Fulfillment in *As You Like It*

Since Bloom and Jaffa’s seminal work most political philosophers who have engaged with Shakespeare have placed him firmly in the classical tradition.[[1]](#footnote-1) Few have directly challenged this view, but occasionally it has been acknowledged that there are elements in his thinking which are impossible to reconcile with classical philosophy. David Lowenthal notes of Prospero that it is his “three year daughter’s smile. . . and not his philosophy that bore him through the ordeal at sea,” and argues elsewhere that in *Romeo and Juliet* Shakespeare goes “beyond the value placed on sexual love by classical philosophers. . . celebrating a higher form of love in a new way.”[[2]](#footnote-2) Scott Crider even argues that Shakespeare “enacts a modern love” in the way he celebrates “the lyric will to constancy in love” in his sonnets.[[3]](#footnote-3) If these critics are correct, Shakespeare would clearly be diverging from the classical tendency to value friendship only insofar as it facilitates philosophy.[[4]](#footnote-4) The comedies are not often studied by political philosophers—perhaps precisely because they seem to be concerned principally with love and friendship—but I would argue that they contain the heart of Shakespeare’s thought about the ways in which love can fulfill us. The events of *As You Like It* can easily be summarized: the hero, Orlando, and the heroine, Rosalind, are both forced to flee to the Forest of Arden, where they encounter Rosalind’s father, Duke Senior, who has also been exiled. All three are followed into exile by loyal friends: Rosalind by her cousin Celia and Touchstone, her fool; Orlando by Adam, the faithful family retainer; and Duke Senior by a number of lords, including Jaques, a quirky melancholic. Once in the forest, Rosalind tests out Orlando as a potential lover under the cover of her male disguise, and various pastoral characters are encountered, one of whom Touchstone marries. I will argue that Shakespeare uses these apparently trivial events to smuggle in a carefully developed and logically ordered argument.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The play opens with the hero, Orlando, bitterly complaining about the tyrannical behavior of his elder brother Oliver since his father’s death. He admits that mere “growth” is a “gain” and that he is given enough to eat, but complains bitterly that his brother “mines his gentility with his education” (1.1.10–14, 1.1.21).[[6]](#footnote-6) The intensity of Orlando’s rage suggests that his hunger to advance himself is as deep-seated as his need to eat, even though he recognizes dimly even at this point that social status, or “the courtesy of nations” as he calls it, is insubstantial compared to his innate “blood” (1.1.44–48). It is a similar desire for honor that seems to underlie his brother’s jealous conviction that Orlando is more “enchantingly belov’d” by the people than himself (1.1.163–71). Both here and elsewhere in the play such ambitions are presented as either fruitless or actively painful—in that they lead us to compare ourselves continually with others, while diverting us from what is intrinsically satisfying—but at the same time as deeply embedded in our nature. It should be noted, however, that Orlando’s bold assault on his elder brother seems to be provoked primarily by his attachment to his father’s memory, although here, as is typical of his character in the early part of the play, pride and love merge in a rather confused way: “he is thrice a villain that says such a father begot villains” (1.1.57–59).

Shakespeare chooses this moment to emphasize his key theme through insistent references to the power of loyal devotion. We see Adam’s brave and defiant devotion to his dead master’s memory, even though he is now officially attached to the tyrannical Oliver, and we learn the latest news from court: that the old duke, Rosalind’s father, has been banished by his younger brother Frederick, but followed into exile by “three or four loving lords,” who endure the confiscation of their property as punishment for their loyalty; while Frederick’s daughter Celia has developed such a lasting attachment to Rosalind, “being ever from their cradles bred together, that [she] would have follow’d her exile, or have died to stay behind her” (1.1.63–64, 1.1.82–88, 1.1.99–110). This bunching of parallel instances is one of the ways in which Shakespeare guides his readers and audiences to the philosophical interior of his plays. All the key issues of the play have, I will argue, been introduced in this opening scene: “gentility,” “education,” and even “feeding” are all explored at length later, while love and its relationship to spiritedness and self-sacrifice are Shakespeare’s central concern.

Shakespeare develops this theme in the next scene by focusing on Rosalind’s tremendous effort to restrain her grief over her exiled father: “Well, I will forget the condition of my estate, to rejoice in yours” (1.2.15–16). All other passions are subordinated to the deep empathy which springs from her devotion to her cousin. Celia feels exactly the same way:

If my uncle, thy banished father,

had banish’d thy uncle, the duke my father, so thou

hadst been still with me, I could have taught my

love to take thy father for mine; so wouldst thou,

if the truth of thy love to me were so righteously

temper’d as mine is to thee.

(1.2.9–14)

There is no reason for this reprimand, however, for Rosalind has already declared that she is “show[ing] more mirth than [she is] mistress of,” for Celia’s sake (1.2.3–4). An early critic came close to the heart of the play when he noticed that the two friends possess “the gift of self-renunciation, which renders them strangers to all egotism,” adding that Rosalind’s friendship with Celia “lightened” her situation, since she “constrained herself from love to her, to be more cheerful than became her position.”[[7]](#footnote-7) Both women have a strong sense that their happiness depends on their mutual intimacy, so both strive constantly to restrain any passion which threatens to disrupt the friendship. This is the alchemy of love, Shakespeare suggests, by which the most intense desires are so “temper’d” as to point towards their own transcendence. Both women accept that their deepest needs are best fulfilled by turning away from all other needs, however pressing they may seem at the time, in order to focus on the happiness of their friend. This section of the dialogue culminates in a great oath of loyalty by Celia, which is aimed at reinforcing Rosalind’s determination to devote herself fully to the friendship, since it should leave her completely confident that this effort will be mutual (1.2.19–22). The trust that Rosalind feels in Celia because of her deeds and vows fosters a lightness of heart which quickly allows her to become distracted from her grief and “devise sports” (1.2.24–25).

Thus a close analysis of the love between Celia and Rosalind reveals that it has an importance that is not usually recognized, since, despite occupying only two brief scenes, it represents Shakespeare’s most fully extended portrayal of a thoroughly equal, loyal, and mutually sympathetic attachment. He aims to remind us of both the overwhelming power and the paradoxical effects of our yearning for such attachments, substantiating his intuitive grasp of human nature, as always, through a presentation of human relationships which is so meticulously realistic as to be utterly convincing to harmonious souls among the audience.

Touchstone, who is the court’s clown and a close friend of Celia, is introduced as “Nature’s natural” and as an aid or “whetstone” in reasoning about nature and fortune (1.2.54–55). He arrives just as Rosalind is arguing that beauty and honesty could be classed as natural qualities (1.2.40–42). In reply, Celia stresses the ephemeral character of beauty, showing that the real question here is not which qualities are natural, but which of our natural qualities can help us to fulfill our nature: “when Nature hath made a fair creature, may she not by Fortune fall into the fire?” (1.2.43–44). Pleasures associated with our bodily appetites are fleeting, but Celia’s comment that “Nature hath given us wit to flout at Fortune” reminds us that we have been given one natural quality at least which allows us to distinguish the transient from the durable and substantial (1.2.45). This is exactly what the fool proceeds to do, showing the vanity of “honor” through his story of the knight who “never had any; or if he had, he had sworn it away,” and yet still retained his reputation (1.2.78–79). Beauty is ephemeral and honor is insubstantial, but at least it seems that those with “wit” are able to restrain their desire for such hollow prizes. Touchstone himself remains in control of “Fortune” as far as is possible, since he pursues neither beauty nor honor, and so, as his name implies, becomes a sort of benchmark for what is naturally fulfilling. Nevertheless, although wit is clearly valued by all three characters and appears to play a habitual part in their intimate friendship, it is important to note that Rosalind seems to see it merely as a substitute for the more practical discussion of “falling in love” in which she had attempted to engage her more conventionally modest friend (1.2.25–33). She enjoys philosophy, but it is not by any means her deepest concern.

In a typically subterranean way Shakespeare has used this bantering conversation to suggest that wit, honor, and the physical appetites will all feature in the argument, and, further, that the main purpose of the play will be to judge the extent to which each of these passions is conducive to a lasting and substantial fulfillment. In other words, as the title of *As You Like It* itself hints, this is Shakepeare’s play about The Good Life.

Orlando’s decision to divert himself from his troubles by entering a wrestling match at the court with the burly Charles is used by Shakespeare to draw a series of sharp contrasts between the desire for honor and the deep attachments that are formed by lovers and friends. First, he invites us to compare the way Orlando falls in love with Rosalind during the match with Duke Frederick’s hostility to her, which is based entirely on the fact that “the people praise her for her virtues” (1.2.278–80). As with Orlando’s brother Oliver, the duke’s desire to be popular leaves him vulnerable to terrible pangs of envy. (Shakespeare seems to have completely changed the motives of both of his villains in comparison to his source, so that the first quarter of the play becomes in part a critique of the striving for honor that appears to characterize political life.)[[8]](#footnote-8) In contrast, Orlando’s final comment in the scene implies that Rosalind’s “heavenly” nature makes it worth his while to endure the “tyrant Duke” humbly, even though he resembles his own “tyrant brother” (1.2.287– 89). Here for the second time Orlando exhibits the sort of courageous loyalty that has already been shown to be an underlying factor in the deepest friendships.

