Shakespeare’s Mockery of Courtly Love in *As You Like It*

Scholars have long since come to a consensus that William Shakespeare uses Thomas Lodge’s pastoral tale *Rosalynde* as his main source for his play *As You Like It*. Lodge’s *Rosalynde* was first published in 1590, and is seen as a classic example of the pastoral romance. Because Shakespeare so closely follows Lodge’s original piece, scholars have found it critical to examine even the slightest changes that Shakespeare makes. Some scholars, such as Clare Kinney, Stephen Lynch, and Nathaniel Strout, argue that Shakespeare makes the little changes that he does to *Rosalynde* so that he can deconstruct the strict gender codes found in pastorals. Others, such as Judy Kronenfeld, Robert Pierce, and Arthur Quiller-Couch, argue that Shakespeare is offering a criticism of real life by mocking the idealized, simplistic relationships between social classes in the pastoral genre. Lastly, Dora Smith, John Rea, and Albert Tolman say that Shakespeare’s main intention is merely to humanize and improve the original story. Though there is no one consensus among all of the scholars, they are in agreement that Shakespeare is ridiculing many conventions found in the pastoral genre.

It is the combination of these three arguments that sheds light on what conventions Shakespeare is mocking and why he is doing so. If Shakespeare is criticizing the simplified vision that pastorals have of relations between social classes, then by default he is mocking the social codes that govern the characters in these stories. Because he is mocking the social codes
behind both the court and the gender relations found in pastorals, it is clear that Shakespeare is offering a criticism of courtly love. A key point that these scholars have failed to address is why Shakespeare only chooses to purposely humanize some of the relationships found in *Rosalynde* while further romanticizing other relationships. When his choice of relationships to complicate is coupled with the argument that he is mocking courtly love, the reason for the choices that he makes becomes clear. By further romanticizing the courtly love relationships in *Rosalynde*, Shakespeare emphasizes their artificiality. In contrast, he adds complexity to the relationships within the play that have little to do with courtly love. With these practical relationships, he proposes an alternative love that is more fulfilling than courtly love. He endows this “real love” with traits, such as selflessness, that are difficult to achieve in a courtly relationship. Shakespeare takes certain aspects of Lodge’s *Rosalynde* and either deliberately romanticizes or humanizes them in *As You Like It* in order to juxtapose the courtly love that is conventional in a pastoral with his definition of what realistic, healthy love is, mocking courtly love and promoting healthy love in the process.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines “courtly love” as “a highly conventionalized medieval system of chivalric love and etiquette” (“Courtly”). Herbert Moller describes the conventions of poetry that emulates this courtly love: The lover is consumed by his love for a lady, who is “the sovereign of all his thoughts, feelings, and actions. . . . [Y]et ideally this yearning [for her] should never be allayed by possession in reality” (39-40). Conventionally, pastorals possess romances that follow a strict gender code (Kinney 292) and portray social relationships in a glorified, simplistic way (Kronenfeld 336). In essence, pastorals take the romanticized love that courtly love poetry exhibits and act out that rose-colored view of love as
though it is real. Romance that follows such strict codes and is rarely fully realized is ripe for mockery in the form of the relationships that Shakespeare takes from *Rosalynde* and twists in *As You Like It*.

In order to effectively present his mockery of courtly love, Shakespeare takes the relationships in *As You Like It* that wouldn’t be seen as traditional courtly love and humanizes them. Rosalind and Celia have a sisterly relationship that has nothing to do with courtly love. Celia makes her relationship with Rosalind clear when Duke Frederick accuses Rosalind of being a traitor. Describing how powerful and long-lasting their friendship has been, Celia says, “[W]e still have slept together / Rose at an instant, learn’d, play’d, eat together; / And whatsoe’er we went . . . Still we went coupled and inseparable” (I.iii.76-9). In Lodge’s *Rosalynde*, Alinda/Celia merely speaks up for Rosalynde, which causes Torismund/Duke Frederick to retaliate by banishing Celia as well (121). Shakespeare changes this in *As You Like It* when Celia chooses to banish herself of her own accord if it means staying together with Rosalind (I.iii.99-103). Shakespeare presents Celia’s noble affection for Rosalind that prevents Rosalind from being stranded in the woods alone as a far more appealing relationship than one characterized by courtly love where lovers rarely voice their feelings for one another. With these changes, Shakespeare uplifts Rosalind and Celia’s relationship to fit his definition of what realistic love looks like. Through their self-sacrificing loyalty to one another, Shakespeare proposes that a key element of that love is selflessness.

