

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

As You Like it. 1588-89

Shakespeare

OVERVIEW

Like a *Midsummer Night's Dream* or *The Tempest*, *As you Like It* is set in a landscape of the mind, a forest which may have at its root the Forest of Arden in central England, or The Forest of the Ardennes, in Belgium and northwest France, the scene of exceptionally bloody fighting between the Allies and the Germans, in the First World War. (Reality and fantasy face off brutally against one another in such a landscape.) In that place of imagination, a tale which unfolds into love and rural festive marriage complexly disentangles itself. We owe the resolution of many complexities to the charming ingenuity of Rosalind, who closes the drama with a witty and self-effacing epilogue.

CHARACTERS

Rosalind. Rosalind is the daughter of the exiled Duke Senior, one of the jovial and upbeat seniors of this play in the forest. Early in the play she falls in love with Orlando, the youngest son to Sir Rowland de Bois; that first fanciful then passionate relationship leads Rosalind and her friend Celia into the Forest of Arden. Her adventures there become the axis of the play.

Orlando, the youngest son of the exiled Roland de Bois, is oppressed by his brother, and takes off on his own into the Forest of Arden, where he falls in love, fatefully and mutually, with Rosalind, who is eventually to become his wife.

Duke Senior is the father of Rosalind and the rightful ruler of the kingdom from which he has been exiled into the Forest of Arden

Duke Frederick, the brother of Duke Senior, and now the illegitimate occupant of the throne. He cruelly banishes his niece, Rosalind, from presence at the court.

Jaques. Is a loyal lord who followed Duke Senior into exile. He is melancholic, but whimsical, and an addict of the motley. He gives birth to many of Shakespeare's most amazing speeches on the human condition.

Celia. The daughter of Duke Frederic, and the bosom friend of Rosalind. In company with Rosalind, she escapes into the Forest of Arden, disguised as a shepherdess.

STORY

Split. The story begins with a split between two brothers, Shakespeare, as always, grounding his plays in concrete (if historically shadowy) specifics. In this case two brothers—Duke Senior and Duke Frederick—split, the latter taking over the duchy they inherit, the former, with his daughter Rosalind, fleeing into a vast but pastoral forest, the Forest of Arden. Duke Frederick's daughter, Celia, is a deep friend to Rosalind, and accompanies her into exile. At the same time the handsome young Orlando, who is being persecuted by his elder brother—the elder son of Duke Frederick—also goes into banishment, living hand to mouth in the forest.

Disguises. Rosalind and Celia (disguised as Ganymede; male, and Aliena; female) arrive in the forest, where the exiled Duke, Duke Senior, lives with a community of former supporters: among them is an especially loyal lord, Jacques, who is the classic melancholic of Shakespeare's lyric passion. To his imagining we owe such soliloquies as 'All the World's a Stage...'

Poems. Adam, Orlando's servant, and Orlando meet up, in the Forest, with the exiled Duke Senior and his followers. Orlando, in parallel with Rosalind, but without having any way to know that fact, remains entranced by the memory of this beautiful young woman, whom he had met and impressed, shortly before he went into exile. Orlando inscribes many of the trees of the forest with simple love poems to Rosalind, who in her forest wanderings sees them.

Complications. The shepherdess, Phebe, with whom the shepherd Silvius is in love, has also fallen in love with Ganymede (Rosalind in disguise), though "Ganymede" continually shows that "he" is not interested in Phebe. The country clown Touchstone, meanwhile, has fallen in love with a weak minded shepherdess, Audrey, and tries to woo her. (All this rustic tomfoolery, much of it rising to high comedy, plays out around the Orlando-Rosalind axis, after we have had a good look at Shakespeare's increasingly adroit skill at intercalating different puzzle pieces in the whole of a drama.) William, another shepherd, also attempts to marry Audrey, but is stopped by Touchstone, who threatens to kill him "a hundred and fifty ways". It is clear that there is some impending mass marriage scene on the horizon

Repentance. In a dramatic plot-realigning scene, Orlando sees Oliver in the forest and with skill and bravery saves him from being killed by a lioness. At last Oliver repents for his long time abuse of his younger brother, Orlando. Oliver meets Aliena (Celia) and falls in love with her. Rosalind sees resolutions everywhere. Oliver and Celia agree to marry, as of course do the deeply infatuated Rosalind and Orlando. Orlando and Rosalind, Oliver and Celia, Silvius and Phebe, and Touchstone and Audrey all are married in the final [scene](#). At this point the trends of happiness are so potent that we discover that Duke Frederick also has repented; that even the superstructure of the drama has to be realigned. The Duke decides to restore his legitimate brother to the [dukedom](#) and to adopt a religious life. Jacques, ever melancholic, declines their invitation to return to the court, preferring to stay in the forest and to adopt a religious life as well. Rosalind tops it all off with a saucy epilogue recommending men to women, and vice versa, and saluting the power of love to overcome inarticulateness,

THEMES

Love From the outset of the play, we see the importance of love taking place 'at first sight,' as Christopher Marlowe put it. When Rosalind watches Orlando beat the highly favored Charles, in a wrestling match, she is totally captivated. Like Orlando, who also goes into banishment in the Forest of Arden, Rosalind can think of nothing but the handsome young man who won his match, nor he of anything but the lovely free spirited Rosalind, to whom he carves love poems on all the trees in the forest.

