The articles in this study guide are not meant to mirror or interpret any productions at the Utah Shakespearean Festival. They are meant, instead, to be an educational jumping-off point to understanding and enjoying the plays (in any production at any theatre) a bit more thoroughly. Therefore the stories of the plays and the interpretative articles (and even characters, at times) may differ dramatically from what is ultimately produced on the Festival’s stages.

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For more information about Festival education programs:
Utah Shakespearean Festival
351 West Center Street
Cedar City, Utah 84720
435-586-7880
www.bard.org.

Cover illustration by Philip W. Hermansen
As You Like It

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“No household in the English-speaking world is properly furnished unless it contains copies of the Holy Bible and of The Works of William Shakespeare. It is not always thought that these books should be read in maturer years, but they must be present as symbols of Religion and Culture” (G.B. Harrison, Introducing Shakespeare. Rev. & Exp. [New York: Penguin Books, 1991], 11).

We, the Shakespearean-theater goers and lovers, devotedly and ritualistically watch and read the Bard’s plays not for exciting stories and complex plots. Rather, Shakespeare’s language is a vital source of our supreme pleasure in his plays. Contrary to ill-conceived notions, Shakespeare’s language is not an obstacle to appreciation, though it may prove to be difficult to understand. Instead, it is the communicative and evocative power of Shakespeare’s language that is astonishingly rich in vocabulary—about 29,000 words—strikingly presented through unforgettable characters such as Hamlet, Macbeth, Lear, Othello, Rosalind, Viola, Iago, Shylock, etc.

In the high school classroom, students perceive Shakespeare’s language as “Old English.” Actually Shakespeare’s linguistic environment, experience, and exposure was, believe it or not, closer to our own times than to Chaucer’s, two hundred years earlier. Indeed, the history and development of the English language unfolds as follows: Old English, 449–1100; Middle English 1100–1500; and Modern English 1500-present. Shakespeare was firmly in the Modern English period.

At the time Shakespeare wrote, most of the grammatical changes from Old and Middle English had taken place; yet rigid notions about “correctness” had not yet been standardized in grammars. The past five centuries have advanced the cause of standardized positions for words; yet the flexible idiom of Elizabethan English offered abundant opportunities for Shakespeare’s linguistic inventiveness. Ideally it is rewarding to study several facets of Shakespeare’s English: pronunciation, grammar, vocabulary, wordplay, and imagery. The present overview will, however, be restricted to “vocabulary.”

To Polonius’s inquisitive question “What do you read, my lord?” (Hamlet, 2.2.191) Hamlet nonchalantly and intriguingly aptly replies: “Words, words, words” (2.2.192). This many-splendored creation of Shakespeare’s epitomizes the playwright’s own fascination with the dynamic aspect of English language, however troubling it may be to modern audiences and readers. Shakespeare added several thousand words to the language, apart from imparting new meanings to known words. At times Shakespeare could teasingly employ the same word for different shades of thought. Barowne’s single line, “Light, seeking light, doth light of light beguile” (Love’s Labour’s Lost, 1.1.77), as Harry Levin in his General Introduction to The Riverside Shakespeare (9) explains, “uses ‘light’ in four significations: intellect, seeking wisdom, cheats eyesight out of daylight.”

Another instance: Othello as he enters his bedroom with a light before he smothers his dear, innocent Desdemona soliloquizes: “Put out the light, and then put out the light” (Othello, 5.2.7) Here ‘light’ compares the light of Othello’s lamp or torch to Desdemona’s ‘light’ of life.

In both instances, the repeated simple ordinary word carries extraordinary shades of meaning. “Usually such a tendency in a Shakespeare play indicates a more or less conscious thematic intent.” (Paul A. Jorgensen, Redeeming Shakespeare’s Words [Berkeley and Los Angeles; University of California Press, 1962], 100).
Living in an age of the “grandiose humanistic confidence in the power of the word” (Levin 9), Shakespeare evidently felt exuberant that he had the license to experiment with the language, further blessed by the fact that “there were no English grammars to lay down rules or dictionaries to restrict word-formation. This was an immeasurable boon for writers” (Levin 10). Surely Shakespeare took full advantage of the unparalleled linguistic freedom to invent, to experiment with, and to indulge in lavishly.

However intriguing, captivating, mind-teasing, beguiling, and euphonious, Shakespeare’s vocabulary can be a stumbling block, especially for readers. “In the theater the speaking actor frequently relies on tone, semantic drive, narrative context, and body language to communicate the sense of utterly unfamiliar terms and phrases, but on the page such words become more noticeable and confusing” (Russ McDonald, *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents* [Boston: Bedford Books of St. Martin’s Press, 1996], 184).

Unlocking the meaning of Shakespeare’s vocabulary can prove to be an interesting challenge. Such words include those which “have dropped from common use like ‘bisson’ (blind) or those that the playwright seems to have created from Latin roots . . . but that did not catch on, such as conspectuities’ (eyesight or vision) or ‘unplasive’ (doubtful or disapproving). Especially confusing are those words that have shifted meaning over the intervening centuries, such as ‘proper’ (handsome), ‘nice’ (squeamish or delicate), ‘silly’ (innocent), or ‘cousin’ (kinsman, that is, not necessarily the child of an aunt or uncle” (McDonald 184). Because of semantic change, when Shakespeare uses ‘conceit,’ he does not mean ‘vanity,’ as we might understand it to be. Strictly following etymology, Shakespeare means a ‘conception’ or ‘notion,’ or possibly the ‘imagination’ itself.

Perhaps several Shakespearean words “would have been strange to Shakespeare’s audience because they were the products of his invention or unique usage. Some words that probably originated with him include: ‘auspicious,’ ‘assassination,’ ‘disgraceful,’ ‘dwindle,’ ‘savagery.’” Certainly a brave soul, he was “a most audacious inventor of words.” To appreciate and understand Shakespeare’s English in contrast to ours, we ought to suspend our judgment and disbelief and allow respect for the “process of semantic change, which has been continually eroding or encrusting his original meaning” (Levin 8).

Shakespeare’s vocabulary has received greater attention that any other aspect of his language. Perhaps this is because it is the most accessible with no burdensome complications. Whatever the cause, Shakespeare’s language will forever be challenging and captivating.
Not of an Age, but for All Mankind

By Douglas A. Burger

After an enormous expenditure of money and effort, Shakespeare’s Globe Theater has risen again, four centuries later, on London’s south bank of the Thames. Designed as a faithful reconstruction of the original, it uses the building methods of the time and traditional materials (oak timbers, plaster walls, wooden pegs, water-reeds for thatching the roof). From above, the shape seems circular (actually, it is twenty-six sided) with three covered tiers of seats surrounding a central area which is open to the sky. There the “groundlings” may stand to see the action taking place on the stage, which occupies almost half of the inner space. There are no artificial lights, no conventional sets, no fancy rigging.

Seeing a Shakespeare play in the afternoon sunlight at the new Globe must come very close to the experience of those early-day Londoners, except, of course, that we in the twentieth-century behave better. We don’t yell insults at the actors, spit, or toss orange peels on the ground. We also smell better: the seventeenth-century playwright, Thomas Dekker, calls the original audience “Stinkards . . . glewed together in crowds with the Steames of strong breath” (Shakespeare’s Globe: The Guide Book [London: International Globe Center, 1996], 42). And we are safer. The first Globe burned to the ground. The new theater has more exits, fire-retardant insulation concealed in the walls, and water-sprinklers that poke through the thatch of the roof.

That hard-headed capitalists and officials would be willing, even eager, to invest in the project shows that Shakespeare is good business. The new Globe is just one example. Cedar City’s own Utah Shakespearean Festival makes a significant contribution to the economy of southern Utah. A sizable percentage of all the tourist dollars spent in England goes to Shakespeare’s birthplace, Stratford-on-Avon, which would be a sleepy little agricultural town without its favorite son. The situation seems incredible. In our whole history, what other playwright could be called a major economic force? Who else—what single individual—could be listed along with agriculture, mining, and the like as an industry of a region? Why Shakespeare?

The explanation, of course, goes further than an attempt to preserve our cultural traditions. In an almost uncanny way, Shakespeare’s perceptions remain valuable for our own understandings of life, and probably no other writer remains so insightful, despite the constantly changing preoccupations of audiences over time.

The people of past centuries, for example, looked to the plays for nuggets of wisdom and quotable quotes, and many of Shakespeare’s lines have passed into common parlance. There is an old anecdote about the woman, who on first seeing Hamlet, was asked how she liked the play. She replied, “Oh, very nice, my dear, but so full of quotations.” She has it backwards of course. Only the King James Bible has lent more “quotations” to English than Shakespeare.

Citizens of the late nineteenth century sought in the plays for an understanding of human nature, valuing Shakespeare’s character for traits that they recognized in themselves and in others. The fascination continues to the present day as some of our best-known movie stars attempt to find new dimensions in the great characters: Mel Gibson and Kenneth Branagh in Hamlet, Lawrence Fishburn in Othello, Leonardo de Caprio in Romeo + Juliet, to name just a few.

Matters of gender, class, and race have preoccupied more recent audiences. Beatrice sounds a rather feminist note in Much Ado about Nothing in her advice to her cousin about
choosing a husband: Curtsy to your father, but say “Father, as it please me.” Coriolanus presents a recurring dilemma about class relations in its explorations of the rights and wrongs involved in a great man’s attempt to control the masses. Racial attitudes are illuminated in Othello, where the European characters always mark the hero by his race, always identify him first as the “Moor,” are always aware of his difference. London’s new/old Globe is thus a potent symbol of the plays’ continuing worth to us. The very building demonstrates the utter accuracy of the lines written so long ago that Shakespeare is not “of an age” but “for all time.”
Elizabeth’s England

In his entire career, William Shakespeare never once set a play in Elizabethan England. His characters lived in medieval England (Richard II), France (As You Like It), Vienna (Measure for Measure), fifteenth-century Italy (Romeo and Juliet), the England ruled by Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII) and elsewhere—anywhere and everywhere, in fact, except Shakespeare’s own time and place. But all Shakespeare’s plays—even when they were set in ancient Rome—reflected the life of Elizabeth’s England (and, after her death in 1603, that of her successor, James I). Thus, certain things about these extraordinary plays will be easier to understand if we know a little more about Elizabethan England.

Elizabeth’s reign was an age of exploration—exploration of the world, exploration of man’s nature, and exploration of the far reaches of the English language. This renaissance of the arts and sudden flowering of the spoken and written word gave us two great monuments—the King James Bible and the plays of Shakespeare—and many other treasures as well.

Shakespeare made full use of the adventurous Elizabethan attitude toward language. He employed more words than any other writer in history—more than 21,000 different words appear in the plays—and he never hesitated to try a new word, revive an old one, or make one up. Among the words which first appeared in print in his works are such everyday terms as “critic,” “assassinate,” “bump,” “gloomy,” “suspicious,” “and hurry;” and he invented literally dozens of phrases which we use today: such un-Shakespearean expressions as “catching a cold,” “the mind’s eye,” “elbow room,” and even “pomp and circumstance.”