Similar to Celia and Rosalind, Orlando and Oliver’s developing brotherly relationship does not have anything to do with courtly love, and yet Shakespeare pays careful attention to it in his rewriting of *Rosalynde*. Dora Smith draws attention to the fact that, whereas Saladyne is
motivated by nothing but pure spite in his hatred of his brother Rosader, Oliver has valid reasons to be envious of his brother Orlando (494-5). Oliver admits that Orlando is “gentle; never schooled and yet learned . . . of all sorts enchantingly beloved . . .” (I.i.163-5). By endowing Orlando with qualities that are sufficient enough to warrant jealousy in any older brother, Shakespeare humanizes the struggles that Orlando and Oliver go through in their relationship, and thus makes it all the more significant when they reconcile later in the play.

Shakespeare goes to great lengths to ensure that the reparation of Orlando and Oliver’s relationship is one of the focuses of the play. Shakespeare chooses to begin the play by establishing the state of Orlando and Oliver’s relationship, bringing it immediately to the audience’s attention (I.i.1-25). Whereas in the original Rosalynde, Saladyne/Oliver maliciously has Rosader/Orlando chained to a pole for three days without food (Lodge 138), Shakespeare omits this inhumane incident. By the end, their relationship, as well as “nature stronger than his just occasion,” inspires Orlando to save Oliver from the lioness (IV.iii.136). This brotherly relationship strays far from courtly love, and yet Shakespeare presents it as an ideal kind of love. In a courtly relationship, where the passion is internalized and prevents the lovers from speaking candidly to one another, forgiveness is an element that scarcely seems applicable. Yet Shakespeare rewrites Rosalynde so that forgiving love suppresses artificial courtly love. Despite that Oliver denied Orlando of a gentleman’s education and did little to make amends, their relationship still allows for reconciliation and forgiveness. With Oliver and Orlando’s changing relationship, Shakespeare makes a powerful statement about how healthy, realistic love invites the possibility of growth and forgiveness.

Furthermore, the human follies present in the relationship between Touchstone and
Audrey puts the crown jewel on Shakespeare’s mockery of courtly love. As Touchstone and Audrey are two of the few characters who were not in the original *Rosalynde*, Shakespeare’s inclusion of them is very deliberate. What could easily be presented as another courtly relationship that happily ends with a wedding has the opposite effect as Touchstone’s human desires disrupt any notion there is of romanticized love. Robert Pierce sums up this argument when he says, “Touchstone . . . embodies a comic statement . . . closely woven into the language of the play, that of parody. Parody laughs from inside, by being the thing it mocks” (172). Through both his actions and his words, Touchstone shows how romantic courtly love is not feasible when faulty human nature is considered. By using Touchstone’s recount of his pathetic attempts to win Jane Smile, Shakespeare diminishes the dramatic words of characters like Silvius who are smitten by courtly love.

