

8. *As You Like It*

An innocent young woman is suddenly, unjustly and capriciously exiled. A ruler is banished from his court and exposed to the inclemency of nature. He is accompanied by several nobles who voluntarily suffer on his behalf. Exposure to the elements teaches him what he is. He claims to prefer these counsellors - wind and cold - to court flattery. An innocent young man is deprived of his rights by his wicked brother, who accuses him of being a secret and villainous contriver plotting unnatural murder. A fool who speaks wisely what wise men do foolishly is threatened with whipping for it. This is, of course, a synopsis of the first few scenes of *King Lear*. But wait a minute! Is it *King Lear*? Or is it *As You Like It*?

Let's start with a simple question: what is the difference between comedy and tragedy? One may think it is too simple a question to be worth asking. Think of the two masks which traditionally represent theatre, one grinning, the other grief-stricken. Comedies are happy, amusing stories intended for our entertainment; tragedies are sad stories intended to move us to pity and fear. Such a distinction will not hold water for a moment. Even if we leave out of account black comedy (such as Samuel Beckett's), which can be far bleaker than tragedy, and satirical comedy, which can be very cruel and whose purpose is to expose wickedness and folly, and concentrate on the kind of genial, festive comedy of which *As You Like It* is an example, it still won't hold water.

So, let's try another distinction between comedy and tragedy. Comedy and tragedy often deal with similar problems, but comedy has a happy ending and tragedy an unhappy. Now we are getting a bit nearer. The happy ending is certainly characteristic of comedy, and tragedies usually end with the death or downfall of the protagonist. But satirical or 'black' comedy often ends in destruction; and the greatest tragedies do not send us home from the theatre feeling suicidal. On the contrary, they can be exhilarating in their affirmation of the capacity of people to triumph spiritually and morally over the worst that fate and evil can throw at them, to triumph in some mysterious way even over their own deaths and the deaths of those nearest and dearest to them. When a play does not have this kind of 'resolution' but ends with mere destruction (like *Troilus and Cressida*), we often withhold the title of tragedy and for, want of a better name, call it a problem play.

All Shakespeare's plays deal with human problems. In a comedy these problems are presented as soluble and are in fact solved, though often in a non-realistic way, with considerable contrivance by the author to prevent them getting out of hand and tipping over into tragedy. The solution of these problems does not demand any extraordinary resources from the characters, merely a modicum of common-sense, common decency and common humanity, qualities so often missing in the world of "confusion" that their rediscovery and re-affirmation seems to constitute a blessing. In tragedy the same problems are allowed to get out of hand, as they might well in real life, and to go beyond the point at which they might have been solved. There is no way back to order and harmony; only a way forward through loss and madness and pain and death to the affirmation that there are human values which shine out most radiantly at just such moments of apparent annihilation.

What I am suggesting, then, is that what determines whether a play about a certain set of problems shall be a comedy or a tragedy is an arbitrary prior decision by the author as to whether or not he will allow the problems to go beyond that critical point, over that edge. Shakespeare likes to play at brinkmanship in this matter, to push things so far that we can hardly believe that he can contrive a return - in *The Merchant of Venice*, *Much Ado*, *Measure for Measure*.

The difference between comic and tragic solutions emerges very clearly in *King Lear* where, throughout the first two acts, the Fool strives to impose comic solutions on the confusion Lear has unleashed, to use his satirical wit to drag Lear back to the world of sense; but in Act III he has to admit defeat. His role in the play is over, and he is superseded by Mad Tom, whose function, like a Laingian psychiatrist, is to accompany Lear into madness, to guide him through his dark night of the soul to the deeper sanity which lies on the other side, that is, to a tragic resolution.

So, how and at what point in a comedy do we know that it is going to be a comedy and not a tragedy? Usually we know before the play even starts. The title tells us. The tragedies are all named after their protagonists; but the comedies all have very low profile, casual, throwaway titles: *As You Like It*, *Twelfth Night* or *What You Will*, *Much Ado About Nothing*, *All's Well that Ends Well*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Love's Labour's Lost*, *A Comedy of Errors*. In a sense they are all comedies of errors. One would not say that the tragedies were the result of men's errors (temporary mistakes which can be corrected), rather of their flaws (permanent disabilities which, in the inescapable circumstances, make life impossible). Comedies are not about real, special, unique, three-dimensional individuals, in the grip of their doom, who are to be sounded to the depths of their souls, but about groups of very ordinary people trying to be happy, to get on with their ordinary living and loving, in a context of family and society, living in what Rosalind calls "the full stream of the world", or on brief holiday from it. Yet, if the characters are ordinary, the events are not. Comedy pays no debts to reality, but moves freely between the commonplace and the contrived, the familiar and the fantastic, the mundane and the magical. Instead of the inevitability of tragedy, there is the sense that anything can happen, however preposterous, except the irreversible or irredeemable fall into tragedy. The happy ending is determined not by fate or by the necessities of character or the logic of events, but by the prior decision of the author that there shall be a happy ending, however much contrivance may be entailed. If the tone of the play is light, there is a realisation that life should and could be like this, if only we could live naturally, in accordance with our true selves. But if the tone is dark, and the contrived happy ending preposterous, that "if only" may become bitterly ironic or cynical, simply deepening our awareness that real life is not and could never be like that.

