What is the play about?

As You Like It doesn’t have a conventional theme, as we might say the theme of Macbeth is ambition or the core of Romeo and Juliet is love. Instead, it repeatedly and variously poses a question: What if the world were other than it is? Other ways the world could be are conjured through the characters’ use of what Touchstone near the end of the play calls the “virtue in ‘if’” (5.4.101). As You Like It is a set of experiments in which its characters conditionally change an aspect of their world and see what comes of it: what if I were not a girl but a man? What if I were not a duke, but a figure like Robin Hood, and my realm were not the artificial hierarchies of a ducal court but something more natural and democratic, a woodland band of cooperating near-equals? What if I were a deer? “What would you say to me now an [that is, “if”] I were your very, very Rosalind?” (4.1.64–65). And then, most importantly, what follows? Over the course of As You Like It, characters and audiences find out together by theatrically playing with other possibilities, talking some through, putting others into action, and gauging the outcomes. They experiment with other ways the world could be because the worlds they find themselves in are not as they like them. Over the course of the play, they come closer to learning what they do like, and how their world can be more as they like it.
The titles of Shakespeare’s tragedies and histories point to the central figure around whom they pivot: *Hamlet, Othello, Henry V, Richard III*. The titles of his comedies, in contrast, hardly point anywhere: *A Midsummer Night’s Dream, A Comedy of Errors, Much Ado About Nothing, Twelfth Night*—and, of course, *As You Like It*. It’s sometimes assumed that the titles Shakespeare chose for comedies are throwaways, confections that could apply to any of a number of plays. *Twelfth Night*, we assume, was called that because it was performed on the twelfth night after Christmas. *All’s Well That Ends Well* could really be used for almost any of Shakespeare’s comedies, and actually doesn’t fit the play it is attached to particularly well.

But with *As You Like It* it is hard not to feel a stronger affinity between the title and the play. The problem the play poses is not a simple connecting of dots, where boy meets girl, loses girl, finds girl again. That’s the play’s plot in a nutshell (unless maybe it begins girl meets boy, girl loses boy…), but *As You Like It* does not take it for granted that it knows what we, or it, or its characters, *would* like. Although Rosalind and Orlando are immediately drawn to each other, I suspect that if they were married at the end of the first act, before long they wouldn’t really like each other all that much. They require the play to bring their different expectations about love and each other into tune. At the play’s end, Jaques remains in Arden in part because he does not yet know what he likes. The title *As You Like It* raises a question more than it makes a statement. What *is* as you like it? What is it that you really like or want? *As You Like It* doesn’t tell us that it knows what we like and will give it to us. It asks us find out.

To ask “what if?” is a favorite tactic of Shakespeare’s. What if someone were betrothed to both a man and a maid (Olivia in *Twelfth Night*)? What if two men loved the same woman — and then for some reason fell in love with her best friend (Lysander and Demetrius in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*)? What if a prince learned that his father had been murdered by his uncle for his crown and his queen? What if a Moor became an honored general in the Venetian army, but then married the daughter
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of a senator? It’s not hard to frame most of Shakespeare’s plays as enactments of this kind of thought experiment. But in most of his other plays, the characters are the experiment and the audience is—well, the audience, observing and appraising the outcomes of the plot.

In *As You Like It*, the characters themselves are both experiment and experimenters. They do what they can to find out what the world would be like if certain things in it were different than they are. They do not, that is, begin from scratch, but in a world that they find themselves in, a world that they must begin, at least, by accepting as given. The first step every experimenter in *As You Like It* makes is to imagine, deeply and immersively, some particular change in the world as it is, and then to explore speculatively and performatively what follows from that change: to act it out. With greater or lesser degrees of self-consciousness, these experiments all begin with a hypothesis, an “if”. The characters assert something about the world that they know is not the case, and this fiction lets them act out what would happen if it were—and not only if it were, but something, not otherwise apparent, about how it is now. Rosalind, for instance, can become Ganymede, and then invite Orlando to let Ganymede become Rosalind. Together they work (or act) out answers. As Ganymede, Rosalind confirms her guess that young men have a different kind of liberty than young women, but also that they have some unexpected obligations (to behave in a “manly” way, whether that is not quailing at violence or not flirting with attractive men like Orlando) and some similar constraints (Ganymede seems to be as vulnerable to sexual predation as Rosalind, when Jaques approaches her). Practicing his courtship on Ganymede as if Ganymede were Rosalind (Orlando’s hypothesis is unusually lucky), Orlando discovers that it is not enough to muse on his beloved and then to kiss her (or, alternately, die in his “own person” [4.1.85]). He must talk with her and listen to her as well.

There are many experimenters in *As You Like It*, and in their experiments they work over and under one another, interfere with one another, complement and divert one another. They
produce not one other possible world but many, as many and more as the characters onstage. They are not as powerful as Shakespeare’s later technicians of the possible, like Prospero in *The Tempest* or Paulina in *The Winter’s Tale*, and they lack the magical abilities of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*’s confident, incompetent Oberon and Puck to change how others view the world. On the other hand, they are not as helplessly lucky as Viola, Orsino, and Olivia in *Twelfth Night*, who discover in Viola’s twin brother Sebastian a painless doubling that redistributes an awkward threesome evenly into two couples; or as paralyzed as Hamlet, who seems baffled by the way things are not as he would have them be and in the end finds — perhaps — that the best he can do is take them as they are and let be.

