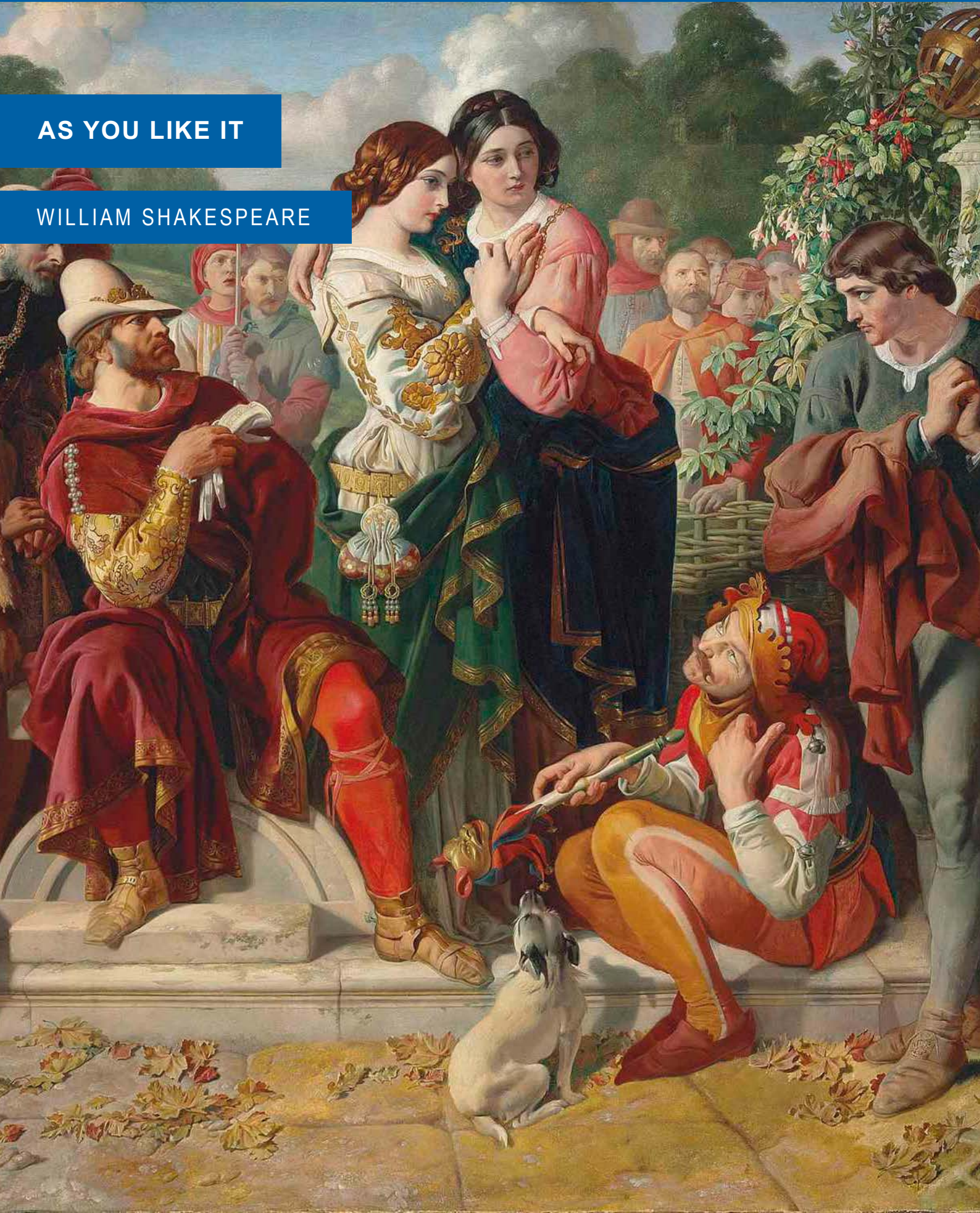


AS YOU LIKE IT

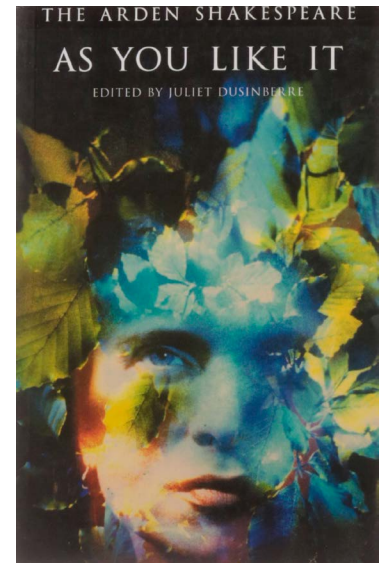
WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE





## INTRODUCTION

*As You Like It* is a pastoral comedy believed to be written and first performed in 1599. It was published in the First Folio (as the first collected edition of Shakespeare is known) in 1623. Shakespeare's output during the 1590s had focused on history plays and comedies about love. He was also writing the sonnets during this period.



The play tells the story of Rosalind escaping tyranny by dressing as a boy and fleeing to the Forest of Arden. Also fleeing into the Forest of Arden is a boy, Orlando. The two met briefly in Act I, fell in love and now find each other in the forest. However, Rosalind is still in her disguise as a boy Ganymede. As a kind of game to pass the time, Ganymede and Orlando woo each other. In amongst many other plot strands, they are eventually married, along with three other couples. Four weddings and no funeral, if you will.

Dr Johnson, writing in 1765, found the fable '*wild and pleasing*', the character of Jaques '*natural and well-preserved*', the comic dialogue '*very sprightly, with less mixture of low buffoonery than in some other plays*', and '*the graver part*' '*elegant and harmonious*'.

## MAIN CHARACTERS

### DUKE SENIOR

Duke Senior, in exile. Having been usurped by his brother, Duke Senior and a band of loyal courtiers have escaped to the Forest of Arden. The Duke is enjoying this return to rural life, asking his 'co-mates and brothers in exile' the question 'Are not these woods more free from peril than the envious court?'. He seems to live a life of almost total leisure in the forest in contrast to the political machinations of his former life.

