

## Second Thoughts About Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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*As You Like It* is my favorite among Shakespeare's plays, but lately it has occurred to me that I have liked it for the wrong reasons. Or, to put the matter more accurately, there are many reasons and ways to enjoy this play and while I have long recognized some of them, I have only lately noticed others. The features of the play that I have always enjoyed are still there but there are others that I only recently began to appreciate. Those are the ones I want to talk about.

My talk this afternoon has *five* parts.

- **First**, there is a rehearsal of the play's *plot* for those of you who haven't seen or read it recently or who, for whatever reason, are a little foggy about what happens in it.
- **Second**, a description of the reasons I have loved this play ever since I first saw it performed when I was a teenager.
- **Third**, the questions that have prompted re-examination of my original understanding of the play.
- **Fourth**, some speculative responses to those questions; and finally,
- **Fifth**, a short summary and conclusion.

I will try to keep each of these steps brief so that there will be plenty of time for real business of the afternoon, namely, sharing among ourselves more questions and a free and open discussion of the play.

**Part I:**  
**The Plot of *As You Like It***

The story line of *As You Like It* interweaves several sub-plots which are not too complicated – provided your standards for complexity are furnished by novels on the scale of Tolstoy's *War and Peace* or Joyce's *Ulysses*.<sup>1</sup>

The setting is somewhere in northern France, in and around the “Forest of Arden.”<sup>2</sup> There is nothing especially French in the play, and the typically English songs included in the script tempt the audience to identify the location as the “Forest of Arden” in Warwickshire, not far from Stratford-upon-Avon where Shakespeare grew up. Whether we are in France or England, there is a court with surrounding landholdings and a nearby forest called “Arden.”

The cast of the play includes two pairs of brothers: (i) Duke Senior and Duke Frederick who are connected with “The Court” and (ii) Oliver and Orlando who are of lower social rank and who reside somewhere nearby. In both pairs, the elder brother envies and despises the younger. Among the nobles, Frederick (the younger brother) has deposed his elder brother Senior before the action of the play begins and banished him to the Forest of Arden where he resides with “three or four loving lords” who have followed him into “voluntary exile.” (I. i. 99 - 102). Each of the noble brothers has a daughter. Celia is the daughter of the usurper, Frederick; Rosalind is the daughter of the exiled Senior. Cousins Celia and Rosalind are best friends and, when Rosalind's father was sent off to the forest, Rosalind stayed behind in the court as companion to her cousin Celia.

In the lower social rank, the elder brother Oliver abuses his younger brother Orlando in defiance of the will of their deceased father, Sir Rowland de Boyes, who (we later learn) had been a partisan of the exiled elder Duke Senior. As the play begins, Orlando rebels against this ill-treatment and, after a brief fight, storms off. Oliver plans to do

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<sup>1</sup> Anyone who thought I would deliver a lecture without at least one reference to James Joyce was obviously mistaken.

<sup>2</sup> In the original source from which Shakespeare drew the story, this region was probably what we know as the *Ardennes* Forest, famous now as the location of Adolf Hitler's final gamble in the west, the “Battle of the Bulge” in 1944. In *As You Like It*, it is presented as a landscape filled with pastoral shepherds.

away with Orlando, first by trying to have him killed in a wrestling match held at the duke's court. When that fails, he plans to set his lodging on fire. Warned by a faithful servant, Adam, Orlando escapes into the Forest of Arden.

Turning back to the court, Rosalind and Celia have attended the wrestling match that Orlando unexpectedly won and, while watching him display his fighting prowess, Rosalind falls in love with him. (Orlando apparently, makes quite an impression with his shirt off.) Soon after Orlando is sent away, Duke Frederick unexpectedly announces that Rosalind will be banished from the court. He says that Rosalind's virtues detract from those of his daughter, Celia. It's not clear why that has suddenly become an urgent matter; maybe he has seen Rosalind connecting with Orlando the son of his old enemy, the deceased Sir Rowland. However that may be, Celia attempts in vain to defend her cousin and, when her father exits the scene, she announces her intention to accompany Rosalind into exile and suggests that the two go to the Forest of Arden. Rosalind proposes that they bring along Touchstone, the court jester. To protect themselves, the girls take on disguises: Celia pretends to be "Aliena" and Rosalind disguises herself as a young man named "Ganymede."

Thus, by the beginning of Act II, the major characters of the play – Duke Senior, Orlando, the two girls, and the jester Touchstone – have separately relocated from court to the Forest. Orlando joins the court of Duke Senior. Celia, Rosalind, and Touchstone stay aloof from Duke Senior's encampment, moving into a cottage in the woods. Nevertheless, Rosalind soon becomes aware of Orlando's nearby presence when she finds his poetry extolling her name tacked onto the trees all over the forest. When the two meet, Rosalind retains her disguise as "Ganymede", a deception that Orlando is unable to penetrate. (The audience must suspend disbelief here. In Shakespearean comedies, if a young woman wears trousers and a cap that hides her hair, no one can recognize her. Get over it.) Rosalind-disguised-as-Ganymede offers to "cure" Orlando of his love-sickness if he will pretend that he/she is Rosalind and woo her. Orlando agrees and undertakes to court the young "man" who he believes to be "Ganymede," calling him / her *Rosalind*, which unbeknownst to Orlando is in fact his / her name.

Clear so far?

Meanwhile, in the woods Rosalind / Ganymede meets a poetical shepherdess named Phebe who has spurned the equally poetical shepherd, Silvius. Taken in by his / her disguise, Phebe falls in love with Ganymede. Call this “subplot 1.”

