5.2: As You Like It

Shakespeare’s comedies cover an enormous range of styles. His earliest comedy was *The Comedy of Errors*, based largely on work by the Roman playwright Plautus. This play is amusing, though it is rather simple, but with its two sets of twins separated in infancy and accidentally reunited, it foreshadows Shakespeare’s continuing concern with themes of identity, self-knowledge, and self-discovery. Among his last plays are several, including *Cymbeline*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*, that take the notion of comedy so far that they are classed together as romances. What could “comedy” mean that it covers so many different kinds of plays?

Although numerous comedies were written in fifth-century BCE Greece, very few have survived, and they are all by Aristophanes. If Aristophanes’ comedies were staged today as they were in his own day, they would be considered obscene. They are full of sexual jokes, both verbal and visual, and they are often quite funny. But they are also quite serious. Aristophanes, whose political views tended to the conservative side, used his comedies to comment on some of the most important moral issues of his time. His most famous play, *Lysistrata*, is a very funny yet devastating attack on the Peloponnesian War and on the male values that prolonged that destructive and useless war.

In the Middle Ages (how is that for a leap?), comedy came to mean a story that ended happily. The best example is a poem rather than a play, Dante’s early fourteenth-century *Comedy* (which his contemporaries renamed *The Divine Comedy*). There are not a lot of laughs in Dante’s description of his journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven; but the heavenly ending, including Dante’s vision of God and his assurance of order in the universe, makes the poem a comedy, a divine comedy. It ends happily and it conveys a profound sense of order and truth.

Shakespeare’s comedies show this same progression. He begins with an imitation of Plautus, who himself imitated Aristophanes, and he ends with the sublime poetry of *The Tempest*. It should be clear by now that describing a work as a comedy does not necessarily mean that it is funny. There may be much to laugh at in these comedies—the last act of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* can be particularly hysterical—but the comedies also present a view of the world that can...
be profound and moving and that even now challenge many of our assumptions. There are times in Shakespeare when comedy verges on tragedy and tragedy verges on comedy. For instance, if Romeo had not been quite so impetuous, if he had talked for only another minute or two in the last act, Juliet would have awakened, the tragedy would have been averted, and they could begin sending out wedding announcements. The play would have been a comedy. On the other hand, if Aemilia had not appeared at the end of *The Comedy of Errors*, the play would conclude with executions and other punishments and, despite all of its humor, it might have been *The Tragedy of Errors*. It may be a little too simple to say that the end of a play determines whether it is a comedy or a tragedy, but my point is that the comedies are not simple vacuous entertainments and they are hardly frivolous, funny though they may be. In fact they often provide profound commentaries on human existence. *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* offers serious reflections on a number of political issues, while *Taming of the Shrew* raises issues of gender relations that are still with us.

Actually, in many ways the comedies are more difficult to deal with than the tragedies. In a tragedy the hero dies—Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Troilus, Coriolanus, Antony and Cleopatra all die, and so their stories end. In the comedies, the main characters’ stories will continue, because the comedies convey a sense of rightness, of wholeness, of preparation for a better future. In fact, the comedies usually end with weddings, with the promise of happiness to come. (Some of the plays, however, like *Measure for Measure* or *All’s Well that Ends Well*, conclude with the prospect of marriages that may not turn out well, which leads these plays to be classified among the “problem” plays.) Tragic heroes may learn about themselves and the world, but at the end they are gone, though the world continues. In the comedies, the characters also learn about themselves and the world, and at the end they are ready to apply that knowledge in a world where that knowledge might prove beneficial.

*As You Like It* is a wonderful example of Shakespearian comedy. It was written almost exactly in the middle of Shakespeare’s playwriting career and combines the fun and humor of the early comedies with the special kind of profundity that characterizes the later ones. The play is based on a romance by Thomas Lodge called *Rosalynde* that had been printed in 1590. *Rosalynde* is fun to read, though late sixteenth-century prose can take some getting used to, but we do not need to read it in order to grasp the play, for Shakespeare made the story his own as surely as Sophocles made the story of Oedipus his.