The actor playing Duke Senior has one key balance to strike. He has to be jolly and avuncular, whilst also being convincing as a former ruler. Some productions veer too much towards a kind of Santa Claus Duke Senior, which robs the part of some of its depth.

### ROSALIND

Rosalind, his daughter: one of the most demanding comic parts in Shakespeare. She commands nearly all of the scenes in which she appears and has to grapple with a dazzling array of complex emotions. Her performance in Act I is a mixture of defiance and fear, before her adventurous spirit shines through:

*Were it not better,  
Because that I am more than common tall,  
That I did suit me all points like a man?  
A gallant curtle-axe upon my thigh,  
A boar-spear in my hand; and – in my heart  
Lie there what hidden woman's fear there will –  
We'll have a swashing and a martial outside,  
As many other mannish cowards have  
That do outface it with their semblances.*

The wooing game with Orlando that dominates the middle acts requires extremely careful handling. She and Orlando find each other in the forest. Orlando expresses his wish to talk about his love, Rosalind. Rosalind (dressed, remember, as Ganymede) seizes this opportunity and suggests that Orlando pretend he/she is Rosalind and woo her accordingly. In a moment of apparent whim, he says yes and the game begins:

**ROSALIND:** I would cure you [of your love], if you would but call me Rosalind and come every day to my cote and woo me.

**ORLANDO:** Now, by the faith of my love, I will: tell me where it is.

If you or the audience questions this moment too logically, the magic will be broken. Pace is crucial here. If the play can build up momentum, much like spinning a plate perhaps, then the magic may continue. If too slow, the plate will fall from its stick and the audience will fail to suspend its disbelief.

