

“All the World’s a Stage”: How Shakespeare Mocks Deep Thinkers.

“All the world’s a stage” is second only to the untouchable “To be, or not to be, that is the question” as the most famous line in a Shakespeare play. Every now and then, popular culture features this quote in a film, novel, or song. But do we understand what it means?

Some readers might interpret it as a depressing — yet accurate — comment on the performative nature of life. Instead of being ourselves, we desperately try to fit into roles that others have made for us.

Let’s take a look at this critical line. If we insert the play’s full context, we’ll find that “All the world’s a stage” is not as depressing as it sounds. We’ll also find that when Shakespeare penned it, he was mocking cynics, not agreeing with them.

If you’ve never read *As You Like It*, don’t worry. I’ve included the monologue below. Jaques (pronounced Jakes) is the name of the character who delivers it. He’s a rather unhappy person, as you’ll see in just a moment. That’s all you need to know for now. We’ll talk about him in more depth a bit further on. For now, here’s the monologue:

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players.
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,
His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms.
Then the whining schoolboy with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,
Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation
Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,

With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts
Into the lean and slippered pantaloon
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side,
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank, and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes
And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

A dismal view of life, no doubt. He even makes young love sound depressing.

Does Shakespeare share Jaques's pessimism? Was he speaking from the heart when he wrote "Last scene of all . . . is second childishness and mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything"? Here are several reasons why I don't think he was.

First, Jaques's name is a play on the Elizabethan word "Jakes," which means toilet. (Most of Shakespeare's audience would not have seen the word written and thus would not have recognized the homophone.) If a character named Toilet entered the stage and started discoursing on life, how much credibility would you lend to his insights?

Second, "All the world's a stage" was, according to one scholar, a tired cliché in Elizabethan vernacular — one that would have been recognized by Shakespeare's audience.

Third, the play offers a fitting response. The monologue concludes with a dismal view of old age, where everything has been stripped away. Directly after, the faithful, elderly servant Adam enters. It's like Shakespeare is saying: Jaques believes old age is bleak and hopeless, but here's an old man with honor, virtue, and happiness.

How Jaques Compares to the Other Characters

Let's compare Jaques with Orlando, the hero of this play. These two run into each other in the Forest of Arden, where they have a brief philosophical discussion. Jaques encourages Orlando

to join in his sadness. He says, “And we two will rail against our mistress the world and all our misery.” But Orlando bluntly declines: “I will chide no breather in the world but myself.”

Here, we see a key difference: Jaques blames everybody else for his problems; Orlando blames himself.

Let’s also compare Jaques with Duke Senior. Duke Senior has been banished from court at the hands of his own brother. His power has been stolen from him. He is forced to make a new life for himself in the wilderness, a far cry from his comfortable palace. He has every reason to complain, but this is not what we see. Instead, he embraces hardship. “Sweet are the uses of adversity,” he exclaims.

He looks around in nature and sees opportunities to learn and make himself better. He finds “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in everything.”

Here, we see another key difference: Duke Senior finds “good in everything.” This perspective is anathema to the all-the-world’s-a-stage mindset. In his monologue, Jaques runs through the seven ages of life, determined to see the *bad* in each one.

It’s clear to me that Shakespeare is *satirizing* Jaques. If he wasn’t agreeing with him, why did he include this character and this monologue?

Shakespeare’s Intention

Shakespeare included this monologue and this character to mock cynics. He wanted to poke fun at those people who believe they are above humanity and its flaws. Instead of working to correct the injustices of the world, people like Jaques watch from the sidelines and complain. Jaques is not interested in solutions — just moral posturing.

The first bit of information Shakespeare gives us about Jaques is from a peculiar story. Jaques is sitting under a tree, watching a deer that is too wounded to join its herd. He can relate because he, too, is aloof from his herd, namely the other characters. Jaques delivers a very telling line: “Thus misery doth part the flux of company.” In other words, he’s saying miserable people are better off alone.

He's an outsider, which he views as a badge of superiority. He thinks being different is a claim to privilege. Additionally, he chides the insiders — Duke Senior and the other lords — as “usurpers” and “tyrants.” He blames them for the ills of society and believes himself to be morally superior.

This brings to mind Teddy Roosevelt's “Man in the Arena” speech. The former president writes about people who possess “a cynical habit of thought and speech, a readiness to criticise work which the critic himself never tries to perform, an intellectual aloofness which will not accept contact with life's realities — all these are marks, not as the possessor would fain to think, of superiority but of weakness.”

Sounds an awful lot like Jaques, doesn't it?

Justifications like “All the world's a stage” ground his cynical worldview in something out of his control. This allows him to avoid accountability. He can't work to fix his character flaws because he's just an actor on this fatalistic stage. He can't change anything, even if he wanted to. A very convenient worldview, I must say — if the goal is to avoid responsibility at all costs.

A key point: the decision to be optimistic about hardship is accompanied by successful social integration in this play. The decision to be pessimistic is accompanied by social isolation. We don't need Shakespeare to tell us how draining it is to be around negative people.

So, is all the world really a stage? Indeed, it is — for the feckless people (is it too impolite to call them toilets?) who whine about the inequities of life but who have no real interest in resolving them. But the Orlandos and Duke Seniors of the world forge their own paths. They create their own roles and write their own scripts.