Also, Duke Frederick has sent Orlando’s wicked brother Oliver to the forest to find him so that Duke Frederick can have him killed. In Act IV, however, he appears and tells how he has been magically turned from his evil purpose and reconciled with Orlando. Within moments he meets Celia, falls in love with her and the two plan to marry. This is “subplot 2.”

Finally, Touchstone the jester has found his own mate, the un-poetical shepherdess Audrey. This is “subplot 3.”

Act V culminates with the final multi-couple wedding ceremony which Rosalind orchestrates. Rosalind’s plan is to reveal herself *first* to her father, who will be surprised, *next* to Orlando, who will be delighted, and *finally* to Phebe, who will be disappointed.

At the conclusion of the wedding ceremonies, a messenger arrives to announce that the evil Duke Frederick is no longer a threat. While pursuing his brother into the Forest to kill him, Frederick encountered “an old religious man” (V. iv. 159) who persuaded him to abandon all worldly interests and to become a sort of contemplative monk. With that bothersome detail out of the way, Rosalind marries Orlando, Celia marries Oliver, Silvius marries Phebe, Touchstone marries Audrey, and everyone is happy.

Well, almost everyone. There remains Jaques, a morose hanger-on at Duke Senior’s court, who is never happy. He plans to join Duke Frederick’s religious isolation. Jaques is an important character and delivers some of the most memorable speeches of the play, but he hasn’t been mentioned in this summary so far because *nothing he says or does contributes anything to advancing the plot*. This is remarkable. (See? I have just remarked upon it!) This may be our first clue that there is something going on in *As You Like It* that is not apparent on the surface. We’ll return to Jaques momentarily.

## **Part II: First Interpretation of *As You Like It***

At a first glance, *As You Like It* appears to be an insubstantial, light-hearted romantic comedy. The playful love-story of Rosalind and Orlando is the reason the play continues to be as popular as it is. Audiences love watching Rosalind – who has, by the way, the largest feminine role in any Shakespearean play – as she orchestrates the interactions of other characters, “counterfeiting” (as she puts it) an outward show of joking indifference while privately confessing to her best friend Celia her wild passion for Orlando.

Another attraction of the play is the role of *nature*. *As You Like It* presents the superiority of natural simplicity over civic sophistication. Act I, scene 1, opens on Orlando who, we learn, is *naturally* superior to his brother Oliver despite having had little or no education. “[C]all you that ‘keeping,’” he protests, “for a gentleman of my birth, that differs not from the stalling of an ox?” (I. i. 8 - 10). When Orlando exits and Oliver is alone on-stage, he confesses in soliloquy that he envies his brother’s natural superiority. “[H]e’s gentle,” Oliver admits, “never schooled and yet learned, full of noble device, of all sorts enchantingly beloved.” (I. i. 164 - 166).

In the noble court, Duke Frederick directs a similar envy at Rosalind. He recognizes that “the people” perceive Rosalind’s natural superiority in comparison to his own daughter, Celia. He believes that Celia “will show more bright and seem more virtuous” when Rosalind is out of the picture. (I. iii. 77).

In both cases, envy drives the animosity directed against our romantic protagonists. To put the matter a bit pompously, we might say that “civilization perverts the natural order.” Legal trickery and political violence have expelled the naturally virtuous characters. Orlando, Rosalind and Duke Senior all escape into the Forest of Arden where, we hope, the proper natural order can reassert itself.

Act II opens in the Forest where Duke Senior extolls the simple virtues of the rustic life. The forest not only provides refuge from the corruptions of the court, but its power also seemingly banishes hatred, excludes resentment and eliminates all negative feelings. We might expect Duke Senior to resent his brother’s treachery and to brood over the loss of his title. But no such thing! He embraces the hardships of his sylvan exile. “Sweet are the uses of adversity,” the duke exclaims,

... Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,  
Wears yet a precious jewel in his head.  
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.  
I would not change it.  
(II. i. 12 - 18)

The Forest of Arden is compared to a remnant of the Golden Age, the pre-historical era of simple rustic happiness described by Hesiod<sup>3</sup>, Ovid<sup>4</sup> and Virgil<sup>5</sup>. In the Golden Age, there was no strife anywhere. Nature spontaneously supplied all our wants. Variants of the Golden Age myth take on many forms. It is the Garden of Eden in the Bible.<sup>6</sup> It is the City of Pigs in Plato's Republic.<sup>7</sup> It is the land of Petrarch's poetic shepherds, Rousseau's idyllic state of nature. It is Shangri-la from *Lost Horizon*, Peter Pan's *Never-Never Land*, the Big Rock Candy Mountains and *Brigadoon*.<sup>8</sup> It is cousin to all dreams of escape from the corrupting influence of society, such as Henry David Thoreau's Walden Pond and Scott and Helen Nearing's *Good Life*.<sup>9</sup> Who hasn't dreamt at one time or another that outside or behind or before the tedious annoyances and irritations of ordinary life there was – or might be – some simpler and more satisfying existence? A psychologist might speculate that such fantasies arise from idealized memories of childhood. Theologians might voice other ideas. Whatever its origin, the Golden Age is a powerful image.

