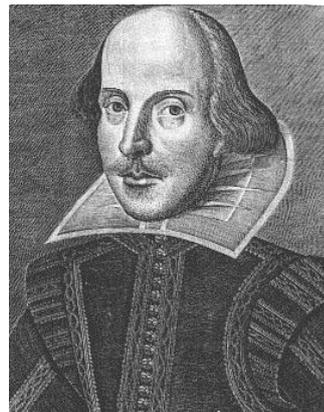


As You Like It

by Alex Wright



English Association Shakespeare Bookmarks

No. 4

As You Like It

'The truest poetry is the most feigning': What does disguise mean to Shakespeare?

by

Alex Wright

Shakespeare is quick to establish the setting for *As You Like It*. As soon as the curtain goes up, we are presented with a world pocked by domestic upheaval and scarred by political turmoil. Under the premiership of a 'humorous'¹ Duke, fear and suspicion reign; 'such is the Duke's condition', as Le Beau regrets, that everyone is considered, without exception, an enemy and a traitor. One moment Rosalind is 'beloved of her uncle'², for instance; the next, she is accused of treachery and banished. In this topsy-turvy society, treason is 'inherited'³, 'graces serve [men] as enemies'⁴ and brothers are set against brothers; the chilling parallel between Oliver's rejection of Orlando and Frederick's dismissal of Duke Senior is symptomatic of the social unrest, an instability which is neatly captured by Charles' account of goings-on at the court:

There's no news at the court, sir, but the old news. That is,
the older duke is banished by his younger brother the new duke.
(I.i.97-99)

Disguise evolves, therefore, as a means of fleeing this oppressive routine. Frederick's regime is so despicable, Shakespeare suggests, that escape is never far from his subjects' minds. Throughout Act 1, a series of wistful allusions are made to an idealised state, which stand in vibrant contrast to the autocratic court; Charles looks back to a halcyon 'golden world'⁵, whilst Le Beau anticipates a 'better world than this'⁶. This paradise is not imagined, however, but made real in Arden; the dramatic geographical and scenic shift which takes place between the first two acts, in which a 'working-day world' is transformed into a vernal wood, intensifies the leap from bondage to freedom.

Arden stands, however, for more than just political freedom. It is telling that Celia chooses to don 'poor and mean attire' and that Rosalind selects a 'doublet and hose'; in disguising themselves, they relish the opportunity to shed their class, their gender and their identity. In *Antony and Cleopatra*, disguise performs a comparable role; disillusioned with 'the world and [Antony's] great office'⁷, the pair delight in 'wandering through the streets, and noting the qualities of people'⁸. Both go, according to Shakespeare's source, North, 'disguised like slaves

¹ I.iii.255

² I.i.109

³ I.iii.59

⁴ I.iii.11

⁵ I.i.116-117

⁶ I.iii.273

⁷ Antony and Cleopatra II.iii.1

⁸ Antony and Cleopatra I.i.54-55

in the night', Antony setting aside his uniform and Cleopatra swapping her stately robes for 'a chamber maides array'.

By changing their costumes, Antony and Cleopatra project and re-affirm their identities. At moments of climax, for example, Cleopatra is desperate to conceal and disguise her femininity, which, in the Roman opinion, is synonymous with inconstancy and weakness. Thus, her cry on the eve of battle ('I will appear there for a man') and her pledge on the point of death ('I have nothing of woman in me') are designed to steel her resolve, to fuel her courage and to defy Octavius' comment that 'women are not in their best interests strong'⁹. This defiance is most pronounced, moreover, when she wears Antony's 'sword Phillippan', a weapon emblematic of masculine valour and representative of martial prowess.

Antony, on the other hand, is more interested in his own reputation. Perspicacious enough to notice the souring of his standing in the public eye, he admits that his sword, once such a potent reminder of his authority, is 'made weak by [his] affection'¹⁰. Indeed, his precarious sense of self-worth is pricked by the unflattering monikers ('amorous surfeiter', 'the fan to cool a gypsy's lust') which are snidely exchanged in Rome. In this light, the arming scene in Act 4 Scene 4 assumes a deeper significance; as each armour plate is strapped around his body, his courage is re-girded and his reputation re-asserted. At this point, the arrival of a common soldier, who looks 'like him that knows a warlike charge', intensifies the connection between costume and identity.

