



As You Like It: A Dream Play

Laura B. Vogel, Richard C. Friedman, and Edwina J. Cruise

lauravogel920@gmail.com, rcf2@columbia.edu, ecruise@mtholyoke.edu

Abstract

The title *As You Like It* suggests satisfaction of the audience's fancies. We propose that the play's construction incorporates the strategy of dreams, in which a dream wish is disguised by dream work: here the "wish" is the consummation of Rosalind and Orlando's mutual desire, and the dream work includes elision of logic, magical thinking, displacement, condensation, and symbolization. The audience become dreamers, and the improbable plot the dream. The dream-like qualities of the play are enhanced in the Forest of Arden, the realm of snake and lioness and fairy-tales, a territory that evokes wishes and fears. Shakespeare's use of condensation accounts for some of the variability in interpretation and perception of the plays.

Keywords

Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, dreams, dream wish, dream-work

To cite as

Vogel, L.B., Friedman, R.C., and Cruise, E.J., 2016, '*As You Like It: A Dream Play*', *PsyArt* 20, pp. 116–123.

Shakespeare's intuitive understanding of unconscious mental processes, so apparent in his plays, predates Freud's exploration of the human mind by three hundred years. Freud's lifelong reading of Shakespeare is widely acknowledged to have influenced his work, including his classic study, *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Indeed, the comedy *As You Like It* incorporates the strategy of dreams, in which, in keeping with Freud's theory, dream work disguises and obfuscates a dream wish or latent dream thought. Let's start with the dream wish in this play:

In Act 1, Scene 2, Rosalind, the play's heroine, watches the valiant and attractive Orlando defeat Charles, an experienced, dangerous wrestler. Excited and admiring, Rosalind succumbs to intense desire. She gives him the chain she wears around her neck and tells him: "Wear this for me" (1.2.235).

Orlando is struck dumb with desire when Rosalind hands him her chain; he regains speech only as she departs: “Can I not say, I thank you? My better parts are all thrown down” (1.2.238-9). She returns at the sound of Orlando’s voice and admits: “Sir, you have wrestled well and overthrown/ More than your enemies” (1.2.242-243). Rosalind herself has been “overthrown,” felled by love as she thrilled to the wrestling. Her language suggests that she has imagined herself a player in the manly sport of wrestling, pinned to the ground and passionately submitting to Orlando. Rosalind again departs, this time for real, and only then does Orlando speak, echoing Rosalind’s wrestling image: “O poor Orlando, thou art overthrown/ Or Charles or something weaker masters thee”(1.2.248-9). Orlando and Rosalind have been struck down by love, a “coup de foudre,” a lightning bolt of immediate passion.

That passion, mutual sexual desire, ignites the dream wish in the play. The subsequent dream work is relocated from the rigidly governed court to the Forest of Arden, one of Shakespeare’s fanciful and liberating topographies. These woods offer sanctuary and freedom for the oppressed, and invite wishes. Orlando flees from his brother’s murderous intent into that magical forest, where his response to the lovers’ mirrored sense of being overthrown and to his own speechlessness is to write inept verses proclaiming his love for Rosalind, and hang them on the trees for all to see.

Conveniently, Rosalind, banished by Duke Frederick, her uncle and father of her best friend Celia has likewise fled to Arden’s rustic bowers. Her defense against the vulnerability, loss of control, and sense of dislocation that accompany falling in love is to dress as a man. Entering the woods, she assumes a male identity, thereby protecting herself and Celia from unwanted advances, and literally masking her love for Orlando. In doublet and hose, it may also be easier for Rosalind to imagine herself wrestling with, and subdued by, Orlando. She adopts the name of Ganymede, Jove’s young male lover.

This same terrain of Arden, unstable ground and habitat for a snake and lioness, also evokes fears.

The dream work embedded in *As You Like It* includes elision of logic, magical thinking, displacement, and condensation with its accompanying symbolization. In this paper, we are especially interested in Shakespeare’s use of condensation, the psychological mechanism that also accounts for some of the wide variability in interpretation and perception of the plays.

In naming his play, Shakespeare invites the audience to join in wish fulfillment; the audience become the dreamers, and the improbable plot the dream. He promises a good outcome, “as you like it.” Personal engagement with Rosalind and Orlando’s “dream wish” can influence whether or not audience members like or do not like *As You Like It*.

Wishes and fears—the stuff of dreams—involve primary process unconscious impulses and defenses and do not operate in logical ways; secondary process logical thinking is governed by the reality-based principle

of the ego (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p.90). Time, not recognized by the unconscious, is acknowledged by the ego. In this play, Time, the subject of Rosalind and Orlando's first verbal exchange in Arden (3.2.291-322), cooperates with the dream work in creating a delay of the satisfaction of Rosalind and Orlando's desire. Sublimation is expressed in the couple's prolonged dialogues. Rosalind's disguise ensures that the lovers come to know and trust each other; their growing pleasure in each others' company diminishes the anxiety created by their mutual sense of being overthrown.

