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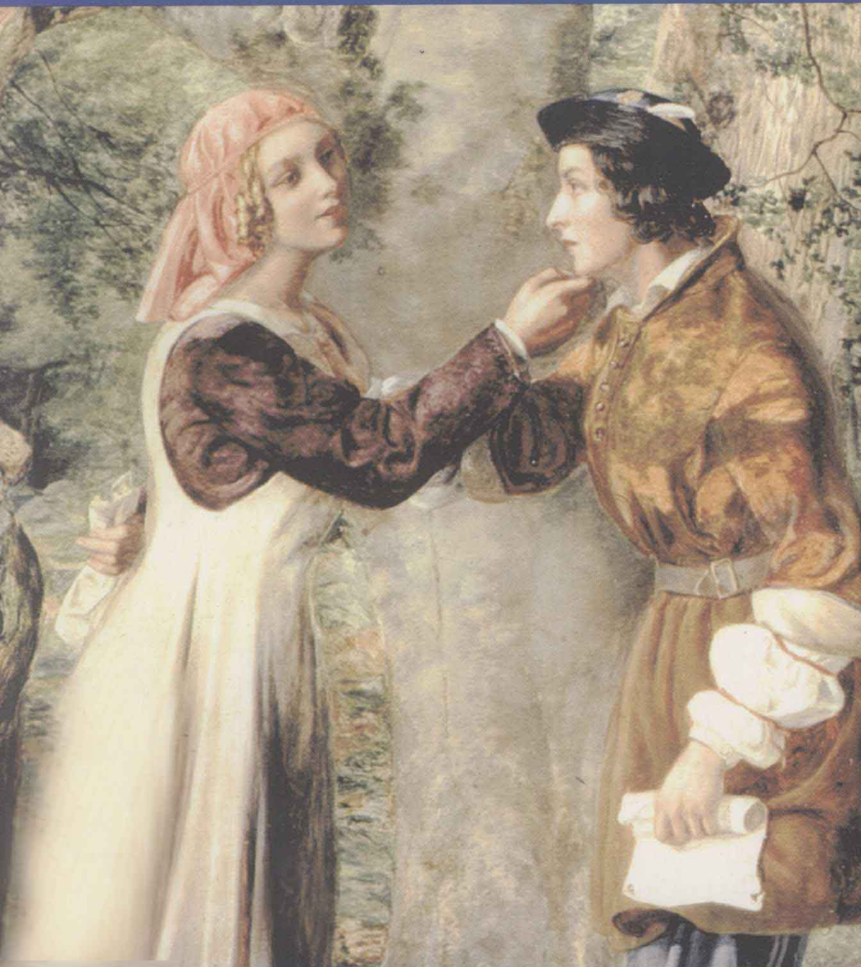
# As You Like It

## WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE



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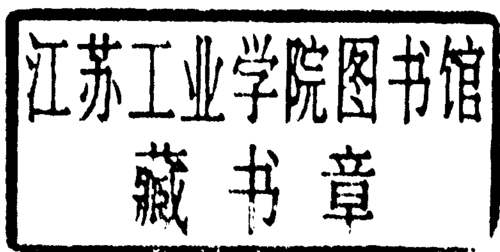

# AS YOU LIKE IT

**William Shakespeare**

*With an Introduction and Notes by*
CEDRIC WATTS

WORDSWORTH CLASSICS

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# INTRODUCTION

'[T]he truest poetry is the most feigning'
(*As You Like It*, 3.3.16).