Disguise works, therefore, by challenging perception and convention. Once stripped of our clothes, we can assume any identity we wish. Ironically, we can also become more truly ourselves, free from the crippling expectations of class and the restrictive judgements of society; Oliver's relationship to Sir Rowland de Boys, for instance, is an obstacle to his success; 'I would thou hadst been son to some man else', exclaims Frederick in Act 1 Scene 2, a remark which hints at the complex bundle of preconceptions and prejudices caught up in a title. In the same way, Juliet laments the burdensome weight of the family name:

What's in a name? That which we call a rose
By any other name would smell as sweet;
So Romeo would, were he not Romeo call'd,
Retain that dear perfection which he owes
Without that title.

(II.ii.43-47)

But disguise is not an unequivocally positive phenomenon. The same qualities which make disguise so useful to the prisoner (facilitating disappearance) can easily be appropriated by the gaoler. For every sincere Ganymede, there is a sinister Polonius, a deceitful Rosencrantz or a sly Guildenstern. In both *Measure for Measure* and *The Winter's Tale*, disguise is employed for political ends; disguise enables the Duke and Polixenes to stealthily monitor their subjects, allowing them to catch Angelo and Florizel off-guard and unprepared.

⁹ Antony and Cleopatra III.xii. 29-30

¹⁰ Antony and Cleopatra III.xi.67

As Celia suspects, though, there is no character more slippery and duplicitous than the lover. In *As You Like It*, love is variously described as a 'giddy offence', 'a wound' and 'a madness'. Unsurprisingly, therefore, Celia has a cynical view of love; 'Love no man in good earnest', she cautions Rosalind in Act 3 Scene 4, because 'the oath of a lover is no stronger than the word of a tapster'. In her sceptical eyes, Orlando is no exception; he is 'as concave as a covered goblet or a worm-eaten nut'. Her inconsistent and incongruent similes are designed both to reflect, as she sees it, the artifice of the lover, and to mock the mawkish comparisons made in Orlando's poems ('No jewel is like Rosalind').

Love-poetry, Shakespeare proposes, is not only drenched in sentimentality, but also peppered with disguise and deceit. In Act 3 Scene 3 Touchstone evaluates the 'poetical' to conclude that

...the truest poetry is the most feigning; and lovers are given to poetry,
and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign.
(III.iii.16-18)

According to Touchstone, lovers are inherently disingenuous and crafty, employing grand words and empty rhetoric to mask their true feelings. His confused syntax, with its embedded repetitions of 'lovers', 'poetry' and 'feign' highlights the ambiguity of language, which obscures meaning and hides the truth. In his poem, 'The Truest Poetry is the Most Feigning', W.H. Auden develops this idea, exploring the artifice and the ingenuity of verse. He exhorts lovers to 'be subtle, various, ornamental, clever'¹¹ and encourages poets to tell 'tall tales, the luck of verbal playing'¹². 'By all means sing of love', he proclaims,

...but, if you do,
Please make a rare old proper hullabaloo.
When ladies ask 'How much do you love me?'
The Christian answer is *cosi-cosi*.
(1-4)

Device and contradiction are love's proper hallmarks. This is implied by a series of sharply turned oppositions; just as the sober tone of 'rare old proper' clashes with the noisy ebullience of 'hullabaloo', so does the sincerity of 'How much do you love me?' with the glibness of 'cosi-cosi'. Auden's depiction of courtship is particularly bleak; 'Man', he contends, is 'the only creature ever made who fakes'¹³, a perpetually strutting and preening Lothario, a calculating Casanova who disguises his base intentions in a surfeit of blandishments. In the same way, Rosalind, in the guise of Ganymede, generalises that 'Men are April when they woo, December when they wed'¹⁴; when a relationship begins, they feign affection and love; when it is consummated, they exhibit archness and contempt.

As a result, Rosalind practises disguise in order to guard against love's wily tricks. Matching artifice with deceit, she promises to 'play the knave' with Orlando 'under the habit' of a 'saucy

¹¹ Line 7

¹² Line 77

¹³ Line 74

¹⁴ IV.i.136

lackey¹⁵, probing and gradually proving the integrity of his affection. Experience has taught her that 'the worst fault you have is to be in love'¹⁶; watching Silvius' pitiful courting of Phebe, she sees first-hand the 'extremity of love'¹⁷. Everything is turned upside-down by passion, as the following exchange reveals:

Silvius: Sweet Phebe, do not scorn me; do not, Phebe:
Say that you love me not, but say not so
In bitterness. . .