Elizabethan England was a time for heroes. The ideal man was a courtier, an adventurer, a fencer with the skill of Tybalt, a poet no doubt better than Orlando, a conversationalist with the wit of Rosalind and the eloquence of Richard II, and a gentleman. In addition to all this, he was expected to take the time, like Brutus, to examine his own nature and the cause of his actions and (perhaps unlike Brutus) to make the right choices. The real heroes of the age did all these things and more.

Despite the greatness of some Elizabethan ideals, others seem small and undignified, to us; marriage, for example, was often arranged to bring wealth or prestige to the family, with little regard for the feelings of the bride. In fact, women were still relatively powerless under the law.

The idea that women were “lower” than men was one small part of a vast concern with order which was extremely important to many Elizabethans. Most people believed that everything, from the lowest grain of sand to the highest angel, had its proper position in the scheme of things. This concept was called “the great chain of being.” When things were in their proper place, harmony was the result; when order was violated, the entire structure was shaken.

This idea turns up again and again in Shakespeare. The rebellion against Richard II brings bloodshed to England for generations; Romeo and Juliet’s rebellion against their parents contributes to their tragedy; and the assassination in Julius Caesar throws Rome into civil war.

Many Elizabethans also perceived duplications in the chain of order. They believed, for example, that what the sun is to the heaves, the king is to the state. When something went wrong in the heavens, rulers worried: before Julius Caesar and Richard II were overthrown, comets and meteors appeared, the moon turned the color of blood, and other bizarre astronomical phenomena were reported. Richard himself compares his fall to a premature setting of the sun; when he descends from the top of Flint Castle to meet the conquering
Bolingbroke, he likens himself to the driver of the sun's chariot in Greek mythology: “Down, down I come, like glist'ring Phaeton” (3.3.178).

All these ideas find expression in Shakespeare's plays, along with hundreds of others—most of them not as strange to our way of thinking. As dramatized by the greatest playwright in the history of the world, the plays offer us a fascinating glimpse of the thoughts and passions of a brilliant age. Elizabethan England was a brief skyrocket of art, adventure, and ideas which quickly burned out; but Shakespeare's plays keep the best parts of that time alight forever.

(Adapted from “The Shakespeare Plays,” educational materials made possible by Exxon, Metropolitan Life, Morgan Guaranty, and CPB.)
History Is Written by the Victors
From Insights, 1994

William Shakespeare wrote ten history plays chronicling English kings from the time of the Magna Carta (King John) to the beginning of England’s first great civil war, the Wars of the Roses (Richard II) to the conclusion of the war and the reuniting of the two factions (Richard III), to the reign of Queen Elizabeth’s father (Henry VIII). Between these plays, even though they were not written in chronological order, is much of the intervening history of England, in the six Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI plays.

In writing these plays, Shakespeare had nothing to help him except the standard history books of his day. The art of the historian was not very advanced in this period, and no serious attempt was made to get at the exact truth about a king and his reign. Instead, the general idea was that any nation that opposed England was wrong, and that any Englishman who opposed the winning side in a civil war was wrong also.

Since Shakespeare had no other sources, the slant that appears in the history books of his time also appears in his plays. Joan of Arc opposed the English and was not admired in Shakespeare’s day, so she is portrayed as a comic character who wins her victories through witchcraft. Richard III fought against the first Tudor monarchs and was therefore labeled in the Tudor histories as a vicious usurper, and he duly appears in Shakespeare’s plays as a murdering monster.

Shakespeare wrote nine of his history plays under Queen Elizabeth. She did not encourage historical truthfulness, but rather a patriotism, an exultant, intense conviction that England was the best of all possible countries and the home of the most favored of mortals. And this patriotism breathes through all the history plays and binds them together. England’s enemy is not so much any individual king as the threat of civil war, and the history plays come to a triumphant conclusion when the threat of civil war is finally averted, and the great queen, Elizabeth, is born.

Shakespeare was a playwright, not a historian, and, even when his sources were correct, he would sometimes juggle his information for the sake of effective stagecraft. He was not interested in historical accuracy; he was interested in swiftly moving action and in people. Shakespeare’s bloody and superb king seems more convincing than the real Richard III, merely because Shakespeare wrote so effectively about him. Shakespeare moved in a different world from that of the historical, a world of creation rather than of recorded fact, and it is in this world that he is so supreme a master.
Could the plays known as Shakespeare’s have been written by a rural, semi-literate, uneducated, wife-deserting, two-bit actor who spelled him name differently each of the six times he wrote it down? Could such a man know enough about Roman history, Italian geography, French grammar, and English court habits to create *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Comedy of Errors*, and *Henry V*? Could he know enough about nobility and its tenuous relationship to royalty to create *King Lear* and *Macbeth*?

Are these questions even worth asking? Some very intelligent people think so. On the other hand, some very intelligent people think not. Never mind quibbles about how a line should be interpreted, or how many plays Shakespeare wrote and which ones, or which of the great tragedies reflected personal tragedies. The question of authorship is “The Shakespeare Controversy.”

Since Mr. Cowell, quoting the deceased Dr. Wilmot, cast the first doubt about William of Stratford in an 1805 speech before the Ipswich Philological Society, nominees for the “real author” have included philosopher Sir Francis Bacon, playwright Christopher Marlowe, Queen Elizabeth I, Sir Walter Raleigh, and the earls of Derby, Rutland, Essex, and Oxford—among others.

The arguments evoke two premises: first, that the proven facts about the William Shakespeare who was christened at Holy Trinity Church in Stratford-upon-Avon on April 26, 1564 do not configure a man of sufficient nobility of thought and language to have written the plays; and, second, that the man from Stratford is nowhere concretely identified as the author of the plays. The name “Shakespeare”—in one of its spellings—appears on early quartos, but the man represented by the name may not be the one from Stratford.

One group of objections to the Stratford man follows from the absence of any record that he ever attended school—in Stratford or anywhere else. If he were uneducated, the arguments go, how could his vocabulary be twice as large as the learned Milton’s? How could he know so much history, law, or philosophy? If he were a country bumpkin, how could he know so much of hawking, hounding, courtly manners, and daily habits of the nobility? How could he have traveled so much, learning about other nations of Europe in enough detail to make them the settings for his plays?

The assumptions of these arguments are that such rich and noble works as those attributed to a playwright using the name “Shakespeare” could have been written only by someone with certain characteristics, and that those characteristics could be distilled from the “facts” of his life. He would have to be noble; he would have to be well-educated; and so forth. On these grounds the strongest candidate to date is Edward de Vere, seventeenth earl of Oxford.

A debate that has endured its peaks and valleys, the controversy catapulted to center stage in 1984 with the publication of Charlton Ogburn’s *The Mysterious William Shakespeare*. Ogburn, a former army intelligence officer, builds a strong case for Oxford—if one can hurdle the notions that the author wasn’t Will Shakespeare, that literary works should be read autobiographically, and that literary creation is nothing more than reporting the facts of one’s own life. “The Controversy” was laid to rest—temporarily, at least—by justices Blackmun, Brennan, and Stevens of the United States Supreme Court who, after hearing evidence from both sides in a mock trial conducted September 25, 1987 at American University in Washington, D.C., found in favor of the Bard of Avon.

Hooray for our side!
Musical development was part of the intellectual and social movement that influenced all England during the Tudor Age. The same forces that produced writers like Sir Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, John Donne, and Francis Bacon also produced musicians of corresponding caliber. So numerous and prolific were these talented and imaginative men—men whose reputations were even in their own day firmly established and well founded—that they have been frequently and aptly referred to as a nest of singing birds.

One such figure was Thomas Tallis, whose music has officially accompanied the Anglican service since the days of Elizabeth I; another was his student, William Boyd, whose variety of religious and secular compositions won him international reputation.

Queen Elizabeth I, of course, provided an inspiration for the best efforts of Englishmen, whatever their aims and activities. For music, she was the ideal patroness. She was an accomplished performer on the virginal (forerunner to the piano), and she aided her favorite art immensely in every way possible, bestowing her favors on the singers in chapel and court and on the musicians in public and private theatrical performances. To the great composers of her time, she was particularly gracious and helpful.

Singing has been an integral part of English life for as long as we have any knowledge. Long before the music was written down, the timeless folk songs were a part of our Anglo-Saxon heritage. The madrigals and airs that are enjoyed each summer at the Utah Shakespearean Festival evolved from these traditions.

It was noted by Bishop Jewel in 1560 that sometimes at Paul's Cross there would be 6,000 people singing together, and before the sermon, the whole congregation always sang a psalm, together with the choir and organ. When that thundering unity of congregational chorus came in, “I was so transported there was no room left in my whole body, mind, or spirit for anything below divine and heavenly raptures.”

Religious expression was likely the dominant musical motif of the Elizabethan period; however, the period also saw development of English stage music, with Morley, John Wilson, and Robert Johnson setting much of their music to the plays of Shakespeare. The masque, a semi-musical entertainment, reached a high degree of perfection at the court of James I, where the courtiers themselves were sometimes participants. An educated person of the time was expected to perform music more than just fairly well, and an inability in this area might elicit whispered comments regarding lack of genteel upbringing, not only in the ability to take one’s part in a madrigal, but also in knowing the niceties of musical theory. Henry Peacham wrote in The Compleat Gentleman in 1662 that one of the fundamental qualities of a gentleman was to be able to “sing your part sure, and...to play the same upon your viol.”

Outside the walls of court could be heard street songs, lighthearted catches, and ballads, all of which indicates that music was not confined to the cathedrals or court. We still have extant literally hundreds of ballads, street songs, and vendors’ cries that were sung or hummed on the street and played with all their complicated variations on all levels of Elizabethan society.

Instruments of the period were as varied as the music and peoples, and the instrument and songbooks which remain in existence today are indicative of the high level of excellence enjoyed by the Elizabethans. Songbooks, mainly of part-songs for three, four, five, and six
voices exist today, as do books of dance music: corrantos, pavans, and galliards. Records
from one wealthy family indicate the family owned forty musical instruments, including
twelve viols, seven recorders, four lutes, five virginals, various brasses and woodwinds, and
two “great organs.” To have use for such a great number of instruments implies a fairly large
group of players resident with the family or staying with them as invited guests, and the
players of the most popular instruments (lutes, virginals, and viols) would be playing from
long tradition, at least back to King Henry VIII. In short, music was as necessary to the
public and private existence of a Renaissance Englishman as any of the basic elements of life.

