Toyon Literary Magazine

Volume 65 | Issue 1 Article 19

2019

The Wordsmith As Worldsmith in Shakespeare's As You Like It

Jessica C. Lao
The Westminster Schools

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon

Part of the Creative Writing Commons

Recommended Citation
Lao, Jessica C. (2019) "The Wordsmith As Worldsmith in Shakespeare's As You Like It," *Toyon Literary Magazine*: Vol. 65 : Iss. 1 , Article 19.
Available at: https://digitalcommons.humboldt.edu/toyon/vol65/iss1/19

This Critical Analysis is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Toyon Literary Magazine by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Humboldt State University. For more information, please contact kyle.morgan@humboldt.edu.

The Wordsmith as Worldsmith in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

Jessica C. Lao

Court against country, mind against body, even truth itself against fiction—in a play filled with dualities, perhaps none is so encompassing as that of action and passivity in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. As its characters struggle to impact and even define reality, this interplay of thought and action frames their interactions with the world, before being ultimately refined by Rosalind's synthesis of the two through language. In fact, as an intermediary between the mental and the physical, linguistic performance comes to claim greater creative power—of worlds, genders, bonds—than either. Indeed, in a work that delights in fiction as much as truth, Shakespeares' and his heroines' creations testify to the triumph of language in shaping reality more effectively than either crude action or ideas alone.

Nowhere is the play's reproof of unacted thought or thoughtless action more stark than in the ineffectual extremes of Jaques and Touchstone. Dismissed by 19th-century critic William Hazlitt as Shakespeare's "only purely contemplative character," Jaques and his passive obsession with the "abstract truth" (Hazlitt 547-48) evoke a mock transcendence at the price of earthly bonds, like the love he deems Orlando's "worst fault" (3.2.286). Perhaps unsurprisingly, his final abandonment of community to muse inwardly with ascetics highlights his spurning of not only action, but even the communication required to cause outward change (5.4.190-191). Tellingly, this pure cerebral detachment fails to promise any happiness but that of uncertain pursuit—not to mention that even the much-mulled pessimism behind that chase may be simply disproven by examples like "good old man" Adam, who finds peers and music in times of weakness (2.7.208). Contrasting such isolation in one's own mind, Shakespeare blasts the action-centered, less melancholy but vapidly physical alternative in lines like Touchstone's "from hour to hour we ripe and ripe, / and...rot and rot" (2.7.28). Though lacking Jaques' pseudo-intellectual

solemnity, this libertine abandonment of any higher thought than pleasure still by no means equals satisfaction. Banal in the physical and even chronically regular sense, its adherents' ripening meets only a rotting end that—like Jaques' confinement to his head—offers neither happiness nor meaning from affecting others, much less from asserting one's own vision for happiness onto the world. After all, differences in route aside, both fools end up in a bleak isolation sealed by Touchstone's "two month" marriage to dull Audrey (5.4.201). For all its earthly "realism" compared to Jaques, even that lusty courtship proves ineffective at winning real love or happiness from the world, only confirming the mind-/body-obsessed pair as poor at communication and out of touch with reality in multiple ways.

As much as the supporting cast fails to communicate or act on their surroundings, Rosalind excels at both tasks, and she reveals the play's inextricable link between the two in the process. Seen in her comparatively successful marriage and scorn at Touchstone's "rotten" idea of love, Rosalind's actions clearly hold more of both tactical thought and romantic ideals than those of the dissolute fool (3.2.120). However, more than evincing a greater initiative to act than Jaques', her verbal interventions like urging Phoebe to "look on [Silvius] better" mark Rosalind's wit as the conduit of not just her own courtship, but many other otherwise stagnant ones in the play (3.5.82). In the same vein, after Rosalind's promise to unite all with magic, the stalemated lovers' thrice-repetitions of "it is to be all...and so am I" (5.2.88-89) and "if this be so, why blame you me to love you?" allude to her linguistic magic in more ways than literally resembling the chants of a spell (5.2.8-10). Whether in correcting Phoebe, guiding Orlando, or simply calling everyone to their weddings with those very "incantations," Rosalind fulfills her magician's promise with the magic of her linguistic translation of thought into action—a virtual creation of love. Thus, out of the extremes of ascetic introspection and base action arises the synthesis of language. Limited to neither mind nor body, at the heart of *As You Like It's* dualities is this most productive intermediary embodied by the witty and cross-dressing Rosalind.

Interestingly, in Rosalind's veiled courtship of Orlando, that same creation of love parallels her words' creation of entire genders and identities. Just as her speech represents both union and translation of idea into action, her verbal ruses as the male Ganymede draw on ideas of gender construction to reinforce her depiction of language's creative power. From her very first donning of male disguise, Rosalind's observation of how "mannish cowards" derive masculinity from "swashing and...martial [outsides]" introduces the idea of manhood as an act (1.3.127- 128). Indeed, mirroring Shakespeare's own creation of Arden and the play itself, gender—like many relationships in the story—becomes something of a linguistic product that Rosalind creates and maintains with

characteristic verbal finesse, bidding all to "call me Ganymede" before advising lovers through her male identity (1.3.132). In fact, though some may dismiss her creation of gender as more image-based than word, Rosalind's traitorously "pretty" form as Ganymede mitigates any physical presentation's contribution to her ruse (3.5.120). In this way, just as her verbal facilitation of love testifies to the power of language, so too does Rosalind's creation of a male identity illustrate the power of words to build entire aesthetic realities.

Of course, if to act is also to be perceived and judged, it follows that the audience, too, has a voice in the moral judgment of any performance—*As You Like It* proves no exception. In the realm of Arden, however, there is no truth or lie scrutinized as closely as the freedom of creation itself. After all, when linguistic performance can create a new reality, the need to choose between reality and fantasy is diminished in a sense; Thomas MacFarland of Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy characterizes love as a mistaking of reality, but in a play that offers few consequences to penalize such a mistake, one may just as well have crafted a new reality instead to enjoy (117). From Touchstone's celebration of the truest poetry as the most "feigning" or "fain-ing"/preferable, to this entire work of fiction's endurance in the modern canon, the idea of creation as great—a trait perhaps less debatable than its virtue—abounds in nearly every judgment around the play (3.3.18-19). Indeed, when the curtain drops, regardless of Shakespeare's or Ganymede's success at a form of world-building, one might say that As You Like It celebrates fantasy not in literally becoming reality, but in being created to be indulged in at all.

Bibliography

Bloom, Harold. *Shakespeare: the Invention of the Human.* Fourth Estate, 2010.

Hazlitt, William. *Characters of Shakespeare's Plays.* Rowland Hunter with Charles and James Ollier, 1817, www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/5085.

Hunter, Lynette, and Peter Lichtenfels. *Shakespeare, Language and the Stage: the Fifth Wall: Approaches to Shakespeare from Criticism, Performance and Theatre Studies.* The Arden Shakspeare, 2005.

Jameson, Anna. S*HAKESPEARE'S HEROINES: Characteristics of Women, Moral, Poetical and Historical (Classic Reprint)*. FORGOTTEN BOOKS, 2015.

MacFarland, Thomas. *Shakespeare's Pastoral Comedy*. Univ. of North Carolina Pr., 1973. Shakespeare, William. As You Like It. Edited by Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine, Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2009.

Shakespeare, William, et al. S*oliloquy!: the Shakespeare Monologues (Women)*. Applause Theatre Book Publishers, 1988.