When Audrey puzzles over what it means to be “poetical,” Touchstone explains, “[T]he truest poetry is the most feigning; and lovers are given to poetry, and what they swear in poetry may be said as lovers they do feign” (III.iii.16-21). Touchstone criticizes the hypocrisy of outward courtly love by pointing out that its flowery, “feigning” language does not line up with a realistic view of what humans are motivated by. Touchstone verifies his claims about feigned love with the lack of love and commitment that he shows toward Audrey. When Touchstone calls upon Sir Oliver Martext to marry him and Audrey, he muses, “[H]e is not likely to marry me well; and not being well married, it will be a good excuse hereafter for me to leave my wife” (III.iii.92-4). Because he feels that he is condescending to marry Audrey, and that the most poetical love is full of false words, Touchstone shows how the follies of human nature make a perfect courtly relationship all the more unreasonable. Shakespeare creates this couple that has
the potential to be an example of courtly lovers and uses them to demonstrate why human beings
aren’t capable of forming courtly love that is genuine. Only the relationships in the play that
don’t resemble courtly love are immune to Touchstone’s mockery, and thus are presented as
ideal.

While the relationships that do portray Shakespeare’s definition of healthy love involve
selflessness and forgiveness, the relationships that approximate courtly love lack these qualities.
First, Silvius exhibits the characteristics of a captivated lover in his one-sided love for Phebe.
Silvius admits to Corin that his love for Phebe has overwhelmed him to the point that it is
clouding his judgment and actions (II.iv.34-42). Kinney points out that in *Rosalynde*, Montanus
(or Silvius) earns sympathy from his listeners in his tragic courtship of Phebe; in *As You Like It*,
however, this sympathy is overridden by Touchstone’s mockery and his recount of his own vain
attempts at love (304). In the end, Silvius does manage to win Phebe, and Shakespeare uses this
as an opportunity to scorn a central component of courtly love: the fact that the relationship
between the lovers should never be fully realized. By portraying a courtly relationship that does
result in marriage, Shakespeare mercilessly points out its fated demise. Silvius’s victory is not
attributed to Phebe returning his affections. Rather, the only reason that Phebe will marry Silvius
is because she promised Ganymede that she would marry Silvius if she found a reason not to
desire a marriage with Ganymede, and Phebe does not want to be someone who doesn’t keep her
promises (V.iv.154-5). Though Silvius should be satisfied with his marriage to Phebe in the end,
the fact that she only marries him to keep her word raises the implication that their marriage may
not turn out to be the happy ending Silvius wishes it to be. Because Silvius and Phebe’s love is
not based on any of the principles found in Shakespeare’s proposed alternative of healthy love, it
is set up for a downfall. Through their relationship, Shakespeare makes it clear that even when
Courtly love is successful, it isn’t necessarily long-lasting.

When Celia and Oliver meet, they fall in love upon first glance. By emphasizing this
courtly relationship that is only founded upon physical looks, Shakespeare ridicules courtly love.
In Lodge’s *Rosalynne*, Alinda/Celia has reason to fall in love with Saladyne/Oliver when he
saves her from a band of rascals who try to kidnap her in hopes of sending her as a present to
their lecherous king (Lodge 180). Shakespeare overlooks this event, making Celia and Oliver’s
courtly relationship unfeasible by giving it no basis. After he falls in love with Celia in this
impractical way, Oliver is so overtaken by her that he readily tells Orlando that he can have his
estate so that Oliver can “love Aliena . . . and here live and die a shepherd” (V.ii.8-12). Oliver’s
willingness to give up everything that he has known throughout his life for a woman that he just
met is irrational by all accounts. By giving Celia and Oliver a relationship where they rush into
marriage, having had no time to learn how to form a realistic relationship that involves
selflessness and forgiveness, Shakespeare reveals the many faults of courtly love.

Through the portrayal of Rosalind and Orlando’s relationship, which transitions from
courtly love to healthy love, Shakespeare presents his ultimate advertisement of realistic love
over courtly love as the ideal for happiness. Shakespeare deliberately lays stress on Orlando’s
initial position as an overwhelmed courtly lover; whereas Orlando is rendered speechless by
Rosalind’s presence (I.ii.249-51), the original Rosader/Orlando doesn’t suffer this “diminishment
of manly vigor.” Rather, he immediately sets “pen to paper and sends a sonnet to Rosalynde”
(Lynch 12). Touchstone’s mockery of courtly love throughout the play does nothing to dignify
Orlando’s obsessive affection. While indicating the distastefulness of the love poetry that
Orlando has pinned to the trees in the forest, Touchstone says, “Truly, the tree yields bad fruit” (III.ii.117). The fact that Rosalind becomes the sole object of Orlando’s thoughts shows that their relationship, at first, is not a candidate for Shakespeare’s definition of realistic love.