Phebe: I would not be thy executioner:
I fly thee, for I would not injure thee.

(III.v.1-3, 8-9)

Silvius' language is obsequious and submissive; the repetition of 'Phebe' highlights the insistence of his love, whilst the re-iteration of 'do not' suggests the wretchedness of his grovelling. His love-sick frailty is further conveyed by a dramatic swoon on stage. His Phebe does not even have to love him, he begs, as long as she isn't hostile, a sentiment engendered by his abject emasculation. Phebe's lines are spiked with a haughty loathing; she is not moved to spare his life out of kindness, as one might expect, but out of contempt. Her indifference is overwhelmingly conceited; by virtue of Rosalind's disguise, however, she is taught to recognise her own affectation and to appreciate the sincerity of her suitor.

In 'Venus and Adonis', a poem which traces Venus' ill-fated and ill-conceived pursuit of Adonis, there is no such moment of self-realisation. Both protagonists are blind to their respective faults, and their relationship is remarkable for its lack of deceit. Although Adonis claims to detest such trickery ('I hate not your love, but your device in love'¹⁸), his real gripe is with love itself; in the fourth line, Shakespeare writes that 'love he laughed to scorn'. Indeed, without a Rosalind to act as a guiding voice and a steering hand, the relationship falters.

Throughout the poem Shakespeare emphasises Venus' fatal lack of subtlety. The hunting theme and the avian leitmotif (Venus is compared to a 'vulture' [55], an 'eagle' [551] and a 'falcon' [1027], Adonis to a 'dive-dapper' [86]) convey the rapaciousness of Venus' approach. Her bluntness is expressed in the opening lines:

Sick-thoughted Venus makes amain unto him,
And like a bold-faced suitor 'gins to woo him.

(5-6)

No attempt is made to conceal her love; the title 'bold-faced suitor' evokes a feeling of masculine self-belief and resolve, whilst the present historic ('makes amain') compounds the urgency of her purpose. By abbreviating 'gins' and creating a briefer, more economical verb, Shakespeare further suggests her speed and efficiency. Her full-frontal assault, which is launched with the power and force of a military campaign, extends to her sexual behaviour;

¹⁵ III.ii.289-291

¹⁶ III.ii.276

¹⁷ IV.iii.23

¹⁸ V & A 789

Backward she pushed him, as she would be thrust,
And governed him in strength, though not in lust.

(41-42)

The muscular verbs ('governed', 'pushed', 'thrust') signal her overbearing, dominating mentality. Twelve lines prior, Shakespeare had stated that 'desire doth lend her force', a phrase which galvanises the connection between brute 'strength' and 'lust'. In the same way, Shakespeare's allusion to 'the engine of her thoughts'¹⁹ likens her erotic drive to a relentless, mechanical siege-engine. But missing from her battle-strategy is even the slightest flash of subtlety or artifice; she makes only a passing reference to such trickery:

' . . . I will enchant thine ear,
Or, like a fairy, trip upon the green,
Or, like a nymph, with long dishevelled hair
Dance on the sands'.

(145-148)

In fact, her threat is weakened by the anaphora of 'Or', which suggests that her resolve is unclear and half-decided, and by the half-rhyme of 'ear' and 'hair', which introduces a wavering note of hesitancy to her tone.

Adonis is similarly inept at disguising his true intentions. Throughout the poem, Shakespeare highlights his age; he is a 'sweete youth'²⁰ and, as a result, a bad liar. Because he is not attracted by Venus in the slightest, he has no initial need to disguise himself; a 'flint-hearted boy'²¹, he is stubbornly resistant to her advances. When his horse bolts, however, he changes tack, suddenly desperate for freedom, and so, hiding 'his angry brow'²² with his bonnet, pretends to 'take no notice that [Venus] is so nigh'. This sequence is little more than a charade, a 'dumb-show', though; the tension is only briefly sustained before Venus 'heaveth up his hat', a moment of bathos which draws attention to the frailty of Adonis' trickery.

Shakespeare then contrasts the failure of Venus' courtship with the success enjoyed by Adonis' 'strong-necked steed'. Even this relationship, as primal as it is, has a place for disguise; the female

. . . puts on outward strangeness, seems unkind,
Spurns at his love and scorns the heat he feels. . .