The Forest of Arden takes its place alongside other Shakespearean magical locations such as Prospero's island or the fairy-infested Athenian woods in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Like those places, Arden, too, seems to have supernatural powers. Arrival in the forest is sufficient to convert the wicked characters of the play, Oliver and Duke Frederick, away from their malevolent designs. As a bonus, the forest

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<sup>3</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, 109

<sup>4</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, Book I, lines 89 – 112

<sup>5</sup> Virgil, *Aeneid*, Book 8, lines 325 - 329

<sup>6</sup> *Genesis*, ch. 2 – 3.

<sup>7</sup> Plato, *Republic*, Bk. II, 369a-372d

<sup>8</sup> Although not, perhaps, *Schmigadoon*.

<sup>9</sup> Helen and Scott Nearing, *Living the Good Life* (Schocken Books, 1970)

promotes romantic love. Through its influence, four marriages result, a Shakespearean record!<sup>10</sup>

This, then, is the First Interpretation of *As You Like It*: a light-hearted comic distraction in which frustrated couples come to a magical land where troubles arising from the envy and malevolence of society dissolve and romantic possibilities bloom. That's what many theatre-goers want to see. If they come to *As You Like It* with that expectation, they won't be disappointed.

### **Part III:**

#### **Problems with and Questions about the Simple View of *As You Like It***

There are some oddities and problems, however, that make the "simple rom-com" understanding of *As You Like It* appear, if not wrong, at least incomplete. Two that I want to describe arise from the play's dramatic structure, that is, from the literary craft that Shakespeare employed in creating *As You Like It*. The first question arises from Shakespeare's varied use of verse and prose in the play; the second comes from the way in which he drew upon a pre-existing literary source in composing *As You Like It*. As will appear, these technical issues have important consequences for our understanding of the characters and plot of the play.

#### **Part III A: Verse and Prose in *As You Like It***

As a master of language, Shakespeare was capable of writing masterful verse and equally capable of writing elegant prose. *As You Like It* contains both forms of writing, and the way in which Shakespeare chose which parts of the play would be in verse and which in prose shines an interesting light on the play. However, because the distribution of verse and prose in *As You Like It* is a bit subtle, it may help to look briefly at some other Shakespearean plays to get an idea of what the distinction between verse and prose means for the playwright.

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<sup>10</sup> Actually, it's a tie with *Love's Labors Lost* (4 marriages). However *As You Like It* beats out *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night* (3 marriages) and *Much Ado About Nothing* and *Two Gentlemen of Verona* (2 marriages).

### Part III A - 1: The Verse and Prose Distinction in General

As a general matter, Shakespeare uses *verse* for persons and situations of high rank and dignity and situations of great importance or solemnity. Prose, by contrast, signifies low or base characters or casual, relaxed situations.<sup>11</sup> The distinction can be seen very clearly in *Henry IV* where the setting oscillates frequently between a royal court and a London tavern. In the *Henriad* plays, scenes among nobility are in verse, while scenes in the taverns of Eastcheap are in prose. Noblemen generally speak in verse, even when they are planning a rebellion against the king. Such actions are politically treacherous, but if performed by the members of the upper class they are dignified and suitable for expression in verse. Prince Hal himself is a kind of amphibian who can move between these settings. In modern parlance, we might say that he engages in a sort of “code-switching” as he goes from prose in the Boar’s Head tavern to verse in the royal court and back again.

The case of Falstaff is interesting. Falstaff is a denizen of the pubs and speaks almost exclusively in prose. It is, to be sure, wonderful prose that occasionally ascends to rhetorical distinction, but he is fundamentally a low character. Ultimately his aspirations to genuine nobility fail. At a crucial moment at the end of *Henry IV pt 2*, he attempts to force himself into the parade for the newly crowned Henry V and cries out:

“My **King!** My **Jove!** I **speak** to **thee**, my **heart!**” (Henry IV pt 2, V.v.46)

That is a line of iambic pentameter. In this moment, Falstaff is trying to move above his station. His words reach beyond his accustomed style. Immediately, the king, his old barroom pal prince Hal, demolishes him. He does so, as befits his rank, in proper verse:

**I know thee not, old man. Fall to thy prayers.**

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<sup>11</sup> This is not a novel or original observation with me. A classic study of the significance of high and low language styles in many forms of Western literature, including Shakespeare’s plays, is Eric Auerbach’s 1946 critical study *Mimesis*. Auerbach describes this distinction of verse and prose speech as “separation of styles” and traces its roots in literature far before Shakespeare. Broadly speaking, tragic characters are serious and speak verse; comic characters are base and speak prose. Auerbach traces how this distinction, clear in classical literature, becomes more and more tangled as the Bible, and especially the New Testament – works its way into Western European culture. In the Bible, lowly characters like shepherds, fishermen and carpenters can and do take on crucial roles in the drama of humanity’s relation to God. Whatever theologians may make of this change, literary stylists find it very confusing.



How ill white **hairs** become a **fool** and a **jester**! (id., line 47 - 48)<sup>12</sup>

Falstaff turns away, deflated. Returning to ordinary prose he says to his companion, “Master Shallow, I owe you a thousand pound.” (id., line 72). It’s a crushing fall, accentuated by Shakespeare’s manipulation of the verse / prose distinction.

The distinction between verse and prose can also occur in comedy. A delicious example comes from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. In that play, King Theseus and Queen Hippolyta speak verse, as do the fairy king Oberon and his queen, Titania. So, too, do the four young lovers. Prose intrudes with the “Rude Mechanicals” who come to the woods find a secluded place to rehearse the show they hope to present at the royal wedding. When Oberon magically turns Bottom, the ham of that company, into an ass and makes Titania fall in love with him, we get some wonderful juxtapositions of verse and prose. For instance, when Titania asks the transformed Bottom in perfect iambic verse,

“What, **wilt** thou **hear** some **music**, **my** sweet **love**?”