The Utah Shakespearean Festival musicians perform each summer on authentic replicas
of many of these Renaissance instruments. The music they perform is authentic from the
Elizabethan period, and the instruments are made available for audience inspection and
learning.
Actors in Shakespeare’s Day
By Stephanie Chidester From Insights, 1994

The status of the actor in society has never been entirely stable but has fluctuated from the beginnings of the theatre to the present day. The ancient Greeks often considered actors as servants of Dionysus, and their performances were a sort of religious rite. Roman actors, often slaves, were seen as the scraps of society, only one step above gladiators. In medieval Europe, both the theatre and the actor, suppressed by the Catholic Church, were almost non-existent but gradually re-emerged in the form of the liturgy and, later, the Mystery plays. The actors of Shakespeare’s age also saw fluctuations in reputation; actors were alternately classified as “vagabonds and sturdy beggars,” as an act of Parliament in 1572 defined them, and as servants of noblemen.

As early as 1482, noblemen such as Richard, duke of Gloucester (later Richard III), the earl of Essex, and Lord Arundel kept acting companies among their retainers. But other than these select groups protected by nobles, actors lived lives of danger and instability because when they abandoned their respectable trades, they also left behind the comfort and protection of the trade guilds.

However, life soon became much more difficult for both of these classes of actors. In 1572, Parliament passed two acts which damaged thespians’ social status. In the first one, the Queen forbade “the unlawful retaining of multitudes of unordinary servants by liveryes, badges, and other signs and tokens (contrary to the good and ancient statutes and laws of this realm)” in order to “curb the power of local grandees” (Dennis Kay, Shakespeare: His Life, Work, and Era [New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1992], 88). One result of this was that some of the actors, now considered superfluous, were turned away. To make matters even worse, these actors faced yet another impediment: the “Acte for the punishment of Vagabondes” (Kay, 88), in which actors were declared “vagabonds and masterless men and hence were subject to arrest and imprisonment” (Thomas Marc Parrott and Robert Hamilton Ball, A Short View of Elizabethan Drama [New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1943], 46).

However, there were still nobles, such as the earl of Leicester and the earl of Sussex, who endorsed players; the protector would usually seek royal permission for these actors to perform in London or, less frequently, some other less prestigious town. Thus the actors were able to venture forth without fear of arrest. It is through these circumstances that Shakespeare ends up an actor in London.

There are many theories—guesses really—of how Shakespeare got into the theatre. He may have joined a group of strolling players, performed around the countryside, and eventually made it to London, the theatrical hub of Britain. Another theory suggests that he began as a schoolmaster, wrote a play (possibly The Comedy of Errors) and then decided to take it to London; or, alternately, he could have simply gone directly to that great city, with or without a play in hand, to try his luck.

An interesting speculation is that while he was young, Shakespeare might have participated in one of the cycles of Mystery plays in Stratford: “On one occasion the Stratford corporation laid out money for an entertainment at Pentecost. In 1583 they paid 13s 4d ‘to Davi Jones and his company for his pastime at Whitsuntide.’ Davi Jones had been married to Elizabeth, the daughter of Adrian Quiney, and after her death in 1579 he took as his wife a Hathaway, Frances. Was Shakespeare one of the youths who trimmed themselves for the Whitsun pastime?” (S. Schoenbaum, William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life [New York: New American Library, 1977], 111).
But however he got into the theatre and to London, he had made a very definite impression on his competitors by 1592, when playwright Robert Greene attacked Shakespeare as both actor and author: “‘There is an upstart Crow, beautified with our feathers, that with his Tiger’s heart wrapt in a Player’s hide, supposes he is as well able to bombast out a blank verse as the best of you: and . . . is in his own conceit the only Shake-scene in a country’” (G. B. Harrison, *Introducing Shakespeare* [New York: Penguin Books, Inc., 1947], 1).

We don’t often think of Shakespeare as primarily an actor, perhaps because most of what we know of him comes from the plays he wrote rather than the parts he played. Nevertheless, he made much of his money as an actor and sharer in his company: “At least to start with, his status, his security derived more from his acting skill and his eye for business than from his pen” (Kay, 95). Had he been only a playwright, he would likely have died a poor man, as did Robert Greene: “In the autumn of 1592, Robert Greene, the most popular author of his generation, lay penniless and dying. . . . The players had grown rich on the products of his brain, and now he was deserted and alone” (Harrison, 1).

While Shakespeare made a career of acting, there are critics who might dispute his acting talent. For instance, almost a century after Shakespeare’s death, “an anonymous enthusiast of the stage . . . remarked . . . that ‘Shakespear . . . was a much better poet, than player’” (Schoenbaum, 201). However, Shakespeare could have been quite a good actor, and this statement would still be true. One sign of his skill as an actor is that he is mentioned in the same breath with Burbage and Kemp: “The accounts of the royal household for Mar 15 [1595] record payments to ‘William Kempe William Shakespeare & Richarde Burbage seruantes to the Lord Chamberlain’” (Kay, 174).

Another significant indication of his talent is the very fact that he played in London rather than touring other less lucrative towns. If players were to be legally retained by noblemen, they had to prove they could act, and one means of demonstrating their legitimacy was playing at court for Queen Elizabeth. The more skilled companies obtained the queen’s favor and were granted permission to remain in London.

Not all companies, however, were so fortunate: “Sussex’s men may not have been quite up to the transition from rural inn-yards to the more demanding circumstances of court performance. Just before the Christmas season of 1574, for example, they were inspected (‘perused’) by officials of the Revels Office, with a view to being permitted to perform before the queen; but they did not perform” (Kay, 90). Shakespeare and his company, on the other hand, performed successfully in London from the early 1590s until 1611. It would be a mistake to classify William Shakespeare as only a playwright, even the greatest playwright of the English-speaking world; he was also “an actor, a sharer, a member of a company” (Kay, 95), obligations that were extremely relevant to his plays. As a man of the theatre writing for a company, he knew what would work on stage and what would not and was able to make his plays practical as well as brilliant. And perhaps more importantly, his theatrical experience must have taught him much about the human experience, about everyday lives and roles, just as his plays show us that “All the world’s a stage, / And all the men and women merely players” (*As You Like It*, 2.7.149–50).
Shakespeare’s Audience:  
A Very Motley Crowd  
From *Insights*, 1992

When Shakespeare peeped through the curtain at the audience gathered to hear his first play, he looked upon a very motley crowd. The pit was filled with men and boys. The galleries contained a fair proportion of women, some not too respectable. In the boxes were a few gentlemen from the royal courts, and in the lords’ box or perhaps sitting on the stage was a group of extravagantly dressed gentlemen of fashion. Vendors of nuts and fruits moved about through the crowd. The gallants were smoking; the apprentices in the pit were exchanging rude witticisms with the painted ladies.

When Shakespeare addressed his audience directly, he did so in terms of gentle courtesy or pleasant raillery. In *Hamlet*, however, he does let fall the opinion that the groundlings (those on the ground, the cheapest seats) were “for the most part capable of nothing but dumb shows and noise.” His recollections of the pit of the Globe may have added vigor to his ridicule of the Roman mob in *Julius Caesar*.

On the other hand, the theatre was a popular institution, and the audience was representative of all classes of London life. Admission to standing room in the pit was a penny, and an additional penny or two secured a seat in the galleries. For seats in the boxes or for stools on the stage, still more was charged, up to sixpence or half a crown.

Attendance at the theatres was astonishingly large. There were often five or six theatres giving daily performances, which would mean that out of a city of one hundred thousand inhabitants, thirty thousand or more spectators each week attended the theatre. When we remember that a large class of the population disapproved of the theatre, and that women of respectability were not frequent patrons of the public playhouses, this attendance is remarkable.

Arrangements for the comfort of the spectators were meager, and spectators were often disorderly. Playbills seem to have been posted all about town and in the theatre, and the title of the piece was announced on the stage. These bills contained no lists of actors, and there were no programs, ushers, or tickets. There was usually one door for the audience, where the admission fee was deposited in a box carefully watched by the money taker, and additional sums were required at entrance to the galleries or boxes. When the three o’clock trumpets announced the beginning of a performance, the assembled audience had been amusing itself by eating, drinking, smoking, and playing cards, and they sometimes continued these occupations during a performance. Pickpockets were frequent, and, if caught, were tied to a post on the stage. Disturbances were not infrequent, sometimes resulting in general rioting.

The Elizabethan audience was fond of unusual spectacle and brutal physical suffering. They liked battles and murders, processions and fireworks, ghosts and insanity. They expected comedy to abound in beatings, and tragedy in deaths. While the audience at the Globe expected some of these sensations and physical horrors, they did not come primarily for these. (Real blood and torture were available nearby at the bear batings, and public executions were not uncommon.) Actually, there were very few public entertainments offering as little brutality as did the theatre.

Elizabethans attended the public playhouses for learning. They attended for romance, imagination, idealism, and art; the audience was not without refinement, and those looking for food for the imagination had nowhere to go but to the playhouse. There were no newspapers, no
magazines, almost no novels, and only a few cheap books; theatre filled the desire for story discussion among people lacking other educational and cultural opportunities.

The most remarkable case of Shakespeare's theatre filling an educational need is probably that of English history. The growth of national patriotism culminating in the English victory over the Spanish Armada gave dramatists a chance to use the historical material, and for the fifteen years from the Armada to the death of Elizabeth, the stage was deluged with plays based on the events of English chronicles, and familiarity with English history became a cultural asset of the London crowd,

Law was a second area where the Elizabethan public seems to have been fairly well informed, and successful dramatists realized the influence that the great development of civil law in the sixteenth century exercised upon the daily life of the London citizen. In this area, as in others, the dramatists did not hesitate to cultivate the cultural background of their audience whenever opportunity offered, and the ignorance of the multitude did not prevent it from taking an interest in new information and from offering a receptive hearing to the accumulated lore of lawyers, historians, humanists, and playwrights.

The audience was used to the spoken word, and soon became trained in blank verse, delighting in monologues, debates, puns, metaphors, stump speakers, and sonorous declamation. The public was accustomed to the acting of the old religious dramas, and the new acting in which the spoken words were listened to caught on rapidly. The new poetry and the great actors who recited it found a sensitive audience. There were many moments during a play when spectacle, brutality, and action were all forgotten, and the audience fed only on the words. Shakespeare and his contemporaries may be deemed fortunate in having an audience essentially attentive, eager for the newly unlocked storehouse of secular story, and possessing the sophistication and interest to be fed richly by the excitements and levities on the stage.
Shakespearean Snapshots

From Insights, 2002

By Ace G. Pilkington

It is hard to get from the facts of Shakespeare's life to any sense of what it must have been like to have lived it. He was born in 1564 in Stratford-on-Avon and died there in 1616. The day of his birth is not certain, but it may have been the same as the day of his death—April 23—if he was baptized, as was usual at the time, three days after he was born. He married Anne Hathaway in the winter of 1582–83, when he was eighteen and she was twenty-six. He became the father of three children. The first was Susannah, who was born around May 23, close enough to the date of the wedding to suggest that the marriage was not entirely voluntary. Shakespeare’s twins, Hamnet and Judith, were baptized on February 2, 1585. Hamnet died of unknown causes (at least unknown by us at this distance in time) in 1596. Shakespeare’s career as actor, theatre owner, manager, and, of course, playwright began in the vicinity of 1590 and continued for the rest of his life, though there are clear indications that he spent more and more time in Stratford and less and less in London from 1611 on. His work in the theatre made him wealthy, and his extraordinary plays brought him a measure of fame, though nothing like what he deserved or would posthumously receive.

