

**The Use of *Theatrum Mundi* in Shakespeare's comedy
As You Like It:**

The World as a Stage.

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Supervisor: Dr. Joan Curbet

Pol Borrell Falcó

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Abstract

Theatre was created not just to entertain, but to search the truth of daily existence through fantasy and myths. Since its origins in ancient Greece, there always have been comparisons between the imaginary world of plays and actual reality. Both aspects (reality and staged fiction) are seen as influencing one another, and are understood as representing one another; this is known as *theatrum mundi*. This is an idea that has been developed through the centuries, and which can be said to have reached the present time and postmodernist culture. The theatre of the Renaissance, deeply influenced by the major playwrights of the classical Greek and Roman era, exemplified (all over Europe), through comic and tragic plays, the idea that the theatre is a close imitation of the world, and that the world is also a form of theatre. Undoubtedly, William Shakespeare was one of the playwrights that worked repeatedly on this idea, in order to provoke in his audience the necessity of self-reflection, and to comprehend the position they occupied in the world. Shakespeare wrote many plays where this issue is alluded to or represented: *Hamlet*, *The Merchant of Venice* or *A Midsummer Night's Dream* are some of the examples among the most-known plays; but it is in *As You Like It* where the bard did his most extraordinary comparison between drama and actual reality. We will try to find those similarities through a detailed analysis of this last comedy. However, Shakespeare certainly does not just suggest that these two levels of reality alike; in fact, he describes through the illusion of the play some of the characteristics of the theatre itself, and how it is differentiated from the real world, and at the same time similar to it. This comedy works on the idea of *theatrum mundi* through the words and actions of several characters which behave in different ways than they are expected to, because of their change of environment. All in all, the use of this subject is not just an entertaining resource used by the playwright, but a way in which he could transmit to his audience his impressions about the world that surrounded him and its similarities to the fictional world of drama.

Keywords: William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, *Theatrum Mundi*.

0. Introduction.

My intention is to provide the possibility of reading one of Shakespeare's plays through the critical perspective of a major rhetorical and critical concept that the Bard used in several works: the idea of *theatrum mundi*. This concept implies, in itself, a theatrical conception of the world. If we read his plays with this idea in mind we will find that it provides a strong possibility of subverting the stereotypes of social conventions, and furthermore, we will find in plays such as *As You Like It* (the comedy on which I will focus) not just entertainment but philosophical, theological and social points of view.

In order to understand the importance of *theatrum mundi* in Shakespeare's comedy *As You Like It*, I will divide this work in three clear parts. In the first part, it will be necessary to provide an accurate representation of that concept in the Bard's era and to understand how it influenced literature and arts in general. Secondly, I will discuss Shakespeare's use of this expression in order to clarify the importance of the self-representation of the poet/playwright. When these two issues have been explored, I will focus on the analysis of *theatrum mundi* in the above-mentioned comedy, since it is one in which the interrelation between life and art is explored in detail.

First of all, I find the necessity of writing an accurate description of what is *theatrum mundi*. The *theatrum mundi* is the conception of the theatre as a representation of the world and works as a mirror of it. The idea that art and life are co-related and they influence one to each other. At the Era in which we focus our explanations; *theatrum mundi* is also related with the fortune and destiny of the human beings (theological and existential questions never answered). Hoffmeister wrote in "World as a Stage - *Theatrum Mundi*". *The Literary Encyclopedia*:

The idea that human life is like a play scripted and directed by a mighty producer (God, Fortune, Fate), a play in which each player is given an allotted role, goes back to Greek philosophy and flourished over the centuries from Heraclitus until Hofmannsthal. In literary history, this image developed from a metaphor to a recurrent formula (*topos*) and, mocked early on because of overuse, experienced a vibrant revival in the late Middle Ages as an all-encompassing portrayal of the universe, culminating as a powerful emblem of the spirit and art of an entire age, the Age of the Baroque.