'[T]he Bard gets his chance just at the moment when his obsolescence has become unendurable'
(George Bernard Shaw).[1]

If it's realism that you like, *As You Like It* will *not* be as you like it. This comedy by Shakespeare can seem ostentatiously unrealistic: a romantic, escapist, highly-patterned, witty and reflective play which employs as central character a woman (originally played by a boy), disguised as a young man, pretending to be a woman, and being wooed by a woman who takes her for a man. At the end, characters pair off like the animals entering Noah's ark two by two, and the god Hymen appears out of nowhere to preside over the occasion (though, since Hymen, god of marriage, had in ancient times disguised himself as a woman, he'll find himself at home in this plot). You might well ask what an ancient Greek god is doing in a play set in the Christian era; to which the answer is that his presence is as logical as the presence of a lioness in what, most of the time, seems to be France. Of course, the 'Forest of Arden' of the play seems to wander between France, England, the classical Arcadia and the never-never-land of pastoral romance, just as the characters' names are variously French, English and indeterminate.

Realism? This play often thumbs its nose at it. Look at Oliver. In Act 1, he's an evil Machiavellian who seeks to destroy his brother Orlando. In Act 4, having been saved from both a snake and a lioness by his brother, he becomes a totally reformed character.

Celia, understandably puzzled, says:

> Was't you that did so oft contrive to kill him?

The prompt reply is:

> 'Twas I; but 'tis not I: I do not shame
> To tell you what I was, since my conversion
> So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.

Oliver promptly falls in love with Celia, transfers his wealth to Orlando, and decides to 'live and die a shepherd' in the forest. If you think *that*'s implausible, how about the conversion of the wicked Duke Frederick? –

> Duke Frederick, hearing how that every day
> Men of great worth resorted to this forest,
> Addressed a mighty power, which were on foot,
> In his own conduct, purposely to take
> His brother here and put him to the sword:
> And to the skirts of this wild wood he came;
> Where, meeting with an old religious man,
> After some question with him, was converted
> Both from his enterprise and from the world:
> His crown bequeathing to his banished brother,
> And all their lands restored to them again
> That were with him exiled.

Just like that! With plotting like this, who needs fairy-tales?

*As You Like It* has a plot in which wickedness is rampant in Act 1, in order to set people on the run, get them into the forest, put some into disguise, and, in short, to engender the comic complications; but it's also a plot in which, at the end, the wickedness melts away like a chocolate teapot, four marriages are briskly co-ordinated, and harmony prevails. On the way to that ending, we have to believe that Rosalind, when wearing the clothes of a youth, cannot be recognised by her lover or her father, that Phebe the country-woman can accurately quote Marlowe's *Hero and Leander*, and that choristers ('exiled pages') can suddenly emerge from the wood-land to give a harmonious rendering of that evergreen lyric, 'It Was a Lover and His Lass'. *As You Like It* is replete with witty jests; but the evolution of the English language has rendered many of

them obscure. Even scholarly editors are baffled by some of the word-play;[2] and, in any case, a joke explained is a joke killed. Various jests that have preserved their sense have lost their humour. For instance, Touchstone's rigmarole on 'the degrees of the lie' mocks formal niceties of etiquette which sank into oblivion long ago. Again, Elizabethans seem to have found perennially funny the notion that a cuckolded husband sprouts horns from his forehead: horns which are invisible to him but visible to others. In *As You Like It*, snails, rams and deer are all recruited to provide cues for this cliché. In Act 4, scene 2, a dead deer is introduced so that the company can give a rendering of a naughty song which declares that both your grandfather and father wore the horns. Indeed, Touchstone declares: 'As horns are odious, they are necessary': necessary for Shakespearian comedy, evidently, but not always so for modern directors, who often excise such tediously dated material.[3] As Shaw has remarked:

> Who would endure such humor from anyone but Shakespear? – an Eskimo would demand his money back if a modern author offered him such fare.[4]

In the past, sympathetic commentators repeatedly commended the sweetly lyrical qualities of the play. For example, in 1877 Edward Dowden said:

> Upon the whole, *As You Like It* is the sweetest and happiest of all Shakspere's comedies. No one suffers . . . It is mirthful, but the mirth is sprightly, graceful, exquisite . . . There is an open-air feeling throughout the play. The dialogue . . . catches freedom and freshness from the atmosphere.[5]

And in 1907 Max Beerbohm declared:

> No other play is so fragrant, through and through, with young lyrical beauty. It is less like a play than like a lyric that has been miraculously prolonged to the length of a play without losing its airiness and its enchantment. If butterflies were gregarious, one would liken *As You Like It* to a swarm of butterflies all a-wing.[6]

You can see what they have in mind; but their romantic praise may sound, to a later generation, rather like an apology for a trivial

piece of escapism. A good production, however, shows that the pleasures of *As You Like It* are substantial enough; though the play needs to be considered in an appropriate context.