One of the key factors in this play is the way Shakespeare eventually moves all of his characters from the various corrupt courts that they inhabit into the forest of Arden, where harmony and order can be restored. Shakespeare used a similar device in other plays, like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, but it is not a device that Shakespeare invented. Rather it fits into the history of the pastoral. In numerous highly developed societies, the rural world has been used as a symbol of naturalness and simplicity. Of course, from the ancient Greek writers Theocritus, Bion, and Moschus through Virgil and modern writers like Robert Frost, there have been tremendous variations on pastoralism. Frequently the characters in pastoral poetry, who are usually shepherds, speak in very sophisticated ways about politics, poetry, and religion, a combination that Christianity developed in part based on the traditional imagery of Jesus as both the good shepherd and the lamb of God. The great age of Elizabethan poetry began in 1579 with the publication of Edmund Spenser’s pastoral collection, *The Shepheardes Calender*.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare uses a slightly different conception of pastoral. All of his major characters come to the forest of Arden, a rural retreat where the complexities of court life can be largely forgotten. In a sense, the Duke still maintains his leadership, but there is no pomp in the forest, no court behavior. He is the first among equals rather than the leader who must be obeyed. Even the tyrannical villains who enter the forest, Oliver and Duke Frederick, cease to be villains when they get there. This forest, or as it is often called, this “green world,” has therapeutic qualities. People
come there and their problems are straightened out. The native inhabitants of the forest, however, like William or the shepherds Corin and Silvius, are presented as really simple, highly unsophisticated people. Occasionally Shakespeare, like other pastoralists, pokes fun at their simplicity, but just as often their simplicity is contrasted with the artifices of sophistication so that their native goodness is allowed to appear. As we read a play like *As You Like It*, then, we must avoid stereotyping the characters. Phebe and Audrey may be a little simple, but they are not evil. They provide some humor, but so, in different ways, do the more sophisticated characters. And we should realize, too, that Orlando is several times referred to as the son of Rowland de Boys. Since "de Boys" means "of the woods," we can see how thoroughly the pastoral motif pervades the play.

Although the pastoral setting seems to have healing powers, it is not the Garden of Eden. There are, as we shall see, numerous references in the play to a kind of Edenic existence, but the effect of those references is to remind us that we live, in the Christian terms that Shakespeare would have grown up with, in a fallen world, a world that, no matter what we do, we cannot wholly repair. But by the end of the play, we certainly feel that at least some healing has taken place. In Shakespeare’s tragedies we often feel that there is evil in the world and that evil must be excised so that healing and reconciliation can take place. In the comedies, we often see healing and reconciliation. In both kinds of plays, the characters must come to terms with themselves, must learn who and what they are. *Hamlet* opens with the key words that resound throughout Shakespeare’s plays, “Who’s there?” At the end of *Othello*, Othello knows better than he has ever known in his life what he is, but along with that knowledge comes the necessity of death. In *As You Like It*, too, self-knowledge and self-deception play important roles, but no one dies.

Actually Shakespeare was always fascinated by questions of role-playing and self-discovery, which probably is not surprising for someone who was involved in theatre. In many of his plays, characters stage scenes, as Polonius and Iago do, while other characters adopt disguises or pretend to be other than they are. One of the best examples comes in *As You Like It*. One of the conventions of Shakespeare’s theatre was that women’s parts were played by boys. We do not know why, but it is interesting to note that in ancient Greece and in Japanese Noh dramas, women’s parts were played by men. Although the female characters are so important in all of these kinds of drama, women themselves were not allowed on stage. At any rate, at one point in the play, Rosalind, the young woman being played by a boy, disguises herself (or is it himself?) as a young man and that young man then pretends to be Rosalind. In other words, we have a boy playing a girl playing a boy playing a girl, and each identity is real at some level. We even have Rosalind pretending not to be Rosalind pretending to be Rosalind. The reality keeps changing, depending on where the observer is.

Rosalind’s disguises, however, are voluntarily assumed. Many of the other characters also disguise themselves, but less self-consciously. The play abounds with references to role-playing. For instance, the Duke says,

This wide and universal theater

Presents more woeful pageants than the scene

Wherein we play in.

