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A Penchant for Escape in *As You Like It* and a Midsummer Night's Dream

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Abstract:

The contrast between countryside and city is foregrounded in many of Shakespeare's works. The city is a place of order, of law, governed by magistrates, princes, dukes, and, ultimately, kings. The countryside, however, is a place not so much of disorder, but of a lack of formal order, a place of escape. This paper looks at two of Shakespeare's "bucolic" plays— "As You Like It" and "A Midsummer Night's Dream" and considers the roles of the "rustics"—such as Jaques—and their place not just in the hierarchy but in the pecking order of love.

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Written only four years apart, Shakespeare's comedies *As You like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* have much in common. They both detail an escape from the strictures of civilized society; they both look at the capriciousness of love, the difficulty of successful erotic pairing, and the nearness of erotic love to death; they both feature "wise fools" who speak generally of what could be called the plays' overall wisdom. To me, however, *As You like It* far eclipses *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in its exposition of Shakespeare's world vision. *AYLI* has been said to suffer from "poor craftsmanship" (Gilman 1986); George Bernard Shaw called it a tale "of the most damnable foolishness in the world" (In Barnett 1986). The play, however, seems to me to be neither poorly crafted nor damnably foolish; in fact, it is the opposite of those two pejoratives. The play has little action beyond the first act's pratfalls and banishments, less action, by far, than the involved *MND*. The characters in *AYLI* are sent off to the Forest of Arden, and there they engage in talk and philosophical inquiry, and eventually a happy ending is made. The characters' talk, however, is extremely interesting: like Bottom, many of them seem to speak nothing but wisdom, and the imagery they use both invokes an older world—the world of Duke Senior, with its connotations of the Old Testament and also of Saturn and a lost, golden age—and proposes a better order, an improved golden age, or new Genesis. Shakespeare blends classical and Christian worlds in this play and uses them to expand on the vision of erotic love that he set down in *MND*, making it into a vision of life. It is a vision articulated by Bottom, in *MND*, and by Jaques, "Monsieur Melancholy," in *AYLI*, who, unlike most of the characters, remains un-coupled, and yet happy.

Both plays represent areas outside of the city with simple descriptions put into the mouths of characters, as was the custom in Shakespeare's time. Demetrius sets the scene with "Thou told'st me they were stol'n unto this *wood*, / And here am I" (*MND* 2.1.191-2); Rosalind is even simpler: "Well, this is the forest of Arden" (*AYLI* 2.4.13). Simple enough, but with connotations very different in Shakespeare's time than in our own. The forest, the wild, was a place where the rules of civilized society held no sway, where the law had no teeth. Lysander calls it a "place the sharp Athenian law / Cannot pursue us" (*MND* 1.1.162-3), and we know that it is presided over by fairies and the feuding, capricious, and yet in the end benevolent Oberon and Titania, who mirror Theseus and Hippolyta but are more forgiving and indulgent of erotic love. The Forest of Arden is the abode of the good, banished Duke Senior, a just ruler—however much he might tease Jaques—exiled by his wicked younger brother. By creating a place out of reach of civil society, Shakespeare puts the mores of that society to test, and finds them overly harsh, inimical as they are to lovers, worthy rulers, and unjustly "misprized" third sons.

In the forest, far from the city—where the transfer of property to legitimate heirs trumps the concerns of lovers—Shakespeare can focus on erotic love without having his plays turn to tragedy. The wilderness serves as a kind of showcase for a topic which would be, in Shakespeare's time, rather difficult in an urban setting: the Verona of *Romeo and Juliet*, for example. Shakespeare looks at love's capriciousness: Oliver falls immediately for Celia, so quickly that Orlando asks him "Is't possible that on so little acquaintance you should like her? that but seeing, you should love her?" (*AYLI* 5.2.1-2). Titania becomes enamored of Bottom, even though he has been "translated" into an ass. Touchstone is almost instantly married to the homely Audrey; and Phebe, of course, falls immediately for Rosalind in her guise of Ganymede. There is no reason behind erotic pairing, Shakespeare seems to say, and erotic love, without luck or the agency of some higher power, is perilous—indeed it seems that the laws of civilized society are heavily against it. These plays are comedies, they take place in magical forests, and

things are worked out in the end for the best; but it is easy to see how things could have turned for the worse. AYLI, especially, seems to me a dark play, with sadness lurking in every corner of the foreboding Forest of Arden, home of lions and serpents. Why are the characters in the Forest of Arden, anyway? They are banished there by the Duke Frederick, of whom LeBeau says "The Duke is humorous" (AYLI 1.2.256). Why do men act as they do? Shakespeare here gives us one answer in the idea of the four humors; it is as fitting an answer as any.

