeare believed about women.

2. Introduce the last segment by noting that many readers of the play think Shakespeare’s comedic heroines reflect a positive view of women. Tell them to pay attention to how the commentator in the segments describes Shakespeare’s comedic heroines. What do her observations suggest about Shakespeare’s views on women? Was Shakespeare’s view different from what people generally believed about women in his society? Does Shakespeare’s presentation of his heroines empower women, or restrict them?

3. Play the segment “Superior to Men?” (Access the video segments for this lesson at the Video Segments Page.)

4. After showing the segment, pose the questions you asked students to think about: What do the commentator’s observations suggest about Shakespeare’s views on women? Does his presentation of his heroines empower women, or restrict them? (*Shakespeare created strong, generous, eloquent women. His comedic heroines suggested that women could be superior to men, not inferior, as the current beliefs suggested. The idea that women could be equal to or better than men is an empowering idea, but Shakespeare does give voice to disempowering stereotypes, and can’t imagine comedic heroines who don’t end up married—a very restrictive role in that society. But Shakespeare also represents marriage as a very enriching, satisfying role in its own right.*)

5. Call your students’ attention to the comment made by critic Germaine Greer in the segment: “I think Shakespeare regarded women as people—which doesn’t mean that he was a feminist.”

6. Ask your students to think about what it means to be a feminist. Note that men can be feminists, so the fact that Shakespeare was a male playwright doesn’t mean he couldn’t have been a feminist.

7. To help your students understand what it might mean to be a feminist, ask them to consider what it means today to be a feminist. How are women empowered today? Use the following prompts to help them think about feminism in their daily lives:

   * Do women have a voice in American society? (*Women can vote, serve in elected office, and share in the same rights of free speech that men do.*)
   * Do you know any women who own their own property? A car?
   * How would you describe the relationship of wives and husbands today? Does the husband “own” the wife? Does she have a say in how money is spent in the house or in other major decisions?
   * How much freedom do women have in determining what they will do with their lives? (*While some careers are still male-dominated, by and large, women have the freedom to choose their own careers. Marriage isn’t the only option, and many women choose not to be married.*)
• Are men and women viewed as equal? (*Men and women are given the same rights, but many still believe that there are ways men are better or more able than women. Often, women don’t earn as much as men for doing the same work, and tend to be promoted less quickly than men.*)  
• Are there situations in which a woman can be in a position of authority over a man? (*Yes, a woman can be a boss, a teacher, a supervisor, a mentor, and so forth.*)

8. Tell your students you want to compare these modern-day notions of feminism with Shakespeare’s presentation of Rosalind. Does he empower Rosalind as much as modern-day women are empowered? How is she restricted?

9. Either as an in-class writing assignment or as homework, have your students use the character of Rosalind to write a 1-2 page paper that answers this question: In what ways was Shakespeare a feminist? Explain that there is no single right answer to this question, but that you want them to think about whether Rosalind is seen as an equal to the men around her, or whether she is more restricted than they are. How does her depiction align with the culture’s views on women, and in what ways does it challenge them?

10. To help your students explore this topic, present them with the following questions:

• Does Rosalind seem like a "stereotypical woman" according to the ideas of Shakespeare’s time? Or does she suggest that Shakespeare thought that women could be different than the views of his time suggested? Look for particular scenes and speeches to help you answer this question.
• How is Rosalind empowered in the play? Is she able to achieve what she wants? If so, how?
• What is Rosalind’s ultimate fate? What will Rosalind’s life be like after the play ends? Does her fate match her society’s notion of what women must do with their lives? Are we as viewers happy to see her embrace this outcome?
• If you were going to write a modern-day version of *As You Like It*, would you change anything about this character? Would her outcome differ?
• With Rosalind, in what ways does Shakespeare overturn his society’s views on women? In what ways does he support what his culture believed about women’s lives?

If students are to complete the essay as homework, distribute the “In What Ways Was Shakespeare a Feminist?” Writing Prompts, which list the questions provided above.

11. Collect the students’ papers for an assessment of the lesson.