(*II.vii.137-39*)

On one level he is talking about the world, and he is acknowledging that other people, elsewhere, also have their own stories; but on another level he may be referring to this scene, the seventh scene of the second act of *As You Like It*, and saying that the theatre, the reflection of human life, encompasses any number of stories. And when Jaques replies
with his famous “All the world’s a stage, /And all the men and women merely players” speech, he complicates matters even more. If all the world’s a stage, then all the men and women watching him make this speech on a stage are also on stage, and what they are watching is—shades of *Hamlet*—a play within a play. And suddenly the boundaries of reality have been stretched again. Where does one play end and the other begin? That dividing line between the stage and the audience dissolves, as the audience becomes part of the larger play that includes both players and observers. If the actors in *As You Like It* are portraying characters who are seeking or affirming their identities, then so are the people in the audience, that is, the people who have undertaken to play the role of the audience in the context of the larger play of the world.

We can see this theme worked out in a number of ways throughout the play. At the beginning of Act II, we hear the Duke, who has been exiled to the forest by his usurping younger brother, comment on how nicely things have worked out:

> Sweet are the uses of adversity,
> 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 every thing.
>
> (II.i.12-17)

To which one of his attendants, Amiens, responds, “I would not change it.” The Duke claims to have found good in the evil that has befallen him, and Amiens agrees. Truly, by the end of the play, when order and harmony are restored and everyone is happy, this sojourn in the forest proves to have been universally beneficial. Still, as soon as the Duke learns that his brother Frederick has taken up a religious life and abandoned the court, he proclaims his intention to return there immediately. The forest may be nice in adversity, but none of the characters except Jaques want to stay there. Has the Duke been lying—even if only to himself? No. In adversity he loves the forest and finds it beneficial, but he is a man of the court and longs to return there. Perhaps at court he will live in accordance with the things he has learned in the forest. Perhaps he will not.

The words that the Duke uses in his adversity speech are also important in other ways. When he finds tongues, books, and sermons in the trees, brooks, and stones, he means that nature has taught him lessons, good lessons about proper living, the kind of lessons he might find in sermons. Shakespeare could have made that point in a number of ways, however, so that we must look at the significance of the words he used. When he made similes out of tongues and books and sermons, he focused our attention on nature and language, though this speech is hardly the first occasion in the play when these motifs are combined.

In the very first speech in the play, Orlando complains to Adam about his treatment at this brother’s hands. In a play in which the characters retreat to an almost Edenic forest, an old man named Adam is a significant character. Orlando
complains that while his middle brother is off at school, he is kept at home and treated like an animal. He compares his situation to “the stalling of an ox,” says the horses are treated better, and adds that his brother “lets me feed with his hinds.” Surely Orlando’s complaints are justified, and yet he is also quite mistaken. Later on, he will obtain an education, but he will do so in the forest, not in a school, and his education will teach him that he must be more natural. When he falls in love with Rosalind, he makes the trees speak by hanging his love poems from them. In the Duke’s terms, he gives “tongues” to the trees, but unfortunately his poetry is not very good, full as it is of all the clichés that composed so much Elizabethan love poetry. He must go beyond the clichés and be able to feel and to express his natural love. One reason that doing so is so difficult is fallen human nature. What Orlando seems to want to learn in his opening speech is to be like the courtiers, perhaps even like his brother. What he ultimately learns is to be himself, to be natural—that is, as without artifice as a human being can be, at one with nature.

We can see these ideas in Orlando’s conversation with his brother in the first scene:

\[
\text{Oliver. Know you where you are, sir?}
\]

\[
\text{Orlando. O, sir, very well; here in your orchard.}
\]

\[
\text{Oliver. Know you before whom, sir?}
\]

\[
\text{Orlando. Ay, better than him I am before knows me. I know you are my eldest brother, and in the gentle condition of blood you should so know me. The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you are the first born…}
\]

(I.i.40-47)