The characters of *As You Like It* stand at a hinge of thought and action, conscious that they desire something, but not wholly capable of getting it. Their desires move them in ways they do not fully control, as Touchstone sees: “As the ox hath her bow, sir, the horse his curb, and the falcon her bells, so man hath his desire” (3.3.73–74). One’s desire is like a burden, then, or a telltale, something that puts its bearer to service and sets him or her working in the world. Before they begin their experiments, it is not even clear what the play’s characters like, and what you like, even (or especially) to them. This is how a nineteenth-century preoccupation with character gets so much right (I find myself beginning this essay with characters, for instance, and not themes) and is still so wrong. It takes for granted that the characters are complete and fixed, and that the play gradually reveals their complexity. But it is much more as if the characters start out relatively incomplete and uncomplicated, and then, by testing their desires against what the world gives them, put themselves in much more complicated, much less presumed, relations to both world and desire. Their awareness that the world could be different than it is, is a step towards making it something that they wish it to be, and towards learning what that is. This is most obvious in the characters the play focuses on, like Orlando, Rosalind, Touchstone, or Jaques. But the play gives us a sense that if we were to look more deeply and more
widely, we would see that all the characters — Oliver, the exiled Duke, Corin, Audrey, Adam — are no less engaged in trying to imagine and to realize a world more as they like it. And not only the play’s characters are experimenting to discover what they like. The stagings of the events that the characters of the play undertake, the play suggests, are also attempts to find something for its audiences, as they like it.

The psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott distinguished two ways people can think about alternative realities: *fantasying*, which is omnipotent but also dissociates the thinker from a lived reality into a daydream, and *playing*, where anticipations, projections, and hypothetical actions are constantly exchanging with reality, transforming it and being transformed. For the most part, *As You Like It*’s experimenters *play* in the play, allowing what is real to press back against what they would like it to be (Silvius seems a notable exception, and when he says that to be a lover “is to be made all of *fantasy*” [5.2.90, my emphasis], he is using the word almost in Winnicott’s sense: disconnected *fantasy* is precisely Silvius’s Petrarchan problem). Their playing is what makes *As You Like It* experimental rather than *fantastic*: by thinking through or acting out these changes, characters get to see some of the consequences they bring with them, some of the resistances that foreclose them, and some of the opportunities they unexpectedly open. These consequences aren’t always welcome, and they are rarely what their initiators expected: “what shall I do with my doublet and hose?” (3.2.212–13) asks Rosalind in frustration when it turns out that crossdressing is liberating in some ways and confining in others. That is the importance of putting imaginings into action, or at least into voice. It is what separates the play as *playing* from utopian dreaming or *fantasying*, where every story marvelously ends as its dreamer wills it.

We think of Shakespeare as working in and making theater, but the word he and his contemporaries used more often for what they did was *playing*. It’s not a huge distinction, but there are differences in what each word expresses—each way of categorizing the shared activity of actors, the tiremen who
outfitted them with costumes and props, their writers and bookkeepers, audiences, the gatherers who collected their pennies, and all the others whose labor first realized As You Like It and other plays in England in the 1590s.

The word theater comes from a Greek word that means to look; the same word is the origin of words like theory. Theater was not a common word, at least in English. Its Latin form theatrum was well known to every schoolboy who was trained in the writings of Terence, and what may have been the first purpose-built playhouse in London was given the proper name The Theater in 1576, but up until the middle of the sixteenth century, when it appears in English, it is almost always defined or translated, as “a common beholding place,” for instance. Even when it came into more common use, theater retains something of its learned feel. It is — surprisingly, perhaps, to us — a little bookish. A faint etymological vibration from its Greek origins resonates in it, and the word suggests a kind of distanced vision, a spectacle held at arm’s length and taken in through the eye or perhaps the ear, one that its audience beholds but in which it does not take part.

Playing, in contrast, is all in. It takes the whole body, both of its performers and of its watchers, and while these two groups have different roles, they are equally involved in the action that they make. Like players in any other kind of game, the people who come together at a stage play commit to its rules, and their shared participation makes it happen. Play became a subject of study for psychologists, sociologists, philosophers, and cultural critics in the twentieth century; their many different approaches agree on play’s centrality to thinking and living and its startling combination of intense seriousness, deep absorption, and lack of necessity. Scholars as varied as Winnicott, educator Jean Piaget, and cultural historian Johan Huizinga all put play at the center of human activity, echoing the observation of Friedrich Schiller — an admirer and translator of Shakespeare — that the human is most fully human in the freedom of its play. This kind of creative, open-ended play is a much better description of what As You Like It is about than purely speculative theater.
Some figures, like Jaques, would rather step back and observe and critique, but they are no less at play than Rosalind with her multiple disguises or Touchstone and the clever schemes that always seem to swirl around him and sweep him up with them. And the audiences of *As You Like It* are also involved, if they allow themselves to be, plotting ahead with Rosalind or Orlando towards unforeseen outcomes.

By exploring ways the world can be different than it is, the characters of *As You Like It* strive to make the world a place in which they can be at home, not as a utopia—Arden may promise that, but certainly doesn’t fulfill it—but as an ongoing work of living. More than any other Shakespearean comedy, *As You Like It* resists the closure of “happily ever after.” Part of the play’s brightness is that it shows living itself as an ongoing, difficult, unresolved, but ultimately happy task. Thus Touchstone woos Audrey, praises “the gods for thy foulness,” and hopes that “sluttishness may come hereafter” (3.3.36–37); Oliver and Celia give up their social station to “live and die…shepherd[s]” in Arden (5.2.12); Phoebe acknowledges that Silvius’s steady “faith” has won her “fancy” (a word which is after all another way of saying fantasy [5.4.148]); Jaques and the usurping younger brother of the Duke stay in Arden to contemplate their worlds further, perhaps never to return (although who can imagine that Jaques, no less driven by the world than Touchstone, will not come back in some other guise, in some unwritten Act Six?). We get a sense at the play’s end not that things have been settled once and for all, but that the characters have taken time to breathe—to live in their new situations until they discover better ones, or until they discover new desires.