In *As You Like It* there are many other ways, apart from the title, by which we quickly become aware that, however black things look, we are not in the world of tragedy. The play abounds in artifice, with its Arcadian nymphs and shepherds. Tragedies do not have characters with names like Sir Oliver Martext, and in tragedy people are not always bursting into song. The problems, the causes of discord, may be the same as those of tragedy, but they are presented in a much more casual and conventional way. The overall tone is comic, with more attention being paid to wooing and clowning than to the 'serious' matters in hand. We are told virtually nothing about the character or motives of either of the villains, Oliver and Duke Frederick; and their conversions at the end of the play are even more cursory. Shakespeare isn't interested in them, nor, really, in the problems they create. That is to say, those problems and the suffering they cause are not the subject matter of the play, merely a mechanism to get all the other characters into Arden as quickly as possible. Their conversions at the end are another mechanism to get them out again. The play starts from and returns to the 'real' world of hypocrisy and discord and corruption. But wickedness has about as much substance as it does in a fairy tale. The author plays fairy godmother, ready with his wand at any moment to intervene and nip tragedy in the bud.

The editor of the aptly named Arden edition writes:

Violent occurrences would break the intricate and delicate web. They do from time to time take place - old Adam lies down to die, Orlando draws his sword. serpent and lioness threaten Oliver, the embattled usurper marches on the forest - but as the play unfolds these are non-events. anxiety is dissipated before it can grip. the audience knows what kind of reception Orlando will meet with. It knows that Oliver survives both the perils of the wood and of Orlando's natural resentment, since he is alive to tell the tale. Jaques de Boys gives the news of Duke Frederick's conversion in the same breath as he tells that he has taken up arms. Adam's plight is softened by Orlando's undaunted courage and tender concern, and we know there will be no need for him to engage with wild beasts for food. We have just seen the Duke's banquet spread.
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The play is, in a sense, about Arden. In Arden is out of the world (the world in which hypocrisy, discord and corruption are possible). All the characters, as soon as they arrive in Arden (or after their first good night's sleep there) find their problems fall from them, as if they had been lifted out of time. Arden is a retreat, not only in the sense of an escape and a refuge, but in the religious sense of a place to which one withdraws for a short time from the world of clocks and calendars and class-distinctions and jobs and problems, in order to refresh one's spirit, recover one's sanity, and remember what really matters in life.

There is, of course, a region called Arden near Stratford, but there was never a Forest of Arden there. In any case, the play is set in France. Arden is an anglicization of Ardennes. But since there were never lions or palm trees in the Ardennes any more than in Warwickshire, the exact geographical location is of no importance whatsoever. Arden is a mythical region where the vegetation is simultaneously tropical and temperate, and where anything can happen. Arden is to ordinary space what holiday is to ordinary time. Orlando's first comment on its strangeness is that the Duke and his followers 'lose and neglect the creeping hours of time'. In Arden it is perpetually a warm afternoon in spring, 'the only pretty ring time'. 'Winter and foul weather' are frequently referred to, mainly in songs, but we never actually see any inclement weather, or any form of deprivation. The Duke and his followers live lavishly off the land, and 'fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world'. The golden world was a mythical Golden Age which classical writers looked back to. Ovid wrote:

And the first age was Gold.
Without laws, without law's enforcers,
This age understood and obeyed
What had created it.

Trees 'had no premonition of the axe'.

Men needed no weapons.
Nations loved one another.
And the earth, unbroken by plough or hoe,
Piled the table high. Mankind

Was content to gather abundance
Of whatever ripened.

(Hughes: *Tales from Ovid*, 8-9)

Traversi comments:

The 'golden world' is set in an ideal past, presented as a compound of legendary antiquity, of the reign of the gods and goddesses in Arcadia, and of the original timeless innocence which existed in the Garden of Eden before the Fall. The ability to neglect the action of time, indeed, is essential to the conception, the key at once to its attraction and to its final insufficiency. At some period in the past, during the generation of Orlando's virtuous father, who was not accidentally named Sir Rowland de Bois, a creature by implication of the woods, the forest world of ordered harmony and simple, unchanging human happiness, corresponded to an ideally natural ordering of society, which is then supposed to have existed in court and state; but since the passing of that mythically fortunate generation forest and court, ideal and reality have become grievously separated, and the consequent loss for mankind, tantamount to a kind of Fall from original grace, may be said to be symbolized in the figure of the faithful Adam, whose name is again not without significance and who is obliged, after his banishment from a corrupted society, to pass his old age wandering through Arden in painful search for the ideal order to which he once belonged and to the reality of which his continued loyalty to Orlando testifies. (*An Approach to Shakespeare I*, 286-7)

Arden is an unfallen world which has the power to make wickedness, folly and weakness fall from people. Almost as they enter it they are refreshed, made new; they become their best selves. Nature here will permit nothing unnatural.