It’s hard to get even the briefest sense of what Shakespeare’s life was like from such information. It is probably impossible ever to know what Shakespeare thought or felt, but maybe we can get closer to what he saw and heard and even smelled. Perhaps some snapshots—little close-ups—might help to bring us nearer to the world in which Shakespeare lived if not quite to the life he lived in that world. In Shakespeare’s youth, chimneys were a new thing. Before that, smoke was left to find its way out through a hole in the roof, often a thatched roof, and there were even some who maintained that this smoky atmosphere was better than the newfangled fresh air that chimneys made possible—along with a greater division of rooms and more privacy.

In the year of Shakespeare’s birth, Stratford had more trees than houses—“upwards of 400 houses as well as 1,000 elms and forty ashes” (Peter Thomson, Shakespeare’s Professional Career [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992], 1). Peter Levi says, “The town was so full of elm trees that it must have looked and sounded like a woodland settlement. For example, Mr. Gibbs’s house on Rothermarket had twelve elms in the garden and six in front of the door. Thomas Attoft on Ely Street had another twelve. The town boundaries were marked by elms or groups of elms (The Life and Times of William Shakespeare [New York: Wings Books, 1988], 7). Shakespeare’s “Bare ruined choirs where late the sweet birds sang” becomes a far more majestic image with the picture of Stratford’s elms in mind. And the birds themselves had a sound which modern ears no longer have a chance to enjoy. “We must realize that it was ordinary for . . . Shakespeare to hear a dawn chorus of many hundreds of birds at once. . . . as a young man thirty years ago I have heard a deafening dawn chorus in the wooded Chilterns, on Shakespeare’s road to London” (Levi 10).

Exactly what Shakespeare’s road to London may have been or at least how he first made his way there and became an actor is much debated. He might have been a schoolmaster or fifty other things, but he may well have started out as he ended up—as a player. We can then, in John Southworth’s words, “Picture a sixteen-year-old lad on a cart, growing year by year into manhood, journeying out of the Arden of his childhood into ever more unfamiliar, distant regions, travelling ill-made roads in all weathers, sleeping in inns, hearing and memorising strange new dialects and forms of speech, meeting with every possible type and character of person; learning, most of all perhaps, from the audiences to which he played in guildhalls and inns” (Shakespeare the Player: A Life in the Theatre [Gloucestershire: Sutton Publishing Limited, 2000], 30). At some time in his life—in fact, many times—Shakespeare must have known theatrical tours very like that.
In London itself, the new Globe, the best theatre in (or rather just outside of) the city, was in an area with a large number of prisons and an unpleasant smell. “Garbage had preceded actors on the marshy land where the new playhouse was erected: ‘flanked with a ditch and forced out of a marsh’, according to Ben Jonson. Its cost . . . included the provision of heavy piles for the foundation, and a whole network of ditches in which the water rose and fell with the tidal Thames” (Garry O’Connor, William Shakespeare: A Popular Life [New York: Applause Books, 2000], 161). The playgoers came by water, and the Globe, the Rose, and the Swan “drew 3,000 or 4,000 people in boats across the Thames every day” (161). Peter Levi says of Shakespeare’s London, “The noise, the crowds, the animals and their droppings, the glimpses of grandeur and the amazing squalor of the poor, were beyond modern imagination” (49).

England was a place of fear and glory. Public executions were public entertainments. Severed heads decayed on city walls. Francis Bacon, whom Will Durant calls “the most powerful and influential intellect of his time” (Heroes of History: A Brief History of Civilization from Ancient Times to the Dawn of the Modern Age [New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001], 327), had been “one of the persons commissioned to question prisoners under torture” in the 1580s (Levi 4). The opportune moment when Shakespeare became the most successful of playwrights was the destruction of Thomas Kyd, “who broke under torture and was never the same again,” and the death of Christopher Marlowe in a tavern brawl which was the result of plot and counterplot—a struggle, very probably, between Lord Burghley and Walter Ralegh (Levi 48).

Shakespeare, who must have known the rumors and may have known the truth, cannot have helped shuddering at such monstrous good fortune. Still, all of the sights, smells, and terrors, from the birdsongs to the screams of torture, from the muddy tides to the ties of blood, became not only the textures and tonalities of Shakespeare’s life, but also the information and inspiration behind his plays.
Some time in the mid 1580s, young Will Shakespeare, for reasons not entirely clear to us, left his home, his wife, and his family in Stratford and set off for London. It was a time when Elizabeth, “la plus fine femme du monde,” as Henry III of France called her, had occupied the throne of England for over twenty-five years. The tragedy of Mary Stuart was past; the ordeal of Essex was in the future. Sir Francis Drake's neutralization of the Spanish Armada was pending and rumors of war or invasion blew in from all the great ports.

What could have been more exciting for a young man from the country, one who was already more than half in love with words, than to be headed for London!

It was an exciting and frightening time, when the seven gates of London led to a maze of streets, narrow and dirty, crowded with tradesmen, carts, coaches, and all manner of humanity. Young Will would have seen the moated Tower of London, looking almost like an island apart. There was London Bridge crowded with tenements and at the southern end a cluster of traitors’ heads impaled on poles. At Tyburn thieves and murderers dangled, at Limehouse pirates were trussed up at low tide and left to wait for the water to rise over them. At Tower Hill the headsman’s axe flashed regularly, while for the vagabonds there were the whipping posts, and for the beggars there were the stocks. Such was the London of the workaday world, and young Will was undoubtedly mentally filing away details of what he saw, heard, and smelled.

Elizabethan people in general were an emotional lot and the ferocity of their entertainment reflected that fact. Bear-baiting, for example, was a highly popular spectator sport, and the structure where they were generally held was not unlike the theatres of the day. A bear was chained to a stake in the center of the pit, and a pack of large dogs was turned loose to bait, or fight, him. The bear eventually tired (fortunately for the remaining dogs!), and, well, you can figure the rest out for yourself. Then there were the public hangings, whippings, or drawing and quarterings for an afternoon’s entertainment. So, the violence in some of Shakespeare’s plays was clearly directed at an audience that reveled in it. Imagine the effect of having an actor pretend to bite off his own tongue and spit a chunk of raw liver that he had carefully packed in his jaw into the faces of the groundlings!

Despite the progressing enlightenment of the Renaissance, superstition was still rampant among Elizabethan Londoners, and a belief in such things as astrology was common (Ralph P. Boas and Barbara M. Hahna, “The Age of Shakespeare,” Social Backgrounds of English Literature, [Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1931] 93). Through the position of stars many Elizabethans believed that coming events could be foretold even to the extent of mapping out a person’s entire life.

Where witches and ghosts were concerned, it was commonly accepted that they existed and the person who scoffed at them was considered foolish, or even likely to be cursed. Consider the fact that Shakespeare’s Macbeth was supposedly cursed due to the playwright’s having given away a few more of the secrets of witchcraft than the weird sisters may have approved of. For a time, productions experienced an uncanny assortment of mishaps and injuries. Even today, it is often considered bad luck for members of the cast and crew to mention the name of the production, simply referred to as the Scottish Play. In preaching a sermon, Bishop Jewel warned the Queen: “It may please your Grace to understand that witches and sorcerers within these last few years are marvelously increased. Your Grace’s
subjects pine away, even unto death; their color fadeth; their flesh rotteth; their speech is benumbed; their senses bereft” (Walter Bromberg, “Witchcraft and Psychotherapy”, *The Mind of Man* [New York: Harper Torchbooks 1954], 54).

Ghosts were recognized by the Elizabethans in three basic varieties: the vision or purely subjective ghost, the authentic ghost who has died without opportunity of repentance, and the false ghost which is capable of many types of manifestations (Boas and Hahn). When a ghost was confronted, either in reality or in a Shakespearean play, some obvious discrimination was called for (and still is). Critics still do not always agree on which of these three types haunts the pages of *Julius Caesar, Macbeth, Richard III,* or *Hamlet,* or, in some cases, why they are necessary to the plot at all. After all, Shakespeare’s ghosts are a capricious lot, making themselves visible or invisible as they please. In *Richard III* there are no fewer than eleven ghosts on the stage who are visible only to Richard and Richmond. In *Macbeth* the ghost of Banquo repeatedly appears to Macbeth in crowded rooms but is visible only to him. In *Hamlet,* the ghost appears to several people on the castle battlements but only to Hamlet in his mother’s bedchamber. In the words of E.H. Seymour: “If we judge by sheer reason, no doubt we must banish ghosts from the stage altogether, but if we regulate our fancy by the laws of superstition, we shall find that spectres are privileged to be visible to whom they will (E.H. Seymour “Remarks, Critical, Conjectural, and Explanatory on Shakespeare” in *Macbeth A New Variorum Edition of Shakespeare* [New York: Dover Publications Inc., 1963] 211).

Shakespeare’s audiences, and his plays, were the products of their culture. Since the validity of any literary work can best be judged by its public acceptance, not to mention its lasting power, it seems that Shakespeare’s ghosts and witches were, and are, enormously popular. If modern audiences and critics find themselves a bit skeptical, then they might consider bringing along a supply of Coleridge’s “willing suspension of disbelief.” Elizabethans simply had no need of it.
Shakespeare’s Day: What They Wore

The clothing which actors wear to perform a play is called a costume, to distinguish it from everyday clothing. In Shakespeare’s time, acting companies spent almost as much on costumes as television series do today.

The costumes for shows in England were so expensive that visitors from France were a little envious. Kings and queens on the stage were almost as well dressed as kings and queens in real life.

Where did the acting companies get their clothes? Literally, “off the rack” and from used clothing sellers. Wealthy middle class people would often give their servants old clothes that they didn’t want to wear any more, or would leave their clothes to the servants when they died. Since clothing was very expensive, people wore it as long as possible and passed it on from one person to another without being ashamed of wearing hand-me-downs. However, since servants were of a lower class than their employers, they weren’t allowed to wear rich fabrics, and would sell these clothes to acting companies, who were allowed to wear what they wanted in performance.

A rich nobleman like Count Paris or a wealthy young man like Romeo would wear a doublet, possibly of velvet, and it might have gold embroidery. Juliet and Lady Capulet would have worn taffeta, silk, gold, or satin gowns, and everybody would have had hats, gloves, ruffs (an elaborate collar), gloves, stockings, and shoes equally elaborate.

For a play like Romeo and Juliet, which was set in a European country at about the same time Shakespeare wrote it, Elizabethan everyday clothes would have been fine—the audience would have been happy, and they would have been authentic for the play. However, since there were no costume shops who could make clothing suitable for, say, medieval Denmark for Hamlet, or ancient Rome for Julius Caesar, or Oberon and Titania’s forest for A Midsummer Night’s Dream, these productions often looked slightly strange—can you imagine fairies in full Elizabethan collars and skirts? How would they move?