## DUKE FREDERICK

Duke Frederick, his usurping brother. He establishes himself in Act I as a threat to Rosalind, fearing her influence on his daughter Celia. He banishes Rosalind under threat of death, forcing her into the forest. At the end of the play, he is marching into the forest to destroy his brother finally. However, on the way he undergoes a spiritual conversion – the sort of thing that happens in these magical forests – and this allows Duke Senior to return to his rightful position:

*And to the skirts of this wild wood he came;  
Where meeting with an old religious man,  
After some question with him, was converted  
Both from his enterprise and from the world,  
His crown bequeathing to his banish'd brother,  
And all their lands restored to them again  
That were with him exiled.*

## **CELIA**

Frederick's daughter and great friend of Rosalind. Celia accompanies Rosalind into the forest and whilst she seems less enamoured of the rural lifestyle, she enjoys the merriment to be found there.

## **TOUCHSTONE**

the court jester. Perhaps the most difficult of Shakespeare's clown parts, Touchstone is the easiest to get wrong. He delivers a great many Renaissance jokes and flights of fancy, not all of which translate easily to modern performance. The most successful performances adopt the following approaches. Firstly, he must have a genuinely warm relationship with Rosalind and Celia, whom he accompanies into the forest. Secondly, he must rattle through the lines with high energy. That does not mean screaming the part as quickly as possible – Touchstone should have a light touch in delivery, but be vocally and physically agile and nimble.

## **OLIVER DE BOIS**

eldest son of Sir Rowland de Bois. Oliver is one of the baddies of the piece. He abuses Adam, who has served the family for many years and treats his younger brother, Orlando, poorly. Oliver even tries to set fire to Orlando's house with him in it, forcing Orlando to flee to the forest. Oliver, however, eventually finds himself in the forest and at the mercy of wild beasts. He is saved from a snake and a lioness by his brother Orlando (off-stage, conveniently) and this provokes their reconciliation. He also takes a shine to Celia when he meets her in the forest towards the end of the play and they are one of the four couples married at the end.

## **ORLANDO DE BOIS**

younger brother of Oliver. As explained, Orlando flees his brother's tyranny before meeting Rosalind in the woods and engaging in the wooing game. The actor playing Orlando should try to answer two questions about his character. Firstly, why does Orlando go along with the game? Secondly, how much does Orlando suspect and at what point(s) in the play?

An Orlando who seems to take Ganymede simply as Ganymede tends to look witless in contrast to Rosalind's theatrical mastery. However, an Orlando ready to give as good as he gets, and who may even apprehend that Ganymede is not all he seems, is much more likely to be a match for the heroine.

## JAQUES

a melancholy traveller. Perhaps one of the most enjoyable parts in the play, Jaques is responsible for one of Shakespeare's most famous speeches, the Seven Ages of Man. Jaques' acerbic wit and irresistible pessimism provide the play with some rougher textures. Again, there is a balance to be struck in performing this character between his wit and his melancholy; if he played it too jokey, his jarring departure at the end of the play comes out of nowhere; if played too miserably, his scenes will drag.

William Hazlitt was typical of eighteenth century criticism in praising Jaques as '*the only purely contemplative character in Shakespeare.*'

## ISSUES

August W. von Schlegel wrote in 1809–11 that *'nothing is wanted to call forth the poetry which has its dwelling in nature and the human mind but to throw off all artificial constraint and restore both to their native liberty'*.

## GENRE

This play is a pastoral comedy. Its most obvious counterparts are *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Twelfth Night*, but many of the comedies share the same structure. The play begins in a world of order and civilisation. The characters then enter a chaotic forest or similar space (the island in *The Tempest*, for example) and their world is turned upside down. At the end of the play everyone returns to their ordered lives, but takes with them some of what they have experienced in chaos.

