As If: Essays in As You Like It

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What’s in a name?

The pasts of the main figures in As You Like It are as unsettled as their futures at the play’s end. Shakespeare regularly borrowed characters, settings, plot points, and whole stories from previous writers; so did most of his contemporaries, who did not think much of originality but deeply admired tradition, even when they were actively changing it. Like the play’s title, the names of many of the characters are suggestive, all the more surprisingly so because, when read in other ways, they could seem to be so derivative. But the distances between some of the origins for these characters and their outcomes in Shakespeare’s play are striking, and hint again that an important part of the play is imagining things otherwise.

The most direct source for the name of the play’s heroine, Rosalind, is Thomas Lodge’s prose romance of nearly a decade before, Rosalynde (1590), which also gave Shakespeare the bones of his plot. Its heroine Rosalynde is also the daughter of an exiled nobleman; also escapes to a forest of Arden disguised as a boy, Ganimede, to join her father; and also brings her inseparable friend, who in the romance is named Alinda and renames herself in disguise as Aliena, like Celia. Lodge’s Rosalynde also features a younger son who runs away from a cruel older brother to the forest of Arden; an unhappy shepherd wooing an uninterested shepherdess; a clutch of plaintive sonnets; and
most of the play’s startling reversals and happy endings. Sound familiar yet? Shakespeare also gives the name Rosaline to a particularly sparky princess in *Love’s Labors Lost*, and Rosalind is Romeo’s first love, who never appears onstage. In *Antonio and Mellida*, a play produced about the same time as *As You Like It*, a Rosalind is a witty counselor-in-love to the heroine.

More intriguingly, a Rosalind appears in Edmund Spenser’s *Shepheard’s Calendar* (1579), a widely influential collection of a dozen pastoral poems keyed to the months of the year, with extensive and perhaps joking explanatory notes by a commentator “E.K.,” who may be Spenser himself. In the first poem of the sequence, “Januarye,” Rosalind is a shepherdess eagerly courted by Colin, a shepherd whom E.K. explains is a figure for the poet. (Is there any of Colin in *As You Like It*’s Corin, the kind shepherd who welcomes Rosalind and company to Arden?) Of “Rosalind” E.K. explains, “Rosalind is also a feigned name, which being wel ordered, wil bewray the very name of hys [that is, the writer of the Calendar’s] loue and mistresse, whom by that name he coloureth” — perhaps even one of Queen Elizabeth’s pastoral avatars, as she was frequently imagined by courtier poets looking to ingratiate themselves with her. Still more interestingly for Shakespeare’s play, Colin is being timidly courted with gifts by an older shepherd, Hobbinol, but he is not interested. Rather crassly, Colin hands them over to his own object of desire: “Ah foolish Hobbinol, thy gifts bene vayne: / Colin them gives to Rosalind againe” (“Januarye,” 59) This prompts E.K. to anxiously weigh love between men and women against love between men and boys, and to prefer the latter, “pederastic” kind (written coyly by E.K. in Greek), while rejecting with vigor all kinds of “execrable and horrible sinnes of forbidden and unlawfull fleshlinesse.” While Shakespeare’s most immediate debt is to Lodge, something of Spenser’s Rosalind has also seeped into Shakespeare’s. Spenser’s Rosalind suggests a rejection of same-sex desire (Colin chooses her over Hobbinol) at the same time that Shakespeare’s Ganymede evokes it. E.K.’s endorsement of spiritual, “Platonic” same-sex love, and
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preference of it to heterosexual, physical love, complicates things further.

Disguised as Ganymede, Shakespeare’s Rosalind adds another layer of complication to the already complicated formula of Elizabethan boy-acting by offering to play a girl — in fact, to play Rosalind — for Orlando to practice his wooing on. The name she chooses when she goes into exile, Ganymede, is suggestive, to say the very least. Ganymede was, famously, the cupbearer of the gods, but he became their cupbearer after Jupiter saw him and desired him so passionately that he swooped him up to Olympus. Ganymede appears in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* rather chastely, less so in the first scene of Christopher Marlowe’s *Dido Queen of Carthage*, where he offers to “spend [his] time in [Jupiter’s] bright arms” (1.1.22). The word *catamite*, slang for a boy prostitute or any male who was a sexual partner for other men, was supposedly derived from the name. But in other intellectual traditions from Plato onwards, Ganymede assumed a very different valence, representing the desire to exceed the physical world and rise to the divine. The name “Ganymede” thus came to Shakespeare with two significations in apparent conflict, as an emblem of the destructive passions of same-sex desire and as a representation of the human spirit borne aloft by its intellectual desire for the divine. Leonard Barkan beautifully characterizes this transvaluation as “[w]hat might be said to be the most illicitly carnal of all the divine amours is translated into the most positively sanctioned.” Ganymede thus emblematizes both the loftiest of human aspirations, to soar aloft in contemplation, and what was then considered a degrading and unnatural imprisonment in the mire of earthly, physical pleasure.

