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Notes & Commentary on Shakespeare's As You Like It

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Introduction

Shakespeare's "As You Like It" remains one of the most beloved plays in the canon of English literature, celebrated for its wit, wisdom, and warmth. As a work that explores the complexities of love, identity, and society, it offers both delightful comedy and profound insights into the human experience. For students of English literature, the play's rich language, intricate character dynamics, and engaging narrative provide countless opportunities for analysis and appreciation.

"Notes & Commentary on Shakespeare's As You Like It: A Guide for Students" has been crafted to serve as a comprehensive companion for learners and enthusiasts navigating the play. This guide seeks to illuminate key aspects of the text, unpacking Shakespeare's literary techniques, thematic preoccupations, and historical context. Whether you are encountering the play for the first time or returning for a deeper study, these notes offer accessible explanations and thoughtful commentary to support your understanding.

The chapters in this guide follow a logical progression, starting with the context in which Shakespeare wrote and moving through meticulous examinations of characters, themes, and dramatic structures. By considering the play's central motifs—including love, exile, disguise, and transformation—you will be better equipped to appreciate how Shakespeare weaves his magic, both on the page and on the stage.

Particular attention is given to the Forest of Arden, the play's primary setting, which functions not only as a location but also as a symbol for renewal, freedom, and possibility. The roles of Rosalind, Orlando, Celia, and other iconic figures are explored in detail, illuminating how their journeys reflect broader questions about identity, relationships, and the society of the time. Additionally, this guide delves into Shakespeare's use of language, humor, and music—tools that enliven the play and invite readers to engage more deeply with its text.

In providing notes, commentary, and analytical strategies, this book aims to prepare students for both academic study and personal enrichment. Alongside detailed discussions of particular scenes and themes, readers will find suggestions for further exploration and essay topics. Most importantly, the guide encourages critical thinking and independent interpretation—essential skills for any student of literature.

May this book serve as a helpful resource as you explore the enchanting world of "As You Like It." Through study and reflection, you will discover not only the enduring relevance of Shakespeare's work, but also the joy and creativity that have made this play a favorite for generations.

CHAPTER ONE: Understanding the Context: As You Like It in Elizabethan England

To truly appreciate Shakespeare's "As You Like It," it helps considerably to step back in time and immerse ourselves, as much as possible, in the world from which it sprang. When Shakespeare penned this delightful comedy, somewhere around 1599 or 1600, England was firmly in the grip, or perhaps the embrace, of the latter years of Queen Elizabeth I's reign. This was a period of relative stability following decades of religious and political turmoil, yet it was also a time of significant social change, economic expansion, and burgeoning national identity.

Elizabeth I, the 'Virgin Queen', had occupied the throne since 1558, providing a lengthy period of centralized, if sometimes unpredictable, rule. Her court was the epicentre of power, influence, and patronage, a dazzling but often treacherous environment where fortunes could be made or lost on the strength of royal favour. This contrast between the glittering, competitive court and other ways of life is a thread that runs through many Elizabethan works, including "As You Like It," which explicitly separates its action between the ducal court and the Forest of Arden.

The social fabric of Elizabethan England was rigidly hierarchical. One's place in society was largely determined by birth, although wealth and proximity to power could facilitate some movement within or between ranks. At the top sat the monarch, followed by the nobility, great landowners with hereditary titles and significant regional influence. Below them were the gentry, lesser landowners who aspired to noble status and often served in local government. This structure was underpinned by strict social etiquette and expectations, dictating everything from dress (via sumptuary laws) to behaviour.

Below the gentry were the vast majority of the population: merchants, skilled craftsmen, yeoman farmers who owned their land, tenant farmers, and a large number of labourers and servants. While the play deals primarily with characters from the nobility and gentry who find themselves in unusual circumstances, understanding this underlying social structure helps illuminate the shock of their displacement and the class dynamics that still peek through even in the idealized forest setting.

London, the setting for the play's opening scenes before the characters flee to the forest, was a rapidly growing metropolis, a hub of trade, finance, and culture. Its population swelled throughout Elizabeth's reign, bringing wealth and opportunity but also overcrowding, poverty, and disease. It was a vibrant, noisy, and sometimes dangerous place, a stark contrast to the romanticized peace of the countryside

depicted in pastoral literature.

The city was also home to the burgeoning public theatre scene, a relatively new phenomenon that had exploded in popularity during the late 16th century. Playhouses like the Globe, where "As You Like It" was likely performed, were popular entertainment venues attracting a diverse audience from all social classes, though their location outside the city limits often reflected official ambivalence towards them. These theatres were commercial enterprises, hungry for new plays, and Shakespeare was one of their most prolific and successful suppliers.