This exchange recalls two conversations from the beginning of Genesis. One is the conversation between God and Adam after the latter has eaten the fruit, when God asks, “Where art thou?” Whether or not Shakespeare knew that the word “paradise” comes from a Persian word that means “orchard,” Orlando’s answer makes us recall Eden, the archetypal orchard; but Oliver is not God. He is a simple human tyrant who uses human customs, the primacy of the first-born, to torment his brother. Thus the other biblical conversation that is recalled here is the one between God and Cain, when the latter asks, “Am I my brother’s keeper?” The natural answer to this question is “Yes, of course you are,” but the customs of men have made the answer less clear. Again, the return to nature in the forest will result in Oliver’s learning the natural answer to his question as he ceases to be his brother’s oppressor. To return once more to the words of the Duke, there are “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones,” if only we learn how to read and hear them.

There are two visions here, then, and the characters can choose between them. Do they prefer the vision of Eden, though it must necessarily be a fallen Eden, or do they prefer the fratricidal vision of Cain? The whole plot focuses on two sets of brothers, Oliver and Orlando, the Duke and Frederick, who are at odds. Frederick has exiled the Duke, and Oliver tries to have Orlando killed; but by the end of the play, Oliver and Orlando are reconciled, and Frederick has withdrawn to a religious life and restored his brother to the dukedom. Furthermore, every available couple is about to be married. There are any number of new beginnings at the end of the play. Are we allowed to say, therefore, that everyone lived happily ever after? Well, no. They still have to live in the world, and the world is a tricky place. It is, as Jaques tells us, a stage, and the great play that is enacted on that stage is not over. At the play’s end, for instance, when Rosalind reveals her identity and all the couples fall naturally together, we may want to believe that things are what they seem,
and we must remind ourselves that this Rosalind, who is no longer pretending to be the young man Ganymede, is still a girl being played by a boy. And lest we forget, Shakespeare sends him (or her?) to deliver the epilogue, which includes the words “If I were a woman” and which concludes with a request for applause. “Don’t forget,” Shakespeare is saying, “you are watching a play.” And yet, if all the world’s a stage, everything is a play, and this particular play is as real, or as pretend, as anything else.

In fact, though, things are seldom what they seem, and if the Duke finds reminders of language in nature, the play shows us time and again how slippery language can be. As I said earlier, much of Shakespeare’s word play is difficult to see because it depends on sixteenth-century pronunciations. A good example is the character Jaques. We cannot pronounce his name in the modern French way, “zhak”, because the meter of some lines indicates that the name has two syllables: “The melancholy Jaques grieves at that…” We also need to know, however, that the “a” is pronounced like a long “a”, which makes the name “jake-es” and which makes it sound the same as the word “jakes”, an Elizabethan term for an outhouse. Perhaps this is just an example of Shakespeare’s toilet humor, but the pun on this character’s name is appropriate for a character who takes such delight in being melancholy. Jaques’ cynicism represents another important perspective in the play, but the humor of his name makes that cynicism seem just a little bit ridiculous. It makes us question Jaques’ attitude—after all, he is the happiest when he is the most melancholy—and yet Shakespeare never makes things that simple, because at the play’s end, when all of the exiled courtiers who proclaimed their love for the forest are excited about getting back to the court, Jaques alone says that he will stay in the woods with Frederick. He may be slightly ridiculous, but he does have a serious side. He has learned something in the forest, and he is not ready to trade that knowledge in for a chance to be back at the court. The little word play involving his name makes us aware of, and adds to, his complexity.

Much of the word play in the play makes us aware of a subtext. The words, in their primary sense, mean one thing, but in their alternate sense they mean something quite different but something that bears on the major themes of the play. At one point Jaques reports the words of Touchstone:

‘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.24-28)

This melancholy moralizing should appeal to Jaques, and yet he says that when he heard the fool being “so deep contemplative” he laughed for an hour. What is so funny about Touchstone’s reflections on human mortality and the passage of time? Nothing, unless we realize that when the play was written, “hour” was pronounced so that it sounded almost the same as “whore.” Touchstone has managed, therefore, to comment not only on human mortality but on courtly morality and to make a connection between them, for such courtly morality (or immorality) is sure to hasten the course of human mortality. And Touchstone makes this point with an appropriately earthy pun. Jaques not only find the fool humorous, but he wishes he were such a fool himself:
O that I were a fool!

