What happens in As You Like It?

Actually, a lot: a younger brother, badly raised by his older brother after their father’s death, rebels; so does another younger brother, who usurps the duchy of his older brother, who in turn flees with his followers to a nearby forest; four pairs of characters meet and part and couple and marry; and besides that, there are combats, ambushes, changes of heart, narrow escapes, and secret plans. But as August Schlegel, a contemporary of Goethe and one of Shakespeare’s great translators, observed, “It would be difficult to bring the contents within the compass of an ordinary relation: nothing takes place, or rather what takes place is not so essential as what is said.” The events of the plot in As You Like It are not really what make up the play. Instead, they are there to create a background against which the characters can reflect on their situations, in love, in society, in family. Jaques’s meditations on the world and the stage, or Orlando’s poetizing on love, are as much part of the action as Orlando’s wrestling match or Rosalind’s disguises. The most memorable and central parts of As You Like It do not really happen at all, or at least not as we usually imagine events or action to happen. They are topics for debate. The hardest work in the play is accomplished not in action, but in words; when Orlando throws Charles to the ground and has to flee the court, the most overt kinds of physical action are left behind with the bruised wrestler.
What really happens in *As You Like It* is talking, thinking, wondering, analyzing, interpreting, discussing what has just happened, what is that like, what to do next, what it all means. *As You Like It* is a play in love with its own voices. Talking and thinking structure the play as much as any events it portrays. Conversations follow their own rhythms, begin, are dropped, then taken up again, informed by new events or considerations—and with every shift, as Rosalind says to Orlando about differences of opinion, “there begins new matter” (4.1.74). Characters return to themes introduced earlier by other characters or develop new viewpoints based on what they say or hear. Few problems are resolved by talking about them, but talking makes their contours clearer, both their consequences and the opportunities they present. In conversation characters practice imagining worlds different from the one they inhabit, and taking steps to make those worlds real.

**Act I**

Before the play begins, the younger brother of the Duke has overthrown his brother and sent him into exile. The exiled Duke now lives with his companions in the nearby forest of Arden.

A younger son of an aristocratic family, Orlando, complains to his family’s aged servant, Adam, that his oldest brother and the head of the family, Oliver, has raised him in neglect. When Oliver appears, Orlando explodes, threatening him and demanding whatever inheritance he has from their father. Oliver expels Orlando from the household, and with him discharges old Adam.

A professional wrestler from the court, Charles, warns Oliver that Orlando is planning to challenge Charles during an exhibition match. Charles is afraid that he may injure Orlando and wants Oliver to talk Orlando out of it. Oliver, though, tells Charles that he doesn’t mind if Orlando is hurt or even killed. Charles, no fool, promises that he’ll make sure that Orlando is at least maimed. But the next day at the match, to everyone’s astonishment, Orlando overthrows Charles so forcefully that it
is Charles who is injured. A notable member of the audience, Rosalind, the daughter of the recently exiled Duke who has stayed on at court, tells Orlando that he has overthrown more than his enemies. She and Orlando are both overwhelmed by love. Orlando is advised by a sympathetic courtier, Le Beau, to leave the court before the usurping Duke does worse than ignore him. He does, and — hinting at the wisdom of Orlando’s departure — the usurping Duke exiles his niece Rosalind with no further explanation. Rosalind’s cousin and friend Celia and the court jester Touchstone offer to accompany her to find Rosalind’s father, the exiled Duke, in the Forest of Arden. Celia suggests that the women disguise themselves, and she chooses to become Aliena. Rosalind comes up with the idea of dressing as a young man and calling herself “Ganymede.” Touchstone, as his name suggests, remains unchanged. Everybody is underway.

Act II

In Arden, the exiled Duke praises the new life away from court that he and his followers have found. It is physically harder, colder, and more demanding, but free from the flattery, hypocrisy, and deception of the society they have left. It is further lightened by the presence of Jaques, a melancholy retainer whose grumbling reflections on both court and forest the Duke loves to hear, although it isn’t always clear whether Jaques is a satirist of the court’s flaws or their best example.

Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone arrive exhausted in Arden; Rosalind is delighted by it, Touchstone less so, Celia simply worn out. They meet Corin and Silvius, two of the forest’s shepherds, and learn of Silvius’s desperate love for a shepherdess, Phoebe. Corin invites them back to his cottage, regretting that he cannot do more for them. Celia decides “right suddenly” to buy the land and sheep Corin tends (2.4.99), and they all go to settle in.

As the Duke and his companions prepare a rustic feast, Orlando charges in and demands food at swordpoint to feed old Adam, who has collapsed from hunger and weariness. The Duke greets him hospitably, and tells him that he is welcome to share
with them. Orlando is chastened, Adam is saved, and the exiled Duke welcomes them both to Arden.

