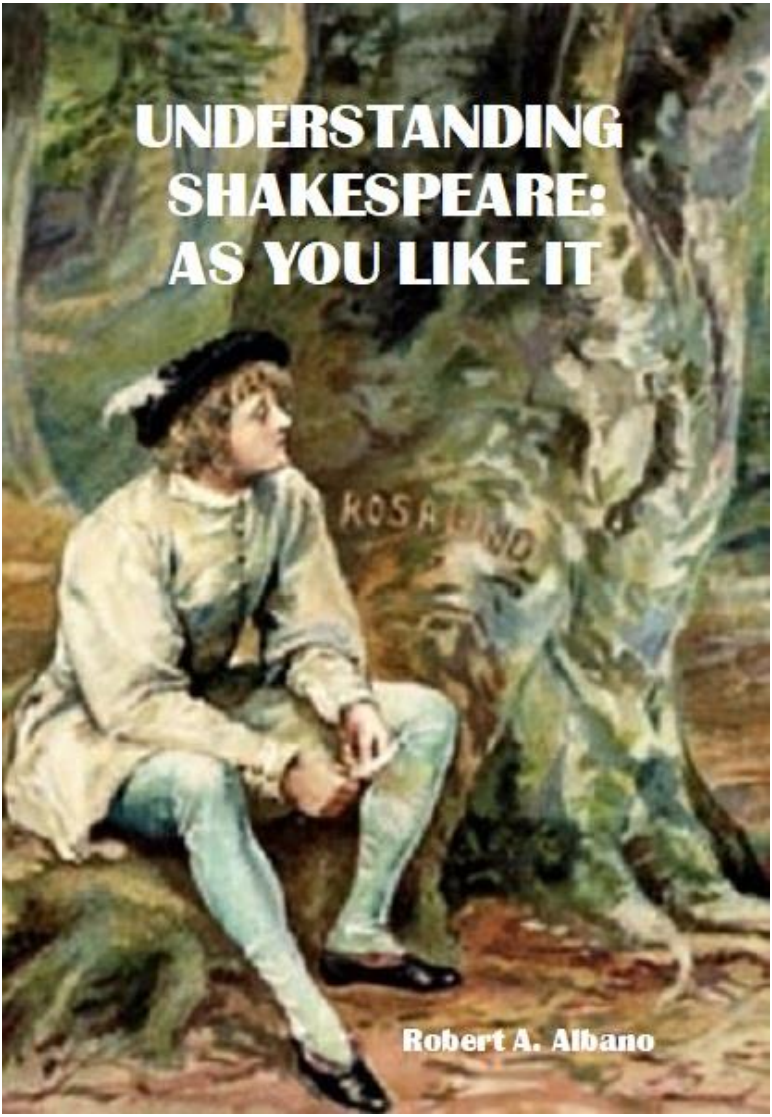
UNDERSTANDING
SHAKESPEARE:
AS YOU LIKE IT
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As You Like It

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UNDERSTANDING SHAKESPEARE:
As You Like It

NOTE: All act and scene divisions and lines numbers referred to in this text are consistent with those found in *The Norton Shakespeare* (Stephen Greenblatt, editor).

INTRODUCTION

As You Like It is one of Shakespeare's most delightful and most magical comedies. However, the magic in it is not the obvious and direct form of magic found in plays like *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (with its fairies) or *The Tempest* (with its sorcerer and sprite). Rather, the magic is subtle: it is the influence of nature upon various citizens who have abandoned the city for various reasons and have come to live in the country and woodlands. And upon their arrival in the countryside, marvelous transformations begin to occur. Nature is a physician, a mystic healer, who cures its inhabitants of their anxieties, troubles, fears, and materialistic desires. Nature is a benevolent goddess who teaches and enlightens the inhabitants of the city who have become too far entrenched in the social, materialistic, and artificial environment of urban life. Living in the city, mankind forgets what is important in life. The visit to the countryside thus restores man to his natural self.

Shakespeare purposely creates a **fairy tale setting**. The story takes place once upon a time. His primary location, the Forest of Ardenne, may cause audiences to think of the Forest of Arden in England or Ardennes Forest in Belgium and France. However, it is neither of these. Or, it is both of these and more. Shakespeare's mystical forest is located wherever the soothing influences of nature can be found.