In both plays, the characters have some trouble adapting to the lack of structure of the forests and bring their city values with them. When Lysander's affection is suddenly switched, through the agency of the love juice, from Hermia to Helena, he gives "reason" as the cause of his transformation: "(R)ea^son says you are the worthier maid" (MND 2.2.116). Similarly, while Duke Senior claims that "Here feel we not the penalty of Adam" (AYLI 2.1.5), he invokes the accoutrements of civilization for the forest: "books in running brooks, sermons in stones" (AYLI 2.1.16).

Reason, however, has no sway here; the characters' loves, and their lives, are at the hands of whimsical fate. Indeed, in MND, the stage seems set for disaster: Hermia and Lysander will be found out and exposed, Hermia will die or be sent to a nunnery; Demetrius will never love Helena, and she will eternally pine for him; even Oberon and Titania, at loggerheads, see their problems as insoluble. AYLI, as well, begins in sadness: Duke Senior is in exile, Rosalind and Orlando soon follow. Orlando's brother Oliver, moreover, hates Orlando with an uncontrollable passion: "(M)y soul, yet I know not why, hates nothing more than he" (AYLI 1.1.154), which mirrors the hatred of Duke Frederick for his older brother. These are insoluble problems of love, politics, and family, then, which require some outside agency for their happy resolution. In MND, it is the love juice, and the power of Oberon and the fairies, which turns disaster into happiness. Even Theseus, that icon of the power of the state, is brought along, and, in the spirit of the hinterland, looks at Athens' law as almost a contrivance, something harsh and punitive. To Egeus, who craves the law, Theseus responds: "Egeus, I will overbear *your* will" (MND 4.1.178)! Not the law of Athens, but the cantankerous spluttering of an old patriarch. In AYLI, Rosalind tries to be the matchmaker at the end of the play, but she is human, after all, and the god Hymen interrupts her with "Peace ho! I bar confusion: / Tis / must make conclusion of these strange events" (AYLI 5.4.125-6); he is the equivalent of the love juice for this play. But the problems, in AYLI, extend beyond matchmaking to family and politics. The magic of the Forest of Arden itself solves one remaining problem, turning Oliver's hatred for his brother abruptly to love, so that he says "'Twas I. But 'tis not I. I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion" (AYLI 4.3.134); and in a similarly magical manner and old denizen of the forest "converts" Duke Frederick, as Jaques de Boys says:

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

(AYLI 5.4.157-63)

The forest, the area beyond the power of the city, shows the faults of the city: the lack of human decency in families, the difficulty of erotic love, the vagaries of life. The emphasis on the capriciousness of erotic love, and on the frailty of the characters, makes us think about our own difficulties in an imperfect world, where bad things happen to good people, and the rules of society seem harsh in their execution.

The rules of society, of course, were in classical thought set out by Jupiter, who threw down his father, Saturn, and ended the "golden age." In AYLI we have Duke Senior, exiled by his usurping brother, and the Duke's daughter Rosalind, who ironically takes the name of Ganymede, "Jove's own page" (AYLI 1.3.122). We see Orlando describe his servant, *Adam*, as someone representing "The constant service of the antique world" (AYLI 2.4.56). AYLI seems to be presenting the Forest of Arden as a refuge of the antique world, where lovers and family are true, where Amiens need not sing, perhaps, of "man's ingratitude" or "friend remembered not" (AYLI 3.1.180-90). In the end the couples, and Duke Senior, return to the city, leaving behind only Duke Frederick and Jaques.

Duke Senior says early on to Jaques: "Thou thyself has been a libertine / As sensual as the brutish sting itself" (2.7.64-5). That Jaques has been a libertine is important, in that this play depicts favorably a certain lifestyle and certain ideas. Jaques, as a melancholy philosopher and libertine, embodies the wisdom of this play in specific and, possibly, of Shakespeare in general.

Jaques responds to the Dukes accusation of libertinage by saying "Why, who cries out in pride / That can therein tax any private property?" (AYLI 2.7.71-2). This response reminds us of the biblical injunction "He that is without sin among you, let him first cast a stone," (KJV John 8.7). The biblical element is interesting, as it is argued (Fraser 1991) that this play can be read as Shakespeare's version of Genesis. As for Jaques, he is a man who knows his own weaknesses. He says of the Duke

And I have been all this day to avoid him. He is too disputable for my company. I think of as many matters as he, but I give heaven thanks and make no boast of them.

(AYLI 2.5.30-34)

This is the type of wisdom that is inherent in Shakespeare, which shows man's good fortune as dependent on whimsical grace. Jaques thanks heaven for his thoughts, and for his blessings in general, because he knows he does not merit them. He sees man's general inadequacy and realizes that he is not exempt.