_Act III_

Having learned of the flight of Celia, Touchstone, and Rosalind, and suspecting (wrongly) that they are with Orlando, the usurping Duke demands that Oliver reveal where Orlando is. When Oliver protests that he does not even like his brother, much less know where he is, the Duke commands him to deliver Orlando within the year. Oliver, too, finds himself bound for Arden, looking for Orlando.

Meanwhile, in the forest, Orlando is busy writing poetry to Rosalind and hanging it in the trees for anybody to read. Rosalind, Touchstone, and Celia—that is, Ganymede, Touchstone, and Aliena—wander in one by one, each with a small harvest of poems. Celia reveals that it is Orlando who has written the wooden rhymes; she discovered him lying under a tree and recognized him from the wrestling match. Rosalind is both thrilled and horrified.

Orlando and Jaques take a quick and cordial dislike to one another. Rosalind introduces herself to Orlando as Ganymede and begins to chat him up. Orlando explains that he is desperately in love with Rosalind. Ganymede doubts it—Orlando doesn’t look nearly sick enough to be in love. But he offers to cure Orlando of it by letting him get the wooing out of his system on Ganymede, who will pretend to be Rosalind. Orlando does not think much of this kind of talking cure, but Ganymede reassures him and Orlando agrees to at least one session.

Touchstone scares up a love interest of his own, the shepherdess Audrey. Although his appreciation of her is as ambivalent as his feelings about the forest, he finds a priest to marry them anyway, the tellingly-named Oliver Martext. Corin shows Ganymede and Aliena to another struggling pair, the high-minded and infatuated Silvius, and Phoebe, who is not interested in him at all. But Phoebe likes what she sees in Ganymede very much, despite his attempts to brush her off,
and after Ganymede and Aliena leave, Phoebe recruits Silvius to deliver Ganymede a letter from her.

*Act IV*

Orlando appears for his first love therapy session, late. Rosalind— in fact Rosalind as Ganymede as Rosalind— tries to lead Orlando through some basic lessons in love and gets as far as rehearsing a wedding ceremony before Orlando has to go dine with the exiled Duke. He promises to return. Silvius comes in with Phoebe’s letter. Then Oliver unexpectedly appears with another, still less welcome message for Ganymede. Coming to Arden to seek out Orlando, Oliver had fallen asleep and was about to be attacked by both a poisonous snake and a lion. Luckily Orlando stumbled across him and chased off the menagerie, but was injured while protecting Oliver. Because of his wounds, Oliver explains, Orlando cannot make his next appointment. Orlando’s display of fraternal love has completely altered Oliver, who feels himself a new man. Aliena thinks he is rather a nice one. Ganymede gets suspiciously woozy at the sight of Orlando’s blood on the handkerchief.

*Act V*

Having settled on a priest, Touchstone and Audrey are limping for better or worse towards marriage, but now they run into other problems: Audrey may already be betrothed to another shepherd, William. With a flurry of big words and loose reasoning, Touchstone convinces him that Touchstone has the better claim to her (proximity, apparently) and William, flummoxed, departs.

Now wholly reconciled, Oliver confesses to Orlando that he has fallen in love with and courted Aliena, and that, since they have decided to marry and live together in the forest, he is giving the family estate to Orlando. Ganymede is as surprised as Orlando by this sudden example of successful matchmaking, but Oliver’s announcement seems to change Orlando’s mood.
He is done courting by proxy, he says; he “can no longer live by thinking” (5.2.54). Ganymede promises him a resolution at Oliver and Celia’s wedding the next day, and similarly assures Silvius and Phoebe of happy endings to their respective desires for Phoebe and for Ganymede at the wedding. If Ganymede can produce Rosalind, Orlando will marry her; if Phoebe then refuses to marry Ganymede, she will marry Silvius. All agree to meet at the wedding and, if Ganymede can satisfy them all, be married tomorrow. Touchstone and Audrey will join them. It looks as if a lot of loose ends, and spare bodies, may be bound up at once.

At the wedding the next day, Ganymede and Aliena slip out and return, undisguised, as Rosalind and Celia, in the company of Hymen, the pagan god of marriage. Orlando is thrilled to find that his boy was his girl all along; Phoebe is startled, but goes along with her promise to marry Silvius since Ganymede is no longer available. When Orlando and Oliver’s middle brother, who confusingly is named Jaques like the Duke’s grouchy retainer, unexpectedly shows up to say that usurping Duke has decided to restore the dukedom to his elder brother and to withdraw to the forest of Arden to follow a life of contemplation, all seems resolved. As the forest court prepares to leave Arden, melancholy Jaques (and not the middle brother) decides to stay in Arden with the usurping Duke-turned-hermit. The newly restored Duke announces that the wedding rites for all will begin — and the play is over. Rosalind lingers onstage to present the epilogue, and, while delivering it, changes slowly from girl character to boy actor. And the boy leaves the stage.