## CITY/COUNTRY

Linked to the paragraph above, this is more than a matter of simple geography. The differences between urban, courtly life and the life of the countryside animate many of the characters in this play. Duke Senior is happy to be in the apparent simplicity of the country, though some of his courtiers seem to prefer the comforts of urban life. The country provides an opportunity for escape from social pressures and conventions; people can re-fashion their identities in the country in a way they cannot in the town. Corin, one of the shepherds, disputes with Touchstone at one point about philosophy. Corin's common-sense attitude to life cuts through Touchstone's sophisticated nonsense. Shakespeare, who worked in London but grew up in the countryside around Stratford-upon-Avon, is perhaps getting here at how easy it is to become detached from truth and goodness if you are detached from the natural world:

**CORIN:** And how like you this shepherd's life, Master Touchstone?

**TOUCHSTONE:** Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life, but in respect that it is a shepherd's life,

it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now, in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As is it a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach. Hast any philosophy in thee, shepherd?

**CORIN:** No more but that I know the more one sickens the worse at ease he is; and that he that wants money, means and content is without three good friends; that the property of rain is to wet and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep, and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun; that he that hath learned no wit by nature nor art may complain of good breeding or comes of a very dull kindred.

Charles and Mary Cowden Clarke, in their edition of 1864, stressed the literary and generic features of the Forest of Arden. It:

*represents a poetical forest generally, where lovers, dukes, lords, shepherds, jesters, natural philosophers and artificial philosophers, lions and lambs, serpents and goats, oaks and olives, palm-trees and osiers, may all flourish contentedly and plausibly, without disturbing the peace of those whose imaginations accept the truths of poetry as universal truth, not mere geographical, animal, or botanical literalities.*



## REALITY/ILLUSION

This finds its most obvious manifestation in Rosalind/Ganymede. Shakespeare is playing with identity here and his central question is this: How does illusion interact with reality? Orlando woos the boy Ganymede, but is also wooing Rosalind. Is he therefore in love with Ganymede as well? Does it matter? Is identity a fixed point, or a more fluid set of ideas?

This also, of course, relates to theatre. How much of what we see in the theatre do we take with us into our own lives afterwards? When we are in the theatre, what is the distance between actor and performance? If we were to fall in love with an actor during their performance, are we falling in love with the actor or with the character? How real is theatre?

Stage history has often documented the thinness of the line separating masculine from feminine in *As You Like It*. Michael Redgrave fell in love with Edith Evans as the Rosalind to his Orlando in the Old Vic's production of 1936, directed by Esme Church. Being bisexual himself, did Redgrave fall in love with Rosalind, or Ganymede, or some combination of the two?

The focal moment for this in the play is Jaques' speech about the way humans seem to play different theatrical roles at different stages of their life. In response to Duke Senior's remark that 'This wide and universal theatre presents more woeful pageants than the scene wherein we play in', Jaques replies that:

*All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players:  
They have their exits and their entrances;  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant...*

Peter Brook (1953) noted that much of the spirit in a successful production of *As You Like It* 'comes from the juxtaposing of scenes written in different keys,' so that the director 'must not be afraid of inconsistency.'

## LOVE

This play can be seen as Shakespeare road-testing a variety of ideas about love and playing them off against each other. The four couples married at the end have all reached their union on very different paths. Rosalind and Orlando have had an extended, poetic courtship. Celia and Oliver '*no sooner met but they looked, no sooner looked but they loved*'. Touchstone and Audrey's relationship is based on physical attraction and little else. Touchstone seems to want a get-out clause even before they have wed. He says that being married by a dubious vicar '*will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife*'. Jaques gives it two months before it fails. Finally, the shepherd Silvius is obsessed with the shepherdess Phoebe and dotes on her. Phoebe wants none of it until she is instructed by Rosalind/Ganymede to settle down, '*Sell when you can: you are not for all markets*'. Perhaps the truth is that reciprocated love is a combination of these; part poetic wonder, part enigmatic connection, part physical attraction and part compromise.

