

A Guide to AS YOU LIKE IT

by William Shakespeare



Alistair McCallum

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Setting the scene

Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It* in or around 1599, when he was in his mid-thirties. He was already a successful dramatist and actor, and a member – and shareholder – of the most prestigious theatre company in London.

His creative output at this time of his life was prolific and varied: *Much Ado About Nothing*, *Henry V*, *Julius Caesar*, *As You Like It* and *Hamlet* were probably all written within the space of two years. The other great tragedies, and the later, darker and more mysterious comedies, were yet to come.

Following its initial public performances at the Globe, and possibly some private performances for King James I a few years later, *As You Like It* was not played again for well over a hundred years. However, a revival at the Drury Lane theatre in London in 1740 – with actresses playing the female roles, rather than the boys of Shakespeare’s time – proved an instant success. The play quickly became established as a perennial favourite, and has remained so ever since.

As You Like It, with its woodland setting, is frequently labelled a ‘pastoral’ comedy. But this suggests an idealised, sentimental view of life, and the play presents something much more subtle than this. Its pastoral stillness and simplicity is woven through with continual, lively threads of questioning, criticism, irony and discussion. Its enduring appeal lies in its thoughtfulness as well as in its delicate beauty.

“... *the prose is light and sparkling and has the speed of talk as well as the form of art. The poetry has a lyrical clarity with overtones of gravity ... and the songs echo through the play with a grave sweetness. As a lyrical comedy of romantic love ... As You Like It stands supreme.*”

David Daiches, *A Critical History of English Literature*

Discord between brothers

Duke Frederick deposes Duke Senior ...

Duke Frederick has seized power. He has deposed his elder brother, Duke Senior, banished him and confiscated his lands.

The old Duke is now in exile, with a few followers, in the Forest of Arden.

The old Duke's daughter, Rosalind, has stayed behind at court to be with her beloved friend and cousin, Celia, daughter of Duke Frederick.

Oliver denies Orlando his inheritance ...

Sir Rowland de Boys, now dead, left most of his estate to his eldest son Oliver. In the will, he instructed Oliver to look after the education of the youngest son, Orlando.

Oliver, irrationally jealous of his younger brother, has refused to comply with his father's wishes. He has completely neglected Orlando's education, and refused even to hand over the thousand crowns left to Orlando in the will.

Curtain up

“The spirit of my father ...”

I, i

Orlando has reached the end of his tether. His anger against his older brother Oliver – who refuses to allow him a proper education – is overwhelming. With a good education, he could live up to his father’s name: without it, he feels degraded and worthless.

When he sees Oliver, he finally boils over and attacks him. He demands the education due to him; or, at the very least, the thousand crowns left to him in the will. When Orlando finally lets go of him, Oliver half-heartedly promises that Orlando will get at least part of what he wants.

The scene is witnessed, mostly in unhappy silence, by old Adam. He was previously servant to Sir Rowland, whom he remembers with affection: he now serves Oliver, whom he can neither like nor respect.

As soon as Adam and Orlando have left, Oliver makes it plain that he has no intention of giving Orlando anything.

Charles is persuaded

Charles is the court wrestler, employed by Duke Frederick. He has a fearsome reputation, and takes on all comers in prize bouts.

He also has a sentimental, romantic streak, and talks wistfully of the exiled Duke Senior and his followers:

Charles: They say he is already in the Forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world.

Charles has come to see Oliver because he is worried about a rumour that Orlando is to challenge him at the next wrestling bout. Presumably Orlando is keen to win the prize money, and prove his worth in the process.

“It is no laughing matter my friends, it is a weeping matter, a heavy matter, under the pretence for gathering for Robin Hood, a traitor, and a thief, to put out a preacher, to have his office less esteemed ... This realm hath been ill provided for, that it hath had such corrupt judgements in it, to prefer Robin Hood to God’s word ...”

Bishop Hugh Latimer, in 1549, complaining that people were attending festivities on Robin Hood’s Day instead of going to church.

As Charles says, he has a reputation to keep up: Orlando will not get special treatment, and is unlikely to escape without injury. Charles assumes, naturally, that Oliver will be concerned about his younger brother, and will try to dissuade the young man from fighting.

Oliver claims that he has tried, unsuccessfully, to do just that. But Orlando is stubborn: worse, he is ambitious and villainous: worse still, he is plotting against his own brother, Oliver: worst of all, he is plotting against Charles himself. If he does not defeat Charles in the wrestling,

Oliver: ... he will practise against thee by poison, entrap thee by some treacherous device, and never leave thee till he hath ta'en thy life by some indirect means or other.

