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INTRODUCTION

As You Like It

If we were obliged to answer the question which of Shakespeare's plays contains, not indeed the fullest picture of his mind, but the truest expression of his nature and habitual temper, unaffected by special causes of exhilaration or gloom, I should be disposed to choose *As You Like It*.

— A.C. Bradley, *Oxford Lectures on Poetry* (1909)

As You Like It is and long has been one of Shakespeare's best-loved plays. Critics in the nineteenth century in particular were captivated by what they saw as its artful blend of wistful nostalgia, buoyant optimism, and a dash of worldly wisdom in what the great Romantic essayist William Hazlitt declared "the most ideal of any of this author's plays." Love for the play was tied up in an equally ardent Victorian love for the character of Rosalind, which even Shakespeare's most famous baiter George Bernard Shaw recognized with some exasperation: "Who ever failed, or could fail, as Rosalind?"

The play continues to be well-loved by audiences and readers. Less so by the last generation of scholars. Playing on the play's title, the scholar of performance Bruce Smith observes that "[c]uriously, many academic critics since the 1970s... *don't* like it." Important engagements with Rosalind's multiple transvestite disguises, looking at female agency and gender identity, have

enriched existing views of Rosalind's intelligence, creativity, and appeal, confirming her in new ways as "the philosopher of the play" and not just its protagonist. But the play was largely bypassed by New Historicists and other avowedly politically and socially engaged trends in scholarship that rose to prominence in the latter half of the twentieth century. These tended to seek out the darker, more obviously fraught comedies, *Twelfth Night* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in their investigations of the cultural poetics of Elizabethan England. Despite the play's clear interest in many of the positions that also interested these critics, like the instability of norms of gender and desire, or the machinations and blind spots of power, *As You Like It* seemed too chipper, too sanguine, too conservative in its conclusion. Smith shares the ideological convictions of such critics (as do I), but suggests that they "have refused to be taken in by the sights and sounds of *As You Like It*" — by all, in fact, that is most *likable* in the play, rather than intelligible or arguable.

As You Like It is indeed astoundingly rich in humor, vigor, and an attractive physicality both displayed and described. I would add that misliking critics, by focusing on an outcome rather than on how the play reaches it, also miss some of the force of the play's lyrical and clever use of language, imaginative flights, and evocative setting to carry an audience or a reader away, as it seems to have done to Hazlitt and even the reluctant Shaw. Yet even at its zenith, praise for *As You Like It* can feel temperate, partly because the play itself seems to be about finding the proper temper for passion and reflection, ecstasies and contemplation. Bradley, for instance, especially admires how precisely *As You Like It* reins in the extremes of Shakespeare's imagination. "[E]xhilaration or gloom" we might find in *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *King Lear*; *As You Like It* can feel much more safely domesticated.

These disparate reactions can be traced to what seems to me a misunderstanding of *As You Like It* as a carefully measured, even reticent, play. In some ways it certainly is, as Smith's disgruntled scholars noticed. It questions deeply-held convictions about property, or knowledge, or desire, or freedom, and imagines

compelling alternatives to the world as it is, but then often seems in the end to fall back into conventional positions: Rosalind-Ganymede is really a girl, suitable for Orlando to desire and to marry, but not for Phoebe — or for Celia; Oliver and Celia can happily settle on Corin's homestead because they have the money to do it; the exiled Duke can command his followers to pretend to be his equals in Arden, until of course it is time to return to court. Smith rightly notes that the pleasure in the course of the play need not impeach our sense that its conclusions may not be ours. But its very modesty allows *As You Like It* to experiment with a kind of radical foundation-shaking that is rarely found in Shakespeare or elsewhere.

The optimism of *As You Like It*, beginning, middle, and end, comes from its relentless attention to how *what may be* need not be mired in *what is*. The play drives forward, even in the last lines of its epilogue, towards future ways of life that are not merely different but can be *made* different, and made *better*, than present ones. The temperate solutions with which the play concludes are not offered as final, but as clearly open to ongoing changes. The play's very reserve and moderation, its resistance to extremity and desperation and finality, is what allows for its relentless confidence that things can be changed. In this, it is perhaps more literally progressive (that is, *stepping ahead*) and more literally radical (that is, *from the root*) than any settled position on the instabilities of gender, or the elusiveness of equality, or the variety of desire, could be. As Jaques reports Touchstone observing,

“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.” (2.7.23–28)

“Rot” sounds much more final, and much more like Jaques than like Touchstone; “ripe” sounds closer to the comic arc of the

play. But across the two claims together, there is another, larger claim: everything changes, all the time, and those changes can always be potentially consequential. Thereby hangs the world's tale, always spinning out. It is also true, as the great director Peter Brook said of a 1953 production designed by Salvador Dalí, that "*As You Like It* seems written purely to please." In our pleasures, the play leads us to wag along with the rest of the world, according to the rhythms we can at least in part discern and choose to follow or reject. There is no last step.