

As You Like It: Shakespeare's Golden World

by Paul Dean



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As You Like It (1599) is the last in a group of romantic comedies — the earlier ones being *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Much Ado About Nothing* — which form a distinctive group in their emphasis upon courtship culminating in marriage. (*Twelfth Night*, which comes just after *As You Like It*, is slightly different in tone.) Shakespeare owed something to the Latin comedies of Plautus which he had read at school, and to the court comedies written by John Lyly in the 1580s, but both these playwrights kept the spectators' emotional involvement at arm's length, by farcical speed or stylistic artificiality, whereas Shakespeare asks us to explore the psychology of falling in love. (One play by Lyly, *Galatea* (1592), does seem to have struck a repeated chord in his mind, in *Twelfth Night* particularly, as I shall explain later.) Nor does he owe much to the satirical comedies of his contemporaries Ben Jonson or Thomas Middleton, which assumed a morally corrective stance entailing the punishment of folly and vice by holding them up to ridicule. There is mockery in *As You Like It*, but hardly ridicule or humiliation. Jaques is said to criticise 'most invectively [...] The body of city, country, court' (2.1.58-9), and promises if invested in motley to 'cleanse the foul body of th'infected world' (2.7.60) but the overall balance of the play is not satiric; the 'medicine' which Jaques would prescribe (2.7.61) is replaced by the more benign 'physic' Rosalind administers to Orlando's love-sickness (3.2.345). Again, whereas satirical comedy enforces the code of its society by expelling those who refuse to conform to it, Jaques chooses to leave Arden for a positive reason, rather than being cast out like Shylock or Malvolio.

Shakespeare's main source was Thomas Lodge's prose romance *Rosalind* (1590), which he had already used in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*. This supplied him with many plot details and characters, but he greatly modified them, altering the balance between the political and pastoral elements of the story so that the former is less prominent and less violent. Both court and forest worlds, however, exhibit a remarkable feature of *As You Like It*: its technique of using contrasting perspectives to adjust each other. Value-systems are held for inspection in solution, as it were, rather than one of them being exclusively backed by the play. Duke Senior is compared to 'the old Robin Hood of England' (1.1.111); the fact that the legitimate ruler and his followers have to appear as exiles from the law, in order precisely to emphasise that they *are* the true court, whilst Duke Frederick and his train are pretenders in every sense of the word, is quite in keeping with the conventions of outlaw literature. Shakespeare has done as much as he can to separate the world of Act 1 from that of the other four Acts, by contrasting them in terms of mood and action. The appearance of two brothers called Orlando and Oliver is an allusion to the fabled boon-companions Roland and Oliver in chivalric romance — ironically, since their relationship is sour and aggressive rather than loving; it is only healed at the end of the play by Oliver's convenient conversion, reconciliation with Orlando, and marriage to Celia. Shakespeare is using a kind of shorthand here, to suggest that his engagement with romance will be unconventional, just as his sketch of the Phebe/Silvius relationship, on which in an earlier play he might have expended more pains, is intended largely to make the Orlando/Rosalind one more substantial and convincing. Once in Arden, the characters are free from tyranny and injustice; we need to feel the truth of Rosalind's statement to Celia, as they quit the court, that they are going 'To liberty, and not to banishment' (1.3.135). They are free to play, to experiment and to debate — a form of therapy, explicitly practised by Rosalind upon Orlando. For its success, our imaginative participation is essential, and *As You Like It* consciously reflects, and asks us to reflect, on its own theatricality as a means of examining the world. Shakespeare's addition of the characters of Jaques and Touchstone to Lodge's narrative allows even more diversity. If you

see everything from any one character's point of view — even that of Touchstone, despite his name — you will not be open to what Shakespeare wants to show you. He is writing a play, in which values are *in* play, and the concept of play itself is explored through its connection with the make-believe of poetry.

Here Shakespeare draws on Sir Philip Sidney's *Apology for Poetry*, published in 1595 but written in the 1580s. Sidney contrasts the 'golden' world of poetry with the 'brazen' world of Nature, suggesting that poetry can offer a more imaginatively enriching experience, and a higher kind of truth, because it is not tied to the 'bare was' of historical fact. Against that 'was', Shakespeare opposes the 'as' of his title, and the 'if' in which Touchstone finds 'much virtue' (5.4.101) — and finds it, moreover, in his anatomising of the concept of a lie. Against the brazen world of fact (the way things are), poetry opposes the golden world of the conditional (the way things might be). And drama, of all forms, is a major way of playing the game of let's-pretend or what-if. Yet this does not mean, as Plato had objected, that the poet is a liar. Sidney's counter-argument is summed up in one brilliantly short sentence: 'Now for the poet, he nothing affirms, and therefore never lieth'.