The most appropriate of contexts is the pastoral tradition, which, in Europe, is practically as old as literature itself. Theocritus's *Idylls* and Virgil's *Eclogues* helped to establish its conventions, and these endured until at least the Victorian Age.[7] The pastoral offers a beautiful rural landscape populated by shepherds who have ample leisure in which to play their pipes and sing songs of love or lamentation. In Sir Philip Sidney's *Arcadia* and in Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde* (the main source for *As You Like It*), the pastoral realm was a location of melodramatic events, disguises and pursuits, and stylised amatory rhetoric; noble characters travel from the court or city to the fields and woodlands and encounter the rustic denizens. When Shakespeare adapted the material of *Rosalynde*, he reduced the number of violent actions, sharpened the characterisation, and accentuated the comedy of love and courtship. By adding Touchstone and Audrey to the couples heading for marriage, he extended the thematic range. The sceptical Jaques is another Shakespearian innovation. What results from the adaptation and modification of Lodge's material is a series of similarities and dissimilarities in the situations of the paired characters which gives a full, partly-sympathetic and partly-critical treatment to romantic and courtly love. Traditionally, the pastoral setting provides warrant for comparisons of the simple life to the life of high civilisation, and these in turn lead to a consideration of human nature itself: to what extent is it actually natural or artificial, intrinsic or culturally-conditioned? These topics gain explicit and implicit development in *As You Like It*. Indeed, it's in the lively diversity of the dramatised discussion that much of the play's appeal lies. And there's no doubt of its enduring appeal. *As You Like It* has long been one of Shakespeare's most popular comedies: in one fifteen-year time-span there were more than fifty different revivals of it in the United Kingdom;[8] and numerous adaptations for the cinema and television have extended its audiences. (Even the acerbic Shaw had found it fascinating and largely delightful.) Part of the pleasure is as traditional as that of pantomime: we enter a benign region of cross-dressing and cross-purposes, of clowning and song and dance, knowing that eventually, however preposterously, all will

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end well. There are obvious anticipations of the modern musical comedy, when characters break from prose into well-rehearsed lyrics. But part of the pleasure is more strenuous, as we follow that questioning of nature, human nature and the comedy of courtship and sexual desire.

Pastoral hyperbole is uttered by Duke Senior in the first scene set in the forest:

> Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
> Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
> More free from peril than the envious court? . . .
> 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.

But he will; he certainly will. 'Cultural primitivism' is the name given to the advocacy of a culturally simple way of life, a return to nature.[9] And the scholars who have defined and analysed that topic have made evident the easy paradox that such literary and philosophical advocates are generally writers who enjoy the amenities of advanced civilisation. Theocritus and Virgil were no tillers of the soil. The countryside is fine for a holiday but hard work for a labourer or the owner of a small farm. Duke Senior, once his lands are restored to him and his exile can end, will leave the forest and resume the civilised life. But even in that scene in which he extols the sylvan world, the play's argumentative dexterity is evident. He and his men kill deer for food, and there follows a poignant, indeed sentimental, picture of a wounded deer; and that victim prompts Jaques's ironic reflections that the lords who escape tyranny have introduced a new tyranny to the woodlands:

> we
> Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what's worse,
> To fright the animals and kill them up
> In their assigned and native dwelling-place.