(310-311)

Her veneer of contemptuous indifference puts his ardour to the test, ruthlessly and cruelly examining his passion; the sibilant alliteration ('strangeness...seems...spurns...scorns') offsets the staccato punch of 'love' and 'heat' to express the duel between affectation and affection. The conflict may be fleeting, but it is effective, allowing the jennet to study his reaction; his fury proves his desire and validates their relationship.

¹⁹ V & A 367

²⁰ V & A 155

²¹ V & A 95

²² V & A 341

Shakespeare thus explains the calamitous outcome of Venus' courtship of Adonis. Venus comes to rue her lack of tact; in future, she bitterly prophesies, Love 'shall be fickle, false and full of fraud'²³; it shall be 'most deceiving when it seems most just'. She is at once cursing and celebrating artifice, at once realising and regretting its potency. In Sonnet 138, disguise and love are fully integrated; Shakespeare writes that 'love's best habit is in seeming trust', implying that relationships can be fortified by a facade of dishonesty. Exploiting the ambiguity of 'lie', he reveals that deceit is a sure-fire concealer, sealing up the cracks which threaten to engulf marriage:

Therefore I lie with her and she with me,
And in our faults by lies we flatter'd be.

(13-14)

In *As You Like It*, on the other hand, marriage is concurrent with the unveiling of disguise. Shakespeare suggests that, ultimately, the integrity of the lover will shine through any disguise. Jacques' claim that Orlando's 'true faith doth merit'²⁴ Rosalind's love is particularly revealing; perhaps there is a play on the sounds of 'feigning' and 'faith', which might illustrate the triumph of honesty over deception. At the end of the play, as political and romantic tensions are resolved, there is no longer any need for disguise. Even the theatrical conceit is cleared up; in the epilogue, Rosalind ceases to be Rosalind, or even Ganymede; she is unmasked as the boy-actor playing her role ('If I were a woman'), a final twist which turns the notion of disguise, deceit and feigning on its head:

I am not furnished like a beggar, therefore to beg you will not become of
me: my way is, to conjure you . . .

(V.iv.205-207)

Rosalind teases the relationship between appearance and identity; only by assuming the beggar's clothes, she playfully suggests, can she act like a beggar; only by wearing a 'doublet and hose' can she act like a man. At the same time, however, she maintains her theatrical persona; the reference to 'conjuring' recalls Act 5, Scene 2, in which she had pretended to be a magician. Shakespeare leaves us with this playful ambiguity; the figure now occupying the stage is, in equal measure, a woman playing the role of a man and a boy playing the part of a woman. Rosalind cuts through the limits and boundaries of the 'working-day world', winking at fixed identities and skipping over received truths. In particular, she challenges the rigid order prescribed by Jacques:

. . . All the world's a stage
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages.

(II.vii.139-143)

²³ V & A 1141-1156

²⁴ V.iv.186

The way in which Rosalind nimbly hops between personas emphatically defies Jacques' assertion that we cannot outwit the solemn march of Time, and forcefully refutes his conviction that we move necessarily from infancy to adulthood, a seemingly inevitable progression implied by the recurrence of 'And then'. At every stage of our lives, he explains, we are defined by what we do or how we look, described not as individuals, but as stereotypes; our identity is shaped by our profession ('lover', 'soldier') and our dress ('the lean and slipper'd pantaloons').

Immediately after Jacques' speech, however, the youthful Orlando arrives, gallantly supporting Adam on his back, a stage direction which resists Jacques' bitterly misanthropic world-view; Shakespeare hands us proof that love and charity are still powerfully active in the world. Similarly, Amiens' lyrics, while emphasising the cruelty and ingratitude of 'most friendship' and 'most loving', point to the possibility of fidelity:

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,
Thou art not so unkind
As man's ingratitude;
Thy tooth is not so keen,
Because thou art not seen,
Although thy breath be rude.
Heigh-ho! Sing, heigh-ho, unto the green holly:
Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly.
Then heigh-ho, the holly!
This life is most jolly.

(II.vii. 174-183)

The lines which succeed this song, in which the Duke's fondly remembers Sir Rowland, are telling; 'I am the duke that lov'd your father', he reveals, and so demonstrates the endurance of sincere affection and genuine attachment. In spite of the 'slings and arrows of outrageous fortune', in spite of the political injustice of the state and the romantic anguish of the lover, 'this life is most jolly'; in *As You Like It*, Shakespeare asserts, the resounding triumph is one of love and faith, not of 'feigning' and 'folly'.

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