It's clear enough that all this is gestured towards in the contrast between the usurping court of Duke Frederick and the exiled Court of Duke Senior. But as well as Ovid's Golden Age, it is Sidney's golden world of poetry that Shakespeare is embodying and exemplifying, but without simply accepting uncritically the idea of poetry's transformative power. Already, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, he had made Theseus say that 'The lunatic, the lover, and the poet/Are of imagination all compact,' and had voiced a distrust of 'tricks' of 'strong imagination', whilst the would-be poets Armado and Holofernes in *Love's Labour's Lost* are mercilessly mocked. Rosalind, too, describes love as a form of madness, but her cure involves the use of imagination rather than its rejection ('He was to imagine me his love...', 3.2.390-91). Lodge's *Rosalind* contains a large number of poems in addition to the prose narrative. Shakespeare's view of these may be suggested by the badness of Orlando's verses and the generally teasing attitude Rosalind adopts towards the posing they indicate, treating them as symptoms of a kind of illness that requires a cure. 'Men have died from time to time — and worms have eaten them — but not for love' (4.1.97-9) is a common-sense retort to Orlando's habit of using art as a means of hiding from experience, as Touchstone is using witty paradox and Jaques is using satire. Of course, Shakespeare is not rejecting poetry, only bad poetry, but the play nonetheless allows a suspicion about poetry's power over the imagination. It contains a rare reference by Shakespeare to his own medium, 'blank verse', mentioned with distaste by Jaques (4.1.28-9); it also contains an unusually high proportion of stylized prose, influenced by Lyly. The power of poetry is closely linked with the question of its truthfulness, as Touchstone reminds us ('the truest poetry is the most feigning', 3.3.17-18), and hence our response to poetry becomes, for philosophers from Plato onwards, a *moral* matter. The special property of poetry's golden world is its capacity to hold reality in suspension, as it were, while its truth-claims can be dispassionately examined. *As You Like It* does this at the linguistic level by means of debate, at the plot level by means of disguise, and at all levels by being a play, which presumes our willingness to accept the false identities of actors dressed up. Just as 'the truest poetry is the most feigning' — because, in being a pretence, it is being exactly what poetry should be — so the truest disguise is that which, with Wildean paradox, reveals the deceiver's identity. Rosalind pretends to be exactly who she is, and when as Ganymede she calls herself Rosalind, and has Orlando do so too, both of them affirm the truth, although only one of them knows it.

Much — possibly too much — has been written about the use of male disguise by Shakespeare's female characters, and critics have become obsessive about the homoerotic possibilities of boys dressed as girls. The degree to which these speculations would have made sense to an Elizabethan audience can never be known, but in fact there is more flirting with the androgynous attractiveness of boys in Lodge's *Rosalind* than there is in *As You Like It*, or will be in *Twelfth Night*. As I mentioned earlier, Lyly's *Galatea* was a play which stayed in Shakespeare's mind. It turns on the double disguise of two girls, Galatea and Phillida, as boys, each of whom believes the other to be a real boy and falls in love with 'him'. At the

end of the play, Venus promises to turn one of them into a boy, but we never discover which one, since the transformation takes place offstage. The boy actors playing Galatea and Phillida may have been rather younger than the boy playing the much longer and more complex part of Rosalind. Boys' voices broke later in those days than now: some, it is thought, as late as sixteen. Moreover, the emotional demands of Lyly's female roles are narrow compared to those of Rosalind and Celia.

Orlando is asked to pretend that Ganymede is Rosalind, not so that he will find an outlet for repressed homosexual desires, but so that he will learn better how to court a member of the opposite sex; and his liberation comes when he says 'I can live no longer by thinking' (5.2.49). This seems to me, with no exaggeration, one of the greatest lines that Shakespeare ever wrote. It means that Orlando now realises that his initial infatuation with the idea of Rosalind was absurd,¹ and it signals the death of 'if', the putting aside of the whole game of let's-pretend, in preference to the reality for which the pretences are now seen to have been an inadequate substitute. When Orlando says he can live no longer by thinking, he has grown up. Rosalind had teased him by saying that 'Love is merely a madness and, I can tell you deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do' (3.2.384-5). Reading backwards, as it were, from *Twelfth Night*, we can see that Orlando is being cast simultaneously as Orsino and Malvolio, a man deluded about his own feelings and needing to be cured. Yet he is a more complete being than either of those victims of love-folly; his decision to confront the reality of love commands more respect than Orsino's effortless acceptance of Viola or Malvolio's sour indignation.

