As If: Essays in As You Like It

William N. West

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N. West, William.
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What happens when Rosalind dresses as a boy?

Having lost their homes, their families, and their status (1.3), Celia and Rosalind respond by doubling down. They give up still more and try something new. Celia decides to “put myself in poor and mean attire / And with a kind of umber smirch my face” (1.3.101–2), and suggests Rosalind do the same. But Rosalind has another idea:

Were it not better,  
Because I am more than common tall,  
That I did suit me all points like a man? (1.3.104–5)

It is the play’s first, longest, and deepest experiment in imagining the world as other than it is. Rosalind notes how she is already like a man and deduces what she will need to be more like a man, in this case some decent props and costuming (it cannot be an accident that both Rosalind and the play repeatedly designates maleness by a male outfit, “doublet and hose,” for instance at 2.4.6, 3.2.190–91, 3.2.212–13, and 4.1.162). Rosalind concludes by distinguishing what she can change and what she can’t:

[I]n my heart
Lie there what hidden woman’s fear there will.
We’ll have a swashing and a martial outside
As many other mannish cowards have
That do outface it with their outward semblances. (1.3.108–12)

The fuzzy logic of “mannish” expresses what it is that allows Rosalind to put this “what if…?” into effect. The word is ambivalent about whether or not it points to a man. It can characterize Rosalind in her disguise as well as the “other … cowards” she distinguishes herself from. They are men and she is not one, but both she and they are like men, close to the qualities that mark or make a man. For Rosalind to be mannish, like a man, is to be closer to being a man than she is; for the cowards, being only like a man is further from being the men they should be. “Mannish” and like words of likeness find space between seeming and being, which Rosalind and the “cowards” approach from different directions. Likeness and likening do two things at once: they confirm distances, between one thing and what it is like, and between the things and those who assert their likeness; and they reveal the hidden symmetries and resemblances that bring things closer together. As Robert Watson puts it, even the title As You Like It “places ‘like’ as a barrier between ‘you’ and ‘it’”. Bruce Smith sees the force of the claim made by the title differently: “‘Like’ implicates you in it”. The “mannish cowards” are in Watson’s camp; Rosalind is in Smith’s.

Here, early in the play, Rosalind speaks of what is as lying inside what only seems: what is makes a kind of true core that can be dressed up but not, finally, denied. She uses forms of the word “out” three times in three lines: her “martial outside” will “outface” her fearful woman’s heart just as cowards’ “outward semblances” do theirs. She proposes to Celia that, disguised as a man, she will be just as successful at warding off danger as any other outward-seeming man. In other words, Rosalind explains why and how she disguises herself as a boy, whether or not we buy it. As You Like It, though, is less interested in Rosalind’s decision than in its consequences, in what happens
when Rosalind becomes a boy. The difference between causes and consequences is, in a sense, the play’s preoccupation as it imagines alternatives to how things are. To shift from causes to consequences tilts the relation of being to seeming from that of inner and outer to that of before and after. Appearances can be stripped away, core truths uncovered. But it is hard to the point of impossibility to return to a past, and scarcely any easier—at least in *As You Like It*—to see the past as wholly, predictably contained in the present, or the present in the past. Rosalind has her reasons for disguising herself as Ganymede, but these are quickly outstripped by her changed reality as she begins to act and interact as him. In the love lesson Ganymede does not simply put on Rosalind again, and at the end of the play Rosalind cannot simply take off Ganymede. The Rosalind she becomes by becoming Ganymede is not the same one she was. One consequence of being Ganymede is that Rosalind needs to invent a history to explain to Orlando how a youth native to Arden exhibits such a refined and graceful accent, even though she is striving to sound like a “saucy lackey” (3.3.286–87; her father the exiled Duke may hear this as well when he asks Ganymede’s parentage, 3.5.30). Another is that she attracts the unwanted amorous attentions of Phoebe (3.6) and perhaps of Jaques too, who asks to be “better acquainted” with the “pretty youth” (4.1.1–2). (It’s also possible that Jaques is not fooled by the disguise and wants to be better acquainted because he sees that Ganymede is a woman, or that he’s just lonely.) A new identity in Rosalind’s present, in other words, demands a new past and projects a changed future. It quickly goes beyond simply concealing a present (and past, and future) truth. She is less in disguise than inhabiting a different history, bound for a different future.

