As If: Essays in As You Like It

William N.West

Published by Punctum Books

N.West, William.
As If: Essays in As You Like It.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/76464
Why does Touchstone say the truest poetry is the most faining? Or is it “feigning”? 

In his praise of Arden, the exiled Duke values above all the forest’s forthrightness. Life in Arden, the Duke insists, is a lesson that speaks clearly and without deceit to those who know how to listen — those like the Duke thinks he is:

And this our life exempt from public haunt  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones and good in every thing. (2.1.15–17)

For the Duke, the forest — or really, Nature itself — is refreshingly unambiguous and briskly truthful. This is not quite what he says a few lines earlier, when he praises the climate of the forest for its honesty. For the Duke, things in the forest speak. A little weirdly, this viewpoint takes for granted that Nature is addressing him and his companions, as if the trees, brooks, and stones were there primarily to tell them something. A few scenes later, Orlando makes the Duke’s vision comically real, when he announces that “these trees shall be my books” (3.2.5) and hangs his poems in their branches. Orlando’s poetry-carving has the advantage that Orlando understands that he is the one putting the poems in the trees. The Duke seems to think that they just grow there.
When Jaques imagines the wounded stag as a wronged and abandoned citizen, the Duke enjoys it as “moralizing” — treating the world as if it had a moral or lesson for those who looked closely enough (2.1.44). He seems to have no comparable critical sense when it comes to his own translation of what the forest is saying to him. But even Orlando, although he knows that the tongues in trees are really his own, uses them to assert, like the Duke, that the world is proclaiming something. For the Duke, the world tells him of his own flawed humanity: the “counselors… feelingly persuade me what I am” (2.1.10–11). For Orlando, the message is simply the name “Rosalind”: “Let no fair be kept in mind / But the fair of Rosalind” (3.2.91–92), the vacuousness of which Touchstone extends effortlessly and obscenely in the same vein:

If a hart do lack a hind,  
    Let him seek out Rosalind  
If the cat will after kind,  
    So be sure will Rosalind … (3.2.98–101)

“It is the right butter-woman’s rank to market … the very false gallop of verses,” (3.2.95, 110), he concludes. Both Orlando and the Duke share a fantasy that things themselves have a language that it is possible for them to overhear and interpret. This language of things simply confirms what they had decided already. Even Orlando’s hanging of love poems in Arden’s trees is not really original, but provided to him by a well-established convention of literary romance, including his precedent Orlando, Ariosto’s. This language appears not as poetry (something made, from Greek poiesis) but as data (something given, from Latin, datum).

The theater director Declan Donnellan counterintuitively observes that

one of the reasons that Shakespeare is a great writer is that he knows that words don’t work and you have to know that words don’t work before you can write properly because it’s believing that words work perfectly that gets us into so much trouble … [H]e understands both
his own limitations and the limitations of words. He understands his own dissarticulacy — if that word exists.

Dissarticulacy — if that word exists — would be something like both the inability to fit words together rightly, and the inability to fit the right words to things. If the Duke or Orlando possess it, they will never know, because they are sure that their words are not only right but natural, accurate, true, and necessary. Blindness to how words are not working is part of what turns speculating into moralizing, poetry into data: forgetting that there is a difference between letting a natural scene, a cold wind, or a wounded stag spur your thinking at new rhythms into new directions, and believing that you are not thinking on your own at all, but merely transcribing what things are saying. And what better way to authorize what you think than to insist that it is not you, after all, but the very nature of things that bears this message? The Duke and Orlando mute their own voices in order to reappear insistently as the subjects of the stories they tell. It is no accident that the message that both Orlando and the exiled Duke hear the world repeating is, essentially: Here is what is important to you — or, as we might translate it for this play, This is As You Like It.