... his reply drops to the lowest level of prosaic banality:

“I have a reasonable good ear in music. Let’s have the tongs and the bones.” (IV.i.27 – 29)

In a way, it’s the same contrast as was employed to show the devastation of Falstaff, but used for an entirely different purpose.

### Part III A - 2: The Verse and Prose Distinction in As You Like It

*As You Like It* employs both verse and prose in ways that follow the distinctions just described. Conversations in the ducal court are in verse while the exchange between Orlando and his brother Oliver, who are not as socially elevated, are in prose. Rosalind and Celia chat together informally in prose, but when they appear at court they switch to verse.

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<sup>12</sup> The final, eleventh syllable in “**jester**” is the unstressed “feminine ending” of an iambic pentameter line, a frequent variant in Shakespeare’s blank verse.

In the Forest of Arden, things get a little more complicated. The campsite-court of the exiled Duke Senior conducts its business entirely in verse. Duke Senior, it seems, wishes to maintain at least that level of dignity, however low his fortunes have fallen. On the other hand, when the shepherd Corin describes the virtues of the country life to Touchstone, he speaks in plain, straightforward prose, saying –

CORIN

Sir, I am a true laborer. I earn that I eat, get that I wear, owe no man hate,  
envy no man's happiness, glad of other men's good, content with my harm,  
and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck.

(II. ii. 71 - 75)

The forest life is not entirely prosaic, however. The pastoral lovers Silvius and Phebe always speak in verse. Like the lovers in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, their romantic ardor conveys on them an elevated status. Moreover, Corin can engage in the same sort of code-switching as Prince Hal or Rosalind. When he speaks with Silvius, Corin matches the lover's versified language.

### Part III A - 3: The Problem Highlighted by the Verse and Prose Distinction in *As You Like It*

Given the verse-prose distinction as it appears in *As You Like It*, what would we expect to be Rosalind's form of speech as she addresses Orlando? To say that she is romantically attracted to him is understatement; she is head-over-heels in love with him. When Celia reveals who has been tacking poems to the trees, Rosalind fairly explodes with excitement.

ROSALIND Alas the day, what shall I do with my doublet and hose? What  
did he when thou saw'st him? What said he? How looked he? Wherein went  
he? What makes he here? Did he ask for me? Where remains  
he? How parted he with thee? And when shalt thou see him again? Answer  
me in one word.

(III.ii. 218 - 23)

We might expect – I certainly expected – that Rosalind would rise up to meet or exceed the poetic frenzy that has seized Orlando. He was utterly tongue-tied in Act I when Rosalind tried to speak with him after the wrestling match, but when he arrives in the Forest he gets swept up in its pastoral-poetic atmosphere. Almost immediately he begins plastering the tree trunks with reams of verse. To be sure, his poetry is bad. For one thing, it is composed in iambic tetrameter couplets.

ROSALIND, as Ganymede, reading a paper  
*From the east to western Ind  
No jewel is like Rosalind.  
Her worth being mounted on the wind,  
Through all the world bears Rosalind.  
All the pictures fairest lined  
Are but black to Rosalind.  
Let no face be kept in mind  
But the fair of Rosalind.*  
(III. ii. 88 - 95)

It is possible to write good poems in iambic tetrameter, but it is *very easy* write *bad* ones in it.<sup>13</sup> This is the jogging rhythm of “roses are red, violets are blue.” It is the meter that Chaucer used for the self-mocking, deliberately execrable *Tale of Sir Thopas*.<sup>14</sup> Rosalind doesn't need Touchstone to tell her that Orlando's poetry is doggerel, but he is there and he hammers the message home by extemporizing some lines of his own:

TOUCHSTONE  
If a hart do lack a hind,  
Let him seek out Rosalind.  
If the cat will after kind,  
So be sure will Rosalind.  
(III. ii. 99 - 102)

... and so on.

When two prospective lovers meet in the Arden forest, it would be reasonable to expect them to explode into poetry, but that is exactly *not* what Rosalind does. Her linguistic behavior is the exact opposite of Orlando's. She disparages his verses and he ceases to write them, falling in with Rosalind's prose.

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<sup>13</sup> E. g. William Blake's *Tyger*, like much of his verse, is in iambic tetrameter couplets:

Tyger Tyger, burning bright,  
In the forests of the night;  
What immortal hand or eye,  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?

<sup>14</sup> The opening lines of Chaucer's *Tale of Sire Thopas*:

Listeth, lordes, in good entent,  
And I wol telle verrayment  
Of myrthe and of solas,  
Al of a knyght was fair and gent  
In bataille and in tourneyment;  
His name was sire Thopas.

We have then a question: if the Forest of Arden embodies the romantic / poetic spirit – as it seems to have done for Orlando – how is it that Rosalind either doesn't feel it or is determined to resist it?