In seeking sanctuary, the men have destroyed a sanctuary; and while praising the unspoilt world, they are despoiling it. (This ecological case has extended vigorously through time to the

present, in which it has become pressingly urgent.) The Duke, who extols the simple rural existence, himself tells Orlando:

> True is it that we have seen better days,
> And have with holy bell been knolled to church,
> And sat at good men's feasts . . .

Indeed, the debate about the merits of the pastoral life is given brisk summary by Touchstone, when he tells the shepherd:

> In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach.

If there is a calculated ambiguity in the treatment of the sylvan retreat, there is a more extensive calculated ambiguity in the play's treatment of love. The cross-dressing repeatedly generates subtle questions about sexual attraction and sexual identity. Rosalind, dressed as Ganymede, rebukes Phebe for her rejection of Silvius. Phebe is then smitten, to Rosalind's embarrassment, with love for Ganymede. Has Phebe been so completely misled by the young person's disguise, or is the attraction really to the subliminally-recognised femininity of the 'youth'? Again, when Ganymede asks Orlando to pretend that the 'youth' is Rosalind, cooing 'Woo me, woo me' to the fascinated man, is Orlando's fascination that of a lover drawn by Rosalind-like aspects of Ganymede, or is it of a lover attracted by a confusingly androgynous lad? Sexual identities become teasingly volatile. The central ambiguity is enacted on a large scale by the disguised Rosalind. Though deeply in love with Orlando, and genuinely flattered by his ritualised professions of desire for his lady-love (the poems, the fervent hyperboles), her male guise gives her licence and opportunity to mock and probe the amatory conventions. As she tells Orlando:

> Love is merely a madness, and I tell you deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do: and the reason why they are not so punished and cured is, that the lunacy is so ordinary that the whippers are in love too.

And famously, to challenge his protestations that he would die if rejected, she declares:

> Men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love.

Repeatedly, the most lively scepticism and common sense on the subject come from the sprightly 'youth' who, nevertheless, is more deeply in love than anyone else in the play; and this is one reason for the fulness and attractiveness of this central characterisation. It is only a mild exaggeration to assert that the success of a modern production of *As You Like It* depends on the actress's skill in rendering both the entrancement and the scepticism, both the rapture and the lively intelligence of Rosalind. Vanessa Redgrave was a renowned Rosalind in the early 1960s, and Helen Mirren came not far short in the late 1970s. Mirren was at her best in those moments when the underlying yearning threatens to subvert her masculine masquerade. Both performances glowingly evinced Rosalind's knowledge that to be in love is both an enslavement to modes of folly and a liberation into a realm of ecstasy.

The ardour of Orlando and Rosalind has its farcically reductive counterpart in Touchstone's reminiscences of his yearning for Jane Smile:

> I remember the kissing of her batler and the cow's dugs that her pretty chopt hands had milked . . .

And his attitude to his partner Audrey is frankly cynical:

> As the ox hath his bow, sir, the horse his curb, and the falcon her bells, so man hath his desires; and as pigeons bill, so wedlock would be nibbling[;]

and therefore he presses in,

> amongst the rest of the country copulatives, to swear and to forswear, according as marriage binds and blood breaks.

It's he who prefers a marriage of dubious legality, as 'it will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife'. A poem by Orlando praising the peerless beauty of Rosaline meets its match in Touchstone's bawdy parody:

> He that sweetest rose will find,
> Must find love's prick and Rosalind.

In such ways, Touchstone provides some of the salt and vinegar to offset the play's sweetness.

Another provider of vinegar is, of course, the melancholy Jaques, detached, aloof and sceptical. Amid the celebrations at the play's close, he strikes a mildly discordant note, preferring to seek the company of a religious convert. And from Jaques has come the most famous 'set piece' of the play, the much-anthologised 'Seven Ages of Man' speech, which depicts man's life as a predictable performance, a sequence of brief rôles beginning with the 'mewling and puking' infant and ending with the horror of senility,

> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

But his pessimism is undercut as, immediately after this line, Orlando enters supporting the aged Adam. Though Adam is old and weak, he has preserved his fidelity and dignity (not to mention his irritating moralism); and the caring support given him by Orlando exposes the human failings in Jaques's posture of patronising detachment. There's even some hypocrisy in Jaques, for, when he claims that his mission is to provide caustic medicine for the world's vices, the exiled Duke cries:

> Most mischievous foul sin, in chiding sin:
> For thou thyself hast been a libertine,
> As sensual as the brutish sting itself . . .

