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Analysis Essay • Drama

The Role of Jacques

As You Like It, William Shakespeare 1599

Watching or reading Shakespeare affects us. We know intuitively, that the play (even a light, much-loved comedy such as *As You Like It*) is deep and meaningful, we feel we have been touched deeply. But no one seems to know why. For instance, the role of Jacques is always mentioned by contemporary literary analysts, because it is recognised important one¹, but other than labelling it as “melancholy”, it is unexplored². The depth and meaning of Shakespearean plays is lost to contemporary analysts, and thus to modern teachers and students. The rectification that this sad situation begs is not possible in a short article. For space reasons, this essay is limited to treating just one role, and identifying some of its depth and meaning³.

While the structure of the play is a refined comedy, the central, and possibly the only, theme of the play is the **confirmation of religious doctrine**⁴. The historical context of the play is yet another aspect that is entirely unknown to literary analysts of today⁵.

One of the religious doctrines worked in the play, is the confirmation of the sanctity of marriage, and this in the time following Henry VIII’s destruction of it. There are four attempts to enter into questionable marriage arrangements, which are toyed with and set aside. The relevance of romantic love and its testing runs throughout the play, for all four couples. There are potential unions which are inappropriate (eg. Phoebe and Ganymede, William and Audrey), these are carefully unravelled and joined appropriately (eg. Phoebe and Silvius). Each bride or groom is married to one of their class. Concerns regarding chastity and its great value are touched on repeatedly. An example of the treatment of both sanctity and chastity is given in (V.2.32-34), reminiscent of heaven, an echo of the recently banned Sacrament of Marriage, which is permanent, for life:

“And in these degrees they have made a pair of stairs to marriage, which they will climb incontinent, or else be incontinent before marriage.”

Throughout the play, Jacques is consistent in that he does not relate to the happiness that each person with whom he interacts feels, and he has a reflection of it that is different to that of the other person. In those exchanges, Jacques proves that he has breeding, as well as substantial knowledge and wisdom. Eg: Amiens’ song (II.5.39-52); the

clown⁶ (II.7.12-61); the city (II.7.70-87); the players⁷ (II.7.139-166); Orlando (III.2.226-260); the mock marriage of the clown and Audrey (III.3.64-74); Rosalind (IV.1.10-22); *Degrees of the Lie* (V.4.60-91).

A standard dramatic device ever since the Greek dramatic form, is the use of the fool, as the counterpoint to the hero. In this play, Jacques is certainly not the fool, the clown is. Given his 225 lines, which places him at the end of the main players, and far ahead of the minor players, the label of “sad” or “melancholy”, parroted by literary analysts, is simply inadequate. So, what role does the character of Jacques play? That is exposed, and resolved, as everything in the play is resolved, in the last scene.

Another religious doctrine that is worked in the play is that God created us for the purpose of accompanying Him in Heaven, and that is where we will find happiness. Although this is not explicitly stated, it would have been well known to the recently post-Catholic audiences of the time. The exposition is in the form, that nothing in the world can, or will, make us happy. After progressing through layers upon layers of drastic change of both scenes and alliances of the players (within the limits of comedy), the final scene pulls it all together and resolves everything. While the resolution of the four couples, and the restoration of Duke Senior and his fellow exiles is obvious, the resolution of Jacques’ character is not so obvious.

Given the abject lack of depth and knowledge of history and religion in contemporary literary analyses, this resolution is completely unknown, except for Barton. Where she has exposed the ending in terms of artistic formalism, I shall attempt to do so in the thematic terms I have identified. Regarding Jacques in the final scene, Barton states:

“He puts the seal on the weddings, sets in motion the dance he himself declines to join ...

A figure of sudden dignity, his judgements are both generous and just ...

Moreover, his absence from the dance sets up reverberations, asks questions more disturbing than any that were roused earlier ...”

Jacques’ pivotal words are:

“Sir, by your patience, if I heard you rightly, the duke hath put on a religious life, and thrown into neglect the pompous court ?

To him will I: out of these convertites there is much matter to be heard and learned ...

So - to your pleasures, I am for other than dancing measures.”

Jacques, along with the audience, finally realise that there is nothing in the world that will make him happy, that only a monastic life, and communion with God will. Jacques is the counterpoint for the happy couples and the duke, for their ongoing engagement with the world.

Note

1. The only exception being John Bell's comments after the Bell Shakespeare Company performance of *As You Like It* in Sydney, 24 Mar 2015, in which he stated that the role of Jacques (which he played) was irrelevant, and that if it were removed, it would make no difference to the play.
It is noted that both the author and the lecturer (Michael Griffith) strongly disagreed with such a notion. This was the subject of a blog article^f.
2. Again with one notable exception: Anne Barton's essay *As You Like It: Shakespeare's 'Sense of an Ending'*, in *Essays, Mainly Shakespearean* (Cambridge University Press 1994), pp 91-100. Reprinted in *As You Like It* (William Shakespeare) edited by Leah S Marcus (W W Norton & Co 2012), pp 246-254. Barton argues that Shakespeare produces Henri Focillon's *classicism*, "a moment of poise, a brief, perfectly balanced instant of complete possession of forms", in the ending. In particular, in Jacques' few closing lines. Also notable is the fact that every single analyst, save for Barton, entirely misses the relevance of the ending.
3. Thus it illuminates the darkness of the larger context to a small degree. In doing so, it confirms the absence of light, depth and meaning, the superficiality, of contemporary analyses.
4. The Roman Catholic Church, as it was the one religion in England for close to one thousand years, until its destruction by Henry VIII in 1534.
5. In order to appreciate the relevance of the argument of this essay, an history of that tumultuous time needs be understood, particularly because the retrospective "history" is Anglicanised, sanitised, and quite false. An authentic history could not be located by the author in the time frame, not even in the Rare Books collection at the NSW State Library.