As You Like It shows repeatedly how the world neglects to give us words for itself, though we badly want to take its dictation. Such dictation extends beyond the literal language that the Duke, or Jaques, or Orlando hear, to the unspoken rules of conduct that we imagine others naturally know and follow. Orlando and Oliver, for instance, are equally baffled that the bonds of brotherhood do not invariably announce themselves to the other sibling as each imagines they should, that is, respectively, as “equality” or “primogeniture.” If Arden is better at addressing us than the world at large, it may be no more than that it speaks with more voices, and not always in concert. But even in Arden the world does not describe itself and what it is is not ever simply given to its visitors. Language is something humans must make for themselves, poetically, and then it can both guide and beguile. Donnellan is certainly right
that words cannot do everything we want them to. The play also shows, repeatedly, how language does not match up to the world, and how this is both a kind of failure and the source of its power. Because words and worlds do not fit, because they are disarticulate, there is room to ask “what if.”

“The truest poetrie,” explains Touchstone to Audrey, “is the most faining” (3.3.16–17). That, at least, is what the earliest printed edition of As You Like It thinks he says. Beginning with Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare’s first “editor” in the modern sense of the word, it has frequently been emended to “feigning,” probably better to match the rest of Touchstone’s explanation:

[A]nd Lovers are given to Poetrie: and what they sweare in Poetrie, may be said as Lovers, they do feigne. (3.3.18–19)

I’m copying the folio text scrupulously here, since not only the spelling but the syntax is difficult to understand, and “when a mans verses cannot be understood, nor a mans good wit seconded with the forward childe, understanding: it strikes a man more dead than a great reckoning in a little roome” (3.3.10–13). (Whatever that means. Scholars largely agree that the great reckoning in a little room recalls Christopher Marlowe, murdered supposedly in a fight over a check — a reckoning — in a back room of a bar … but what of the rest of it?) More accurately, like “faining” or “feigning,” Touchstone’s other words gesture in more than one direction without resolving clearly into any. Do we need to add a word to make sense of it, as some modern texts do: “[W]hat they swear in poetry, [it] may be said as lovers, they do feign”? Should we contrast the swearing of poetry to the saying of lovers, for instance, and see “they do feigne” as the lovers’ translation of whatever is sworn in poetry? A solid meaning seems tantalizingly near, but not quite graspable.

“Faining” means wanting, desiring; “feigning” means pretending. William Empson calls the pun “common” and points out that Shakespeare used it elsewhere, for instance, in A Midsummer Night’s Dream when the crotchety father Egeon complains that a young man has sung to his daughter, “With
faining voice, verses of faining love” (1.1.31). But of course, in a performance, there is no need to choose one or the other; they sound exactly alike. What Touchstone’s words suggest is that the truest poetry most desires the things it reaches towards. It also most dissembles them. And Touchstone’s truest is hardly more stable than his feigning. True can mean, most familiarly, accurate. In Shakespeare’s time, it can mean honest — and then truest poetry might just be poetry that knows and tells its own feigning, or faining. True can also mean unerring or exactly apt, like an aim: “truest poetry” might then be the poetry best fitted to its task of feigning, or faining. Perhaps “truest poetry” is most constant, like a lover, more even than the things it bespeaks — by feigning (dissembling its object, because of the intensity of its desires) it would become more true (more fixed, more stable). The Duke and Orlando both speak the language of faining. But they do not see that they also speak a language of feigning — no surprises in poetry for the Duke or Orlando — and, because of that, perhaps cannot speak the truest poetry.

I will not pretend to be able to resolve the branching complexities and possibilities that Touchstone’s claim opens; I am not sure if they can be resolved without turning the poetry into data, and I also do not really want to see them settled. I do not know if what Touchstone says to Audrey is itself “truest poetry,” or even if it can indicate truest poetry. I want to show how the harder we try to understand these lines to say one certain thing about how things are, the more prodigally they splinter into competing possibilities. The more we try to make them about something fixed, the more things they are about and the more they say about those things. What I sense in these lines is that they lie at another pole from the Duke’s speaking world or Orlando’s predictable poetizing, which both must be as they are. They loosen themselves from the world and they show that disarticulation. It is because language does not fully catch the world (and is not fully caught by it) that through it people can shape alternatives to the world, other ways the world could be. The real powers of words do not come from their capacity to
show how the world is, but to show how it is not what it is, and by thus adding to it, to change it, however blindly or incompletely.