Even this, Oliver assures him, is putting it mildly:

Oliver: I speak but brotherly of him ...

Charles believes every word without question. He leaves, determined to do his worst in the forthcoming bout. Oliver is confident that his problems with Orlando are over.

Rosalind and Celia

I, ii

Rosalind is in low spirits. She misses her father, the banished Duke Senior. Celia tries to console her. She promises Rosalind that she will return all the lands confiscated by her father, Duke Frederick, when she inherits his estate.

They are talking of love, and the unfairness of life, when Touchstone, the court Fool, barges in. He is followed by Monsieur Le Beau, who manages to explain – after a barrage of teasing and interruptions – that the wrestling is about to take place. Charles is in good form, and has just defeated three opponents in a row, leaving a trail of pain and broken bones.

Rosalind is horrified. She cannot believe that anyone else will face Charles:

Rosalind: ... is there any else longs to see this broken
music in his sides? Is there yet another dotes upon
rib-breaking?

They are unsure whether to stay and watch the wrestling, but it is too late. The contestants are already approaching. It is Orlando's turn.

A shock for Charles ...

Duke Frederick leads the way. Even he is unhappy about the prospect of a contest between the hardened, brawny, aggressive Charles and the young, gentle opponent. He asks Celia and Rosalind to talk to the youth and persuade him to change his mind.

They try. Orlando is attentive and gracious, but firm in his intent. He has nothing to lose, he says; if he dies,

Orlando: I shall do my friends no wrong, for I have
 none to lament me; the world no injury, for in it
 I have nothing ...

The fighting starts. To the delight of Rosalind and Celia, the young man seems to be getting the upper hand. As the wrestling goes on, the excitement rises. Orlando continues to resist Charles's onslaught, and refuses to be thrown.

There is uproar as, finally, Orlando throws Charles. Duke Frederick calls an immediate halt to the fight. The unfortunate Charles, unable to get up or even to speak, is carried out.

... and a shock for Orlando

It comes as an unpleasant surprise to Duke Frederick that the winner is a son of Sir Rowland de Boys. He was an enemy of Sir Rowland, although, as he admits, people in general held him in high esteem.

When the Duke leaves with his courtiers, the cousins stay behind to talk to Orlando. Rosalind remembers how her father, like everyone else,

loved Sir Rowland, and she is horrified that she allowed his son to face the prize wrestler.

Rosalind, who was attracted to the young stranger as soon as he appeared, is rapidly falling in love with him, as he is with her. She gives him a chain from her neck, and is sorry that in her present state she has nothing more to offer:

Rosalind: Gentleman,
Wear this for me; one out of suits with fortune,
That could give more but that her hand lacks means.

Orlando is overcome with emotion and, like the defeated Charles, cannot speak. Rosalind persists, and before Celia manages to drag her away she makes her feelings clear:

Rosalind: Sir, you have wrestled well, and overthrown
More than your enemies.

Orlando is left alone, overwhelmed by the passion that has suddenly come into his life.

Is it possible to judge, from his plays, what Shakespeare's personal beliefs and feelings were?

The scholar Caroline Spurgeon believed so, and, after a comprehensive analysis of Shakespeare's work, built up a detailed psychological profile of the man. Some of her conclusions seem particularly relevant to *As You Like It*:

"That which Shakespeare prizes most in life is unselfish love; what he instinctively believes to be the greatest evil is fear ... What most rouses his anger is hypocrisy and injustice, what he values supremely is kindness and mercy."

Caroline Spurgeon, *Shakespeare's Imagery and What It Tells Us*, 1935

A discreet word from Monsieur Le Beau

One of Duke Frederick's courtiers, Monsieur Le Beau, comes back to speak unofficially with Orlando. His language is diplomatic, but his message is blunt. The Duke is displeased by the defeat of his wrestler at the hands of his old enemy's son. He is likely to behave irrationally: Orlando must escape immediately.

Monsieur Le Beau also reveals that the Duke is becoming more and more resentful of Rosalind. She has done nothing wrong, but is a constant reminder to everyone of the popularity of her father, the banished Duke Senior.

Orlando thanks Monsieur Le Beau for his advice, and sets off home.

Rosalind is banished

I, iii

Rosalind, lost in thought, is unwilling to talk. Celia tries to drag her out of her daydreaming, but it is not hard to see what is on her mind:

Celia: Come, come, wrestle with thy affections.

Rosalind: O they take the part of a better wrestler than myself.

As they discuss whether love at first sight is really possible, Duke Frederick enters.

Monsieur Le Beau was right. The Duke, tormented by jealousy, cannot stand the presence of Rosalind in his court any longer. Without any preliminaries, he announces that she is banished:

Duke Frederick: Within these ten days if that thou be'st
found
So near our public court as twenty miles,
Thou diest for it.