I am ambitious for a motley coat.

_Duke S._ Thou shalt have one.

_Jaques._ It is my only suit—

(II.vii.42-44)

The pun on “suit” in the last line, where it refers to the motley clothes of a fool and to Jaques’ desire to wear those clothes, shows that Jaques is correct. Like Touchstone, he can manipulate words and concepts.

We have seen two kinds of word play so far, one involving names and one involving puns. There is another type in which the speaker plays with other people’s words and somehow transforms them:

_Celia._ Were you made the messenger?

_Touchstone._ No, by mine honor, but I was bid to come for you.

_Rosalind._ Where learn’d you that oath, fool?

_Touchstone._ Of a certain knight, that swore by his honor they were good pancakes, and swore by his honor the mustard was naught. Now I’ll stand to it, the pancakes were naught, and the mustard was good, and yet was not the knight forsworn.

_Rosalind._ How prove you that, in the great heap of your knowledge?

_Touchstone._ Stand you both forth now. Stroke your chins, and swear by your Beards that I am a knave.

_Celia._ By our beards (if we had them) thou art.

_Touchstone._ By my knavery (if I had it) then I were. But if you swear by that that is not, you are not forsworn. No more was this knight, swearing by his honor, for he never had any; or if he had, he had sworn it away before he saw those pancakes or that mustard.

(I.ii.59-80)

I will not attempt to explain why the knight was eating mustard with pancakes. What is important here is what Touchstone does with the words. He swears by his honor that he is not a messenger but that he was sent with a message, a clear contradiction. To prove that he is not swearing falsely, he cites the knight, who swore by his honor that the pancakes were good and the mustard bad. When the women still do not understand, he has them swear by their beards that he is a knave, and then he explains that if they swear by that which they do not have, beards, they are not swearing falsely. Hence the knight, who had no honor, could swear by it without lying, just as Touchstone could swear by his honor that he has not come as a messenger though he has a message. Since Touchstone is obviously lying, he must have no honor and is therefore a knave, though he says that he is not because Rosalind and Celia have sworn by
beards that they do not have. The intricacies and paradoxes of this argument could be traced even further, but the point is that Touchstone's apparently silly arguments blur the distinctions between what is true and what is not. Is he a messenger? Does he have honor? Does the knight have honor? Were the pancakes good and the mustard bad? Do the women have beards? (Remember, they were played by boys!) The words in this passage, instead of presenting truth and clarifying reality, obscure the truth and make us wonder where reality is, if it exists at all. In fact what Touchstone does here, and elsewhere in the play, is analogous to what Shakespeare does in the play as a whole, with his use of disguises and his obscuring of the distinction between the stage and the audience.

If we think about Touchstone's behavior in the play, we come up with some surprising ideas. We may be able to accept that Rosalind dresses like a man and no one, even her father or her lover, sees through the disguise. We may explain that someone, Shakespeare or someone else, made a mistake when Rosalind is described as shorter than Celia in I.ii and taller than her in I.iii. But how do we explain Touchstone's dressing like a fool throughout the play? After all, when he is not at court, there is no reason for him to play the fool, and even a fool deserves a day off. Touchstone, however, both dresses as and plays the fool throughout the play. He distorts reality, he plays with words, and he himself gets caught up in his own confusion, even though he often sees the truth in things more clearly than the other characters. He is in many ways like the playwright, like Shakespeare, who makes us consider the nature of reality through the medium of words because he sees it more clearly. I am not saying that the fool is Shakespeare's portrait of himself, but rather that the fool in this play, and in other Shakespeare plays where fools appear, is an image of the playwright, the worker with words who may seem foolish but who is ultimately very serious.