Today’s audiences want costumes to be authentic, so that they can believe in the world of the play. However, Romeo and Juliet was recently set on Verona Beach, with very up-to-date clothes indeed; and about thirty years ago, West Side Story, an updated musical version of the Romeo and Juliet tale, was set in the Puerto Rican section of New York City.

Activity: Discuss what the affect of wearing “special” clothes is—to church, or to a party. Do you feel different? Do you act different? How many kinds of wardrobes do you have? School, play, best? Juliet and Romeo would have had only one type of clothing each, no matter how nice it was.

Activity: Perform a scene from the play in your everyday clothes, and then in more formal clothes. Ask the participants and the spectators to describe the differences between the two performances.
Synopsis: As You Like It

As the play opens, Orlando, a young squire, is quarreling with his older brother, Oliver, over the younger’s inheritance. Orlando inexplicably hates his younger brother and has deprived him of his inheritance and of his chances for an education suitting a well-born young man. As Orlando demands his inheritance and leaves, Oliver and the court wrestler, Charles, plot his death in a contrived wrestling match to be conducted the next day. Oliver and Charles also discuss how the good Duke Senior has been deprived of his dominions by his younger brother, Frederick, and has taken to the idyllic Forest of Arden with a few faithful courtiers. This merry band of outlaws, including the melancholy Jaques, lives there simply, happily, and in freedom, although sometimes hungry and chilled by the harshness of wind and weather.

The next day, Rosalind, who is Duke Senior’s daughter, and her best friend Celia, who is Duke Frederick’s daughter, watch Orlando surprisingly win the mismatched wrestling competition, and Orlando and Rosalind fall in love at first sight. However, the next day Duke Frederick, in a fit of spite, banishes Rosalind from the court. Drawn by friendship and love, Celia goes with her and also takes Touchstone, the court jester. Disguised (Rosalind as a boy, Ganymede, and Celia as a girl, Aliena), the two women, along with Touchstone, flee to the Forest of Arden where they buy a small cottage and search for Rosalind’s father, the good Duke Senior. To their surprise and Rosalind’s joy, the three learn that Orlando (along with his servant Adam) has also fled the court, in his case to avoid another plot against his life by his evil brother, Oliver. Back at court, Duke Frederick orders Oliver to search for Orlando, Rosalind, and Celia.

Orlando, who has joined with Duke Senior and his band, now decks the forest trees with love poems to his secret love, Rosalind—much to Celia’s amusement and to Rosalind’s liking. However, when he accidentally meets her in the forest, he is fooled by her disguise and believes her indeed to be a boy. She, on the other hand, knows who he is and offers to “cure” him of his lovesickness by “pretending” to be Rosalind and allowing him to “court” her.

Meanwhile Touchstone, who wants to marry an ugly woman so she will always be faithful to him, courts the country maid, Audrey; Oliver, who was saved by Orlando from a lion, reforms and falls instantly in love with Celia; Silvius, a young shepherd, desperately pursues Phebe; and Phebe falls head over heels in love with—who else?—Rosalind disguised as Ganymede. The various exiles and lovers begin to gather in the forest; however, Rosalind leaves them, promising she will return tomorrow and satisfy everyone, including the deluded Orlando and Phebe.

True to her promise, Rosalind returns and eventually reveals her true identity to Orlando (and a surprised Phebe); and, by the play’s end, all the love affairs are happily resolved. The multiple weddings of Orlando/Rosalind, Oliver/Celia, Touchstone/Audrey, and Silvius/Phebe are presided over by Hymen, god of marriage; and, finally, in the midst of the celebrations, the newlyweds learn that Duke Frederick has repented and has restored all possessions and estates to their rightful owners.
Characters: As You Like It

Duke Senior: The banished duke—Rosalind’s father, Celia’s uncle, and Frederick’s brother—is an easy-going, good-humored, and contented man. He does not complain of his misfortunes but rather makes the best of things, and even finds good in his banishment.

Duke Frederick: The usurper—Celia’s father, Rosalind’s uncle, and Duke Senior’s brother—is a man no one speaks well of, yet he has overthrown a man everyone does speak well of; thus he must have been capable, even though brutal, harsh, moody, and manipulative. In the end he does repent and restores all estates and possessions to the rightful duke and other owners.

Amiens: A lord attending the banished duke.

Jaques: A lord attending the banished duke and a very melancholy fellow, he has followed the banished duke into the Forest of Arden.

Le Beau: A courtier attending Duke Frederick.

Charles: A wrestler of Duke Frederick.

Oliver: The eldest son of Sir Rowland de Boys, he inexplicably hates his youngest brother, Orlando, and abuses him, deprives him of education, and eventually plots to have him murdered. Yet, near the end of the play, this hardened villain suddenly announces his complete change of character, reconciles with Orlando, and marries Celia.

Jaques: Not to be confused with the melancholy Jaques, he is the second son of Sir Rowland de Boys. He is now away from home, attending the university.

Orlando: The youngest son of Sir Rowland de Boys, he has been kept like a peasant by his brother Oliver all his life. Yet, despite this, his goodness and natural gifts are apparent. To save his life, he flees from a harsh and rigidly structured society in which the old, the lowly, and the female are victimized. In the anarchic world of Arden, he cares for Adam, who is both old and lowly, with great tenderness and with no concern for rank. Most important, he is temporarily set free from the restrictions and fictions imposed on a man dealing with a woman. He comes to know Rosalind not as a mistress placed on a pedestal for greater ease of worship and dehumanization, but as a friend and equal.

Adam: A servant to Oliver, he leaves his cruel master to follow Orlando into exile, asking nothing more than to be a servant.

Dennis: A servant to Oliver.

Touchstone: A fool or court jester in Duke Frederick’s court, he leaves with Celia and Rosalind when they flee to the Forest of Arden. He is more, however, than the average fool, and through his satirical wit exposes the follies of life. He courts Audrey, sometimes as a burlesque, but in the end is happily married to her.

Sir Oliver Martext: A country vicar.
Odd Couple and Odd Man Out in

As You Like It

By Diana Major Spencer

Every commentary of As You Like It begins with the debt Shakespeare owes to Thomas Lodge for publishing his euphuistic novel Rosalynde in 1590. The Bard retained most of the characters, but omitted revenge, bloodshed, incest, and death to sweeten the plot almost to the point of sappiness. To add some bite to a saccharine world where repentance and conversion overcome evil intent at forest’s edge, Shakespeare inserted three wonderfully vivid characters who only peripherally interact with the main plot, but offer a fun-house mirror-image to the euphoria and blank-verse love-in-idleness of the main-plot characters.

Jaques, Touchstone, and Audrey, along with the ponderous pontification, linguistic acrobatics, and slovenly simplicity they respectively embody, are totally original with Shakespeare. While Duke Senior, the wronged duke, delivers encomia on the “sweet . . . uses of adversity” (2.1.12), Jaques is there to disavow any courtly sentiments with his barrage of negativism. Also, while Rosalind and Celia purchase a “cottage, pasture, and the flock” (2.4.92) to settle into, with Corin as caretaker (blowing their cover of “poor and mean attire” [1.3.111]), Touchstone, “comfort to our travels” (1.3.131), is there to superciliously counter any pastoral perspective with his never-ending deluge of one-upsmanhip. Finally, as Rosalind pursues love-prate with Orlando, and Silvius moons over the recalcitrant Phebe, Touchstone introduces as his true love Audrey, a goatherd of minimal vocabulary and ungainly bearing (“bear your body more seeming, Audrey” [5.4.68–69]).

While Jaques enjoys much critical attention, he is of interest here only as a devoted fan of the “motley fool” (2.7.13), whom he encountered in the forest basking in the sun and philosophizing on time and the human condition: “And so from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe, / And then from hour to hour, we rot and rot” (2.7.26–27). Though we never see the laughter portrayed, Jaques claims, to have “crow[ed] like chanticleer / That fools should be so deep contemplative” and laughed without stopping for a full hour (2.7.30–33). A few scenes later, apparently stalking Touchstone to witness further motley deeds, Jaques beholds the courtship scene of Touchstone and Audrey from his covert glade.

Audrey appears in just four scenes and utters a total of twelve speeches, most of just one line, although she remains on stage through a total of 408 lines. Touchstone predictably provides abundant volubility and double-talk. In the 198-line final scene, Audrey says nothing, even as Touchstone’s “quarrel upon the seventh cause,” the wedding ceremony, and Jaques’s departing bequests swirl around her. That gives her ample time to exhibit the make-up department’s interpretation of “a poor virgin, sir, an ill-favor’d thing, sir” (5.4.26–27) and to look vacuous upon hearing such hard words as features, poetical, and honest (3.3.6, 17, 34).

The courtship of these “country copulatives” (5.4.55-56) also reinforces Touchstone’s hollowness. For all his pretentions to courtly manners and intellectual gifts, he uses language only to vanquish, not to persuade or understand. His quibbling with the shepherd Corin about courtly versus country life contradicts itself several times: country life is “a good life,” but “naught”; “I like it very well,” but it is a “vile life”; “it pleaseth me,” but is “tedious”; “it fits my humor” but “goes against my stomach” (3.2.12–21). Similarly, the language he uses with Audrey suggests that marriage is no more than a tool for seduction.

Bemoaning Audrey’s oblivion to “the capricious poet, honest Ovid” (3.3.8)—an allusion Jaques evaluates as, in the mind of Touchstone, “knowledge ill-inhabited, worse than Jove in a thatch’d house” (3.3.10–11)—Touchstone wishes that “the gods had made [her] poetical”
She doesn’t know the word, but asks if it is “a true thing.” “No,” he replies, “for the truest poetry is the most feigning”; and since she swears she is honest (chaste), he reasons, if she were a poet, he “might have some hope thou didst feign”—i.e., only pretend to be chaste. To Audrey's question, “Would you not have me honest?” Touchstone replies that he wouldn't want her honest unless she were also “hard-favor’d”; now, as she is obviously “an ill-favor’d thing,” and “hard-favor’d” should accompany “not honest,” he would therefore not want her to be chaste (3.3.16–30). Two negatives (“hard-favor’d” and “not honest”) indeed make a positive (sexual availability)—he hopes.

Audrey acknowledges that she is “not fair, and therefore I pray the gods make me honest,” then “I am not a slut, though I thank the gods I am foul,” to which Touchstone responds, “Well, prais’d be the gods for thy foulness! Sluttishness may come hereafter” (3.3.33–41). But just in case sluttishness is not forthcoming, he has arranged for an imperfect “marriage” (apparently a necessary prelude to Audrey’s surrender) under the guidance of the neighboring vicar, Sir Oliver Martext (who is most appropriately named). Sir Oliver insists on proper forms in the ceremony, even as Touchstone quibbles on the word give.

