

***As You Like It* (1623) William Shakespeare**

Context

- Pastoral Romance – Arden as developed from ‘Arcadia’, reflecting by inversion, the social and political world of the Duke’s court. Arcadia from Virgil’s *Eclogues*, is an illusion, it is a place that only exists in the imagination.
- Renaissance Pastoral – Reality is inverted, whereby a replay of the real world is ‘played out’ to allow for critical comment. In Arden the characters embark on a trial of new behaviour and social hierarchy through role play. A testing ground for reality that is found wanting.
- Therefore, the Genre has dictated the setting which is used metaphorically to arrive at the themes and purpose of *As You Like It*. The Renaissance Pastoral Romance, set in Arden away from Courtly life, criticises the existing government.
- The Genre of Romance also engages the audience, so that the political commentary will be more readily understood.
- Comedy is used to dismantle power structures and power dynamics, in this case to reconstitute an improved reality. As usurpers, (Oliver and Duke Frederick) those in power are subject to subversion. It is the moral function of comedy to correct this imbalance.

Setting

1. The King's Court

- 'All the world's a stage' (Epilogue) sets up the metaphorical link between the two worlds. The audience is expected to draw parallels between the settings.

2. The Forest of Arden

- Is not a place because it is a mirror of the Court/ Political world. It is also a mirror of illusion, not a real place but an image. What is of real concern in the political world made manifest in Arden as playful subject matter. This deflates the atrocities of court, humanizes the approach to reinstitute order and nobility through comic virtue and the theatrical power of dissembling.

Characters

- **The split self.** Characters who traverse the two settings 'play' out a second self. Rather than schizophrenic this is a character double that is their psychological opposite, so each character, in effect, provides their own foil. They are in a process of wish fulfillment, to belong to this second self so they can belong to others. Caught between leaving their suppressed self behind and enjoying the performance of their future, desired and less alienated self, as experienced in Arden.
- Each character that exists in both worlds develops two distinct 'voices'. This should be viewed as not a contradiction, but part of this process of becoming, the process of belonging.
- In this way, the characters become an anthropological study, as we bare witness to the nature of living with the self and reconciling with others.

- **Rosalin and Orlando** both suffer from externalised identification, where the locus of your identity is found in your approval from others. This is a human need and is an impetus to belong. Rosalin seeks a lover, not a friend, in Orlando. The ruse is to test his love, proving he loves her for personality and intellect alone. Yet she flirts unabashedly. This is where the dramatic irony is enjoyed by the audience. Rosalin's rhetoric is her refusal to be accepted as Orlando's lover until she is accepted as a person. A genuine 'other' in human totality, exceeding and without 'gender'.
- Can it really then be heterosexual love? Without the physical attraction being part thereof? The homoerotic puns in the dialogue between them was another common Shakesperean device that could be conventionally enjoyed especially between two male actors.
- Does Rosalin's ruse purify the love and sanction it as spiritually based as she hopes? Rosalin's belief system and predilections are orthodox after all. Her gender subversion is framed as comic and never as genuine boundary pushing. The evidence is in the dialogue, Shakespeare's dialogue, 'At which time would I, being but a moonish youth, grieve, be effeminate, changeable, longing and liking, proud, fantastical, apish, shallow, inconstant, full of tears, full of smiles;' (3,ii). In other words the dialogue mocks the conventional performance of love. The order is always re-established at the conclusion of a Shakespearean play. The disorder in his comedies is always righted by the play's end; he is forever orthodox and pro-establishment.
- **Jaques is a discursive mirror character.** As he never fully investigates the hypocrisy he criticizes, by applying his understanding to himself. He never understands his own identity and flaws, therefore preventing his own belonging. Jaques self-imposed alienation makes him the only truly tragic character in this Shakespearean comedy.

- **Touchstone** is at once a deliberately self-defeating (conventional fool) and a self-constructing linguist, one who solidifies the meaning in language, rather than submit to its apparent contradictions, obfuscation and nullity, in accordance with characters who never achieve self awareness or belonging. (Jaques).
- Those characters who cannot 'play' in Arden remain unsocialised and hence lack belonging.

Themes

1. Belonging through Alienation or the use of Irony

- In the achievement of Belonging for characters in *As You Like It*, we observe that those who find a sense of self and connection to the world, do so in exile. In the Forest of Arden they have experienced belonging through alienation.
- This would be a quick judgment of the text that must be related to the intention of the composer to gain argumentative weight. Would the misguided Rosalin and Orlando have fallen in love in their original context? The playful setting of Arden demanded their personal development to win their love. Belonging to each other came at the price of experiencing painful disenchantment, insecurity, displacement and role reversals. Their situation was comedic, ironic, in achieving belonging through alienation.
- A belief in this ironic locus of belonging would mean *As You Like It* endorses an anarchic environment, one that frees identity (so is viewed positively) rather than creating more anarchy. There is theatrical license for this playful experiment but it is only to be viewed as metaphor. The anarchic setting of Arden only existed to empower those characters in exile to take their rightful places, to belong where the usurpers had failed.