Nevertheless, although he is mainly contrasted to Duke Frederick, Orlando is presented as being caught between a humble attachment to Rosalind and a proud self-assertiveness, just as he was swayed almost equally by pride and love for his father when he attacked his brother in the first scene. He feels his low status as intensely as ever, and one can see that it is this that is at the root of his despair when he maintains that, if he loses to Charles in the wrestling match, “there is but one sham’d that was never gracious” (1.2.187–88). Here, despite his apparent humility, Orlando shows that he cares deeply about his lowly position, and, further, that he sees the wrestling as a way of regaining some of his pride, since the honor of victory is clearly the unspoken corollary to the potential shame of defeat. The contest serves as an apt image for the way in which a spirited pursuit of honor involves surrendering oneself to the vagaries of “Fortune” for no substantial reward, since victory leaves Orlando no better off and defeat would probably have led to his death if Charles had followed Oliver’s hints (1.1.141–62).

During the wrestling scene Shakespeare continues to explore the tension between pride and love. It is typical that Rosalind urges Orlando to withdraw from the fight and to pay no more than lip service to “reputation” (1.2.180–82). Rosalind’s love for Orlando is not impeded by her poverty: as she gives him her chain she says, “Wear this for me: one out of suits with Fortune, that could give more, but that her hand lacks means” (1.2.246–47). She is not affected by “Fortune” in the way that Orlando is, because her lowly status is irrelevant to her deepest concerns. Her earlier, frustrated wish to discuss falling in love has already shown that she is even less likely to be motivated by conventional standards of honor than Celia (1.2.24–29; see also 1.3.13–25), and now the speed with which she abandons any pretense of maidenly modesty in order to show her interest in Orlando underlines the extent to which she feels free to follow her natural desires: “My pride fell with my fortunes. . . . Sir, you have wrestled well, and overthrown more than your enemies” (1.2.252–55). Rosalind clearly realizes that love can bring far more substantial rewards than reputation. Less typically, however, Orlando is also in his turn suddenly overwhelmed by a passion which seems to proceed from a deeper level of his personality than we have previously seen:

My better parts

Are all thrown down, and that which here stands up

Is but a quintain, a mere liveless block.

(1.2.249–51)

Shakespeare uses the image of the quintain—a wooden figure employed as a target for tilting—to suggest that Orlando has suddenly become at least partially aware of the insubstantiality and artificiality of the code of honor by which he has previously lived. This radical, if implicit, self-criticism, combined with his speechlessness and his confused realization that he has perhaps been “overthrown” by “something weaker” than Charles, all imply that he is beginning to plumb unfamiliar depths within his own nature (1.2.259–60).

At the start of act 1, scene 3 Shakespeare gives us another brief glimpse into Rosalind and Celia’s friendship, once again examining their mutual self-restraint. Again Celia remarks on the way Rosalind has withdrawn from her, but this time she invites her to “lame [her] with reasons” for her sadness; a process which she implicitly likens to throwing stones at a dog (1.3.3–6). She alludes here to the blind loyalty which is leading her to brace herself for confidences that she knows are going to hurt her as if Rosalind’s pain were her own; no doubt partly because they may reveal that her friend is not perfectly fulfilled by their mutual attachment. Celia has clearly come to regret her earlier demand for Rosalind to restrain her grief, showing once again how both women strive to overcome any feeling which threatens to take precedence over their mutual sympathy and so frustrate their desire for absolute unity. In response, Rosalind expresses a typically compassionate reluctance to burden her friend with complaints, since they would then both be “laid up,” or equally crippled. Nevertheless, when Celia demands for a third time to be allowed to share her friend’s feelings by asking whether she is missing her father, Rosalind seems to decide that it would hurt her cousin even more to exclude her than to protect her from the truth and finally tells her that she loves Orlando (1.3.1–12). In other words, she is driven to confide in Celia, not by her own misery, but by a feeling that she owes it to their friendship to be honest, since she realizes that her friend has detected a potentially divisive emotion. Thus she allows herself the relief of venting her feelings only when the self-imposed restraints which are the price of this almost perfect harmony allow it. We can see that this harmony is preserved, and indeed advanced, through both friends’ consistent willingness to prioritize each other’s needs over their own, which binds them ever more closely together with ties of gratitude and trust. With a characteristic mixture of warmth and precise analysis Shakespeare has explored a friendship that seems to come as near as possible to being perfectly harmonious.

Celia is hurt in more ways than one by Rosalind’s confession of her love for Orlando, if one can judge by the number of times she suggests, apparently semiseriously, that her friend should try to restrain her passion. In the end, however, she declares that she “hate[s] not Orlando” (1.3.13–34). In fact she resigns herself to Rosalind’s love for Orlando relatively quickly, given that it is likely to drive the first major wedge between two friends who have been “coupled and inseparable” from their infancy (1.3.73–76). She clearly realizes that she must submit willingly to the partial loss of her friend in order to remain close to her. Rosalind’s response shows both her awareness that the situation is painful for Celia and a confident conviction that she will be able to control this pain: “do you love him because I do” (1.3.38–39). Like mirrors arranged in an endless sequence, the two women strive to reflect each other’s concerns and desires at every turn, and to moderate or release their own passions according to the response which they anticipate in their friend. One feels that only a romantic attachment could have caused Rosalind to introduce such a discordant note. She has evidently decided in the end that Orlando brings the promise of an even deeper intimacy than she currently has with Celia, and is therefore unwilling to restrain her love in the way that she has previously controlled her grief over her father’s exile. This is the first of several indications that love can be ruthless as well as humble under certain circumstances.

Nevertheless the friendship between the two cousins is the clearest example of constancy in the play: an initial attachment is reinforced by an explicit declaration of loyalty and a consistent attempt to put the needs of one’s friend before one’s own, which creates successive layers of trust and gratitude, so that, as far as is humanly possible, unity is achieved. In a typically succinct and indirect way Shakespeare has outlined a vision of The Good Life which establishes friendship as fulfilling in itself; something to be desired immoderately for its own sake and secured only by moderating all other desires.

Again the contrast is drawn through Duke Frederick, whose intense concern with reputation gives rise to a sort of vicarious jealousy which leads him to warn Celia vehemently against Rosalind:

Her very silence, and her patience

Speak to the people and they pity her.

Thou art a fool; she robs thee of thy name,

And thou wilt show more bright and seem more virtuous

When she is gone.

(1.3.78–82)

Rosalind’s complete lack of pride is what makes her loveable. It would appear that even in political life—the main motive of which is honor, if one can judge by the examples of Oliver and the duke—ambition has to be disguised and restrained in order to achieve its objectives. To realize this is perhaps to start to ascend Shakespeare’s own version of the ladder of love that Plato outlines in the *Symposium*. Rosalind’s “silence, and her patience,” however, imply a far more radical indifference to honor itself than would ever be comprehensible to the duke, and this complete indifference to worldly status is clearly shared by Celia, since her only reply to her father is to declare that she must follow Rosalind into exile. As their earlier conversation with Touchstone implied, the two women understand fully the insubstantiality of honor from the vantage point of their own deep sense of intimacy and realize that constancy consists of a continual struggle to master thoroughly the tyrannical elements in their own souls. One can infer that self-restraint becomes ever more important as one ascends what might be called the erotic hierarchy. Celia’s great sympathy with her friend is quickly evident after her father’s speech: “O my poor Rosalind, whither wilt thou go?” She recognizes that Rosalind’s grief may drive them apart, declaring, “I charge thee be not thou more griev’d than I am,” and quickly reminds her “that thou and I am one” (1.3.90, 1.3.92, 1.3.97). Her decision to follow Rosalind into exile is only the most concrete of the many sacrifices she makes as she strives for a relationship of complete harmony.

The contrast between Celia and her father implies that the desire for honor which characterizes political life represents a more or less disguised expression of precisely that tyrannical longing to dominate and possess which the true lover realizes must be carefully restrained in order to be fulfilled. Thus, in an irony that Plato and Xenophon would have appreciated in some ways, the immoderate duke is in fact less deeply erotic than his apparently much more temperate daughter.[[9]](#footnote-9) Ultimately Celia sacrifices her status in the world to achieve a greater good, whereas Duke Frederick, like Oliver, is constantly tormented by a fruitless envy. One may therefore conclude from the first act of the play that, whatever its political usefulness, the desire for honor represents a pervasive and dangerous distraction for the true lover.