It is thus evident that, in this play, no character speaks with comprehensive authority. We experience a diversity of attitudes to a diversity of topics, and what emerges is a sense of the potentiality for benign harmony in human existence, even if we are reminded that the actuality will always contain its discords. Though we are fallen beings, we harbour and are sustained by memories of the lost Eden.

As John Wilders has said,

> although *As You Like It* is a romance, its effect is not merely romantic; it is unsentimental. The combination of a prevailing exuberance with a canny realism which distinguishes Rosalind is characteristic of the whole play. Shakespeare tactfully reminds

> us, largely through Rosalind, that, though men are April when they woo, they are December when they wed; that marriage, though a kind of ending, is also a beginning; and that life itself is but a flower in springtime.[10]

You may say, 'We knew that already'; but this play has given distinctively memorable dramatic embodiment to the ideas. Imaginative productions with intelligent acting can expose the truths within the feigning. And even the irredeemably dated features of the play may lend a poignant resonance to its reminders of the lost Eden and of life's ephemerality.

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NOTES TO THE INTRODUCTION

1 Shaw was commenting on a production of *As You Like It* in December 1896 which used a full text instead of a mutilated text of the play. His review, first published in the *Saturday Review* for 5 December 1896, is reprinted in *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, Vol. 2 (Constable: London, 1932), pp. 266–71.

2 At 3.4.38–9, for instance, we are told that 'a puny tilter . . . breaks his staff like a noble goose'. Some editors, endeavouring to make wit, or mere sense, of 'noble goose', have suggested that 'noble' should be 'notable' or even 'nose-quilled', and that 'goose' may be a mis-reading of 'goofe' (meaning 'stupid or clumsy fellow': hence Walt Disney's Goofy).

3 The booklet supplied with the video of the BBC's 1978 production (director: Basil Coleman) reprints the play's text and conveniently marks those passages which it was deemed necessary to excise. They include: the 'puny tilter . . . noble goose' lines; some 'cuckold's horns' gags in Act 3, scenes 2 and 3, and in Act 4, scene 1; and Touchstone's 'degrees of the lie' speech.

4 George Bernard Shaw: *Our Theatres in the Nineties*, Vol. 2, p. 268. The spellings 'humor' and 'Shakespear' are Shaw's.

5 Edmund Dowden: *Shakspere: A Critical Study of His Mind and Art* (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner, undated reprint), pp. 80, 81. The spelling 'Shakspere' is Dowden's.

6 Max Beerbohm: review of a production in December 1907, reprinted in *Around Theatres* (London: Hart-Davis, 1953), pp. 477–80; quotation from p. 478.

7 In the twentieth century, the pastoral tradition lost its classical trappings, but some of its elements survived in sophisticated, complex and realistic works, notably in D. H. Lawrence's *The Rainbow* and William Golding's *The Inheritors*. The association of the sylvan world with sexual liberation was evident in E. M. Forster's *Maurice* and, of course, in Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover*.

8 Agnes Latham: 'Introduction' to *As You Like It* (London and New York: Methuen, 1975), p. xc.

9 Primitivism, in the sense of 'a belief in the desirability of a "return to nature" ', is listed in *A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), p. 790. The topic is thoroughly explored by Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas in *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935). Their Chapter 1 distinguishes between cultural and chronological primitivism and between the 'hard' and 'soft' varieties.

10 John Wilders: 'Introduction' to *As You Like It* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1978), p. 19.

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