Sir Oliver Martext: Is there none here to give the woman?
Touchstone: I will not take her on gift of any man.
Sir Oliver Martext: Truly, she must be given, or the marriage is not lawful.

Fortunately, Jaques, lurking in the bushes, steps forward to give the bride (“a toy in hand here [a trifling matter],” Touchstone says). Jaques subsequently cautions against the ineptitude of Sir Oliver’s nuptials: “This fellow will but join you together as they join wainscot; then one of you will prove a shrunk panel, and like green timber warp, warp” (3.3.86–89). Touchstone’s aside affirms that Sir Oliver’s incompetence will afford a good excuse to abandon Audrey hereafter. “Come, sweet Audrey,” he adds, “We must be married, or we must live in bawdry” (95–96).

In act 5, scene 4, the final scene, Touchstone, apparently making no interim progress with Audrey, “press[es] in here, sir, amongst the rest of the country copulatives, to swear and to forswear, according as marriage binds and blood breaks” (5.4.55–57, emphasis mine). Taking the vows is to swear; breaking them is to forswear. Marriage binds the couple together; blood (passion) may break them apart. Ho-hum, he seems to be saying about fidelity. Yet it seems that he is desperate enough for a real marriage this time, as his descriptions of Audrey indicate that she is still protecting her “honesty”: “A poor virgin, sir, an ill-favor’d thing, sir, but mine own. . . . Rich honesty dwells like a miser, sir, in a poor house, as your pearl in your foul oyster” (5.4.57–61, emphasis mine).

Prognostications for the future success of the match are unanimously and predictably dismal. After blessing the unions of Rosalind and Orlando, Celia and Oliver, and Phebe and Silvius, Hymen turns to the improbable, mismatched couple: “You and you are sure together, / As the winter to foul weather” (5.4.135–36).

Jaques, abandoning “pleasures” and “dancing measures” to join the reformed usurper, Duke Frederick, in a monastery, bequeaths “honor,” “love,” “your land and love,” and “well-deserved bed” to the other men present at the wedding, saving his only negative for Touchstone: “And you to wrangling, for thy loving voyage / Is but for two months victuall’d” (5.4.191–92).

The charming difficulties the three mainstream couples encounter to prove that “the course of true love never does run smooth” resolve into a promise of “happily ever after.” The earthier denizens of the forest and the pseudo-social and anti-social misfits with their greasy hands and feet of clay assure us that the proverbial “bowl of cherries” is not the only outcome life has to offer. Finally, these characters provide not only a less adolescent alternative to euphoric ever-afters, but the bulk of the humor and hilarity as well.
As You Like It: Touching Elements of Reality
By Donna R. Cheney

For the plot of As You Like It, Shakespeare himself had only to go to the local theatre. Thomas Lodge’s prose romance Rosalynde was popular in the Elizabethan theatres beginning in 1590 and was a wonderful tale, full of bloody wrestling matches and swashbuckling rescues, of nasty outlaws and the violent deaths of wicked villains. In contrast, when Shakespeare’s version opened in 1599, he had turned Lodge’s strong, masculine story into a fairy tale. Yet Shakespeare’s comic version touches us more deeply because of its elements of reality.

Lodge’s story follows the usual pastoral conventions popular at the time, but Shakespeare includes ironic twists which make the characters more immediate to our own experience. The characters in As You Like It move from the complications of a corrupt court to the surrounding forest in search of freedom. In the forest, they find out who they really are; most are refined in the struggle, but a few are not.

The forest itself is an ideal site for the struggle toward fulfillment. We are told at the beginning of the action that those who are fleeing into the woods from Duke Frederick’s tyranny think of the Forest of Arden (probably the woods in which Shakespeare grew up and named for Shakespeare’s mother, Mary Arden) as a place where they can “fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world” (1.1.118–19). The displaced Duke Senior is a romantic Robin Hood figure, but he acknowledges that he and his band must eventually meet icy winter winds with a smile: “Sweet are the uses of adversity” (2.1.12), he says. It pains him that deer must be killed for him and his friends to survive, but he intends to endure in the forest until order can be restored in the royal court.

The other main characters are as non-violent as he. In fact, one primary difference in Shakespeare’s version is that he took out the violence. The result is that Rosalind becomes the central character of the play. She is not just a passive Renaissance maiden, waiting to be saved by her swashbuckling suitor. Not only does she take charge of her own wooing, but she is the fulcrum of the action. It is through her understanding and intercession that the complications are resolved. She is caught up in the romance of Orlando’s very bad poetry, while also acknowledging that “men have died from time to time, and worms have eaten them, but not for love” (4.1.106–8). She thoroughly enjoys dressing up as Ganymede to enjoy Orlando’s company, but uses her male disguise to teach him some important qualities of love. Thus, violent action is replaced by realistic introspection. Orlando doesn’t battle his brother with a sword, as Rosader does in Lodge’s version, but wins him over by saving his life. First, however, Orlando debates with himself whether he should risk his own life to do so.

To add to the irony of the play, Shakespeare invents two characters who do not appear at all in Lodge’s version: Touchstone and Jaques. A combination of romantic and realistic, these two fools add to an understanding of the main characters. Jaques, “Monsieur Melancholy,” is so gloomy as to be runny most of the time. However, his best known speech, The Seven Ages of Man, which begins “all the world’s a stage,” ends with man in “second childishness, and mere oblivion, / sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans every thing” (2.7.139–166). The audience, often shaken with the reality of Jaques’s vision, sometimes misses the next contrast. The next person on stage is ancient Adam, servant to Orlando. His presence refutes everything Jaques has just said: Adam is not childish and is not just a burden. He is, instead, loyal and true, and, rather than going into “mere oblivion,” he will be remembered forever for his virtues. Thus the exaggeration of melancholy in Jaques is refuted by the balance of virtuous reality. Jaques’s pessimism is finally beaten by joyous Rosalind. When he asserts that “tis good to be sad and say nothing,” she responds, “why then ’tis good to be a post”
She chooses deliberate happiness over superficial stoicism.

The melancholy fool Jaques is often compared to Touchstone, the wise fool. Touchstone’s wit seems light and self-effacing, yet is often biting. A touchstone is a criterion (used in the Renaissance as a test for the purity of gold and silver). As a function in the play, Touchstone becomes a standard of measure for the foolishness of the other characters. He draws humor by looking at the absurdities of the games people play. The irony is that he himself is the most ridiculous character in this work. He who considers himself the most wise, marries Audrey, the goatherd, who in her stupidity is certainly the most innocent. When Touchstone wants more in his wife, he wishes she were “poetical.” Audrey says, “I do not know what ‘poetical’ is. Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?” He laments, “No, truly; for the truest poetry is the most feigning, and lovers are given to poetry” (3.3.17 20). His comment underscores the Aristotelian argument for poetry not as a mirror of truth, but of the ideal. By this measure, poetry is in its nature not realistic, but romantic. It gives us a view of what life should be, not what it is. In moving this whole play from Lodge’s prose form into poetic prose, Shakespeare has opened this work to a discussion of the ideal.

Because of this emphasis on ideas, As You Like It is sometimes criticized as having little dramatic tension. By the very nature of Shakespearean comedies, we know in advance that order will be restored, that the wicked will be punished, and that marriages will follow. Certainly the primary intention is to entertain (this play contains more songs than any other Shakespearean play). Yet each character has met and conquered adversity, or has become inured to it. The wise fool has married, but not well; the melancholy fool has joined the wicked duke in a religious retreat. The wicked brother has been conquered by gratitude and by love for the duke’s daughter. (We know the love is genuine because Celia had been disguised as a simple shepherdess.) Order is restored through the reinstatement of Duke Senior, and all can leave the romance of the forest to return to an improved court.

The fairy-tale quality is particularly strong as Rosalind works her magic on the couples to seal all in happiness. The conclusion is not the exaggerated violence of Lodge, but the exaggerated love of Shakespeare’s romantic ideal, with touches of self-recognition which win us over. We are pleased when the golden Rosalind brings us back to reality by asking for our applause.
A “Joyous Comedy”

Young lovers who pursue their happy destiny in a world seemingly far removed from reality, evil that threatens but never harms, beautiful poetry and charming songs—As You Like It, written during Shakespeare’s middle period, seems to have it all.

In this play an increasingly confident playwright consistently balances gay laughter with notes of seriousness and sadness. Although Touchstone’s wit and Jaques’s melancholy remarks question the nature of love and the value of society, the chief characters in Shakespeare’s romantic comedies are always highborn. Rosalind and Celia typify some of Shakespeare’s most engaging characters: well-balanced young people, usually women, who can live with equal ease in the world of courtly romance or the world of rustic idyll as typified by the Forest of Arden.

This play was first published in the 1623 folio, but was probably written in 1599 or 1600, as it was cited in the Stationer’s Register of August 4, 1600 as being protected from unauthorized publication. The source of As You Like It was Thomas Lodge’s pastoral romance, Rosalynde (1590), which in turn was derived from an anonymous fourteenth-century poem. Shakespeare refined both of these earlier sources, replacing violence and death found in the earlier versions with romance and poetry in a pastoral setting—replete with innocent shepherds tending their flocks and falling in love with beautiful lasses to whom they write anguished verse.

The play opens and closes with flurries of events. To begin with, we have Oliver’s various attempts to rid himself of his virtuous younger brother, Orlando, then the banishment of Rosalind and then of Orlando himself—but these are simply transparent devices for getting all the major characters away from the familiar world and into the Forest of Arden. Near the end of the play another little explosion of events precipitates four marriages and releases all the exiles from their pastoral life. In between, Shakespeare seems to go out of his way to avoid generating suspense. Celia and Oliver, Touchstone and Audrey have agreed to marry almost before we realize what is happening. Rosalind has only to abandon her disguise as Ganymede for Orlando to declare himself, and with equal ease Phebe realizes she must be content with her faithful Silvius.

Shakespeare refuses to legislate or even to take sides in the various rivalries the comedy sets up: between court and country, nature and fortune, youth and age, realism and romanticism, laughter and melancholy. These opposites, the subject of ceaseless debate and meditation, tend to be identified with particular characters, but the comedy as a whole is far more interested in doing justice to the complexity of the argument than in arriving at a correct solution. The idea is that sophisticated people, suddenly made part of a rustic life of which they previously had only the most distant and imperfect knowledge, may discover things obscured or undisclosed in the court.

There are in As You Like It seven songs, including the famous “Blow, blow thou winter wind,” “Under the greenwood tree,” and “It was a lover and his lass.” These three are important to the plot, helping to produce the necessary woodland atmosphere. The songs served to provide a setting on a stage without scenery and surrounded on three sides by the audience.