Whereas we have seen that act 1 is concerned centrally with the desire for honor understood in relation to The Good Life, act 2 mainly deals with common self-love and the appetites that are rooted in the body; a subject first introduced by Orlando when he grudgingly admitted that his one “gain” under his brother’s regime had been “growth” (1.1.14). The shift to the forest world of Rosalind’s outlawed father, the ousted Duke Senior, represents a truly decisive break in the play (the stock division of the plays into five acts is a modern addition). The implication is that we have left the artificial world of the court, in which Oliver, Frederick, and even Orlando are constantly comparing themselves to others, in order to consider a more intrinsically fulfilling way of life. It is worth noting that the forest scenes in *As You Like It*, which form the backdrop to the explorations of self-love, “wit,” moderation, and spiritedness that follow, are unique in Shakespeare’s work in being set in a stylized version of an area close to his own birthplace, namely the Forest of Arden, where several of his forebears had lived, as is suggested by the fact that his mother’s surname was itself Arden.[[10]](#footnote-10) This seems to suggest that this is Shakespeare’s most directly personal play, perhaps because it deals with intuitions regarding The Good Life which can only be derived from our most intimate relationships.

The need to hunt for food in his exile “irks” Duke Senior because he feels that the deer have as much a right to occupy the forest as he does (2.1.22–25). His dilemma allows Shakespeare to explore the proper scope of self-love. The fact that the duke does nevertheless hunt despite his qualms constitutes the one small exception in a life which otherwise seems to be entirely compassionate. The duke’s naturally loving nature has been reinforced by his Christian beliefs: he uses the “sermons” of nature to contemplate his own vulnerability and responds later to Orlando’s plight with “sacred pity,” recalling his own “better days” when he had “with holy bell been knoll’d to church” (2.1.17, 2.7.121–23). Nevertheless, the fact that he must give precedence at times to the pressing and incorrigibly private needs of the body is used to reveal that there are limits even to “sacred pity.”

One has to examine Jaques’s critique of Duke Senior and his followers to understand fully the implications of this point. Jaques—who is one of the duke’s attendant lords though very much his own man—declares even more radically than the duke that the outlaws are “mere usurpers, tyrants” in hunting animals in their “native dwelling place” (2.1.61–63). His effort at universal sympathy is, however, even more flawed than the duke’s, since he is not only perfectly willing to eat venison in the end, but is even the only one of the company to react at all greedily and aggressively to Orlando’s desperate request for food later on in the play (2.7.88–90). These inconsistencies show that both the duke and Jaques are demanding something of themselves which is beyond human nature, albeit for different reasons. Jaques’s constant “melancholy” and “sullen fits” are a sign of an inner disharmony which hints at the failure of his idealistic attempt to transcend self-love completely (2.1.26, 2.1.67). Similarly, the universal charity that Christianity encourages is reduced to absurdity by the duke’s worries about prioritizing his own species. Although the duke is a far more harmonious character than Jaques, gaining solid secular rewards for his warm-heartedness in the loyalty and love of his followers, he resembles the latter in his failure to understand that the truly fulfilled life, even at its most nobly self-denying, is founded on self-love. In contrast, both Rosalind’s partial desertion of Celia in order to pursue Orlando and the prolonged testing of her potential lover which follows show how a deep understanding of one’s own needs leads one to make careful discriminations in the search for fulfilling friendships.

This is not to deny that the open and warm compassion exhibited both by Duke Senior and the two women is deeply endearing. One may infer from Rosalind’s first meeting with Orlando that our pervasive longing for intimate attachments leads any harmonious soul to approach the world initially in a spirit of general benevolence and compassion, but to become more discriminating when the possibility of a fulfilling friendship arises (1.2.173–82, 1.2.194–98). The broadly contemporary setting of the play seems to suggest that Christianity is more conducive to The Good Life than classical philosophy, no doubt because it encourages this broadly loving approach. On a more fundamental level, however, Shakespeare agrees with the classical view that the truly fulfilled life involves following one’s own deepest interests, even as he defines these interests in a way that differs radically from Plato and Aristotle.

In contrast with the duke, the philosophical Jaques is subject to a deep melancholia which seems to stem from his determination to isolate himself. Despite his talk of justice he is an unconscious tyrant in his dealings with his fellow men, as we see when he rides roughshod over Amiens’s repeated wish not to sing again, as the two lords while away the time “under the greenwood tree” (2.5.1–18). He sees gratitude—presented as the foundation of all loyal friendships elsewhere in the play—simply as a ruse which obscures the fact that life is a matter of gratifying base appetites: “and when a man thanks me heartily, methinks I have given him a penny, and he renders me the beggarly thanks” (2.5.27–29). The contrast with Amiens shows how far Jaques is from true fulfillment. Amiens’s initial refusal to sing is motivated partly by a worry that music would increase Jaques’s melancholy and partly by a wish not to aggravate his own sore throat (2.5.10–24). Amiens is, in other words, concerned both about himself and his companion: the song he sings celebrates companionship and his music making itself functions as a fitting metaphor for the harmonious interchanges that occur between friends, in which one can simultaneously create joy for oneself and others (2.5.1–8). Jaques, on the other hand, sees himself as indulging his appetite for music with a purely private relish, “suck[ing] melancholy out of a song, as a weasel sucks eggs” (2.5.12–14). He sings his own song in a typically mocking spirit, reducing Amiens’s vision of pastoral harmony to “a Greek invocation, to call fools into a circle” (2.5.59–60).

Nevertheless, in demanding so insistently that Amiens continue his song, his deeper nature is asserting itself, for he is normally notoriously unmusical (2.7.5–6). He clearly finds both the music and Amiens’s celebration of friendship deeply attractive, but the fact that these moods are quickly followed by bouts of melancholy and mockery suggests that his radical attempt to detach himself from the world is constantly obstructing this natural response. Ironically, Jaques’s selfishness seems to stem from this effort to focus exclusively on contemplation, since his desire for companionship is always asserting itself in opposition to his conscious principles in an uncontrolled and ungracious way. In contrast, harmonious souls accept that they have needs which may lead them to tyrannize over deer—or even potential lovers, as we will see later—but, once embarked on a close friendship, quickly realize that it requires enormous restraint, precisely because it has become so central to their lives.

One implication of the contrast between Jaques and Amiens is that deep attachments give us a purpose and focus that allow us to thrive even under adverse circumstances. For Amiens, the joys of companionship outweigh the “winter and rough weather,” but Jaques merely mocks him for “leaving his wealth and ease” (2.5.1–8, 2.5.51–53). These points are further reinforced through the story of Orlando’s journey to the forest. When Orlando is entreated to leave home by Adam, his loyal servant, who warns him that Oliver means to burn him alive, he angrily rejects the idea of making a “thievish living” on the roads at first, but his willingness to die at the hands of his brother rather than turn to theft seems merely proud rather than noble: he scornfully asks the benevolent Adam whether he would have him beg (2.3.19–34). Orlando’s dismissive response to Adam’s pleas may remind us of Jaques’s desire not to hunt and of his own desperate decision to wrestle Charles, since in all three cases pride seems to lie at the root of a sort of self-destructiveness. Orlando, like Jaques, is reliant for his survival on his friends, who are more vigorously attached to life than he because they are more fulfilled.

Adam, whose name evokes a state of natural, prelapsarian contentment, illustrates the link between love and vigor (2.3.46–62): although old, he is healthy because his life has been lived moderately, probably because its main focus has been his immoderate devotion to Orlando and his father. It is this that leads him now to give his master all his savings and to follow him as he flees from his murderous brother (2.3.45–46). His temperate way of living, avoiding “hot and rebellious liquors,” has made a “lusty winter” of his age and allowed him to become a wealthy man through “the thrifty hire [he] saved” as a servant of Duke Senior, but these are incidental benefits, stemming from an inner harmony which leads him to sacrifice them all for love of Orlando (2.3.38–39, 2.3.49, 2.3.52). Shakespeare shows that self-love is transmuted into courageous loyalty in a truly rewarding life: Adam prioritizes his devotion to the family not only over any physical appetites which might have caused “weakness and debility” if given free rein, but even at this point over his sense of self-preservation itself (2.3.51). Paradoxically, a thoroughly temperate and vigorous life turns out to be dependent on a willingness to sacrifice that life at any point. As with the portrayal of Duke Senior, Shakespeare also touches here on the way in which Christianity can support us in overcoming our baser nature: Adam trusts to Him “that doth the ravens feed [and] providently caters for the sparrow” (2.3.43–44). It is a measure of the gulf between Shakespeare and the classical philosophers that Adam and the duke seem to be as close to finding genuine fulfillment as the more philosophical Touchstone.

Although, as we have seen, Orlando’s pride is initially contrasted with Adam’s humble devotion, it is his gratitude to Adam rather than the thought of the five hundred crowns that sustains him as he is eventually persuaded to make good his escape: he praises Adam for his “constant service” with no thought of reward (2.3.57). It is striking, however, that Adam does feel he has been thoroughly recompensed, in that he has been given a chance to express his gratitude and so to “die well, and not [his] master’s debtor” (2.3.76). The financial metaphor which he uses here suggests that the rewards he hopes to gain from returning his master’s love and thus consolidating their friendship are absolutely as real as the five hundred crowns.