Orlando doesn't learn this lesson without Rosalind's help, of course, and Shakespeare manages things so that she is in a much better position than Viola will be. While their initial motive for donning male disguise is the same — fear of men taking advantage of their status as defenceless women — their situations are not at all comparable. Rosalind has been banished but takes Celia with her: Viola is shipwrecked in Illyria and soon loses her only companion, the sea-captain. He alone knows that she is really a woman, but he is not there to confide in, whereas Rosalind always has Celia. Viola has lost her brother; Rosalind pretends to be Celia's brother, as Corin tells us (3.2.83-4), while Orlando says to Duke Senior, 'My lord, the first time that I ever saw him [Ganymede]/Methought he was a brother to your daughter' (5.4.28-9). Viola can talk only to us, in soliloquy, about the trap she has made for herself by her male disguise; Rosalind can let off steam to Celia after she discovers Orlando is in the forest. Viola is at the mercy of events, Rosalind in control of them — although Shakespeare gives her a moment of helplessness when she faints in the belief that Orlando is dead, prompting Oliver to urge her, needlessly did he but know it, 'counterfeit to be a man' (4.3.172-3). Viola's situation is solved, and she is freed to marry Orsino, not by any action of hers but by the lucky chance of Sebastian's re-appearance, whereas Rosalind stage-manages the multiple marriages at the denouement of her play. Most of all, however, Rosalind has nothing to learn about her own emotions, and far from being frustrated by her role is able to use it for her own benefit in focussing on 'curing' Orlando, whereas Viola's loyalties are divided between Orsino and Olivia and her personality as well as her autonomy are constrained by her role as male go-between. Just as Viola/Cesario will chide Olivia for being too proud, only to have Olivia fall in love with her assumed identity, so Rosalind/Ganymede chides Phoebe (3.5.36-64) only to have *her* attracted to hers; but there is never a serious danger to Rosalind's emotional stability. The appearance of Hymen sets the seal on her arrangements rather than making them for her.

This use of a theophany (the appearance of a god) at the end of a play was something to which Shakespeare would not return until *Cymbeline*. It is absolutely crucial, in my view, that Hymen should be a separate character, really the god of marriage, and not impersonated by Corin or Martext or anyone else. The fashion for doing this, often for the sake of comic effects, in modern productions shows how unintelligent some theatre directors can be about

¹ Is there some far-off echo here of Romeo, who is cured of his infatuation with Rosaline by falling in love with Juliet?

the texts they are trying to interpret. The stage direction in the First Folio reads simply 'Enter Hymen', not, as it perfectly well could have done, 'Enter Martext or Corin or whoever else as Hymen' or 'dressed like Hymen', a type of direction which is actually used elsewhere in this play (e.g. at the beginning of 2.1 and 2.7, both directions being in the original text, not added by modern editors). Rosalind's adroit manipulation of others has brought about these marriages but Hymen's conduct of the ceremony lifts them onto a different plane.

Hymen begins:

Then is there mirth in heaven,
When earthly things made even
Atone together. (5.4.106-8)

Editors rightly cite Luke 15.10: 'There is joy in the presence of the angels of God for one sinner that converteth' (Geneva Bible), a verse which may also remind us of Duke Frederick. Just before that comes the parable of the lost sheep as a type of the sinner who is eventually brought back to the fold, and just after it is the parable of the Prodigal Son, a story which appears right at the start of *As You Like It* when Orlando complains of the 'prodigal portion' allowed to him by Oliver (1.1.36). The invocation of the sheep gathered into one fold is the New Testament equivalent of the animals gathered into the safety of the Ark, of which Jaques reminds us at 5.4.35-6. Shakespeare, of course, could take for granted his hearers' and readers' ability to pick up these references. Together with Hymen's use of the word 'atone' they give the ending not only a ritual but a sacramental quality.

Hymen continues:

Peace, ho. I bar confusion.
'Tis I must make conclusion
Of these most strange events.
Here's eight that must take hands
To join in Hymen's banns,
If truth holds true contents. (5.4.123-8)

That is, indeed, a big 'if'! 'If what we take for truth can be trusted to be so', in the context of a marriage service, is what the bride and groom are risking their futures on. To wonder endlessly whether your loved one really loves you is what Orlando might call living by thinking. For marriage more is required — an act of faith. The wonderful mixture of deep joy and ritual solemnity at the end of *As You Like It* has no counterpart at the end of *Twelfth Night*, where Viola, unlike Rosalind, remains in male disguise, and the marriage announcements have a more abrupt and perfunctory air, none more so than the casual information that Sir Toby has married Maria. In place of the 'true delights' decreed by Duke Senior (5.4.196) we have Feste's song about the rain that raineth every day. 'We'll strive to please you every day', he sings at the end, but one feels that this is a long way away from saying that this has been 'as you like it'. Certainly it is remote from Rosalind's epilogue. Shakespeare's thoughts were already turning elsewhere. Like Jaques, he was distancing himself from the golden world of poetry and the luxurious freedom of 'if'. When someone recognisably descended from Jaques next appears in Shakespeare's work, his name is Hamlet.

SUGGESTED READING

I have quoted throughout from the edition of *As You Like It* by Juliet Dusinberre (2006). Other good editions are by Michael Hattaway (2000), which includes extracts from Lodge's *Rosalynde*, and Alan Brissenden (1993). All have extensive critical introductions.

There is a modern edition of Lyly's *Galatea* by Leah Scragg (2013).

Penny Gay, *'As You Like It'* (1999), is a sprightly brief study which covers recent critical approaches and draws on leading productions of the play.

A recent sampling of critical approaches to Shakespeare's comedies is *A Companion to Shakespeare's Works, Volume 4: The Comedies*, edited by Richard Dutton and Jean Howard (2003).

On boy actors, see Joy Leslie Gibson, *Squeaking Cleopatras: The Elizabethan Boy Player* (2000).

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