### **Part III B: Comparison of *As You Like It* with Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde***

Another question arises from coming at the play from a different direction, namely, comparison of *As You Like It* with the source-text that Shakespeare drew upon in composing it. The scholarly consensus is that *As You Like It* is based upon a popular prose romance by Thomas Lodge entitled *Euphues, or, Rosalynde*,<sup>15</sup> and even a cursory reading of Lodge's work demonstrates that scholarly consensus is indisputably correct. All the major plot elements of *As You Like It* are present in Lodge's piece. There are the two dukes, each with a daughter. One duke exiles the other to the Forest of Arden. (Shakespeare changes the names of the dukes but didn't bother to change the name of the forest.<sup>16</sup>) In a lower social rank there are two quarreling brothers corresponding to Orlando and Oliver.<sup>17</sup> There is the wrestling match and the subsequent exile of younger brother to the same Forest of Arden. The dukes' daughters follow later to the forest, both in disguise, one as a maiden "Aliena" and other as a boy, "Ganymede".<sup>18</sup> And so on; the plot parallelism are *nearly*, but not *entirely* complete.

Shakespeare alters the plot in some places. He trims some portions of Lodge's work in order to fit his story into a two-and-a-half-hour play.<sup>19</sup> However, one change that he makes is an *addition*. Shakespeare introduces two new characters: Jaques and Touchstone. We've already noted that Jaques contributes nothing toward advancing the

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<sup>15</sup> "Euphues" (εὐφύης) means roughly "graceful, witty." In English literature, it refers to a style of writing exemplified by John Lyly's *Euphues: The Anatomy of Wit* (1578), characterized by ornate and sophisticated style and copious use of elaborate rhetorical devices. Lodge's *Rosalynde* was published in 1590. There is some controversy about when *As You Like It* was composed, but much scholarly opinion places it in 1599, when Lodge's work had time to become well known.

<sup>16</sup> Duke Senior in *As You Like It* is "Gerismond" in *Rosalynde*. Duke Frederick is "Torismond."

<sup>17</sup> More name changes: Orlando is "Rosader" in Lodge's work; Oliver is "Saladyne."

<sup>18</sup> Shakespeare barely changes Rosalind's name; it is "Rosalynde" in Lodge. Shakespeare's Celia is "Alinda" in Lodge's piece.

<sup>19</sup> *Rosalynde* in Lodge's piece is less stand-offish toward Orlando than in Shakespeare's play. When Lodge describes *Rosalynde* and the Orlando-character meeting in the forest, she does keep her disguise as "Ganymede" (as in Shakespeare's version), but she does *not* volunteer to "cure" him of his love. Instead, the two of them engage in an extended poetic duet. ?

plot of *As You Like It*. Neither does Touchstone, and now we can see why: these two characters are entirely absent from Lodge's original from which Shakespeare took his story. The question then presents itself: what is Shakespeare trying to accomplish by bringing these two characters into the play?

Touchstone and Jaques form a curious pair, both importantly connected with one another while at the same time completely independent. Considered first from the point of view of the story, they have nothing at all to do with one another. Touchstone is a fixture in Duke Frederick's court. Celia knows him well enough to feel confident that he will accompany them into the Forest if she asks. (I. iii. 128 – 129) Jaques by contrast is a companion of Duke Senior. He does not recognize Touchstone at all when he meets him in the woods (II. vii. 12) and later, when Touchstone arrives at the play-ending wedding-plex, Jaques introduces him to Duke Senior in a manner that shows that he doesn't expect Senior to know him at all. (V. iv. 40 – 42). So, in the story-line of *As You Like It*, Jaques and Touchstone are strangers.

Nevertheless, the two new characters are dramatically entangled with one another. When we first see Jaques in Duke Senior's woodland court, he is laughing merrily – something we have already been told he never does – because he has met “a fool” in the woods. This is Touchstone, and Jaques is so taken with him that he announces that he, too, is suddenly seized with the desire to be a fool: “O, that I were a fool!” he declares, “I am ambitious for a motley coat. ... It is my only suit.” (II. vii. 42 - 43) Jaques immediately sees in Touchstone a companion to his disposition.

Other links join them. Jaques and Touchstone both take pleasure in composing satiric lyrics to others' serious songs and lyrics. We have already heard some of the spoof that Touchstone extemporizes in mockery of Orlando's love-poetry. In a similar vein, Jaques composes a parody of Lord Amien's song, *Under the Greenwood Tree*. Instead of “Under the greenwood tree / who loves to lie with me,” his variation begins “If it should come to pass / that any man turn ass.” (Amiens is suitably shocked.) Later, Jaques takes an interest in Touchstone's private life as he urges him not to make use of the burlesque priest Oliver Martext. (III. iii. 74 - 86) to marry Audrey. Jaques puts a stop to the fake ceremony and counsels Touchstone to “[g]et ... to a church, and have a good priest that can tell you what marriage is.” (III. iii. 75 - 77).

The most significant connection between them, however, appears in their two great set-pieces, Jaques's "Seven Ages of Man" speech in Act II and Touchstone's rather less serious but no less important "Seven Causes of Quarrel" performance in Act V. Touchstone's piece will be discussed a little later. Jaques's famous monologue comes first. After telling Duke Senior that he has "met a fool i' the forest," Jaques recounts Touchstone's droll observation on the nature of time:

Jaques  
... [H]e [Touchstone] drew a dial [that is, a watch] from his poke  
And, looking on it with lack-luster eye,  
Says very wisely "It is ten o'clock.  
Thus we may see," quoth he, "how the world wags.  
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,  
And after one hour more 'twill be eleven.  
And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,  
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot,  
And thereby hangs a tale."  
(II. vii. 19 - 29)