Greediness The provocation to this wonderful play about love and joy is provided by the driver of greed. And competitiveness. Duke Frederick has nudged his brother out of the way, for control of their hereditary duchy. Greed and then vindictiveness seem to have pushed the Duke to exile his brother and his retinue, as well as his niece Rosalind. He is thwarted, in the end, by the insistence of his daughter, Celia, to follow her dear friend Rosalind. In the end Duke Frederick has made so many enemies that he repents his greed and power politics.

Resolution Rosalind is the very image of fantasy, female planning, and high intelligence in that kind of solving of life problems which are frequently presented as puzzles—Who came from where, and when? Who will marry whom, and how will that sort out with the other candidates?—in Shakespeare's comedies. Her plotting, for that is her drive toward Orlando, starts with her adopting the Ganymede disguise, and playing herself out as a guy, to the extent she can, which is limited, and ends with her resolving the main players, but also the assorted rustics, into their own appropriate marriage slots.

Humanity In Act II, vii, Jacques, the lord who has faithfully followed Duke Senior into the forest, launches into a soliloquy on 'the seven ages of man.' This insightful and deeply imagined purview of the human condition has haunted all serious humanists, since first it was penned. Shakespeare, through the motley fool Jacques, seems to adopt a ruthless but sharply accurate vision of mankind's trajectory through life.

CHARACTER ANALYSIS

ROSALIND

Character The main character is the fascinating Rosalind. At the beginning of the play, when first fielding the news of her own banishment, Rosalind thinks first of the pain she will feel, at separation from Celia, her beloved friend. (Celia settles the issue by determining to follow her friend.) She sees at once the dangers facing two women as they head out alone into the Forest of Arden, and she hits on the disguises—Ganymede, Aliena—by which they are to pretend, for as long as they can stand it, to be man and woman. The breaking point, for Rosalind, comes when the rustic girl Phoebe falls in love with her, and she (Rosalind) realizes that sooner or later she will need to disclose her gender identity, which she does with gusto after she has rematched herself with Orlando in the forest. The geometrically perfect apportioning of marriages, at the very end, is the beautiful result of Rosalind's planning, as is her epilogue, in which she wraps up the whole tale.

Parallels Rosalind touches the essence of the feminine, what Goethe called 'das ewig weibliche,' 'the eternally female,' that essential condition he was at the time pinning on Helen of Troy, in his *Faust*. Helen herself, therefore, might be a starting parallel to Rosalind, different though their conditions and ages might be. The toothless old Trojan men, sitting on the ramparts of their city, as death and destruction came down around them, saw Helen climbing the staircase into her quarters, and muttered to one another 'it was worth it.' Antigone, from the angle of passionate female youth, expressed the same irrepressible female determination, to do her duty by her male kin. She was too strong for the macho bureaucrat, Creon. To jump, what more of a feminine minx could one devise than Estella in Dickens' *Great Expectations*? Pip faces, in her, all the perplexity the male brings, to the bundle of fantasies, insights, and allurements the eternally feminine exerts.

Illustrative moments

Faithful Rosalind remains true, throughout, to her bosom friend, Celia. They trudge together through the Forest of Arden, eat what they can find, and sleep where they can, until finally they meet up with Duke Senior's welcoming team. Rosalind remains fiercely faithful to her first impressions of the handsome Orlando as he throws the redoubtable Charles in the wrestling match that opens the play.

Impulsive Rosalind falls in love at first sight, when she observes the wrestling match in which Orlando defeats the renowned Charles. She makes no calculations, about how her family and his would fit together, and she has no idea how she will remain in touch with Orlando. But she knows that love will find a way, for she has seen it in his eyes too.

Organized It is Rosalind, under the pressure of Phebe, who has fallen in love with her thinking she is a man, who devises a formula for getting all of the amorous couples effectively paired off. The prompt to this ingenious formulation is Phebe's own mistaken love for what she takes to be the handsome Ganymede.

Antic It goes with Rosalind's light hearted and antic spirit, that she is whimsical, a tease, and that, like Beatrice in *Much Ado about Nothing*, she is endlessly witty and inventive in language. How could

Rosalind play more anticly with Orlando than by talking him into becoming her tutee in the love process of winning the heart of Rosalind herself?

Discussion questions

What do you see as Shakespeare's dramatic reason for introducing rustic characters and clowns—Phebe, Silvius, Touchstone, Corbin—into the present play about love and marriage? Do you see why the French dramatists—Racine, Corneille—a half century later on the whole felt that Shakespeare was a barbarian, flaunting all the rules of *bienseance*, recklessly blending elite characters with rustics?

Jacques's speech on the seven ages of man, wonderful and moving as it is, might seem an intrusion into *As you Like it*. Is it an intrusion? Or is the play itself about the whole scope of the human life? Do you appreciate the kind of brilliant outsider contributions that the melancholy Jacques makes to this play?

What is the role of the fool in Shakespeare's dramaturgy? (Jacques's desire for motley, the cloth typically worn by the jester or fool, clearly goes with this lord's wish to stand outside social norms and speak freely, as the jesters so preciously did, for mediaeval monarchs.) Is Jacques, whose world view is pessimistic, a natural for undercutting the optimistic and joyful which is normally dominant in Shakespeare's comedies? Does the perspective of Jacques fit in any way with that of Rosalind?