Adam and Orlando’s relationship does indeed develop from now on into a fulfilling friendship between equals, which, like Celia and Rosalind’s, is based on gratitude and mutual sympathy. When they too have inevitably made their way to the forest, Orlando refuses to take food until, “like a doe,” he “go[es] to find [his] faun,” recognizing that Adam has “limp’d” after him in “pure love” (2.7.128–31). Paradoxically, Orlando’s drive to preserve his own life is strengthened by his new focus on preserving Adam’s rather than his own. His gratitude leads him to reject his earlier proud squeamishness and resolve to find food by violent means if necessary, and he initially attempts to steal food from the exiled duke (2.6.6–8, 2.7.88–99). One can see again the role that suffering plays in strengthening the bonds of friendship, but here gratitude, which, contra Jaques, is shown to lie at the heart of our impulse to transcend the baser forms of self-love in friendship, proves also to be absolutely central to our attachment to life itself, since it leads to that sense of complete trust and harmony upon which a truly fulfilling life is founded. Adam’s humble devotion also seems to make Orlando question his own pride, an important stage in his development, which perhaps enables him to reach a point where he is worthy of Rosalind’s love. He hopes now to “light upon some settled low content” and seems to have lost his urge to distinguish himself (2.3.68).

The second part of Shakespeare’s argument is therefore that The Good Life is rooted in self-love, but a self-love which has been radically transformed. Suffering comes to be seen as the inevitable price of true fulfillment once one has experienced the robust and temperate joy which is to be found in those friendships where both the parties involved are willing to sacrifice their own pride and pleasures in order to achieve a greater intimacy. The forest setting which forms the backdrop to much of the play seems designed to show that the true test of love is loyalty in the face of suffering. As Amiens’s song states, “Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere folly” when seen from the perspective of the “winter wind” and the “green holly,” which is alone truly “jolly,” presumably because hardship binds men together with ties of gratitude and trust such as those we have seen form between Adam and Orlando (2.7.180–83). In contrast, “the envious court” seems to encourage flattery and ingratitude, reminding us again that honor has no place in The Good Life (2.1.1–11, 2.7.175–76, 2.7.185–89).

The introduction of the shepherds Silvius and Corin enables Shakespeare to extend his meditation on the proper role and status of self-love and the bodily appetites to encompass sexual desire. Silvius feels that his older friend, Corin, cannot have been a true lover if he has forgotten any of the little romantic gestures that characterize the start of a love affair. Touchstone, however, knows that “as all is mortal in nature, so is all nature in love mortal in folly” (2.4.55–56). His claim to be a “true lover” despite the fact that his passion “grows something stale” suggests that love is not in its essence the fierce desire that drives Silvius to run frantically about the forest (2.4.54, 2.4.62). Touchstone’s first love, Jane Smile, no doubt possessed the superficial beauty that her name implies, but he has clearly come to value sturdier qualities, as his courtship of Audrey is soon to reveal (2.4.46–48). We have already seen in the earlier conversation between Rosalind and Celia that the main problem with beauty is its fleeting quality, its exposure to “Fortune,” as well as the fact that it rarely coincides with constancy (1.2.37–39, 1.2.43–44). Touchstone later echoes this point in his comment on the court ladies, reported by Jaques, that if they “be but young and fair, they have the gift to know it” (2.7.37–38). The hallmark of Rosalind’s love is fidelity rather than intense desire, as is implied by her prolonged testing of Orlando, although the fact that she identifies with Silvius’s desperation reminds us that it is physical passion which gives romantic love its initial impetus (2.4.60–61).

As the conversation between Touchstone and the two women in act 1, scene 2 might have led us to anticipate, the third issue that Shakespeare raises is the crucial one of the relationship between “wit” and The Good Life. Jaques’s account of the ages of man is triggered by Duke Senior’s typically compassionate reflections on Orlando’s plight:

We are not all alone unhappy:

The wide and universal theatre

Presents more useful pageants than the scene

Wherein we play in.

(2.7.136–39)

Whereas the duke uses the theatrical image to reflect sympathetically on the suffering of others, Jaques hijacks it to express a radical detachment. The experience of a lover, for instance, is reduced to a series of clichéd, external symptoms (2.7.147–49). The famous speech is undermined, as many critics have realized, by the entrance of Adam, whose fierce loyalty makes him so much more vividly alive than the senile, decrepit relic who represents old age in Jaques’s account. One is not surprised to see Jaques begging to become the duke’s fool, since this position would allow him to remain a detached spectator; he would be in the company, but not of it, and would comment generally on pride without concerning himself with any specific individual (2.7.42–87). When he overhears the fool philosophizing, he merely begins to “crow” with laughter “that fools should be so deep contemplative,” managing to maintain his superiority even as he relishes Touchstone’s meditations on the insignificance and ephemerality of human life (2.7.28–33).

The difference between Touchstone’s speech and Jaques’s reflections on the ages of man is that the fool sees human life as a process of “ripening” as well as “rotting” (2.7.24–27). Shakespeare hints that Touchstone is not exploring the brevity of human life for its own sake, but as part of a larger desire to lead a thoroughly mature life, which possibly culminates in his humble marriage with Audrey. In contrast, in his purely negative view of human society, in which pride is seen as universal, “flow[ing] hugely as the sea,” Jaques is perhaps merely seeing the world in his own image and showing his lack of understanding of the ordinary human attachments by which Touchstone takes his bearings (2.7.72). He does not realize that his single-minded pursuit of the contemplative life is driving a wedge between himself and his friends, rendering him not only incapable of reciprocating the keen relish which the duke takes in their friendship, but also even incapable as a philosopher of understanding the ways in which such friendships can be fulfilling. From the philosophical perspective, as Plato perhaps implies at the end of the *Symposium*, most human affairs may be comic, but here Shakespeare seems to mock this detached standpoint itself by indicating that the attempt to lead a purely contemplative life is likely to be in part itself merely an expression of pride. Jaques does occasionally seek philosophical conversations, but the philosopher as he is understood in the classical tradition must always be isolated in a sense, since he must constantly be checking whether any particular friendship is conducive to the pursuit of his enquiries. Thus Jaques rejects Orlando until he shows his “nimble wit” (3.2.253–57, 3.2.276–77).

All of this is by no means to deny, however, that Jaques is genuinely curious and “full of matter,” as the duke realizes (2.1.68). Ironically, many of his remarks, but particularly his response to Touchstone and the ages-of-man speech, show clearly that he has meditated deeply on human insignificance and the folly of pride. Moreover, there is no doubt that he is motivated in these meditations by the intense curiosity which is the primary characteristic of the true philosopher: his gleeful, hour-long fit of laughter is only partly at Touchstone’s expense, for his abrupt decision to imitate the fool shows how much he relishes a “deep contemplative” approach to life.

The duke’s own curiosity is, by contrast, bound up with his open and sociable approach to life. He eagerly seeks Jaques out even though the latter avoids him, saying that he is ‘too disputable’ (2.5.35). This is not, however, a purely philosophical friendship in the classical sense, even from the duke’s point of view. The passionate nature of his attachment is evident in the way he describes himself as one of Jaques’s “poor friends who must woo [his] company” when reproaching him for his solitary life (2.7.10). He clearly takes delight in Jaques’s character for its own sake as well as relishing his wit, frequently teasing him affectionately, as when alluding to his tone-deaf approach to music or his sinful past (2.7.5–6, 2.7.64–69). He notices Jaques’s uncharacteristic happiness immediately, even before the latter mentions overhearing Touchstone’s entertaining speech, showing a sympathy which is clearly born of deep affection (2.7.11). By contrasting Jaques’s melancholy detachment with the way in which the duke’s understanding is always regulated by his loving nature, Shakespeare suggests that thought must serve something beyond itself in order to be truly useful. This is not of course to deny that philosophical conversation forms an enjoyable element of the Duke’s friendship with Jaques, just as it does in Celia’s relationships with Touchstone and Rosalind.

In contrast to Jaques, as we have seen, Touchstone aims to benefit from his recurrent musings. He says to Corin of the shepherd’s life that, “in respect of itself it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd’s life, it is naught” (3.2.12–14). This seeming nonsense in fact points to the difficulty of arriving at a firm sense of what is good in itself, regardless of social status. Touchstone goes on to say that the shepherd’s life is good in that it is “solitary” and “in the fields,” but adds that it seems merely “private” or “not in the court” when contrasted with his previous existence (3.2.15–20). The shepherd’s life certainly involves paring down one’s physical needs, but again it is the contrast with the “plenty” of the court which causes discontent, rather than the abstemious diet itself (3.2.19–21). Touchstone sees that we involve ourselves in ceaseless comparisons, which distract us from life’s intrinsic joys. This is clearly an internal dialogue that he is rehearsing, which suggests that he is constantly employing philosophy—to which he refers twice in this scene for the first time (3.2.21, 3.2.32)—to restrain both his ambitions and his physical desires. Touchstone’s attempt to be fully aware of the demands of his own nature at all times means that he remains remarkably unaffected by religious and moral traditions, as is shown by his initial willingness to be married under a tree (3.3.65–66). Similarly Rosalind sees inconstancy as a sign of weakness rather than immorality; the mark of a “sheep’s heart” (3.2.423–24). She does refer to religion at one point, but only in order to convey the intensity of Orlando’s kisses, which are “as full of sanctity as the touch of holy bread” (3.4.13–14).