The language of lovers finds equal range in this play. At one end of the spectrum is Rosalind's practical advice, whilst at the other is Silvius' lament to Corin early in the play:

*O, thou didst then ne'er love so heartily!  
If thou remember'st not the slightest folly  
That ever love did make thee run into,  
Thou hast not loved:  
Or if thou hast not sat as I do now,  
Wearying thy hearer in thy mistress' praise,  
Thou hast not loved:  
Or if thou hast not broke from company  
Abruptly, as my passion now makes me,  
Thou hast not loved.  
O Phebe, Phebe, Phebe!*

## STAGING THE PLAY

Shakespeare's plays were staged with as little set as possible, which also made for quick scene changes. Shakespeare gets the language and characters to do much of the work; Rosalind's line '*Well, this is the Forest of Arden*' is one of the best examples of scene-setting in the whole of Shakespeare. Modern productions have taken the opportunity to create trees and bushes and forest backdrops and so on. In some cases this has been very effective at taking us into the world, but it is not in a strict sense necessary and the play can be done without it.

To Charles Clarke (1863), Touchstone '*carries his own sunshine about with him.*'

This play presents several costume challenges. How is Rosalind to be dressed as Ganymede, for example? How much of a boy should she (attempt) to look like? How successful is she at disguising herself? More widely, how successful should she be at disguising her identity more generally? Are there any moments when the mask slips?

H. B. Charlton (1938), '*Arden is no conventional Arcadia. Winter, rough weather, the season's differences, the icy fang and churlish chiding of the winter's wind invade Arden as often as they invade this hemisphere of ours.*'

There have been several notable productions of *As You Like It*:

- Edith Evans and Vanessa Redgrave both won fame in the early 1960s as Rosalind.
- In 1994 Cheek By Jowl did an all-male production with Adrian Lester as Rosalind ([http://www.cheekbyjowl.com/as\\_you\\_like\\_it.php#about](http://www.cheekbyjowl.com/as_you_like_it.php#about)). Michael Billington has declared that this is his favourite production of the play.
- The most successful version on screen is Kenneth Branagh's 2006 film, set in late-19th century Japan. Its highly able cast features Bryce Dallas Howard, David Oyelowo, Romola Garai, Adrian Lester, Alfred Molina, Kevin Kline, Janet McTeer and Brian Blessed doubling Duke Senior and Duke Frederick.

- It continues to be a staple for many theatre companies, most recently at the National Theatre in early 2016 (<https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/shows/as-you-like-it>).

Shaw writes:

*Shakespeare found that the only thing that paid in the theatre was romantic nonsense. When he was forced by this to produce one of the most effective samples of romantic nonsense in existence – a feat which he performed easily and well – he publicly disclaimed any responsibility for its pleasant and cheap falsehood by borrowing the story and throwing it in the face of the public with the phrase As You Like It.*

The first productions were staged at the Globe on London's Southbank, a building very similar to the reconstruction that stands there today. The greatest difference between the Globe and most modern theatres is the way that the structure of the building (as well as the actors) actively engages the audience in the story. Proscenium arch spaces divide the audience from the action, but the thrust space of the Globe means that actor and audience are forever mingling and sharing the same space.

In *As You Like It*, this sense is especially important as the play is constantly blurring the lines between reality and illusion. This is not to say it is impossible to do good proscenium arch performances. Whatever the staging, the audience must feel involved in the action or the play's magic will be lost.

This play presents a number of challenges in performance, but in the right hands there is no play quite like it.



## USEFUL LINKS

Internet Shakespeare Editions - *As You Like It*: <http://bit.ly/2ep5Qqe>

Folger Shakespeare Library - *As You Like It*: <http://bit.ly/2eqJLJ1>

Folger Shakespeare Library - *As You Like It*: <http://bit.ly/2eqJLJ1>

Shakespeare's Globe: Education <http://bit.ly/1p7AsBP>

RSC Education Resource Bank: *As You Like It* <http://bit.ly/2eiz6UU>

RSC: *As You Like It* - past performances <http://bit.ly/2eh1T8T>

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<http://bit.ly/2ep5j7F>

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