

# As You Like It

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## INTRODUCTION

*As You Like It* is first heard of in the Stationers' Register on 4 August 1600, and was probably written not long before. In spite of its early entry for publication, it was not printed until 1623. This play, with its contrasts between court and country, its bucolic as well as its aristocratic characters, its inset songs and poems, its predominantly woodland setting, its conscious artifice and its romantic ending, is the one in which Shakespeare makes most use of the conventions of pastoral literature, though he does not wholly endorse them.

The story of the love between a high-born maiden—Rosalind—oppressed by the uncle—Duke Frederick—who has usurped his elder brother's dukedom, and Orlando, the third and youngest son of Duke Frederick's old enemy Sir Rowland de Bois, himself oppressed by his tyrannical eldest brother Oliver, derives from Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, a prose romance interspersed with verses, which first appeared in 1590 and was several times reprinted. There are many indications that Shakespeare thought of the action as taking place in the Ardenne area of France, as in *Rosalynde*, even though there was also a Forest of Arden in Warwickshire. Like Lodge, Shakespeare counterpoints the developing love between Rosalind—who for much of the action is disguised as a boy, Ganymede—with the idealized pastoral romance of Silvius and Phoebe; he adds the down-to-earth, unromantic affair between the jester Touchstone and Audrey. Once Rosalind and her cousin Celia (also disguised) reach the forest, plot is virtually suspended in favour of a series of scintillating conversations making much use of prose. The sudden flowering of love between Celia and Orlando's brother Oliver, newly converted to virtue, is based on *Rosalynde*, but Shakespeare alters the climax of the story, bringing Hymen, the god of marriage, on stage to resolve all complications. As well as Touchstone, Shakespeare added the melancholy courtier Jaques, both of whom act as commentators, though from very different standpoints.

The first performances of Shakespeare's text after his own time were given in 1740. It rapidly established itself in the theatrical repertoire, and has also been appreciated for its literary qualities. It has usually been played in picturesque settings, often since the late nineteenth century in the open air. Rosalind (written originally, of course, for a boy actor) is the dominant character, but other roles, especially Jaques, Touchstone, Audrey, Corin, and±±in his single scene±±William, have proved particularly effective when played by performers with a strong sense of their latent individuality.