1. *Theatrum mundi* in Shakespeare's Era

We can presume that this idea of *theatrum mundi* was born in the very first conceptions of the theatre in the West, when ancient Greek authors such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes wrote their tragedies and comedies, in which they interconnected divine and human characters. Often the world was considered by them as a stage that was manipulated by the Gods, and where human beings could only play the various parts that had been reserved for them. So, myths as well as drama became a perfect mirror of the role playing that surrounds our daily existence.

(...) The performance of human folly and depravation is often seen not only as instructive but also as amusing, a notion particularly emphasized by the Roman and Greek satirists in their use of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor.

(Quiring, 2014: 27)

This metaphor indeed would become essential for the authors and playwrights at the beginnings of the early modern world. In times when the freedom of communication and thought were far more difficult and strict than nowadays, a major aspect of cultural and ideological discussion in the theatre was the metaphor of *theatrum mundi*. The stage thus became an image of the world, while it was suggested that the world itself might also be a theatre. As Van den Berg wrote in his book *Playhouse and Cosmos: Shakespearean Theatre as a Metaphor*:

In this context of controversy, no dramatist as thoroughly involved in the theatrical enterprise as Shakespeare was could have avoided acute self-consciousness about the moral and philosophical implications of his medium. Nor was the antistage controversy limited to the professional theatre, for it prompted a

renewed interest in the old Platonic and Patristic debate about the nature and the value of artistic representation as such.

(1985. 30)

The use of *theatrum mundi* was common in the Renaissance and Baroque era in many areas of artistic expression. We can find it in diverse art forms such as poetry, painting and drama. It was not an English conception but a European one, because of the use that other countries made of it; for instance, Italy and the *commedia dell'arte*, France and the court games of Moliere's plays, Spanish baroque theatre and Calderón de la Barca's representation of dreams, life and theatre. England had other playwrights and poets such as Ben Jonson and Edmund Spenser, which turn the mirroring effect of art and life into a personal point of view over human existence. And, last but not least, William Shakespeare would reach for the idea of *theatrum mundi* and make it a strong basis of meaning in several of his works.

Italy is a country with a great theatrical comedy tradition, with authors ranging from Carlo Goldoni (18th century) to Luigi Pirandello, Eduardo de Filippo and Dario Fo (all of them in the 20th century). But the first type of comedy to achieve great acceptance was *commedia dell'arte*; of course there were great comic authors in the Roman era such as Plautus and Latin classic comedigraphers that had great importance in the development of *commedia dell'arte*; but here I will refer specifically to post-medieval theatre. The *commedia dell'arte* is a very physical type of comedy that makes a farce of life through some delimited and stereotyped characters, representing very different social backgrounds. Shakespeare's *As You Like It* presents a hint of these delimited and stereotyped characters in a brief monologue by Jaques.

JAQUES: I have neither the scholar's melancholy,
Which is emulation; nor the musician's, which is
Fantastical, nor the courtier's, which is proud;
Nor the soldier's, which is ambitious; nor the
Lawyer's, which is public; nor the lady, which

Is nice; nor the lover's, which is all these; (...)
(2010: 297. Act 4, Scene 1. 10-15).

The plays by these comedigraphers were about events that happened in real life, but which were exaggerated through the acting of comedians that, in the majority of cases, had no text. This implies that these actors used improvisation to accomplish the purposes that their director asked them to. Situations were planned, but they were developed through the imagination of the actors at the very moment of the acting, that a play could be represented in a completely different manner every time that it was staged. This involved a close proximity with the concept of *theatrum mundi*: not only the archetypal characters were put into action to generate a mirror-effect with the citizens that were watching them; the words were spontaneous in the scene, just as they were in life itself. The implication behind this concept was clear: the theater reflected the world, just like life seemed to assume a theatrical pattern.

The French comic playwright Moliere was very influenced by the Italian comic style. He also used archetypes to build his characters, and sometimes these characters pretended to be other characters, as part of the plot. Some of his plays (such as *Amphytrion* and *L'Impromptu de Versailles*) become in fact meta-theatrical, generating a strong feeling of irony and play. Actually, the English word that defines the art that playwrights write and actors act is named 'play'; such an art, with its plots and masquerades, can also be seen as a representation of the need for returning, at least to a certain extent, to the world of childhood and to the games that were played in it.