As with any great work of literature, no commentary, however lengthy, can replace actually reading the work or treat every aspect of the work, and this particular commentary is only intended to prepare the way for reading this multifaceted play. Nevertheless, there are still some points to be covered. One involves the family relationships in the play. Not only are there two sets of brothers in which one brother oppresses the other, but there are two sets of fathers and daughters as well—and (interestingly, as in most of Verdi’s operas) no mothers. The two sets of brothers we can relate to the Cain theme that we saw earlier, but it is more difficult to explain the absence of mothers. I like to think that if Celia’s mother or Rosalind’s mother or Orlando’s mother were in the play, then the evil men would not behave so badly. Aside from Celia, Rosalind, and the country women, the world of the play is a world of men who behave duplicitously, who try to exert power over each other, who deceive themselves and each other. Perhaps if the mothers were in the play, Shakespeare’s focus would have had to change. Or as a friend of mine suggests, if mothers were there, they would have to suffer, as they do in The Winter’s Tale.

Even without the mothers, however, love is still an important issue. As I said in discussing Astrophel and Stella, love was a major concern in Elizabethan literature. A great deal of literature was devoted to love, and a great deal of that literature was also devoted to making fun of the great deal of literature that was devoted to love. Astrophel and Stella seems to take the latter course, until Astrophel makes the situation sinister and threatening. As You Like It, too, mocks the cult of love, but in a more gentle and humorous fashion. Orlando, who is admittedly unschooled and unused to the ways of the world, is a naïve lover who hangs his poems from the trees. These trees may have tongues, but because Orlando’s poetry is so bad, what they say is foolishness. Touchstone, naturally, takes great delight in mocking these verses.

But bad poetry does not make a bad person. Orlando must forget about the conventions that are supposed to accompany love and simply learn what it means to be Orlando. We can see this point when Orlando speaks to the disguised Rosalind, who is describing the signs by which a lover can be recognized:
A lean cheek, which you have not; a blue eye and sunken,

which you have not; an unquestionable spirit, which you have not; a beard neglected, which you have not: but I pardon you for that, for simply your having in beard is a younger brother’s revenue; then your hose should be ungarter’d, your bonnet unbanded, your sleeve unbutton’d, your shoe untied, and every thing about you demonstrating a careless desolation

(III.ii.373-81)

The signs that Rosalind mentions are those that are typically associated with lovers, and Rosalind is clearly teasing her naïve beau, who takes everything she says seriously. But then Rosalind, with her courtly background, says that the woman he loves is more likely to love him than to admit that she does, which in fact is a perfect description of what Rosalind is doing by making that speech. Once again the levels of reality become confused, as the disguised Rosalind, while telling Orlando what Rosalind would do, simultaneously does it, for she loves him without admitting it. Only in IV.iii, when Rosalind hears of Orlando’s narrow escape from danger, does she show her feelings for him, by fainting, and he is not even there to see her. If he has had to learn to be Orlando, she has had to learn to be Rosalind.

Soon Rosalind does reveal herself, but only after Shakespeare makes certain that we see how complicated the situation seems and how simple it really is. As long as we remember that Rosalind is a woman, we know that things will work out for the lovers: Orlando will finally have his Rosalind, Silvius will have his Phebe, and Touchstone will have his Audrey.

The play is, after all, a comedy; and just as we may be sure that a tragedy will end with at least one death, we may be sure that a comedy will end with at least one marriage. And not only does romantic love triumph, but Orlando is reconciled with his brother and he Duke is restored to his office. Whatever has ailed the world has been healed through the magic of the forest, through the magic of the fairy tale.

As profound and moving as many of Shakespeare’s tragedies are, I find an even greater profundity in many of the comedies, for the comedies show beginnings, show how the world might be. In the tragedies, people tend to learn what As You Like It has to teach and then die. Their learning provides a conclusion. In the comedies, the learning is a beginning. There is a joy, a hopefulness in these plays that I find deeply moving. The tragedies may provide us with catharsis, but the comedies provide us with another, a healthier way, of looking at the world. So read As You Like It and revel in it, and then read A Midsummer Night’s Dream and Twelfth Night, which is a more disturbing comedy. Then look at those comedies whose worlds seem more seriously threatening, like Much Ado About Nothing or Measure for Measure. And then look at The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest to see how sublime Shakespeare’s plays can be. Then come back and we will look at Antony and Cleopatra.