The intellectual climate was shaped by the English Renaissance, a period marked by a rediscovery of classical learning, a flourishing of literature and the arts, and a spirit of humanism. Elizabethan thinkers were fascinated by the human condition, exploring themes of identity, fortune, virtue, and the relationship between the individual and society. Education, particularly for upper-class boys and some girls, emphasized rhetoric, classical languages, and history, skills that often appear in the wit and learned references within plays like "As You Like It."

While often romanticized, Elizabethan life could be challenging. Economic conditions fluctuated, with periods of inflation, poor harvests, and unemployment. The enclosure movement, which converted communal lands into private pastures, displaced many rural workers, contributing to migration to cities and social unrest. This economic backdrop, while not central to the plot of "As You Like It," was the reality for many in Shakespeare's audience and underscores the escapist quality of the play's forest retreat.

Religious life was dominated by the established Protestant Church of England, with Elizabeth as its supreme head. However, the wounds of the Reformation were still relatively fresh, and tensions between Protestants and Catholics, as well as Puritan factions within Protestantism, could surface. While "As You Like It" is not overtly religious, the pervasive Christian framework of morality and providence was part of the cultural air Shakespeare breathed and can subtly inform themes of forgiveness and redemption.

A significant cultural trend relevant to "As You Like It" was the popularity of the pastoral genre, a literary tradition that originated in classical Greece with Theocritus and was revived during the Renaissance by Italian and English writers like Sidney and Spenser. Pastoral works idealized rural life, depicting shepherds and shepherdesses living simply, close to nature, often contrasting this innocence and natural beauty with the artificiality and corruption of court or city life.

The Forest of Arden in "As You Like It" is Shakespeare's unique spin on this pastoral ideal. It is not a purely idyllic retreat, as it contains elements of hardship (cold, hunger) and encounters with non-shepherd characters, but it serves fundamentally as an

alternative space where the constraints of the court are lifted, and different modes of behaviour and understanding become possible. The Elizabethan audience would have recognised and enjoyed this engagement with a popular literary mode.

Ideas about love and marriage were complex. While romantic love was celebrated in poetry and song, marriage among the upper classes was often primarily an economic and social contract, aimed at consolidating wealth, power, or alliances. Parental consent was crucial, and arranged marriages were common. Courtship involved elaborate rituals, poetry, and declarations of devotion, often mediated through letters and intermediaries.

The play's central focus on multiple couples navigating the path to marriage reflects the societal importance placed upon this institution. The disguises and playful deceptions employed by Rosalind challenge and explore the conventional expectations of courtship, allowing for a testing of true affection beyond surface appearances and social status.

The status and expectations placed upon women varied depending on their social class, but even noblewomen had significant legal and social restrictions compared to men. Their primary roles were typically defined by their relationships to men – as daughters, wives, and mothers. They were expected to be chaste, obedient, and skilled in managing a household, although many noblewomen, like Elizabeth herself, received excellent educations and could be formidable figures.

Rosalind and Celia, as noblewomen, would have been subject to these societal expectations. Their decision to flee the court and adopt disguises is a radical act within this context, granting them a degree of freedom and agency that would have been unthinkable for unmarried women of their rank in Elizabethan society, highlighting the transformative power of the forest setting.

The legal system, while developing, could be arbitrary, especially for those who fell out of favour with powerful figures. Concepts of justice were tied to the monarch's authority and the established social order. The play's initial scenes, involving the unjust banishment of the rightful Duke and the hostile treatment of Orlando by his brother Oliver, reflect the realities of power dynamics and the potential for abuse within the legal and social framework of the time.

Exile was a very real possibility for those involved in court politics or who held differing religious views. Losing one's place at court meant not only separation from the centre of power but often the confiscation of property and a dramatic loss of status. The forced exile of the Duke Senior and his followers, and later Rosalind and Celia, resonates with the potential precarity of life at the Elizabethan court.

Finally, Elizabethan society placed great emphasis on understanding one's identity in

terms of lineage, status, and fixed social roles. The concept of personal identity was perhaps less fluid than we perceive it today. Disguise, a common theatrical device, therefore offered a fascinating way to explore what happens when these external markers of identity are stripped away or deliberately manipulated, forcing characters and the audience to question what constitutes the 'true' self beneath the social performance.

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