It's an amusing little piece of seeming nonsense, spinning out the hours from nine to eleven into a piece of *faux* profundity. It might easily be forgotten except that Jaques uses its theme for the best-known soliloquy in the play. A few moments after Jaques has described his meeting with Touchstone, Orlando bursts on the scene demanding food for his companion, Adam, whom he has left some distance off in the woods. Duke Senior willingly offers what he needs, and when Orlando goes to fetch Adam, Shakespeare needs to fill up a plausible span of time for Orlando's trip out and back. He does so by having Jaques deliver a speech which has become the most quoted and anthologized piece in the entire play. "All the world's a stage, / And all the men and women merely players," Jaques begins. He elaborates poetically "seven ages" in the life of a typical man, from "the infant, / Mewling and puking in the nurse's arms" to "the lover, / Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad / Made to his mistress' eyebrow." The arc of life culminates in the "soldier, / Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard, / ... Seeking the bubble reputation / Even in the cannon's mouth," then moves towards respectability, age and finally sinks morbidly into "the Last scene of all, ... second childishness and mere oblivion, / Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."  
(II. viii. 146 - 173)

This is a spectacular literary *tour de force*, reminiscent of the miniature portraits that Chaucer gives us of the Canterbury pilgrims, although much darker in its conclusion. Those who encounter it in the context of the entire play understand what those who read it in anthologies cannot know, namely, that it is a tragic reworking of Touchstone's theme presented comically just moments earlier with his brief observation about the passage of time as reflected by his pocket watch. Jaques and Touchstone don't further the plot, but they form a sort of pair, offering contrasting views of the same facts.

Shakespeare has deliberately added this curiously linked pair of characters to his play. He has attached one of them to Duke Senior's court-in-exile and the other to Rosalind and Celia. The question then arises: *what does he accomplish by doing so?* What do Touchstone and Jaques bring to the story that Shakespeare has otherwise copied from Thomas Lodge?

#### **Part IV:**

#### **Proposed Answer to the Problems of *As You Like It***

##### **1) A Disclaimer.**

Before offering responses to my own questions – I probably wouldn't have asked them if I didn't have something say about them! – a brief disclaimer is in order. The rhetorical structure of this talk is somewhat artificial – all rhetorical structures are, really – and may be a bit misleading. I have described an "initial interpretation" of the play as a cheerful woodland rom-com in which the Forest of Arden offers the wholesome, natural alternative to the viciousness of the court. "Problems" were then raised concerning that view. Straightaway, posing these questions makes the "original interpretation" seem like a strawman, set up only to be knocked down. That isn't quite right because the straight-forward, romantic atmosphere of the play is really there, as are the themes of courtly-corruption-contrasted-with-rural-simplicity. More importantly, presenting these questions as "problems" for which "solutions" are expected makes the play seem like an algebra problem, which it is not. One doesn't "solve" a Shakespeare play. At most, what can be offered are perspectives which, if a reader or listener finds

them helpful or interesting, can be added to the multitude of ways in which the play can be appreciated.

With that disclaimer made, here are some perspectives which respond to the issues just raised about *As You Like It*.

## 2) The Melancholy Jaques.

Begin by looking at Jaques or, as he is called by others and as he styles himself, “the *melancholy* Jaques.” We hear about him before we meet him. Immediately after Duke Senior gives his speech praising “the uses of adversity,” one of the attending lords tells how “the melancholy Jaques grieves” even for the game animals that the duke’s party kills for food and “swears [the duke does] more usurp / Than doth the [his] brother that banish’d” him. (II. i. 26 - 28) Jaques does not share Duke Senior’s cheery optimism.

We might wonder why such a gloomy figure as Jaques is inserted into a comic play at all. Is he a sort of “tragic relief,” the emotional inverse of the idea of “comic relief” that is used to explain the gravedigger scene in *Hamlet*? Possibly; but I would suggest that Jaques’s observations are more than a diversion. Jaques speaks the truth that no one else in Duke Senior’s court dares speak aloud. Jaques reinforces the suspicion that Duke Senior’s aggressive optimism is a mask hiding darker and more realistic feelings.

When we turn to Act II, scene vii, we find a small crack in Duke Senior’s enforced cheerfulness. When Orlando exits to retrieve Adam and bring him to the campsite, Duke Senior comments on Orlando’s lot and his own:

DUKE SENIOR  
Thou seest **we are not all alone unhappy.**  
This wide and universal theater  
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene  
Wherein we play in.  
(II. iv. 136 - 139)

“We are not all alone unhappy.” In that single line, Duke Senior lets slip for a moment his mask of cheerful acceptance and his praise of unflattering adversity. In fact, this small gaffe is the spark that kindles Jaques into his “Seven Ages of Man” speech with its parabolic arc, springing up from puking infancy and cratering inevitably at the end in “mere oblivion.” (II. vii. 166). Jaques’s melancholy allows everyone in the Duke’s



company to maintain the pretense of happiness while locating their feelings of hopelessness outside of themselves – in him.

If you will excuse a silly comparison, Jaques seems to play the role of “Duke Senior’s despondency translator.” Perhaps some of you have seen comedian Keegan-Michael Key’s character “Luther, President Obama’s ‘anger translator.’”<sup>20</sup> In his political career, Obama judged that any outward display of irritation would



be exaggerated in the press and had disciplined himself not to show it, an outward affect that earned him the nickname “No Drama Obama.” Playing on the President’s preternatural calmness, comedians Key and his partner Jordan Peele developed skits in which Peele portrayed the president and Key presented “Luther,” who stands behind him as a sign language translator might and transforms the “President’s” restraint into profane screeds of rage. Similarly here, as a leader of his small band of exiles, Duke Senior cannot allow himself the liberty of expressing feelings of hopelessness, anger or resentment. His position demands that he conceal his anxieties and put a cheerful face on a situation that is, in reality, dire. Jaques speaks the truth that Duke Senior and his companions know but cannot say.