But Rosalind’s transformation into Ganymede has other consequences as well. It makes sense to see Rosalind as leading Orlando through their lessons in love when she takes back her role as Rosalind while still in the character of Ganymede. But Rosalind also changes in these exchanges, becoming more capable of realizing what she wants in love, and coming to see
how she can get what she hopes for from her desire. Rosalind is immediately attracted to Orlando, but at their first meeting, as herself, Rosalind is scarcely able to speak to him (“Not a word?” asks the astonished Celia in the next scene [1.3.2]), far from the quick intelligence and easiness she shows with Celia (1.2). In the next scene, though, Rosalind has already begun to imagine the world as different, precociously casting Orlando as her “child’s father” (1.3.11). Celia warns her that it is easier to stick to familiar ways: “[I]f we walk not in the trodden paths, our very petticoats will catch” burrs (1.3.14–15). But As You Like It suggests that Rosalind will be able to avoid the burrs only by leaving the trodden paths behind, as well as her petticoats. Out of her petticoats and in Arden, pretending to be Ganymede pretending to be Rosalind, Rosalind recovers her voice. Ganymede can banter with and refuse Orlando with equal conviction. He can express sexual desires, as when he tells Orlando that he is as native to Arden “as the cony that you see dwell where she is kindled” (3.3.285), a sentence that can mean the rabbit that lives where it was born … or, punning on “cony” as vagina and “kindled” as sexually aroused, something like the vagina you’re looking at stays where it gets hot. He can also utter more domestic ones when, as Rosalind, he asks Celia to officiate at a play marriage (4.1).

Ganymede as Rosalind can also give voice to the concerns that married love will not be perfect, and that not every day will bring bliss. This Rosalind criticizes the stereotypical wife,

more jealous of thee than a Barbary cock-pigeon over his hen, more clamorous than a parrot against rain, more new-fangled than an ape, more giddy in my desires than a monkey, (4.1.139–43)

so sharply that Celia threatens that “[w]e must have your doublet and hose plucked up over your head, and show the world what the bird hath done to her own nest” (4.1.162–64). But Ganymede’s comical misogyny reflects Rosalind’s concern for the sorry proposition that “men are April when they woo, December when they wed” (4.1.117–18) as much as Orlando’s
concern for the dangerous wife. When Hymen seals their match with the pledge that “[y]ou and you no cross shall part” (5.4.115), we are surer of Rosalind and Orlando because they have already uttered and enacted some of their crosses. The couple that marries at the end of the play are much changed from the pair who meet at the beginning, in ways that their earlier selves could not have guessed, or become, without their mutual dalliance with Ganymede.

When Rosalind offers Orlando her chain as a favor, she speaks of herself as “one out of suits with Fortune” (1.2.198), in the third person, as if she were not able to describe herself except as someone else. Rosalind can only be the self she really wants to be — the Rosalind who can love Orlando deeply and richly, as his equal, and be loved by him in the same way, not as the crystalline superlative that Orlando writes in his poems (“No jewel is like to Rosalind” [3.3.66]) but as a living person with hopes of her own — by pretending to be pretending to be that person.

Yes, two pretenses — one to be Ganymede and one to be Rosalind, again. It is something different to pretend to be yourself from the point of view of another. We could even say that Rosalind does not really know the self she wants to be until she experiences herself as something else, as the pretty, saucy Ganymede. Clothes do not simply make the man, as Jean Howard carefully shows in her discussion of the layers of Rosalind's disguises and roles. But neither is being a man, or a woman, as straightforward or stable a condition as Rosalind seems to think when she first plans her disguise. Acting like a man lets Rosalind change the way she understands the world — her desires, sexual, social, familial, friendly; her fears of what she may do and how those she loves may respond; her ambitions; above all, how she navigates and lives all of them.