Rosalind is stunned. She asks what she has done to offend the Duke. Frederick at first accuses her of treason, but even he knows that she is innocent; simply being the daughter of Duke Senior is enough.

Rosalind counters the Duke's accusations with forceful, reasoned argument, and Celia backs her up. The Duke refuses to listen. His obsession with unpopularity extends even to his daughter: he is convinced that people love Rosalind more than her.

Duke Frederick: She is too subtle for thee, and her
smoothness,
Her very silence, and her patience
Speak to the people and they pity her.
... she robs thee of thy name,
And thou wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous
When she is gone.

The Duke repeats his threat of death to Rosalind, and sweeps out with his courtiers. Rosalind and Celia remain, shocked, bewildered and alone.

An escape is planned

Soon the cousins' mood starts to brighten. Celia reassures Rosalind that she will not let her go into banishment alone; they will go together to the Forest of Arden and try to find the exiled Duke Senior.

For safety, they will change their courtly dress for old clothes. Rosalind decides to go even further, and disguise herself as a man. They choose new names to go with their new identities: Celia will call herself Aliena, while Rosalind, as a man, will become Ganymede. They decide to invite Touchstone, the court Fool, to join them.

They leave in high spirits, ready to collect together some jewels and valuables, find Touchstone, change their clothes and set off on their adventure.

“The play’s title is not, perhaps, the throw-away phrase it may seem: during its course we see that the quality of human experience is influenced by the attitude that people bring to it.”

Stanley Wells, *Shakespeare: A Dramatic Life*, 1994

As You Like It is set in France. The forest in which so much of the action takes place is, technically speaking, supposed to be the Ardennes forest in northern France, anglicised by Shakespeare to Arden.

However, the associations with Arden, a region in the rural heart of England, near Stratford-upon-Avon, are inescapable. Shakespeare's mother's family took its name from the area; her maiden name was Mary Arden.

"The main action of the play, then, takes place in a forest that he can only have associated, at every level, with his mother. In the symbolic language of all literatures and traditions, the Mother Forest is the wilderness that guards the mouth of the other world ..."

Ted Hughes, *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, 1992

In the Forest of Arden

II, i

Life is hard for the banished Duke Senior and his followers in Arden. There is no escape from the harshness of their surroundings, or the severity of the weather, and they must survive without any of the luxuries of the court.

Yet the old Duke remains optimistic. There is danger in the forest, he agrees, but it is preferable to the conspiracies of the court: and the cold wind may be cruel, but it enables him to understand and accept his own human frailty. Their life may be austere, but it is simple and satisfying:

Duke Senior: Sweet are the uses of adversity ...
And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.

The Duke proposes that they go hunting for deer, though it grieves him that it should be necessary.

This point reminds them of Jaques, one of the Duke's followers, renowned for his melancholy and his love of argument. Jaques takes the side of the deer even more fervently than the Duke: at this very moment, they are told, he is holding forth on the wounded deer as a symbol of man's aggression and inhumanity. In fact, by hunting the deer in its own territory, claims Jaques, Duke Senior's followers are behaving just as immorally as Duke Frederick when he banished his brother.

Duke Senior, positive as ever, is determined to enjoy the discussion, and they set off to find Jaques.

“... the forest is an anarchist community run on the principle of co-operation between equals ... The myth behind this depiction is one dear to English hearts, of England as she was before foreign invasion brought kingship and barony ...”

Germaine Greer, *Shakespeare*, 1986

Duke Frederick rages

II, ii

Celia, Rosalind and Touchstone have set off for Arden. News of his daughter's disappearance reaches Frederick, who flies into a fury. He is convinced that his own followers are to blame; someone must have witnessed the flight and turned a blind eye. Those around him deny all knowledge of the escape, claiming that it must have taken place in the middle of the night.

It emerges that Celia's maid overheard the cousins praising Orlando after the young man's victory in the wrestling. Duke Frederick immediately orders the arrest of Orlando, or – if he cannot be found – his brother Oliver.

Another shock for Orlando

II, iii

Orlando has taken Monsieur Le Beau's advice, and has left the court. He is on his way back to his lodgings when he comes across Adam. The old man is beside himself with anxiety for the young Orlando, who reminds him so strongly of his old master Sir Rowland.

News of the wrestling has already reached Oliver. His plan to use Charles against his brother has failed: and Orlando's popularity, so maddening to Oliver, has risen even further. Oliver has now decided to take drastic action, and – as Adam has just discovered – intends to burn down Orlando's lodgings this very night.