We don’t have to believe that Jaques is somehow the ghostly alter ego or avatar of Duke Senior or that they are linked like Jekyll and Hyde. Of course, you are free to think any of that if you please. For present purposes, it is enough that the dramatist Shakespeare has crafted the character Jaques in ways that serve to reveal what is happening in the concealed inner life of Duke Senior.

With this idea in mind, we can begin to understand both the role of Jaques in the play *and* the particular magic of the Forest of Arden. Jaques is a window into the soul of Duke Senior. Arden is a place where the dramatist expands and elaborates a character into more than one incarnated form, allowing the emotional turmoil in that person to be

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<sup>20</sup> The Key and Peele presentation of “Obama’s Anger Translator” can be seen [here](#). At the 2015 White House Correspondents’ dinner, Key had the opportunity to play the role of Luther with President Obama himself. That performance can be seen [here](#).

played out in detachment from the demands of his real commitments. Senior's commitments to his followers prevents him from expressing his emotional distress, but in Arden those emotions get expressed and can be dealt with indirectly.

Such a view allows us to hear new significance in many scenes of the play. For instance, if Jaques has this sort of special connection to Duke Senior, we might hear in the prickly conversation between Jaques and Orlando in Act III scene ii echoes of a prospective father-in-law's suspicion of a young man courting his daughter. We may also detect a certain poignancy in Act IV scene 1, when Jaques attempts to become "better acquainted" with Rosalind. Rosalind tells Jaques that he has "good reason to be sad" because he has much experience but few possessions. "To have seen much and to have nothing", she tells him, "is to have rich eyes and poor hands." (IV. i. 22 -23). This observation is a passing curiosity if she is addressing a near stranger, but it is more revealing if Rosalind perceives in Jaques some echo of her father who has left her adrift in the world.

Audiences are generally so excited by Rosalind's romantic attraction to Orlando that her relation to her father tends to go with little comment or notice. Indeed, Rosalind does not dwell on the treachery of her uncle with anything like the resentment and bitterness that one might expect.<sup>21</sup> She and Celia came to the Forest of Arden because he was there, but she does not join him. She maintains her disguise and keeps her distance from him but does not say *why* she does so. We are left to imagine her motives. Perhaps they are not hard to guess. What for her father was a political misfortune has been for her a personal calamity. Rather than living as the princess of the court she has become a political refugee. She has been forced to live in a dependent role at the mercy of her uncle, Duke Frederick, who has no love for her. She is extremely vulnerable and must be frightened. Her father is responsible for the perilous position in which she finds herself, but she never says so. How could she?

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<sup>21</sup> The one reference that Rosalind makes to her father after arriving in the Forest of Arden is in Act III scene 4, lines 33 – 37: Rosalind jokes that she "met the Duke yesterday and had much question with him. He asked me of what parentage I was. I told him, of as good as he. So he laughed and let me go." She then adds, "But what talk we of fathers when there is such a man as Orlando?" If the audience sees Orlando eclipsing her concern with her father, they have good reason!

## 2) Touchstone and the Power of “If”.

That is where Touchstone comes in. Rosalind is in danger and Touchstone and his foolery helps show her how to conceal herself. When Rosalind, Celia and Touchstone enter the forest, they come upon Corin conversing with Silvius the poet-shepherd, who is complaining of his unrequited passion for the disdainful Phebe. We don't have to *imagine* that Rosalind feels attracted to the romance that Silvius embodies; she tells us so openly. “Alas, poor **shepherd**,” she sighs, “**searching of thy wound, / I have by hard adventure found mine own.**” Her sympathy is expressed in perfect iambic pentameter. Touchstone immediately deflates the mood and pulls her tone back towards the prosaic. “And I mine,” he says.

### TOUCHSTONE

... I remember when I was in love I broke my sword upon a stone and bid him take that for coming a-night to Jane Smile ... We that are true lovers run into strange capers. But as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly.

(II. iv. 43 - 53)

Later, Touchstone's mockery of Orlando's poetry-on-trees similarly turns Rosalind away from whatever romantic feelings might place her in danger. Rosalind has fallen hopelessly in love with Orlando. She has every reason to be frightened to show any romantic disposition outwardly. Who can blame her? Her powerful uncle wants her dead! She is in hiding. Detachment, dissimulation and disguise are her only defenses, and Touchstone helps her to maintain them.

A mirroring relation between Touchstone and Rosalind appears also in the gradual melting of their ironic distancing from romance. In Act III, scene iii, a fake marriage is planned between Touchstone and Audrey. Touchstone has retained “Sir Oliver Martext” to conduct the service because, as he admits to Jaques, “he is not like to marry me well; and not being well married, it will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife.” (III.ii, 82 - 85). Jaques blocks this fake wedding, and very soon afterwards we find Rosalind and Orlando participating in another pretend marriage, this time with Celia presiding. (IV. i. 120 - 130).