Shakespeare sees man, then, not as culpable, but as unlucky. His version of Genesis here differs greatly from that of the Bible. He does not see life, or man, as fallen, or evil; instead, we have Amiens singing, again: "...most friendship is faining, most loving mere folly: / Then, heigh-ho, the holly / This life is most jolly" (AYLI 2.7.181-3). Most important, here, is the word "then." Amiens could well have sung "*but*, heigh-ho;" instead, Shakespeare chooses to emphasize that *because* life is full of misfortune, we should rejoice and not dwell too long on the its vicissitudes. The man is wise who sees his own frailty and rejoices in it, because there is no reason not to.

Here lies the importance of Jaques' libertinage. In the past he has succumbed to the "brutish sting" of lust. Shakespeare is showing us that this is not a terrible thing; perhaps, given that Jaques does not get, or one could almost say is denied, a mate in AYLI, it is a good thing. The song in 4.4 is another example: "...Take thou no scorn to wear the horn, / It was a crest ere thou wast born" (AYLI 4.2.14-5). If a man is destined to cuckoldry, so be it; Shakespeare tells him to seize the day and indulge himself. Similar injunctions abound in AYLI, and indeed in all of Shakespeare's plays. Pompey talks of lust in *Measure for Measure*, saying "...in my opinion, sir, they will to't" (MFM 2.2.223); Lavatch in *All's Well That Ends Well* explains his marriage with a bawdy pun, saying "I have other holy reasons, such as they are" (AWTEW 1.3.31-2). Shakespeare's point, I think, is that man is not evil, nor are the desires of the body sinful.

Rosalind has the same sort of thing in mind when she says "the wiser, the waywarder" (AYLI 4.1.154-5), and this is a good description of Jaques. He is, or at least was, a libertine. Now, he goes about on his own, scorns the company of those he dislikes, and does as he pleases. He is also portrayed as melancholy, and this bears examination. Jaques says his melancholy is ...a melancholy of mine own, compounded of many simples, extracted from many objects, and indeed the sundry contemplation of my travels, in which my often rumination wraps me in a most humourous sadness.

(AYLI 4.1.17-20)

This speech is prefaced by his comments on the foolish melancholy of the scholar, musician, etc. These other men affect their melancholy for personal gain, but not Jaques. His melancholy stems from his waywardness. "Yes, I have gained by experience" (AYLI 4.1.25), he says, and he has, and it has made him weary of the world. There is little left for him to enjoy; very little amuses him. This is why he avoids Duke Senior's company and is eager to join up with Frederick. He says "To him will I. Out of these convertites / There is much matter to be heard and learned" (AYLI 5.4.184-5). Jaques is still wayward; he still rejoices in the world. He is not forever melancholy, just bored with Duke Senior and the Forest of Arden.

Jaques is excited far beyond melancholy in meeting Touchstone the clown. He says "A fool, a fool! I met a fool i' th' forest, a motley fool! O miserable world!" (AYLI 2.7.12-3). Jaques is interested because Touchstone is also wayward and wise. And yet Touchstone is, importantly, a "material" fool—full of wisdom—and yet a fool nonetheless. Just in case the point was lost on us, Shakespeare provides the aphorism, via Touchstone: "I do now remember a saying, 'The fool doth think he is wise, but the wise man knows himself to be a fool'" (AYLI 5.1.29-31). This is the exact position of Jaques and explains his liking for Touchstone. Jaques goes on to say "O that I were a fool, / I am ambitious for a motley coat" (AYLI 2.7.43-4). For him, motley is "the only wear" because he realizes that men are frail and foolish. He delivers the quasi-benediction of 5.5, then, because, recognizing his own foolishness, he is the wisest available character to do so, and also because he, like a priest, is left out of the marriages: a benediction is right up his alley.

Jaques' libertinage is important, then, in showing him as wayward and, as far as is possible, wise. Just as the character Adam is wise in being prodigal of his wealth, so is Jaques wise in being prodigal in and of himself. Jaques prodigality is wisdom when, unlike the fortuitously married couples, there is no specific grace—no love juice—reserved for him. Jaques seems to be a happy man. When Rosalind tries to label him as melancholy he says "I am so; I do love it more than laughing" (AYLI 4.1.4). But is not doing what one loves happiness? If Jaques is melancholy, it is because he enjoys it, and thus it is a thing apart from melancholy as we understand it. For Jaques, melancholy, his version of melancholy, has become a part of his life, a life which he still sees as a "strange, eventful history" (AYLI 2.7.164). Jaques has been a libertine, knows that he and all men are fools, is wise in that, and is, in a melancholy way, happy.

Bottom, in MND, to a lesser extent in my opinion, expresses ideas similar to those of Jaques. The two plays are, indeed, very similar. *As You Like It*, however, crystallizes for me the wisdom of Shakespeare: life is short, men are frail, grace is needed for happiness, especially in the realm of erotic love. We should all refrain from throwing stones and be happy that we are alive.

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