Elision of Logic

In writing *As You Like It* Shakespeare has conspicuously eliminated logically motivated behavior from his primary source, Thomas Lodge's popular prose romance *Rosalynde*, published only nine years earlier. Shakespeare removes the rationale for Oliver's hatred of Orlando and for Duke Frederick's sudden antipathy towards Rosalind. He strategically compresses at the close of the play both the character transformation in Oliver, and Oliver's courtship of Celia. Oliver's sudden shift from bad to good might appear to be an example of the illogical nature of dreams; but, as we will suggest later, this transformation may make more sense than meets the eye.

Shakespeare's suspension of logic culminates in an actual performance of magic in the last act of the play. Rosalind reports "I can do strange things. I have since I was three year old conversed with a magician" (5.2.58-9). She conjures up Hymen, the Greek god of marriage, who blesses the four marriages at the play's conclusion. The playwright compounds the magic of theater by adding the primary process thinking of dreams.

Displacement

Freud describes dream displacement as phenomena where "during the dream work the psychological intensity of those thoughts and conceptions to which it properly pertains flows to others" (Freud, p. 17). In *As You Like It* the intensity of Rosalind and Orlando's sexual wish and its psychological derivatives are displaced into two other relationships. These comic foils literally project the sexuality and anxiety displaced from the romantic couple.

Carnality is the touchstone of the relationship between Shakespeare's jester of that name and Audrey. They model sexual desire, and the defects of a union premised exclusively on sex. With a flourish of randy goat puns, Touchstone hurries Audrey, the goatwoman, toward marriage. That ardor is not without equivocation and anxiety; he admits to Audrey: "Truly I would the gods had made thee poetical" (3.3.14). And, when Jaques overrules plans for this possibly unlawful wedding, Touchstone regretfully opines:

*...not being well married it will be a
good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife.* (3.3.84-85)

Not yet married, Touchstone already doubts the success of their union.

Desire generates anxieties. Lovers fear that their love will be not be reciprocated, or that their lover loves them in less than equal measure; and how can one ever assess that measure? Unrequited love defines the comic relationship between Phoebe and Silvius. Rosalind first encounters Silvius in Act 2, soon after she arrives in the Forest of Arden. She overhears him describing with anguish his love for the scornful Phoebe, and says to her companions:

*Alas, poor shepherd, searching of thy wound
I have by hard adventure found mine own* (2.4.41-42).

She immediately identifies with Silvius' lovelorn passion. Later, in Act 3, as a consequence of this identification, Rosalind intervenes, exhorting Phoebe:

...down on your knees,
And thank heaven fasting for a good man's love (3.5.58-59).

Rosalind, who fell in love imagining sexual submission, is urging submission in addition to prayer. Phoebe, indifferent to Silvius' slavish adoration, instantly falls in love with Ganymede.

When Silvius brings Phoebe's love letter to Ganymede, Rosalind, already anxious about Orlando's commitment to her, displaces her anxiety into a diatribe against the shepherd and his unlovely beloved:

*Come, come, you are a fool,
And turned into the extremity of love.
I saw her hand- she has a leathern hand.* (4.3.22-24)

Rosalind then goes on to denounce Silvius for his passive acceptance of rejection, and call him a "tame snake" (4.3.69). Rosalind's unusual aggression towards Silvius may arise from anxiety that Orlando's tardiness signals his indifference towards her, or that his love and desire are far fewer fathoms deep than her own. Her derisive epithet "tame snake" is also particularly evocative. Shakespeare's audiences would have associated a snake in Arden with the dangerous, seductive, and phallic snake of Eden. This compressed connection is a condensation.

Condensation

Condensation, always associated with symbolization, is the most intriguing dream-like aspect of *As You Like It*. Freud offers examples, but does not clearly define condensation in *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In our understanding of condensation, wishes, emotions, fantasies and memories are all compressed, repackaged, and represented in the form of symbols. Condensations can be stored and activated simultaneously from various phases of a person's development. Thoughts, feelings, and sensations experienced in the present stimulate associations from times past of older condensations laden with meaning; meaning, endowed by intense affects, links to the represented experiences. As the merging memories-fantasies organize into scripts, the compression from different developmental phases combine varying degrees of cognitive sophistication. The visual symbolic narrative scripts that result seem illogical and incomprehensible by standards of waking thought.

Condensations carry information from the unconscious mind into conscious awareness and thus influence motivation. A representation and its opposite, coexisting in the unconscious mind, may emerge into consciousness creating a discomfoting sense of duality experienced as ambivalence.

Shakespeare's uncanny awareness of the phenomenon of condensation reveals itself vividly in the well-studied snake and lioness passage. If we read this passage as a complex and inclusive amalgam of compressed wishes, emotions, and fantasies, its evocative images will allow for multiple readings, alternative and sometimes conflicting interpretations.