The final and perhaps the best sign of the connection between Touchstone and Rosalind appears in Touchstone's final speech, the “Seven Causes of Quarrel” in Act V. By the end of the play, we have watched Rosalind protect herself for a long time by

means of disguise and pretense. Her masculine disguise as Ganymede holds Orlando at arm's length, but – remember subplot 1? – it has inconveniently also attracted the eye of the shepherdess Phebe. Rosalind is surrounded by a web of unreality that is protective, but increasingly difficult to navigate. With the prospect of Celia's marriage to Oliver coming up, she decides to abandon her untenable masquerade. She invites the needed participants to the ceremony in a remarkable cascade of conditional clauses. Pay attention to the repetition of the word "if":

ROSALIND, as Ganymede

... (To Silvius.) I will help you **if** I can. (To Phoebe.) I would love you **if** I could.—... (To Phoebe.) I will marry you **if** ever I marry woman, and I'll be married tomorrow. (To Orlando.) I will satisfy you **if** ever I satisfy man, and you shall be married tomorrow. (To Silvius.) I will content you, **if** what pleases you contents you, and you shall be married tomorrow. (V. ii. 114 – 124)

The five "if's" result from the complications of Rosalind's concealment. She is like a squid lost in the ink-screen that she has deployed around herself. But she intends to collapse them all and exits with Celia to change her costume. Shakespeare thus needs to fill up a bit of time, just as he did in Act II when we got Jaques "Seven Ages of Man" speech, and he does it by bringing out Touchstone. Jaques introduces the jester to Duke Senior, and Touchstone advances his *bona fides* as a courtier, saying that he has "undone three tailors ... had four quarrels, and like to have fought one." The quarrel, he explains "was upon the seventh cause," (V. iv. 45 - 52) and Jaques insists that he explain himself. Touchstone complies with a *tour de force* of apparent nonsense.

TOUCHSTONE

... —As thus, sir: I did dislike the cut of a certain courtier's beard. He sent me word **if** I said his beard was not cut well, he was in the mind it was. This is called "the retort courteous." **If** I sent him word again it was not well cut, he would send me word he cut it to please himself. This is called "the quip modest." **If** again it was not well cut, he disabled my judgment. This is called "the reply churlish." **If** again it was not well cut, he would answer I spake not true. This is called "the reproof valiant." **If** again it was not well cut, he would say I lie. This is called "the countercheck quarrelsome," and so to "the lie circumstantial," and "the lie direct."  
(V. iv. 67 - 81)

Another collection of five "if's." To cap it off, at Jaques' request Touchstone repeats the entire litany, concluding with the observation that all but one of these forms of affront

can be turned aside, and that even for that one there is a way out. "All these you may avoid" [he says],

TOUCHSTONE

... but the lie direct, and you may avoid that too with an "if." I knew when seven justices could not take up a quarrel, but when the parties were met themselves, one of them thought but of an "if," as: "If you said so, then I said so." And they shook hands and swore brothers. **Your "if" is the only peacemaker: much virtue in "if."**

(V. iv. 100 – 106)

In one way, this seeming nonsense speech is a tribute to Rosalind's mastery of manipulation of the unreal in pursuit of reconciliation. In another way, it bows to Touchstone's relation to Jaques. Both speeches occupy empty spots when we are waiting for offstage actions. Touchstone's seven causes of conflict – all of which can be undone with an "if" – are a mirror of Jaques's "seven ages of man." Both speeches link their speakers to the persons to whom they are attached, Jaques's melancholy to Senior's hidden angst and Touchstone's "if's" to Rosalind's manipulation of alternative realities.

### Part V:

### Conclusion

*As You Like It* is, as I have said, my favorite among Shakespeare's plays. I used to think that I loved it because it was a lighthearted romantic comedy that included Golden Age themes that promoted the simple and natural over artificiality and complexity. (Not that I had any real intention to relocate to a forest myself; it just seemed attractive in the abstract. Like reading *Walden* in an air-conditioned apartment while eating Chinese carry-out.) Rosalind, the heroine, escapes the wickedness of court life and in a rustic forest environment finds her way to romance and true love.

That appreciation of the play overlooks too much. Most of all, it disregards the way in which Rosalind is *not* simply swept away with the sylvan spirit of romance. In her romance with Orlando, she deliberately avoids compliance with the traditions of pastoral courtship. Until the final moments of the play, she speaks in prose, hides from her lover and dismisses romance.

We can make sense of these departures from the simple, light-hearted, understanding of the play by recognizing that there is another plot in the background of

*As You Like It*, parallel with the romantic comedy that dominates the foreground of the play. In this half-concealed story, Rosalind is a frightened young woman whose father has abandoned her to live at the mercy of her hostile uncle. Driven to the forest, she resorts to disguise and remains hidden while her father, a few miles away at most, desperately pretends that everything is working out for the best. Gradually, father and daughter move toward a reconciliation that neither could quite envision until it happens, facilitated in part by the extraneous characters Jaques and Touchstone who help the father to recognize his real feelings and help Rosalind maneuver her way through the dangers that surround her. When Rosalind re-enters the wedding venue dressed as a bride, she abandons her pretenses both before her father and to her new husband. She speaks to her father in perfect iambic verse: "To you I give myself, for I am yours." She then turns to Orlando and repeats the same line verbatim: "To you I give myself, for I am yours." (V. iv. 115 - 116). Underneath the romantic comedy was a gradual story of overcoming trauma and achieving father-daughter reconciliation. It was harder to see, but it was there all along and it explains much that is otherwise simply puzzling.

This understanding of the play rests on indirect hints, more or less obscure clues and textual analysis that may be too subtle for its own good. The problems described above are real. The proposed answer to them is more speculative. Re-read the play or watch the play again and see how far this understanding helps illuminate the action. If you find this way of thinking about the play helpful, as I do, follow out its consequences for yourself and see where they lead. Take it, leave it, however you wish. Let it be *As You Like It*.