The wikipedia references given are examples of the heavily biased and sanitised versions of history, but they are adequate for the purpose. Note that the imbeciles who write that ever-changing mass of trivia often have their own ideas re dates.

Following one thousand years of dominion of the Roman Catholic Church, Henry VIII created a new religion, based on rebellion against the Authority of the Church; incontinence (meaning loss of control, and specifically sexual in those days); the rejection of six of the Seven Sacraments (notably that of Marriage): and murder. His sexual incontinence, and his various Acts of Parliament destroyed the structure of both the Catholic Church in England and of Catholic England^a, The Acts of his illegitimate child (Henry was Catholic at the time of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon, before his "marriage" to Anne Boleyn) Elizabeth I destroyed it completely^b.

The large scale shift of power and the mass transfer of wealth, due to (a) the confiscation of Church property, and (b) the murder of the Catholic aristocracy and the attainder of their lands, transferred to the newly appointed "aristocracy", caused major upheavals in England^c. While religion had been suppressed, and replaced with heresy, the doctrine and the peaceful life it created was not so easily erased. The audience of the time would have been more than familiar with what they had lost, and they would have yearned for its return.

This subtle but strong Catholic theme in his plays was the second reason that Shakespeare was banned from the theatre until 1740, the first being his honest *Histories* of those barbaric times, and the murderous intrigues of those who came to power in England.

The glorified "reformation" could not be had without a preceding destruction. Thousands of English were martyred, and untold tens of thousands killed^{d,e}. Records were kept only for men of means and education, thus the extent of unrecorded English who were killed will never be known. That history is suppressed. One has to resort to Roman documents and books published outside England.

6. I will not succumb to the common error of modern editors, who give the clown a name, and thus modify the *First Folio*, while alleging to faithfully reproduce it.
7. It is interesting that the most quotes lined from Shakespeare, *All the world's a stage*, etc, are also the most misunderstood. He was famous for mocking things, another reason for his ban. In Hymen's hymn, he mocks Henry VII's many "marriages" and the fact that his new religion has made Hymen (the name in English for the physical sign of chastity) a "god of every town". In *All the world's a stage*, he mocks himself and his company of actors, the *players*. Reading any more than that into it is an absurdity. The ages of man, whether seven or otherwise, has been treated formally elsewhere, there is nothing wise in this rendition.

In making a centre-piece out of a nonsense, a treatise out of a mockery, modern literary analysts give themselves leave to avoid the deep themes in Shakespeare's plays, which they cannot probe. Finally, in that speech, Jacques, true to his character, expresses the insignificance of the world, as well as mocking the *players* in it: a double mockery.

Reference

- a. Specifically the [Act of Supremacy 1534](#); the [Acts of Suppression of Religious Houses 1535 & 1539](#); [Treasons Act 1534 & 1551](#); [See of Rome Act 1536](#); [Ecclesiastical Licences Act 1536](#); [Putting Away of Books and Images Act 1549](#). For a biased list see: [Acts of the Parliament of England concerning religion](#). For a complete (according to wikipedia contributors) list see [List of Acts of the Parliament of England 1485 1601](#). All references retrieved 29 May 2015.
- b. Specifically the [Act of Supremacy 1558](#); the [Acts of Uniformity 1558](#); [Bulls, etc from Rome Act 1570](#); [Religion Act 1580](#); [Jesuits, etc Act 1584](#). All references retrieved 29 May 2015. These consolidated her power and legitimised the Elizabethan Persecution.
- c. This is almost completely suppressed in the sanitised “history”. A few items that refer to it are indirect, but nevertheless indicate its scale. A slightly less sanitised version can be found in the [Pilgrimage of Grace 1536](#). Any rebellion against Henry was crushed with animalistic ferocity. St Thomas More (one of the first martyrs under Henry’s Persecution) wrote a famous series *Utopia*, of which one article *How Sheep Devour English*, is reprinted in *As You Like It* (William Shakespeare) edited by Leah S Marcus (W W Norton & Co 2012), pp 202-203. William C Carroll as a good King’s subject argues against it in typical pharisaic form, in his article *Enclosure, Vagrancy, and Sedition in the Tudor-Stuart Period* pp 205 208. The new problem of masses of poor, the loss of tenure and tenancy by tenant farmers due to the confiscation of Church property is not disputed, only the causes are argued.
- d. One source is [English Confessors and Martyrs \(1534-1729\)](#), by Pollen, John Hungerford. The Catholic Encyclopedia. Vol. 5. New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1909. Retrieved 15 May 2015. It provides a thorough enumeration of known persons. It also stands as an indirect confirmation of the history laid out above.
- e. Another excellent source is [A Menology of England and Wales](#) by Richard Stanton 1884. Retrieved 15 May 2015. This is a google digitised version of an old an rare book, which is presented in page form. For convenience four selected pages covering that period are provided: [Page 474](#), [Page 476](#), [Page 566](#), and [Page 570](#).
- f. [Shakespeare • Common Lack of Insight](#), Derek Asirvadem. Retrieved 29 May 2015.