It isn’t clear from the play if Rosalind ever tells Orlando that she is (a) Ganymede. Perhaps by the time she discovers that Orlando is also in Arden and wishes she were no longer wearing her boy’s clothes (“Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose?” [3.3.184–85]), she no longer finds this situation so funny. But Rosalind gives the highly wrought figure of Ganymede a comic turn, as the pleasures she offers are
really those of clever conversation and companionship, and her wisdom is of a very worldly and practical kind: “[M]en have died from time to time and worms have eaten them, but not for love” (4.1.97–99). But it is not hard to see at the same time something of the desire for eternity in Ganymede that some of Shakespeare’s contemporaries did.

So much for the figures of Rosalind and Ganymede, and the changes that Shakespeare discovers in them. The male protagonist in Lodge’s Rosalynde, the source that Shakespeare imitated for the plot of As You Like It, is called Rosader. Where did “Orlando” come from? The foreign name was familiar to English readers of Shakespeare’s time as the Italian version of the name “Roland” (which, interestingly, is the name of Orlando’s father, Roland or Rowland de Boys, “Roland of the Woods”—perhaps in some sense cueing us to see that Orlando is his father’s proper heir, and that Arden is where he will come into his inheritance). The bold knight Orlando’s multifarious adventures, spread across many works and authors in an overlapping band of chivalric romances, make up a disaggregated Renaissance prequel to the events of the medieval Chanson de Roland. In these tales, Oliver is Orlando’s closest friend; Shakespeare makes him Orlando’s unfriendly older brother. The most famous of these romances were Boiardo’s Orlando Inamorato (“Orlando in Love”) and Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso (“Orlando Enraged”), handily describing Orlando’s two moods in As You Like It. Orlando Furioso was translated into English by John Harington in 1591, and the beginning of Orlando Inamorato was translated into English in 1598, not too long before Shakespeare’s play was first performed. In Ariosto’s often tongue-in-cheek version, Orlando goes mad with jealousy at being deserted by the woman he loves and rampages through the countryside, destroying everything in his path. Shakespeare’s Orlando has something of the same violence in him. He beats Charles the wrestler brutally, and when Oliver calls him a villain, the text makes it clear that Orlando grabs him by the throat, releasing him with the scarcely reassuring words, “Wert thou not my brother I would not take this hand from thy
throat till this other had pulled out thy tongue for saying so” (1.1.55–58). He tries to take food for Adam from the exiled Duke and his followers at swordpoint (2.7). The Duke gently suggests that Orlando will do better with kind words than violence, and while part of his education in As You Like It is in the ways of love, another part is in gentleness.

While Shakespeare could have read Harington’s Ariosto (or perhaps even Ariosto’s Italian), a more likely point of contact for his Orlando is Robert Greene’s play Orlando Furioso, first performed probably in the mid-1590s. Greene narrows down Ariosto’s sprawling tale of intercontinental love and war to the episode in which Orlando finds the name of his beloved carved into the trees of “Ardenia wood” (Arden also makes an early and insignificant appearance near the beginning of Ariosto’s Orlando Furioso, where you might find it if you didn’t read very far) and linked to another man (this turns out to be a cunning plot by Orlando’s enemy Sacripant to drive him crazy). This much simpler framework gives Greene ample opportunities for Orlando to declaim wildly and to inventively pummel other actors. One group, for instance, is thumped with a leg that Orlando has just torn off a shepherd. Greene’s Orlando is finally reconciled with his beloved after a set of gratuitous combats with his fellow knights. When Orlando in As You Like It threatens his brother, or throws Charles to the ground, audience members might have recalled Greene’s earlier, more tempestuous Orlando. If so, Orlando’s willingness to learn less angry ways might have come as a surprise to them.