To prevent his audiences from attempting to

establish a real location for the tale, Shakespeare uses both English names (Charles, Oliver, Adam) and French names (Jacques, Amiens, Le Beau) for the inhabitants of his mythical land. His forest is neither in England nor in France. Rather, it exists in his imagination.

Shakespeare's play thus has a mythic and universal feeling or atmosphere that contributes to the major themes of the play.

Literary critics refer to one of the play's central ideas as the **Two Worlds Theme**. And this theme is found in several of Shakespeare's plays. It can be found directly in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and somewhat less directly in *Much Ado about Nothing*. In both of these plays, as well as in *As You Like It*, visitors from the city or the urban world come to the country or rural world for a brief stay. That stay, however, transforms them or converts them. They are no longer so strict or cruel or judgmental or needy. They become better, or the best, versions of themselves.

One of the foremost delights of the play is the character of **Rosalind**. Like the character of Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Rosalind is witty and clever and charming. And also like the character of Viola, Rosalind dons the disguise of a young man in order to function in a man's world and to survive the perils that a woman in such urgent circumstances would find difficult or impossible to overcome.

Unlike Viola, however, Rosalind is an active force. Where Viola allows fate to take her wherever it will, Rosalind plays a dynamic role in shaping her

destiny. **Fate** is always a strong and dominant force in Shakespeare's plays, but that does not necessarily imply that man – or woman – does not have a degree of choice or free will in determining his future.

Rosalind, however, is also quite human; and, as such, she is vulnerable to all of the frailties and emotions that can affect anyone. One of the dominant conflicts appearing in all of Shakespeare's play is that of **Reason vs. Emotion**. The Church and religious leaders taught that Reason is a gift from God, and that gift allows mankind to control his passions and desires. Reason thus prevents men and women from giving in to temptation.

Shakespeare – as well as other gifted writers from his age – realized that the authorities of the Church were mistaken. Every individual – no matter how strong or how intelligent or how noble – will on occasion submit to extremely powerful emotions. At such moments that individual becomes unreasonable or irrational: he or she cannot think clearly or logically. At such moments the individual becomes temporarily mad.

And one of these most powerful emotions is **love**. Rosalind also falls in love. And, despite all of her logical and clever and rational arguments against love and marriage, Rosalind cannot control her passion. Even she must bow down before the God of Love.

ACT I

Act I, Scene 1: The Courtesy of Nations

The first scene takes place at the estate of **Oliver de Bois**, the eldest of three brothers. Oliver inherited the estate from his father, and his father charged him with taking care of his two younger siblings. Although Oliver treats his middle brother, **Jacques de Bois**, well, he is not so kind to the youngest son, **Orlando de Bois**. Oliver pays for Jacques to attend a university (and, so, Jacques is not a significant character in the play), but the eldest brother treats Orlando miserably. In fact, Oliver treats Orlando like a serf or miserable field hand.

The play opens with Orlando complaining about his treatment to **Adam**, an old and trusted servant of the family. Before Adam can make any response to Orlando, Oliver appears. Adam then stands aside while Orlando makes his complaint to Oliver directly.

During the heated conversation between the two brothers, Orlando asserts the following:

> The courtesy of nations allows you my better, in that you are the first-born; but the same tradition takes not away my blood, were there twenty brothers betwixt us. (39-42)

The phrase "courtesy of nations" refers to primogeniture, the English custom by which the eldest son inherits all money and property. If a wealthy man has more than one son, the other sons usually enter the military or study to become ministers. Although Orlando understands that he cannot inherit any property, he is still the son of an aristocrat and feels that he should be treated better. Orlando is angry for three reasons: (1) he is treated like a lowly serf, (2) he has not been allowed an education befitting a son of an aristocrat, and (3) he has not been given the one thousand pounds that his father left him in his will. Orlando is in the right in demanding that Oliver should treat him better and that Oliver should also follow the bequests made by their father in his will.

Oliver is an arrogant and disdainful individual, however, who hates his younger brother intensely. Oliver feels that Orlando has no right to speak to him in this manner, and so Oliver physically attacks his youngest brother. Orlando, though, is stronger and a better fighter than is Oliver. Orlando grabs Oliver by the throat and begins to choke him.

Orlando then demands that Oliver either (1) should treat him better and provide him with an opportunity or education so that he may become a gentleman or (2) give him the one thousand pounds as stated in their father's will so that he can leave and pursue his fortunes elsewhere.

Oliver grudgingly tells Oliver that he will get the money, and then he should leave the premises. The incensed Oliver also calls Adam an "old dog"

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