On a superficial level we are clearly invited to laugh at Touchstone’s low standards when he decides to court Audrey, a poor and ugly farm labourer, but one of the most intelligent critics of the play realises that Touchstone has genuinely been “thrown down” by “love’s order” with all its “duties of service in just the same way as Orlando and Rosalind.”[[11]](#footnote-11) Another uses the compliment Celia pays Touchstone when she declares emphatically that he will follow her “o’er the wide world” to show that “he is a man to be depended on,” and, unlike many critics, takes absolutely seriously the possibility that his marriage with Audrey will be successful.[[12]](#footnote-12) Touchstone’s desire to marry Audrey is rooted in a cool understanding of his own deep longing for a loyal friend. His concern lest he be cuckolded is clear, despite being expressed flippantly (3.3.51–63). It leads him to scorn convention and seek out a partner of low status, whom he considers more likely to be virtuous than the ladies of the court. Touchstone’s anxiety on this point is indicated by the fact that he has made her swear to him that she is strictly “honest,” even though she seems extraordinarily chaste anyway (3.3.18, 3.3.25– 26, 3.3.33–34). One may be reminded here of Rosalind’s indifference to the conventional code of maidenly modesty and indeed to Orlando’s lowly status when she first met him. Like Touchstone, the main thing that concerns her is loyalty. Touchstone shows all the desire to serve Audrey—by “fetch[ing] up” her goats—and the anxiety as to whether he is “the man” for her that we might see in more romantic lovers (3.3.1–4), but perhaps goes further even than Rosalind in understanding the very core of the fulfilled life: his relationship with Audrey abstracts constancy from all the other elements that could help to make up a happy marriage, such as wit, status and sexual attraction (a tripartite division which again echoes the earlier discussion of beauty, honour and wit— [1.2.37–80]), because he is aware that it is the one quality which is absolutely essential. He certainly responds to the “sugar” of beauty, for he “hath his desires,” but he comments approvingly on Audrey’s “foulness,” since he realizes, not only that constancy is a greater good, but also that it is actually aided by ugliness (3.3.30–1, 3.3.40–41, 3.3.80–81).

Touchstone’s recognition that his verses “cannot be understood” by Audrey, nor his “good wit seconded with the forward child, understanding,” reveals that he is even prepared to sacrifice his philosophy in his attempt to establish a thoroughly trusting and loyal relationship. He does, however, regret Audrey’s lack of education much more than her ugliness or low status, declaring that “he would the gods had made [her] poetical” (3.3.12–16). This suggests that “wit” could easily play its part in a deep friendship, as it does in his relationship with Celia, even though it is not absolutely integral to The Good Life. Touchstone is very much a philosopher in the classical mold in his detachment from the conventions of the day and in the way he subordinates certain aspects of his own nature to his ruling passion, but his evident enjoyment of philosophy does not prevent him from valuing thought primarily as a means to guide himself towards “ripeness” through a thorough understanding of his own need for love.

Nevertheless, Touchstone’s very decision to marry, in however unorthodox a fashion, shows a belief that even the philosophically inclined need social conventions to reinforce their determination to remain constant (3.3.90–94). He is aware that “as the ox hath his bow. . . , the horse his curb, and the falcon his bells, so man hath his desires: and as pigeons bill, so wedlock would be nibbling” (3.3.79–82). His metaphors point to the paradox that it is marriage rather than unbridled passion which liberates our nature, since it helps us to fulfill our deep yearning for constancy. Touchstone almost “stagger[s]” in his project, with a “fearful heart,” since he is fully aware of the chaotic power of physical desires: “as horns are odious, they are necessary” (3.3.51–52). It seems that he is resisting fiercely the despairing thought that must occur to anyone philosophically inclined—especially in modern and early modern times—that our nature is inescapably bestial. He has already expressed doubts about his paradoxical project of a “natural” marriage, and quickly agrees with Jaques that it is best not to be “married under a bush” (3.3.49–51, 3.3.83–84). He acknowledges the role that conventional religious traditions play in restraining aspects of our nature when he reflects that it would be better to be married in a church by a proper priest, lest, “not being well married, it will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my wife” (3.3.92–4). He is aware that fickleness is part of our nature, which means that our higher impulses need every available support from society.

It is significant that Jaques’s most useful and least typical action in the whole play is to advise Touchstone to marry in church rather than following his natural bent, for, if he were to be married “under a bush” rather than in church, his original nature might reassert itself and, “like green timber warp, warp” (3.3.83–89). Here once again Jaques contradicts his habitual pessimism, perhaps revealing a vicarious longing for an enduring love, as well as an uncharacteristic faith in the power of sacred traditions to reinforce our rational decisions and harmonize the potentially chaotic elements within human nature.

Touchstone’s partial reliance on convention might make us wonder whether the radical disillusionment of the philosopher is the best way of achieving The Good Life. One could infer from Jaques’s and Touchstone’s worries about marriage conducted “under a bush” that the latter’s extreme scepticism could have endangered his chances of happiness were it not for his clear understanding of his own ultimate goal. This is especially true because, as we have seen, he is prone to define himself as an animal and so to see adultery as natural. The fact that Audrey has come to set the same value on absolute loyalty as Touchstone by a very different route seems to suggest that a thorough habituation in a moral and religious tradition can guide and restrain our passions at least as effectively as a clear understanding of human nature. Audrey refers to the gods four times in act 3, scene 3 (23–24, 33–34, 38–39, 47), even thanking them for making her “foul” and therefore “honest” (3.3.33–39). Similarly, Corin the shepherd has been given a moral code which enables him to “envy no man’s happiness, [be] glad of other men’s good, content with [his own] harm,” so that the “greatest of [his] pride is to see [his] ewes graze” (3.2.74–77).

The contrast between the philosopher and the nonphilosopher is hinted at when Corin’s simple feeling of fatherly affection for his ewes is brought into question by Touchstone’s blunt reminder that he gets “his living by the copulation of cattle.” This is merely the culmination of a series of remarks in which the fool attempts in a semiserious way to enlighten Corin as to his own bestial nature by pointing out that the “grease of a mutton [is] as wholesome as the sweat of a man” and that the civet which is used in perfumes at court is derived from animals (3.2.55–69). Corin can in the end do no more than change the subject without answering Touchstone’s accusation that he is a “bawd” in the way he “brings[s] the ewes and the rams together” in a very ungodly way, even though he has defended his position sturdily up to this point (3.2.78–87). Luckily for him, Touchstone, like his creator, is flippant enough to avoid ruffling any deeply held beliefs by these remarks. As with the duke and Jaques, Corin’s treatment of animals has been used to show that his life is in one sense inevitably rooted in self-love rather than compassion, but in his case it is important that he does not realize this, lest he come to question the integrity of the principles by which he lives. Similarly, although the partly philosophical duke understands that eating meat is incompatible with his Christian compassion, this insight causes him some discomfort. Touchstone’s thoroughly philosophical insight into his own partly bestial nature is, on the other hand, clearly useful to him, because it spurs him on to marry Audrey. Shakespeare’s recognition that there are two mutually incompatible paths to virtue perhaps explains his characteristic strategy of expressing his most serious points in apparently trivial scenes.

The underlying argument in the last few scenes has been that philosophy can help some people to pursue a fulfilling life, but is not essential to The Good Life itself. Audrey perhaps asks the most important question regarding Touchstone’s poetry: “Is it honest in word and deed? Is it a true thing?” (3.3.17–18). Fulfillment is to be found mainly in an active life of love rather than purely in contemplation, so it is more important to ask whether a poet is honest in his life than whether his poetry is beautiful or profound. Conversely, when Jaques wishes to absent himself from the party at the end of the play in order to enter a monastery, where he hopes that “there is much matter to be heard and learned,” he may remind us of the fictional lover whom Rosalind tells Orlando she “cured” by inducing in him “a living humor of madness, which was, to forswear the full stream of the world, and to live in a nook merely monastic” (5.4.184–85; 3.2.418–21). Rosalind’s covertly scornful implication is that to follow a purely contemplative life is to enter a backwater which cuts us off from the current of our deepest desires.