Oliver describes being threatened by a snake and a lioness, and ultimately rescued by Orlando, in a passage that begins:

*A wretched ragged man, o'ergrown with hair,
Lay sleeping on his back; about his neck
A green and gilded snake had wreathed itself,
Who with her head, nimble in threats, approached
The opening of his mouth [...]. (4.3.105-109)*

*A lioness, with udders all drawn dry,
Lay couching, head on ground, with catlike watch
When that the sleeping man should stir [...]. (4.3.113-115)*

Valerie Traub, in her insightful paper "The Homoerotics of Shakespearean Comedy" uses this passage to argue:

...that in the snake's figure are concentrated the anxieties generated by the text's simultaneous commitment to homoeroticism and heterosexuality. If Oliver is endangered by the snake's 'feminine' sexual powers, he is equally threatened by her phallic ones. He becomes both the feminized object of male

aggression and the effeminized object of female desire. The snake thus represents the erotic other of the text..... (Traub, p. 129)

We offer an alternative interpretation of the phallic aspect of the snake: that the danger posed to Oliver by this snake represents the threat he imagines and fears from Orlando. In Act 1, Scene 1, Oliver strikes Orlando, who seizes him by the throat and subdues him. Oliver then urges Charles the wrestler to kill Orlando in their impending match. After Charles departs, Oliver confesses his hatred of his brother to the audience:

Now will I stir this gamester. I hope I shall see an end of him; for my soul—yet I know not why—hates nothing more than he. Yet he’s gentle, never schooled and yet learned, full of noble device, of all sorts enchantingly beloved, and indeed so much in the heart of the world, and especially of my own people, who best know him, that I am altogether misprized (1.1.153-160).

A “gamester” is an athlete, a player of games, a gambler, a risk-taker. Orlando is both physically fearless and powerful. “Noble device” suggests Orlando’s chivalric behavior, the bravery and courtesy of a knight; this phrase also associates Orlando with the shield and (phallic) lance. The word “enchantingly” hints that Orlando has magical powers that inspire love in others. Throughout this speech, Oliver’s reliance on the thrice-repeated “yet” exposes his hesitation and equivocation. Unlike Orlando, Oliver is not a man of action.

Our reading of Oliver’s speech posits that he feels threatened by and envious of Orlando. He perceives his strong and courageous younger brother to be a male possessed of phallic power superior to his own. Lionel Ovesey, writing in the 1960s, proposed that men can have unconscious fantasies of phallic domination or phallic dependency not accompanied by erotic feeling nor driven by desire; these fantasies arise from concerns about power and/or dependency (Ovesey, 1969). Oliver unconsciously fears phallic domination by the masculine Orlando.

The snake retreats at the sight of Orlando, who then gives battle to the hungry lioness, and rescues Oliver from her threat as well. Shakespeare conspicuously regenders the male lion of the Lodge romance into a nursing mother seeking food for her cubs. The unconscious fantasy is one of a devouring mother who might have killed Oliver to feed his imagined rival sibling, Orlando. The snake and lioness tableau is one of phallic threat as well as danger from intrusive and vicious females; it is a tableau rich with displacements, condensation, and symbols.

In our reading, Oliver’s instant conversion from bad to good, and his whirlwind courtship immediately following his rescue now become more coherent. Once Orlando has dispatched the phallic power of the snake, Oliver is freed from his sense of masculine inferiority and hatred of his brother.

Orlando's defeat of the devouring maternal lioness diminishes the anxiety that both brothers may be experiencing as they anticipate sexual love with women. In a dramatic expression of condensation, Oliver's unconscious conflicts burst into his conscious mind; this transformation liberates his capacity to experience aggression and sexuality. Feeling protected rather than dominated by Orlando, Oliver can identify with his brother in a way which strengthens his masculine self. He instantly falls in love with Aliena/Celia. Orlando, enviously impatient to consummate his desire for Rosalind, now declares "I can live no longer by thinking" (5.2.49).

The chain with which Rosalind possessively encircled Orlando's neck when they first met is mirrored here by the snake wreathed around Oliver's neck. For Rosalind, this chain signifies her erotic attachment and submission to Orlando. The chain and the snake each represents Orlando's phallic masculinity as well, yet another condensation.

Chain, snake and lioness are symbols whose meanings and associations are unstable. Each person's different reality, represented in condensations, drives their responses. Condensation, both in dreams and in waking life, accounts for some of the variability in reactions to Shakespeare's plays, in the same way that it can account for differences in perceived reality. Shakespeare understands that audience reality, although shaped by the specific symbols he constructs, shifts with the individual mind and experience. Recall once again the title *As You Like It*. Everyone likes it their own way, and Shakespeare invites us to see a different play than that seen by the person in the next seat.

As You Like It ends with a volley of "if's" from Touchstone and Rosalind, as well as a series questioning "truth in sight":

Duke Senior

If there be truth in sight, you are my daughter.

Orlando

If there be truth in sight, you are my Rosalind.

Phoebe

If sight and shape be true,

Why then my love adieu. (5.4.116-119)

Traub describes how "if" "makes erotic contingency possible" (Traub, p.128) in *As You Like It*. "If" also raises, however, the question of the contingent nature of reality. Reality, like beauty, resides in the eye and mind of the beholder.

Acknowledgements

Laura Vogel is grateful for the much appreciated ideas, critiques, and support offered by Jack Cameron, Barry Farber, L. Brown Kennedy, Naomi Miller, and Suzanne Slater.

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