As we surrender to the spell of Shakespeare’s magic, we too are free for the moment from the conventions and restraints of the real world, and we linger in an enchanted wood to listen to the theorizing of Jaques, the jests of Touchstone, and the laughter of Rosalind. If Shakespeare put little intellectual labor into the construction of the plot, he lavished treasures of genius on the sparkling prose, the lyric verse, and the creation of the ideal lady for this world of fantasy, Rosalind.
As You Like It: A Heightening of Pastoral Conventions

By Diana Major Spencer

Shakespeare’s As You Like It, like his other comedies, begins by dispatching one or more characters to unfamiliar turf where old uses (customs) no longer apply. The comedies feature disguises (often a nubile female clad in page’s garb), mistaken identities and recognition scenes, love at first sight (usually more than one instance), exchanges of love tokens, and multiple marriages involving two or three distinct social levels—all proclaiming the theme so splendidly articulated by Lysander in A Midsummer Night’s Dream: “The course of true love never did run smooth.” Thus, as one might expect, at the end of act 1, Rosalind and Celia, in disguise, leave the court for the Forest of Arden.

Unlike Shakespeare’s other comedies, though, As You Like It frequently appears alongside Spenser’s Shepheardes Calendar and Sidney’s Arcadia as examples of pastoral literature, popular in England from Spenser to Milton. Sometimes Shakespeare’s source, Thomas Lodge’s Rosalynde, is included. Commentaries on Shakespeare’s debt to Lodge regularly describe a reduction of romance/adventure and a heightening of pastoral conventions—without identifying those conventions.

Pastoral literature originated with Theocritus’s Bucolics. In Eclogues Virgil introduces Arcadia, the symbolic location of any pastoral, idyllic, bucolic paradise inhabited by peaceful shepherds living a simple, happy life. Pastoral, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, means “of shepherds”; appropriately, the genre features shepherds—cowherds if the work is bucolic (from Greek for “cowherd”).

Lodge composed Rosalynde as a pastoral romance. Shakespeare followed his model closely, but omitted the violence. In Shakespeare’s version Oliver hates Orlando for his handsomeness and kindness, not for his property as in Lodge’s version. Frederick exiles Rosalind for the same reasons, not because he actually suspects her of treason. Lodge provided a limb-from-limb execution for the usurping king, while Shakespeare’s Frederick repents and joins a monastery. Charles the wrestler merely injures the three brothers who precede Orlando as challengers, whereas in Lodge he kills them. Orlando, besides demonstrating his own strength, avenges the old father’s loss. Shakespeare also eliminated the razzle-dazzle band of robbers who kidnap Rosalind. In short, he further pastoralized Lodge’s adventure/romance.

Phebe and Silvius, shepherdess and her (whether she likes it or not) shepherd, not only appear in Lodge’s novel, but are also stock pastoral figures—even to their names. In classical pastoral, conventional shepherds and shepherdesses occur in pairs with names like Phoebe and Silvius (or Phoebus and Silvia). The shepherd is lovelorn, and the shepherdess disdainful. Phebe and Silvius perform these roles perfectly, as do Orlando and Rosalind (Ganymede).

The lovelorn shepherd laments the loss or disdain of his lady, either in solo lyric or eclogue (a dialogue between shepherds about the simple life): Silvius complains to Corin; Orlando hangs lyrics on trees. Phebe supplies the customary elegy for a dead shepherd by quoting Marlowe: “Dead shepherd, now I find thy saw of might, / ‘Who ever lov’d that lov’d not at first sight?’” (3.5.81 82; all references to line numbers are from The Riverside Shakespeare, ed. G. Blakemore Evans [Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1974]).

The pastoral represents rural life as idyllic, idealized, and sweetly picturesque. No one feels hunger or cold. A few pure white, woolly lambs gambol among the flowers dotting the verdant hillside, at the base of which meanders a gurgling, tumbling brook. Rural life is unsullied, and therefore superior to urban. Lest the sweetness cloy, however, Shakespeare, himself a country lad,
tempers the idyll with the “adversity” of Jaques, the malcontent, and Touchstone and Audrey, most unlikely lovers. Shakespeare’s additions, all “touchstones” in their own way, ensure that neither court life nor pastoral idyll is too sweet or too adverse.

In Lodge’s original, the two cousins head for the forest without a man. Shakespeare gives them a male companion. Touchstone, a “clownish fool,” embodies the sophistry of court. Both court and country, compared to Touchstone as quality test, seem more genuine than he. Language is supposed to be a means of communication, polite forms marking civilized, courtly relations; yet Touchstone obfuscates, pontificates, and equivocates. In his “eclogue“ with Corin (3.2), he attempts neither good sense or consistency, only verbal victory. Ironically, this master of pretense to courtliness, sniffing prettily at country ways, finds his love-match in the swills and becomes one of the “country copulatives.”

Audrey, the goat girl of small brain and thick tongue, is better suited to a georgic, a poem that depicts the labor of the farm, than to a pastoral, as is Corin’s realistic description of rough, tarred hands from treating the ailments of sheep—which Touchstone refutes. Audrey provides a third social stratum for the marriage-mill and a flip-side to Phebe, the disdainful pastoral beauty who woos Rosalind in blank verse. Audrey also, in her utter failure to understand the linguistic acrobatics of Touchstone, demonstrates the uselessness, not only of his talent for equivocating, but of language itself when lust prevails.

The original Audrey was a seventh-century saint from East Anglia. At the fair on St. Audrey’s Day, one might purchase lace neckerchiefs, over the years progressively more cheaply made and sold. To distinguish this lace from more respectable varieties, it was called St. Audrey’s lace, which, with a slurred first syllable, becomes ’t Audrey’s lace, or tawdry lace. Touchstone’s lines, “Come sweet Audrey [sweee-tawdry?] / We must marry or we must live in bawdry,” certainly suggested rustic life, and very likely suggested a tawdry character for Audrey to go with her reeking goats.

Shakespeare’s third adverse addition is Jaques. G. B. Harrison, editor of a Complete Works (New York: Harcourt, 1980), believes Jaques is Shakespeare’s first experiment in deep character study, which culminates in Hamlet (776). Conversely, Jaques may have been created to accommodate the latest theatre fashion: comedies of humor were now more popular than pastorals. Jonson’s Every Man in His Humour had appeared, with Shakespeare in the cast, just a year before As You Like It. Jaques is a “man in his humour,” his personality determined by an imbalance of bodily fluids, or humours.

Jaques is “Monsieur Melancholy,” suffering a preponderance of black bile (black = melan, bile = choler: melancholy), cold and dry like earth, the heaviest element and the heaviest humour. The Oxford English Dictionary cites a medical treatise from about 1400: “Another substance [engendered] . . . is somewhat stinking and is called melancholy.” The consequence of this condition (which seems to resemble constipation) is “irascibility, ill-temper, anger, sullenness,” as well as “sadness and depression of spirits,” and in pastoral spirit, “a tender or pensive sadness.” Jaques displays all those moods in his various encounters. Before he appears, the lords in Arden describe his maudlin empathy with the weeping deer. From music he “sucks melancholy like a weasel sucks eggs” (2.5.13). The nearest he comes to enjoyment is observing the motley fool, Touchstone, while, ironically, the sheer quantity and inaccuracy of his own nay-saying makes him foolish to other exiles.

Jaques is not organic to the plot; no action requires him; the play coheres without him. Still, Shakespeare gives the conventional pastoral singing match and shepherds’ discourse on the transitoriness of life to Jaques in his encounters with Orlando, Touchstone, and Rosalind. Jaques serves the “sweet use of adversary” to others. He answers Amiens’s “Under the Greenwood
“Tree” with “If it do come to pass / That any man turn ass” (2.5.51 59). Further, he gets the Seven Ages of Man speech, which Harrison considers magnificent (775-76), but which Anne Barton finds “banal . . . generalized and demonstrably untrue” in the play (Riverside Shakespeare, 367).

Moreover, Jaques, the malcontent, is the reality-check for the optimistic Duke Senior, who in exile—bereft of his daughter, his property, and his power—emotes a classic pastoral speech: “Hath not old custom made this life more sweet / Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods / More free from peril than the envious court? / Here feel we not the penalty of Adam, / The seasons difference, as the icy fang . . . / Even till I shrink with cold, I smile and say, / ‘This is not flattery: these are counsellors / That feelingly persuade me what I am.’ / 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” (2.1.1 17).

Pastoral has no room for melancholy. In the end, Jaques joins ex-Duke Frederick in a monastery, Oliver decides to turn shepherd (with Celia), and everyone else returns to court. Shakespeare replaced much of the action of Lodge's original with encounters and cross-encounters of the various characters who inhabit the Forest of Arden. His “touchstones” test other characters by reminding us of mis-uses of adversity; they temper the idyllic pastoral by reminding us of goats and gross ignorance; and they temper court life by displaying its equivocating one-upsmanship and rhetorical tyranny, its incessant cynicism and melancholy, and its equally useless “painted pomp” (2.1.2). Perhaps the greatest use of adversity will be to preserve a measure of pastoral simplicity in the “happily ever after.”
“Ay, Now Am I in Arden
By Stephanie Chidester

The premise of As You Like It and the title itself suggest that the play will be a simple pastoral romance; they further suggest that Shakespeare was pandering to his audience’s tastes, giving them what they wanted—not necessarily what he wanted to write. While there is no indication that Shakespeare composed As You Like It in response to an actual request, there is some evidence that such plays were highly popular (and, more to the point, profitable) at the time: Charles Boyce speculates that “the company may have intended to profit from a vogue for romantic tales of outlaws, stimulated by two plays about Robin Hood—by Anthony Munday and Henry Chettle—presented by the rival Admiral’s Men in 1598” (Shakespeare A to Z: The Essential Reference to His Plays, His Poems, His Life and Times and More [New York and Oxford: Facts on File, 1990] 41).

However, if that were truly what Shakespeare’s audience wanted, they were destined for disappointment. The play is considerably more complex and infinitely more entertaining than the fanciful pastorals of Shakespeare’s contemporaries. The Forest of Arden seems idyllic; as Charles says, “They say [Duke Senior] 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 . . . and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world” (The New Folger Library Shakespeare: As You Like It, eds. Barbara A. Mowat and Paul Werstine [New York: Washington Square Press, 1997], 1.1.113 17). Nevertheless, the “golden world” is undercut by the sarcastic commentary of Jaques and Touchstone. Jaques invents a new verse to a song that includes the words “Here shall he see / Gross fools as he” (2.6.48 55), and Touchstone’s instant judgment is “Ay, now am I in Arden. . . When I was at home I was in a better place” (2.4.15 16).

The earlier reference to Robin Hood in the play begs a comparison of the two situations. Duke Senior and his cohorts are notably lacking in the heroism that prevails in many of the Robin Hood legends; the only adventurous thing they do is hunt deer, and even that is placed in a questionable light by Jaques, who accuses Duke Senior and his men of being “mere usurpers, tyrants, and what’s worse, / To fright the animals and to kill them up / In their assigned and native dwelling place” (2.2.64 66). Duke Senior does nothing to oppose the tyranny of Duke Frederick, but rather takes the attitude of a child whose favorite toy has been snatched from him and who has been unable to retrieve it: he picks up another toy and declares he likes this one better anyway.