Orlando, having made his way to Arden with the faithful Adam, has taken to pinning love poems to Rosalind on trees, unaware that she too is living in the forest. Touchstone mocks the way in which he equates Rosalind’s “worth” with her beauty in his first poem, implying through his scornful references to harts, hinds, cats, and pricks that it is merely an expression of animal attraction (3.2.88–114). He is silent, however, about the second one, which contrasts Rosalind’s chastity and Orlando’s own constancy with the brevity of life and the tragedy of “violated vows,” thus implicitly agreeing with the high value that Orlando sets on a thoroughly enduring love (3.2.125–54). The suggestion is that, although it may be beyond human nature to focus exclusively on the immutable realm of ideas, we nevertheless still find our fulfillment through resisting the mutability of our own passions as far as is possible. As with the earlier contrast between Silvius and Corin, the implied progression of Orlando’s love shows that the intense physical desire which characterizes romantic love in its early stages can in some cases trigger a more enduring loyalty. In the second poem Orlando praises Rosalind for having

Helen’s cheek, but not her heart,

Cleopatra’s majesty,

Atalanta’s better part,

Sad Lucretia’s modesty.

Thus Rosalind of many parts

By heavenly synod was devis’d.

(3.2.145–50)

Here again Shakespeare employs a tripartite division of the soul, but once more he adds a fourth ingredient: Orlando’s list implies that beauty, a Cleopatra-like power or spiritedness, and wit (“Atalanta’s better part”) can all play their part in romantic love, but by ending with “sad Lucretia’s modesty” he shows a new understanding that Rosalind’s most important quality is her chastity; the crucial requisite for a lasting marriage.

Unlike Touchstone, Jaques mocks Orlando’s love itself (3.2.259–60, 3.2.270–72, 3.2.282, 3.2.291–92). Typically, as we have seen, his only interest seems to be in Orlando’s intelligence: “You have a nimble wit; I think ’twas made of Atalanta’s heels. Will you sit down with me? And we two will rail against our mistress the world, and all our misery” (3.2.276–79). Jaques is as eager to talk to Orlando as he was to avoid the duke, as we have seen, showing that he is as ambivalent in his attitude to dialogue as he is to music and venison. He would perhaps claim that conversation is only to be valued insofar as it facilitates philosophy, but the audience may again feel that he is more sociable than he realizes, since he later tries to engage Rosalind in conversation (4.1.1–2). In any case, Orlando rejects his invitation with some scorn, declaring that he will use his wit to criticize his own faults (3.2.280–94). This self-criticism is useful, for Orlando’s aim will presumably be to overcome the pride which has been one of his chief characteristics, so that he can “live and die [Rosalind’s] slave,” whereas Jaques’s detached analysis of society will, as we have seen, only serve to bolster his sense of superiority (3.2.154). The contrast between Jaques and Orlando is sharpened by their references to the Atalanta legend in the lines quoted above: whereas Orlando uses it to show that he appreciates Rosalind’s wit as one ingredient of her charm, but balances this with praise for her constancy, Jaques focuses on the intellect to the exclusion of all else and has no notion of finding fulfillment through love. Orlando clearly has the intelligence to engage in philosophical dialogue, as Jaques recognizes, but, like Rosalind, his priorities are elsewhere. The audience may well agree with him when he pugnaciously defends his love against Jaques’s attack, declaring that if it is a fault, it is superior to Jaques’s “best virtue” (3.2.282–84).

Like Touchstone, Rosalind employs great ingenuity in order to secure a constant love in a fickle world. Her initial excitement when she learns that Orlando is in the forest is almost immediately matched by a contrasting prudence: “O ominous! He comes to kill my heart” (3.2.246). She is worried that Orlando shows none of the signs of suffering that are the usual characteristic of the serious lover, so she decides to test his love in an extremely cautious and restrained way, while preserving her male disguise; presumably with a view to suppressing her feelings if Orlando should be found to be untrustworthy (3.2.369–84). For some time the outcome is uncertain, as Rosalind carefully balances Orlando’s apparent loyalty against his occasional unreliability, using his punctuality to measure his capacity for self-control and consideration (3.4.4–26). She affects to deny that anyone ever died for love and accuses herself of infidelity in order to test his response, worrying that “men are April when they woo, December when they are wed” (4.1.94–108, 4.1.116–19, 4.1.147–48, 4.1.160–69). The strength of her determination to conceal her love is shown by her repeated insistence that she is “counterfeiting” even though she has just fainted out of intense sympathy with Orlando’s wounds (4.3.165–82). Rosalind cannot help her passionate attachment to Orlando, but she can prudently protect herself from excessive suffering by selecting only loyal friends. Thus Rosalind’s conversations with Orlando again show that the main use of “wit” is extremely practical.

Having concluded his tripartite analysis of desire, Shakepeare moves on to measure the value of The Good Life more directly, using Rosalind’s relationship with Orlando to explore the balance between pleasure and pain that the true lover experiences. Rosalind is clearly hurt when Orlando is late, whereas Jaques’s sadness always seems slightly affected, even though he himself criticizes scholars whose “melancholy. . . is emulation” (4.1.10–11). In reality, Jaques too takes pride in his melancholy, claiming self-consciously that it stems from “the sundry contemplation of [his] travels, in which [his] often rumination wraps [him] in a most humorous sadness” (4.1.17–20). The fact that he does not truly suffer is a sign that he is only half alive; Rosalind thinks of him as little better than a “post” (4.1.9). Conversely, the young lovers are nothing if not vividly alive; Rosalind comments that time “trots hard” with a young maid about to be married—“If the interim be but a se’nnight, Time’s pace is so hard that it seems the length of seven year”—whereas for scholars, who carry the “burthen of lean and wasteful learning,” and for lawyers, who “sleep between term and term,” the implication is that time drags slowly (3.2.312–33). The potent mixture of pleasure and pain that characterizes intense love is illustrated by the way in which Rosalind breaks off abruptly from her scolding of Orlando for his tardiness to deliver a passionate plea: “Come, woo me, woo me; for now I am in a holiday humour” (4.1.68–69). Like the maid who “trots hard,” her “thought runs before her actions,” showing that she is in an agony of excitement as she anticipates her marriage to Orlando (4.1.141). As with the maid, it is Rosalind’s intense physical attraction to Orlando that would inevitably create this mixed experience, even if she were not worried about his loyalty. In this early stage of their courtship Rosalind is tempted to see language as merely useful for “entreaty” and love as culminating in the wordless intensity of a kiss (4.1.72–80).

Nevertheless, Rosalind is ultimately far more aware than Jaques that none of our actions can be truly thoughtful unless they help us to fulfill ourselves, as we can see when she tells him curtly that she would “rather have a fool to make [her] merry than experience to make [her] sad” (4.1.28–29). Thus it is surprising at first glance that she allows herself to suffer at first much more intensely than Jaques. Her superior awareness makes it unlikely that she is simply being blinded by sexual desire; rather, her behavior implies a belief that, if one is prudent, the inevitable pains of love need never come close to overshadowing its joys. This means that love must ultimately be more than the intense mixture of pleasure and pain that she is currently experiencing. For Rosalind, constancy is, as we have seen, not primarily a matter of following moral and religious codes, but a natural consequence of deep love, while, conversely, unreliability is a sign that one is “heart-whole” (4.1.49). This suggests that the intense early stages of love may provide the initial impetus for a loyal relationship. Passionate love will not last in its initial form, but will, as the earlier argument between Silvius and Corin implies, eventually settle down, if properly managed, into a much more moderate way of life, where the calm joys of intimacy will outweigh—and indeed be reinforced by—the sacrifices which any mature friendship must entail. The fact that the attachments which come closest to illustrating The Good Life—Celia’s with Rosalind and Adam’s with Orlando—are nonsexual suggests that romantic love is only one of the ways of developing fulfilling friendships. In the end the lovers’ courtship culminates, not in a kiss, but in a mock wedding—one of many references to marriage in the play (4.1.124–41). The mature phase of love is illustrated most vividly in the attachment between the two women—which also culminated in Celia’s formal vow of loyalty—but thoughtful members of the audience might also respect Touchstone’s attempt to move directly to this phase, even though his cool decision to sidestep the earlier and, from his point of view, irrelevant, stages is in one sense comic.

This is not to deny that romantic love may in some cases constitute the most powerful catalyst to a life of loyal devotion; indeed, it should be remembered that Rosalind almost immediately allowed her love for Orlando to overshadow not only her grief regarding her father’s exile, but even her friendship with Celia. Rosalind is already, however, shrewdly aware of the middle ground between the maid who “trots hard” and the living death of the scholars and sleeping lawyers, which is occupied by the “rich man” who “lives merrily because he feels no pain” and so might be said to “amble” through life (3.2.313–33). Such a man is fully alert to the demands of his own nature; more lively than the scholars who pursue “wasteful learning”—who may well remind us of Jaques—but less impatient than the trotting maid, who might remind us of Silvius in the way that she is at the mercy of “love’s keen arrows” (3.5.31). It is likely that Rosalind is coyly anticipating life with Orlando here, for the rich man is implicitly contrasted with the maid impatient to be married. This contrast may remind us of the moment when Rosalind goes to “sigh” until Orlando comes, while Celia, still content with the old friendship, is ready to sleep (4.1.216–18). One may conclude that the joy to be gained from a deep attachment ultimately outweighs its pains by some way, since suffering is greatly reduced in a mature marriage, where loyalty is assured and sexual desire no longer dominates, although the constant need to maintain sympathy will still mean that one frequently has to sacrifice one’s own pleasures, as we have seen.