- An interrogation of this hypothesis should beg the question, is this mythical Arden a place of dreams, an illusion in itself? Its genus being Arcadia we know this to be true. So one court is merely replaced by another as a vehicle for Shakespeare to make his point. Corruption in those entrusted with power breaks the code of honour. In the Pastoral setting stone is replaced by forest and page boys replaced by wood cutters. The hierarchy of those in Arden's inner and governmental sanctum are, like the King's Court, keepers of the peace, protectors of codified laws, whose transgression is punishable by excommunication. This is the 'appearance' of freedom but the environment is interchangeable with the Court. This only serves to heighten the metaphorical parallel and hence further the purpose of the play.
- So, no ideas of order or subservience to institutional hierarchy are being questioned by Shakespeare. The disorder of the current court is the primary concern of the entire play. Shakespeare is not a separatist and those characters that suffer real alienation do so as a punishment for not having 'learned' to socialise themselves; for example, Caliban in *The Tempest* and Lear in *King Lear*. To belong is a Shakespearean and Elizabethan mandate; never was a highly socialised character punished into eternity. They are always rewarded, heralded as examples of the humanist ideal. They are placards to Belonging.

2. Doubling

- The comedy is mostly derived from the play on words, the split selves and the contrary views of characters be they political (highly criticised) or pastoral (largely valourised). It is only through the success of the comedy that the audience arrives at the political thrust of the play.
- The hypocrisy of language, like the hypocrisy of characters in the process or denial of belonging, mirrors the contradictions of those in power. Yet

it is the hypocrisy of language that allows for double meanings, so this literary/ dramatic technique conveys Shakespeare's intention.

- For example: Orlando's first speech, forlorn at the deprivation of his familial rights at the hands of his brother, inverts binary oppositions. The statement of one truth, ironic as it is in word use, 'keeps me rustically at home' (1,i) connotes immediately the opposite, un-kept, which is another truth, implied by the diction. Opposites by their absence are then spoken.
- Orlando rebuffs Oliver when ousted from court. The irrepressible exiled is sure to return triumphant as Oliver is bettered by Orlando's word play. The word 'villain' (1,i) is successfully manipulated by Orlando. This proves the inherent contradictions in Oliver calling his brother villain. Language is the site of hypocrisy but also the means to correcting the imbalance due to its subversive nature.
- Jaques reveals the subversive nature of language but cannot reconcile its true meaning co-existing within this state of flux. He never achieves belonging. Those characters that can play with semiotics (the signs of language) to gain the happiness they seek, are rewarded. They recognise the doubling potential of language, enjoying this potential rather than allowing it to dominate or frustrate them. Rosalin and Touchstone's dialogue contain the best examples of this technique.
- Language can then be seen as a dramatic device in frequent play on words but also as an individuated theme.

3. Hypocrisy and Usurpation in corrupt Aristocracy and Government

- Oliver and Duke Frederick are absolutist in their views, paranoia and language use. They reveal themselves to be incapable of reconciling opposites and are therefore unable to rule effectively. Characters that are perceived as threats are banished, people who do not affirm their views are banished or disinherited/ usurped.
- Oliver and Duke Frederick use language reductively to conduct their affairs, administer dictates and worldviews ensuring their ultimate alienation. They fail to recognise that life, the needs of civilians who depend on humanitarian leadership and a true sense of nobility, exceed absolute values.
- Honour was the guiding principle of court in Shakespearean times. The dishonourable are unfit for duty. Touchstone backhandedly reveals that the Duke's knight is dishonourable. As a direct reflection of the court it is clear the implicit meaning of his conversation (with Rosalind and Celia) is that the Duke and his court lack honour. (1, ii)

Sample thesis statements

1

Belonging becomes a necessity within the confines of Arden, as much as a defense, against corrupt government. Dramatic devices convey these criticisms of aristocracy and human failings. It takes the theatricality of Arden for characters to reconcile with themselves and their place in the real world of the Court. Yet not even in a comedic Renaissance Pastoral play, can a character escape alienation, momentarily or in permanent exile from the self.

2

Identity in *As You Like It* is inextricably linked to honour. It is the deceit of characters in the Court that lead the play into No Place, the Arcadia, of Arden. Within Arden an alternative is played out whereby belonging is sought and characters become equipped to deal with the dishonour plaguing courtly life and government. Shakespeare's indictment against those in power is also a testament to the power of belonging, whereby the individual and their society must experience connections based on Renaissance values.

Suggested related texts**1**

Text type: Film

Title: You, Me and Everyone We Know

Publication Date: 2005

Composer: Miranda July (Writer, Actor and Director)

This film explores connections between unlikely friends, lovers and family members. They are all in some way, outsiders, who seek to overcome the alienated world they inhabit and seek solace in one another. The humour is at once surprising and emotionally revealing.

Note: Work with a small section of the film such as one scene, in great detail, in order to deal with the text in the required depth.

2

Text type: TV Advertisement

Title: Audi Startled Smart (Part 1)

Publication Date: 2011

Composer: Audi

In terms of belonging to a group, identifying with a segment of society or culture, this advertisement lampoons the idea of belonging. The pursuit of belonging to this cohort become ludicrous and extreme. The exaggerated alter egos of the 'students' school them in the corrupt results of vigorously pursuing belonging at the expense of a normal life, real connections and individuality. Its comic execution and imaginative take on this subject matter is refreshing.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9MIs0sBBwBo&NR=1>

3

Text type: Poem

Title: They

Publication Date: 2007 in the volume '*Not Finding Wittgenstein*'

Composer: J.S Harry

This is a great poem to use in terms of how language can separate those that can manipulate it and those who lose their voice because language confuses them. The metaphor here is used to explore wider themes of belonging to your group, be it rabbits or humans or simply sentient life. The philosophies of existentialism, naturalism and semiotics are also explored. Notions of the self in relation to others, the desire to belong to another individual and to a group, culminate in the persona's admission that he only wanted love.