Nor is the forest an entirely merry place; a slight melancholy is the prevailing tone. Certainly Duke Senior and his forest court seem free of human treachery, but they do not live without worry or effort—they must, after all, engage in the serious pursuits of providing food for themselves and protecting themselves from the elements. The exiled Orlando and faithful old Adam become so hungry and weary that Orlando, unsuccessful at hunting, is driven to steal food for them. Duke Senior seems bored, constantly seeking out Jaques for entertainment, and welcomes the entrance of Orlando as a diversion. Even the songs they sing have a bitter edge: “Blow, blow, thou winter wind. / Thou art not so unkind / As man’s ingratitude” (2.7.182 84).

The fairy-tale quality of the main plot lines is also tempered by the darker and more serious debate over human nature and the factors which shape it—fortune, nature, and nurture. The first act of As You Like It, set at court, shows us two families, the members of which differ widely in character and temperament. The de Boys family consists of Oliver, Orlando, and Jaques (not to be confused with the melancholy Jaques who is in exile with Duke Senior). We are told that their father, Sir Rowland de Boys, was a man of noble character. Even Duke Frederick, who considered Sir Rowland an enemy (because he was loyal to Duke Senior), admits to Orlando: “The world esteemed thy father honorable” (1.2.220). And Orlando, “proud to be Sir Rowland’s son” (1.2.228),
rebukes Oliver, “He is thrice a villain that says such a father begot villains” (1.1.57 58).

Nevertheless, Shakespeare makes it clear that the world and families are not quite that simple. It is clear that Sir Rowland did beget at least one villain. While Orlando seems to share his father’s noble qualities and Orlando tells us that “report speaks goldenly of” his brother Jaques (1.1.6), Oliver harbors an irrational hatred of Orlando. He treats Orlando like a lowly peasant and “bars him the place of a brother” (1.1.19), refusing him the education of a gentleman and the inheritance Sir Rowland bequeathed him. Worse, when Orlando insists on receiving his inheritance, Oliver plots to kill him. He instructs Charles the wrestler, “I had as lief thou didst break his neck as his finger” (1.1.143 44). No motive presents itself for this villainy; in this family, heredity alone does not determine a person’s nature, nor does nurture. Orlando, despite rough treatment and poor education, is as noble as ever his father was.

The situation with Duke Senior, Duke Frederick, and their daughters is quite similar. Duke Senior has much less force of will than his younger brother, but he has infinitely more kindness and conscience. Indeed, Frederick’s conscience is conveniently on leave until the final scene of the play. Rosalind and Celia both possess loyalty, intelligence, and courage, and they love one another dearly despite the respective fall and rise of their fortunes. Duke Frederick, on the other hand, is a paranoid megalomaniac who has usurped his elder brother’s estate and is greedily snatching up the “lands and revenues” of those lords who followed Duke Senior (1.1.98 102). He dislikes Rosalind and is overly protective of Celia’s position and inheritance (formerly Rosalind’s): He tells his daughter, “Her very silence, and her patience / Speak to the people, and they pity her. / Thou art a fool. She robs thee of thy name, / And thou wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous / When she is gone” (1.3.80 86). Consequently, Duke Frederick accuses Rosalind of treason and banishes her from the court. Again, we see that heredity is no guarantee that honor—or villainy—in one family member will be shared by the others.

Pastoral notions of romantic love are also debunked in the play. Shakespeare marches out a veritable army of lovers, each pair serving as a commentary on and contrast to the others. Some come close to our expectations, and others are comically flawed, marring the armor of love with considerable tarnish.

Foremost among the lovers in the play are Rosalind and Orlando; they are the closest to the romantic, pastoral ideal, though they deviate from the pattern. Rosalind spends most of the play disguised as a boy and denouncing the very ideal she represents. Orlando is rendered ridiculous by his abominable poetry, composed in honor of Rosalind and hung upon the shrubs and tree-branches. Nonetheless, they seem to have the soundest footing of all the couples, and we are able to believe their relationship will survive the strain of everyday life. Because they interact more than the other lovers do (albeit when Rosalind is in disguise), their affection progresses beyond mere infatuation. Rosalind goes to her nuptials with eyes wide open to the realities of “for better or worse,” and she has done her best, in the guise of Ganymede, to educate Orlando and prepare him for the “worse.”

Next on the scale of pastoral romance are Oliver and Celia—the latter still in disguise as Aliena—who are unaware of anything but their mutual attraction. One moment they are unconscious of the other’s existence, and the next they fall instantly in love and determine to marry. “They are the very wrath of love,” Rosalind says (5.2.41 42), and then suggests that physical attraction is the principal actor at play. Orlando too is skeptical and incredulous, asking his brother, “Is ‘t possible that on so little acquaintance you should like her? That, but seeing, you should love her? And loving, woo? And wooing, she should grant?” (5.2.1 4).

Also problematic is the courtship of Phoebe and Silvius, who present a comic contrast to the
noble shepherds and shepherdesses in other pastoral tales. Like Celia and Oliver, they don’t really seem to know each other well; but, in this instance, the cause is not brief acquaintance. In the throes of infatuation, Silvius sees only a pretty face and doesn’t notice her shallowness. Phoebe, not content with her unexciting, all-too-familiar suitor, despises Silvius and wishes for what she cannot have, perversely loving the one who spurns her. Indeed, she marries Silvius only by default, after she discovers Ganymede is actually female.

Touchstone, who courts the goatherd Audrey, provides the greatest affront to the pastoral ideal. Audrey, with no wit to speak of, comprehends less than half what Touchstone says to her, and she is ugly to boot, a failing she readily acknowledges: “Well, I am not fair, and therefore I pray the gods make me honest. . . . I am not a slut, though I thank the gods I am foul” (3.3.32–33, 37–38). Touchstone, interested in more carnal matters, would happily forego the marriage ceremony if only Audrey would cling less tightly to her honesty. As he tells Jaques, he doesn’t mind being married by the dubious Sir Oliver Martext, because “he is not like to marry me well, and not being well married, it will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife” (3.3.91–94).

So Shakespeare gives us the flavor of the pastoral, under which lies a substantial dose of realism sweetened with humor. Ultimately, the only element of the play which flouts realism entirely (other than the completeness of Rosalind’s disguise) is the resolution to the conflict between Oliver and Orlando, and Duke Frederick and Duke Senior. While it is, presumably, the conclusion we desire—”as you like it”—the mechanism is highly contrived and incredible. Oliver’s change of heart is somewhat understandable since it results from Orlando’s heroic actions and forgiving nature, but the events which make this reconciliation possible—the successive appearances of the viper and the lioness—are rather too convenient. Likewise, Duke Frederick’s sudden and inexplicable conversion by an “old religious man” (5.4.165), upon whom he stumbles en route to the forest, is entirely beyond the realm of belief.

Thus, although the ends are precisely what we wanted, the means leave us feeling less than satisfied; ultimately, these contrivances are anticlimactic and undermine the very happy ending. Also, as fantastic as these events are, they are almost entirely lacking in drama, taking place as they do off stage—Oliver’s episode because of troublesome issues of livestock, and Duke Frederick’s probably due to the difficulty of playing it convincingly. So we find that a magical, fairy-tale resolution is not precisely what we wanted after all—we find ourselves wishing for just a bit more realism and drama.

The deus ex machina (almost literally—it is, after all, a man of God who makes Frederick see the error of his ways) becomes yet another layer in this unexpectedly complex play. It is, in more ways than we could have imagined, “as you like it.” Shakespeare has presented us with the fairy tale and simultaneously reminded us of the true nature of human beings and human life. He has shown us that some wishes are not only flawed but also unsatisfactory: What will make us truly happy, or at the very least content, lies not in the treacherous peaks of romanticism or the dark chasms of cynicism, but somewhere in the vast plains between the two.
“The Seven Ages of Man” Lesson Plan

Using the 2009 Utah Shakespearean Festival education calendar
to help teach As You Like It

This lesson can be completed as an introduction to the play or when the class has read the soliloquy of “The seven ages of man.”

Title:               
The Stages of Life

Time needed:        
Two ninety-minute class periods or two or three forty-minute class periods

Age level:          
Middle and high school students

Objective:          
Students will demonstrate an understanding of Shakespeare’s text by interpreting meaning through discussion, movement, and writing. Also, students will be able to understand that Shakespeare’s words and ideas are still relevant and applicable today.

Materials:          
• Copies of the soliloquy “The seven ages of man,” with each of the seven ages on a different sheet of paper (As You Like It, 2.7.139–166)
• The 2009 education calendar from the Utah Shakespearean Festival, available by calling the Festival education office at 435-865-8333 (optional)

Anticipatory set/hook: 
Have the students write about a memorable moment (such as moving, transitioning into high school, going on a first date, etc.) in their life. How old were they? What were their actions and reactions to this moment? How and why did this moment affect/change your life? The teacher could provide an example to model what the students are to do.

Process:            
1. Now, invite a few students to share what they wrote. Ask the class to respond to the following question: If you were to live for seventy years, what kinds of stages (moments of transition, moments of change) would you encounter in your lifetime? How many stages could you have? During the discussion, have a scribe write down the responses on the board.

2. Now display or hand out copies of the soliloquy divided into seven parts, and divide the class into seven groups (between three and five students per group). Explain that Shakespeare discussed seven stages that men and women encounter in their lifetimes. Not yet knowing how Shakespeare divided up the seven ages of man, have each group only read the passage that they were given and decide upon its meaning/stage in life. Out of the seven stages described by Shakespeare, what number is their stage? How do they justify their decision?

3. Have each group explain to the rest of the class what stage of man their passage describes. Someone can make a tally on the board to show the stage that is chosen by each group. Next, bring out the calendar and go through the various stages and the images that reflect the stages of man outlined in the soliloquy. Did groups guess the right stage? What was their thinking behind their guess?

4. It is now time to show some creativity and interpretation of the text. Have each group create a “sculpture” or frozen scene from the members of their group to represent the stage of man that is being discussed in their passage. It should not be the exact same image that is shown on the calendar. If they need assistance with definitions of the words used in the text, have a computer or dictionary available for research. Everyone will present their sculpture/scene for the class, and those in
the audience will decide what stage of man is being represented. What words did they have to look up? What did they discover?

5. Now bring the concept of the seven ages of man into modern times by asking a couple of questions—What are the seven “ages” of a high school student? What seven “roles” do they play? What are seven “players” in high school?

6. Depending on time, have them write their own soliloquy/speech/poem that answers one of the three questions above. If there isn’t enough time in class, they can finish it as homework. If you want to devote another class period to this, have the students perform their writing for the class.

Tools for Assessment:

The teacher will assess the students’ understanding of the outlined objective by evaluating how groups interpret meaning of the text through discussion, performance of their sculpture/scene, and through their writing assignment of a soliloquy/speech/poem.