The last part of the play is used for a more detailed examination of the ways in which moderation and spiritedness can contribute to The Good Life. In the short scene in which Jaques accompanies his fellow lords as they make their triumphant return to the duke after a successful deer hunt, the hunters’ song seems to endorse Touchstone and Jaques’s suspicion that cuckoldry is an inevitable byproduct of our animal nature:

Take thou no sin to wear the horn,

It was a crest ere thou wast born;

Thy father’s father wore it

And thy father bore it.

(4.2.13–16)

There is clearly some truth in this sentiment, but it was Jaques who suggested that this song be sung, and Shakespeare chooses this moment to remind us that the latter is extremely unmusical through his comment that it need not matter whether the song “be in tune, so it makes noise enough” (4.2.8–9). Here, as elsewhere, Jaques seems unaware of the power of self-restraint to create harmonious relationships. As ever, Touchstone is contrasted to Jaques in the way he controls his ambition, his sexual desire, and even his wit in order to become a loyal and humble lover, but it is the shepherd Silvius who comes to the fore towards the end of the play, declaring that to love

is to be all made of fantasy,

All made of passion, and all made of wishes,

All adoration, duty, and observance,

All humbleness, all patience and impatience,

All purity, all trial, all observance.

(5.2.94–98)

Silvius’s apparently contradictory list shows how the immoderate lover must progress towards moderation in order to achieve his goals. His idea of love is contrasted with that expressed in the song of the two pages in the next scene, which advises us merely to “take the present time” (5.3.30). Touchstone comments scathingly on the vapidity of this song, as he did on Orlando’s first poem: “though there was no great matter in the ditty, yet the note was very untuneable” (5.3.34–36). Again the musical metaphor is used to suggest that passion must be controlled in order to be pleasing to one’s audience (or lover). This praise of moderation is absolutely central to the whole work, as we have seen in the portrayal of Celia’s great self-restraint with Rosalind. The story of Silvius’s love for Phebe, a haughty shepherdess, brings out the utter humility of a deep love. Silvius is completely at Phebe’s mercy, anticipating her repeated scorn as the criminal waits for the axe with “humbl’d neck” (3.5.5). When Phebe employs him as a messenger to Rosalind he reflects that his love is “so holy and perfect” that he will

think it a most plenteous crop

To glean the broken ears after the man

That the main harvest reaps.

(3.5.101–03)

Later he runs another errand for Phebe, like a “tame snake” (4.3.70). Moreover Phebe herself falls in love with Rosalind and writes her a humble love letter, even though the latter treats her with extraordinary rudeness (3.5.37–71, 4.3.40–63).

Phebe’s humiliation is typical of the way in which proud spiritedness is contrasted with the true lover’s willingness to sacrifice himself throughout the play. Nevertheless, Shakespeare has implied all along that love brings with it a particular sort of spiritedness, notably in Orlando’s fierce defense of his father’s honor in the opening scene and in his later willingness to steal venison from the banished duke in order to feed Adam; not to mention the reference to “Cleopatra’s majesty” in his song. When Orlando sees his brother being attacked by a lioness,

Twice did he turn his back, and purpos’d so;

But kindness, nobler ever than revenge,

And nature, stronger than his just occasion,

Made him give battle.

(4.3.127–30)

Clearly Orlando is still angry with his brother—and his wounded pride is shown to conflict with his deeper ties just in the way that a close reading of the play might lead us to expect—but we have seen that his conventional sense of honor has been gradually weakening throughout the play, and in the end compassion proves to be stronger, creating what one might call a gentle and moderate courage, which stems, not from pride, but from the “stronger nature” of a harmonious soul. The corollary of this is the relative ineffectuality of conventional spiritedness, which is famously demonstrated by Touchstone when he mocks the way in which courtiers twist and turn in elaborate ways in order to avoid direct confrontation, because they “durst not give. . . the Lie Direct” (5.4.86). The courtiers’ code of honor is not underpinned by any deep feeling and so creates a mere show of anger, but love creates a uniquely powerful form of spiritedness, leading us to risk our lives to protect those of our friends.

Spiritedness also plays a very different role in love, however: when Touchstone says to William, his rival for Audrey’s hand, “I will kill thee a hundred and fifty ways: therefore tremble and depart,” his aim is to establish his relationship with Audrey in the first place rather than to protect it (5.1.56–57). His assertiveness reveals that love should at times encompass behavior that is completely opposite to the humble sympathy by which it is more usually characterized. Touchstone explains that in some areas naked self-love must be given its head: “the heathen philosopher, when he had a desire to eat a grape, would open his lips when he put it into his mouth, meaning thereby that grapes were made to eat and lips to open” (5.1.32–36). Touchstone’s second major reference to philosophy acknowledges directly that his thinking on love is firmly based on “heathen” rather than Christian principles. He does not care that William loves Audrey, since “to have is to have”; for “drink, being pour’d out of a cup into a glass, by filling the one doth empty the other” (5.1.40–43). We are reminded that it is the desire to possess that forms the foundation of love: the lover is restrained when with his beloved, but in his behavior towards his rivals shows clearly his healthy love of self. In contrast to Viola in *Twelfth Night*, Touchstone does not question whether Audrey would be happier with William than with himself, any more than he would worry about the fate of the deer while eating venison. Unlike Jaques and the duke, he understands that it is neither possible nor desirable to transcend self-love completely.

When Celia and Oliver fall in love at the end of the play, both the comparison of their mutual attraction to “the fight of two rams,” or Caesar’s “thrasonical brag” when he conquered Britain, and its portrayal as “the very wrath of love,” where “clubs cannot part them,” are used to suggest that the theme of this section of the play is the proper spiritedness and “majesty” of love (5.2.30–31, 5.2.40–41). Rosalind’s project of disguising herself as a man, which she approaches with such relish as it allows her to conceal “woman’s fear,” could also be seen as symbolizing her great spiritedness (1.3.119–22). Her immoderate determination to possess Orlando is by no means disguised by the prudence of the methods that she uses to win him. It should be remembered again that Rosalind forgot her grief for her father and disrupted her precious friendship with Celia without a second thought as soon as she met Orlando. The suggestion is that we are all tyrants at the start of a love affair.

At the end of the play Shakespeare sums up on The Good Life. Hymen says that Touchstone and Audrey are as “sure together as winter and foul weather” (5.4.135–36). We may contrast the pageboys’ song, referred to above, where the “sweet lovers love the spring,” focusing only on enjoying “the present time” (5.3.21, 5.3.30). A careful study of the whole play would suggest that these lovers are, despite appearances, less erotic than Touchstone and Audrey, since they fail to realize that it is precisely the endurance of “foul weather” which binds us ever more closely together with ties of sympathy and gratitude. Hymen’s song answers the pageboys’ “ditty” by reminding us of the pervasive appeal of marriage:

O blessed bond of board and bed!

’Tis Hymen peoples every town,

High wedlock then be honored.

Honor, high honor, and renown

To Hymen, god of every town!

(5.4.142–46)

Jaques’s belief that Touchstone and Audrey will soon separate shows how he overlooks the nobility of many ordinary marriages, characterized as they are by a sturdy loyalty (5.4.191–92). Surprisingly, however, he does not dismiss out of hand the duke’s anxious plea for him to stay, but for the first time in the play responds to his friendly advances, agreeing to meet him in his cave before retiring to a monastery (5.4.194–96). Jaques’s descent from the contemplative life to the cave reverses the image of the philosopher who leaves the cave in the *Republic*. Inconsistent to the last, he may in the end, like the characters in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, give way to a deep yearning for human companionship and turn away from the contemplative life which he thinks he desires towards the rewards that human society traditionally has to offer. Foremost among these are the ordinary marriages in “every town,” which are given “high honor, and renown” in Hymen’s song, suggesting how crucial Shakespeare considers marriage to be in supporting our real needs (5.4.143–46). The core of The Good Life is thus seen to be available to anyone who can follow their deeper nature. Its attainment therefore depends on a choice between two widely available alternatives rather than on any more rarefied ability to ascend a hierarchy of love. One could, however, overemphasize this egalitarian perspective, for the thorough, mutual understanding that characterizes Rosalind’s relationship with Celia, and the potential depth of her intimacy with Orlando—who, as we have seen, values her wit, beauty, and “majesty” as well as her “modesty” (3.2.144–48)—would be beyond the reach of many happily married couples.