In tragedy Nature seems to be characterized by pervasive unnaturalness in human terms, so that Hamlet calls the world 'an unweeded garden that grows to seed; / Things rank and gross in nature possess it merely', and Lear asks if there is any cause in Nature that makes these hard hearts. In the fallen world of *King Lear* Edmund says: 'I should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing'. But in *As You Like It* the hard-hearted Oliver ('the most unnatural that lived amongst men') cannot enter Arden but his wickedness falls from him as if it had been a disguise:

I do not shame
To tell you what I was, since my conversion
So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am.

The outer, 'real' world is characterized (as in by all *King Lear*) by all kinds of 'unnatural' behaviour – pomp and flattery, selfishness, caprice and betrayal, brother against brother, in short by 'confusion'. In the tragedies such confusion is the normal state of man in fallen nature. In Eden/Arden it is merely a case of mistaken identities, of men not being the thing they are.

If the world outside Arden is the 'real' world, is Arden, then, simply a world of illusion? Shakespeare is at pains to build into the play precisely such criticisms of Arden as a place of escape or illusion as the sceptic might make. This is the main function of Jaques. His mockery of the Arden ideal does not weaken it, but strengthens it by purging it of its illusions, that is, its most sentimental and self-indulgent extremes. We see that life without what Arden stands for would be reduced either to a predictable sequence of mechanical and caricature stages, as in Jaques' famous seven ages of man speech, or to a humiliating sordidness, as in the cynical humour and carnal opportunism of Touchstone, himself a sad touchstone of humanity. Jaques' generalization, for example, that old men are 'sans everything' is disprived by both the old men in the play, Adam and Corin. And when Touchstone tries to belittle Corin, he only belittles himself. Both Touchstone and Jaques are far more ridiculous than what they ridicule.

The truth at the heart of the play is that 'life is but a flower'. Jaques and Touchstone agree I giving this a negative interpretation, with the melancholy reflection on mortality that 'from hour to hour we ripe and ripe / And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot'. The other characters all give it a positive interpretation, regarding it as a challenge to 'take the present time' and live it to the full. Life is too short for melancholy or cynicism, flattery or greed; too short, that is, for most of what couriers devote their lives to.

The comedies call in question our use of the term 'real'. Why should we take for granted that the surface world of confusion is more real than the deep inner world of harmony we so strongly desire and feel to be the natural state of man. Arden is an imagined, desired, but not impossible world where all is natural, that is, as it should be, free, harmonious. The healing, atoning spirit of the play emanates not from the wishful thinking of the author, but from a magical centre, a mysterious sacred grove, as it were, at the heart of the wood, where the presiding holy spirit of the wood (that is, of Nature) dwells. From this still centre emerges at the end the strange figure of Hymen. Shakespeare leaves it open for us as readers to decide for ourselves, or, in the theatre, for the director to decide, as the Arden editor puts it: 'whether the masque shall be plainly a charade got up by Rosalind, or whether it is pure magic, like the masque in *The Tempest*'. I believe that the director should try to make it no clearer than Shakespeare does which it is, but should rather seek to blur the distinction. Rosalind claims to be a magician, and in a sense she is, for she has discovered – we have seen her in the process of discovering – how to release the power of love and truth that is in her in such a way that it fuses with, becomes indistinguishable from, the power which emanates from the forest. She is, as it were, its priestess and spokeswoman.

The twin symbols of that healing and harmonizing power are music and marriage. Once earthly things have been made even and atone together, once the principal characters have taken hands and joined in Hymen's bands, there is no need to remain any longer in Arden. Nature has performed its magical operation upon them through its agent Rosalind. It has restored them to their true selves, and shown them that friendship and loving are not feigning and mere folly but the means whereby human beings transcend the sterile egotism of a Jaques and become part of the larger pattern of fertile relationships, a pattern symbolized by the concluding dance (from which Jacques excuses himself).

All the nobles praise the woodland life and say they would not leave it if they could; but when they can, they do, returning to the court with the greatest alacrity. Because of this, Auden called the Duke a bit of a humbug. But Shakespeare's tone, if satirical at all, is only mildly so. The main point is that the values learned in Arden are now to be incorporated

into the life of the court. So Prospero is to return to his Dukedom at the end of *The Tempest*, because there is more good to be done there than on a desert island.

Hymen is not a specifically woodland deity. On the contrary, he is, as the song tells us, 'god of every town'; and it is to the town, the 'real' world, that these people must now return, for that is where the lessons learned, the strength gained, the faith renewed in Arden must be used in the business of ordinary living. They leave Arden refreshed, clarified, spiritually restored and fertilized, the better to cope with the world of confusion with its intractable problems and incipient tragedy.

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