However, through her actions, Rosalind moves her relationship with Orlando beyond courtly love and into the realm of healthy love. Lodge uses *Rosalynde* as an example of how love should be a prescribed set of codes. While musing about her newfound love for Saladyne/Oliver, Alinda/Celia reveals how the gendered social code has been drilled into her when she says, “Women must love or they must cease to live, and therefore did Nature frame them fair that they might be subjects to fancy” (Lodge 184). Alinda is so tangled in the pastoral’s gender code that she believes that the forces of nature have made women beautiful because their only purpose is to win a lover. On his deathbed, Rosader’s father informs his sons that “they should choose [a woman] who is ‘chast, obedient, and silent’—the usual Holy Trinity of early modern female virtues” (Lodge 100, qtd. in Kinney 297). In Lodge’s idealized world where women have to be silent and deferential if they wish to be worthy of love (because, according to Alinda, the only alternative is to die), there is no allowance for Shakespeare’s realistic love because there cannot be growth and communication in a relationship where the woman has no voice. For the characters in *Rosalynde*, courtly love is the only possibility that women have if they want love.

So in order to present his alternative definition of love as the ideal love, Shakespeare creates a Rosalind who isn’t afraid to express her emotions. In the epilogue of the play, Rosalind walks onto the stage and declares that while it is not “the fashion to see the lady the epilogue . . . it is no more unhandsome than to see the lord the prologue” (1-2). By giving Rosalind a voice, Shakespeare debunks the notion that people have to fall in love according to a set of rules.
Rosalind’s voice is what provokes the shift in her and Orlando’s relationship from courtly love to realistic love. In *Rosalynde*, Rosalynde doesn’t speak a word to Rosader at the wrestling match. Instead, she has a page deliver him a jewel (Lodge 112). In contrast, Shakespeare has his Rosalind drape her chain around Orlando’s neck after the match, violating the female role of quietness as she informs him that he has made an impression on her (I.ii.254-5).

Rosalind goes on to violate the prescribed role for her during her love lessons with Orlando in the forest. She mocks the conventional courtly notion of a lover as she tells Orlando that his love for Rosalind cannot be authentic because he is not exhibiting all of the outward signs of a man overcome by affection (III.ii.375-91). Rosalind ultimately ruptures the social code with her arrangement of the mass wedding. By the end of the play, Rosalind and Orlando have thoroughly rebelled against the courtly love code. Despite their resistance to the code, their love for each other is mutual, and their relationship is the most satisfying romantic relationship at the end of the play. Rosalind and Orlando’s relationship provides a direct contrast between courtly love and realistic love, and serves as Shakespeare’s final attack against the courtly love code.

Pastoral stories are known to convey the author’s idea of what is ideal, and Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* is no exception. Through emphasizing uncourtly relationships where Celia banishes herself for Rosalind, Shakespeare shows that healthy, realistic love is selfless. It develops over time and is powerful enough that it can heal the rift between Orlando and Oliver that results from Oliver’s jealousy. As Touchstone repeatedly demonstrates, the foolishness of human nature is an unavoidable part of love, and Shakespeare’s definition of love is much more compatible with this foolishness than courtly love. As Shakespeare mocks courtly love, a code that allows for Silvius to be paired with someone who doesn’t love him back, he further
promotes healthy love as a better alternative. And through Rosalind and Orlando’s developing relationship that defies the chivalric code of a knight wooing his silent lady, Shakespeare proves that real love is much more about the mutual feelings between the two lovers than it is about the social codes that they follow while courting. For Shakespeare, this healthy love is the true ideal. This love is what can be realistically achieved and found to be long-lasting in the real world.
Works Cited

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