The traditions, laws, and poetry of particular regimes can clearly be instrumental in confirming the ordinary citizen’s respect for marriage and thus in improving his chances of pursuing a fulfilling life. One critic comments that the “exceptional elaboration” of the play’s conclusion is a sign that it is “informed to an exceptional degree by Shakespeare’s ideal of love’s order,” and notes further the importance of the injunction, addressed in the epilogue to the men in the audience, “that between you and the women the play may please” (line 17), arguing that the play should be seen as a “conjuration,” inviting us to celebrate “love’s harmony.”[[13]](#footnote-13) The slightly unusual preposition “between” in the above quotation indicates Shakespeare’s determination that this play should reinforce the reciprocity of married life for his audience. He wants them to feel the power of Hymen, “god of every town,” as something larger than their own desires—even though the deepest part of their nature yearns for a lasting union anyway—which is why he has the god interrupt authoritatively to “bar confusion” and “make conclusion,” in order to set an official stamp on Rosalind and Orlando’s passion (5.4.125–26). This should be seen as the culmination of his attempt throughout the play to present loyal devotion as admirable.

Friendship, according to Shakespeare, is not for something higher than itself, but is our natural goal whether we know it or not, and one, therefore, that should be pursued without moderation. Rosalind, echoing Bottom in *Twelfth Night*, says that her “affection hath an unknown bottom, like the bay of Portugal” (4.1.207–08). All other passions should be subordinated to our desire for deep attachments, and the slow build up of gratitude and trust which is the mark of true friendship requires great self-restraint and a radical humility. Even one’s “wit” is best employed in thoroughly understanding one’s need for such attachments, and attempting to transcend the elements in one’s own soul that obstruct one’s search for a true friend. Whereas the philosopher sees himself as harnessing or channelling his self-love, the same ends can be achieved through a thorough habituation in a religious and moral tradition which teaches humility and chastity. Romantic and sexual love can act as a strong catalyst for deep friendships, but in the end The Good Life is characterized by a moderate, continuous joy which outweighs any pains, although painful sacrifices are an inevitable and even ultimately a positive part of any trusting and loyal relationship. The spiritedness of the lover is shown not only in his absolute willingness to risk his life for his friend, but also in the courageous and completely self-assertive way in which he will fight to secure that friend in the first place.

Shakespeare thus rejects both positions in the battle between the ancients and the moderns, because he disagrees with the low value which both sides place on ordinary, intimate attachments. For the modern such attachments can never be noble because under the influence of science everything is seen in terms of our animal drives for sex and self-advancement. Ironically, Allan Bloom—a political philosopher in the Platonic tradition and therefore in one sense a celebrator of Eros—is not far from the modern position when he speaks of “the bourgeois myth of reciprocity,” adding that the “Socratic teaching means from the outset, in spite of the passion, pleasure, and excitement of Eros, it is something of a hopeless business.” Only in philosophy, Bloom maintains, following Plato, can “selfishness and selflessness become for a moment the same.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Thus love between individuals in the Platonic tradition may acquire nobility, but only insofar as it points towards something beyond itself. Shakespeare’s account of what I have called the alchemy of love, on the other hand, aims to defend ordinary, loyal attachments both from Bloom’s bleak high ground and from the reductionism of the moderns by showing how such attachments ultimately require those who are able to live in a way that is thoroughly in accord with their nature to turn away completely from the baser or more tyrannical aspects of that nature. To paraphrase Strauss’s remark in his Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, Shakespeare does not lose sight of the high, but shows it to partake of the low, in the sense that he takes his bearings by individual attachments in all their transience and imperfection rather than by the immutable realm of ideas.[[15]](#footnote-15)

Perhaps Shakespeare’s use of a setting which has such strong personal significance represents an acknowledgement that a philosopher must base his reasoning about The Good Life upon a prior, intuitive grasp of its excellence which can only be derived from an awareness of his own deepest longings.[[16]](#footnote-16) It is not to descend into relativism, however, to say that one’s idea of what is ultimately fulfilling may be partly influenced or distorted by one’s experiences. Modern attachment theory postulates a system of “attachment behaviour with its own dynamics distinct from the behaviour and dynamics of either feeding or sex, the two sources of human motivation for long widely regarded as the most fundamental.”[[17]](#footnote-17) Here science has been led to a conception of human nature which is at odds with the main tradition of modernism itself, in that the longing for close attachments just for their own sake is seen as being so strong that it often overshadows the baser impulses so much emphasized by the fathers of modernism.

When thwarted or stunted, it is argued, this yearning can distort our whole way of thinking and feeling. Thus, although Jaques thinks that he has reformed, he still often behaves tyrannically, as we have seen. The duke feels his friend has only superficially shed the “embossed sores” which he acquired in his former life as a “brutish” libertine, so that even though nowadays he undoubtedly wants to “do but good” there is a danger that without meaning to he will still “disgorge” his “evils” even as he is trying to benefit society (2.7.63–69). Shakespeare’s suggestion is that if we are, as it were, reading the world off from our own souls, we must first make sure that they are wholesome and harmonious—by which he means rooted in strong attachments—lest our intuitions regarding human nature be hopelessly skewed. Perhaps one can see clearly that Hymen is the “god of every town” only if able oneself to sense his divinity, at least dimly and intuitively, in the first place. It is significant that Shakespeare draws heavily on the traditional link between deep thought and melancholia in presenting the only purely contemplative character in any of his plays.

All of this is not to forget Touchstone’s regret at Audrey’s lack of education or the evident enjoyment of philosophical conversations shown by all the more intelligent characters in the play, which clearly suggests that philosophy can become an enjoyable ingredient of The Good Life, even if it is not absolutely essential to it. Indeed, Shakespeare could not have meditated so deeply on these matters were he not himself intensely curious. Nevertheless, as we see even more clearly in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, he directly argues against what he sees as an immoderate pursuit of philosophy. Indeed, since Shakespeare’s own name is possibly a corruption of the French name, Jaques Pierre, one could wonder whether the character of Jaques might represent the playwright’s extended reflection on the dangers of one aspect of his own temperament; if so this would again show the uniquely personal nature of this play. One may contrast Shakespeare’s other alter ego, Prospero, who seems to philosophize only a third of the time (see *The Tempest*, 5.1.312). Living The Good Life is rather more important to Shakespeare than analyzing it, and for him, in contrast to the classical tradition, these two things are not identical, although they can exist in harmony.

1. See Allan Bloom with Harry V. Jaffa*, Shakespeare’s Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). This approach informs such work as Paul A. Cantor, “Prospero’s Republic: The Politics of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*,” in *Shakespeare as Political Thinker*, ed. John E. Alvis and Thomas G. West (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2000), 241–59; and John E. Alvis, “Shakespeare’s Understanding of Honor,” in *Souls with Longing*, ed. Bernard J. Dobski and Dustin A. Gish (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2011), 3–38. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. David Lowenthal, *Shakespeare and the Good Life* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 56; and Lowenthal, “Love, Sex and Shakespeare’s Intention in *Romeo and Juliet*,” in *Souls with Longing*, 181. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Scott F. Crider, “Love’s Book of Honour and Shame,” in S*ouls with Longing*, 300. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. David Bolotin, *Plato’s Dialogue on Friendship* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 170. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. For precedents see the work of Leo Strauss, especially *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980); but see also Michael Murrin, *The Veil of Allegory: Some Notes toward a Theory of Allegorical Rhetoric in the English Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. All references to the acts, scenes, and lines of the play and to other plays by Shakespeare are to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans et al. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. G. G. Gervinus, “Shakespeare Commentaries,” in “*As You Like It” from 1600 to the Present*, ed. Edward Tomarken (London: Routledge, 1997), 294. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Sylvan Barnet, “‘Strange Events’: Improbability in *As You Like It*,” in *Shakespeare: Much Ado About Nothing and As You Like It*, ed. John Russell Brown (London: Macmillan, 1979), 171–74. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Similarly, Plato thought that the tyrant would become a philosopher if he properly understood his own desires: see Allan Bloom, *Giants and Dwarfs: Essays 1960–1990* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), 168. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. James Shapiro, *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* (London: Faber and Faber, 2005), 270–71. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. John Russell Brown, “Love’s Order and the Judgment of *As You Like It*,” in *Twentieth Century Interpretations of “As You Like It,”* ed. Jay L. Halio (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1968), 81–82. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. J. B. Priestley, “The English Comic Actors,” in *“As You Like It” from 1600 to the Present*, 448, 452–53. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. Brown, “Love’s Order and the Judgment of *As You Like It*,” 74, 87. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Allan Bloom, *Love and Friendship* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 410, 500. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Leo Strauss, Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken Books, 1965). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Stanley Rosen, *Plato’s Statesman: The Web of Politics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 187. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. John Bowlby, *A Secure Base: Clinical Applications of Attachment Theory* (London: Routledge, 1998), 26. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)