Spain had another author that was deeply concerned in the comparison between the world and the theatre. Pedro Calderón de la Barca was one of the most notorious playwrights of his era and composed some plays that will endure forever because of their imagination and language, such as the worldwide classic *Life Is a Dream* (*La vida*

es sueño, 1635). But it is another of his plays that we must take into account in this paper: *The Great Theatre of the World (El Gran Teatro del Mundo)*. In this play, there is the idea of the preconceived destiny of all human beings, which have to play the specific social roles that somebody (the Author/God) has imposed on them. That means that people play their roles in life as an obligation; that they have no true free will, and possibly they never will.

England had the playwright (and colleague of Shakespeare's) Ben Jonson, the first laureate poet of England, who in his play *Bartholomew Fair* also makes reference to the idea of *theatrum mundi*. This comedy was intended to describe the society and lifestyle of London citizens in the early seventeenth century; like his contemporary Shakespeare, Jonson attempted to change the perceptions and the attitudes of those he wrote about. As John Gordon Sweeney has stated in *Jonson and the Psychology of Public Theatrer*:

A *Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play about the possibilities and responsibilities of the spectator in the *theatrum mundi*. In *Bartholomew Fair*, the significance of Littlewit's motion in relation to the rest of the play and its audience is much the same, but, as we might expect, when there is different audience involved, there is different set of conclusions.

(1985:169)

It is remarkable, though, that the theatre did not have the monopoly of the concept *theatrum mundi*. Poetry also got close to the conception that the world imitates a theater, just like the theater imitates the world. The poet Edmund Spenser comes closer to the Bard's conception of a theatrical world, in his 54th sonnet of the sequence *Amoretti and Epithalamion*.

OF this worlds Theatre in which we stay,
My love like the Spectator idly sits
Beholding me that all the pageants play,
Disguising diversely my troubled wits.
Sometimes I joy when glad occasion fits,

And mask in my life like to a Comedy:
Soon after when my joy sorrow flits,
I wail and make my woes a Tragedy. (...)
(1996:26)

It is possible that Shakespeare knew this sonnet, because one of the monologues of his comedy *As You Like It* (Jaques' monologue, also known as "The Seven Ages Monologue") begins quite similarly to Spenser's sonnet. This sonnet proves that the idea of considering life as similar to a fiction played on the stage was quite usual at the end of the sixteenth century.

2. William Shakespeare and the *theatrum mundi*.

William Shakespeare's use of the concept of *theatrum mundi* is quite extended in his plays (tragedies, comedies, historical and romances) and it also appears in his 23rd sonnet. As we will see in a moment, the Bard's whole work was not just influenced by it; this concept also seems to be one of the bases of his critical thought about world and drama. I must clarify that I will not attempt to provide every single example of every play in which *theatrum mundi* is shown; I will restrict my work to some key moments in some of the major plays, which will help me to clarify the matter to the reader of this paper. I will proceed in chronological order; I must begin, then, with *The Taming of the Shrew*.

This early comedy begins with an exercise of 'metadrama', also known as play-within-a-play. At the beginning of the play a drunken Cristobal Sly is invited to watch a theatre play, as if he was a "sir". This character adopts a role that does not correspond to him, and during the time that the play will run, he will play the part of what he is wrongly supposed to be. But he is not the only one who wears an invisible and false mask: Lucentio is one of the characters of the play-within-a-play that puts a mask on, so as to pretend to be another person, in order to accomplish his purposes.

The next play we will refer to is also a comedy, in fact one of the most-well known and most loved by audiences because of its imagination; it constitutes a great source in which to find a theatrical conception of the world. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* also contains the resource of the play-within-a-play, with gags that are documented as having occurred in real life, such as the apology of an actor to the audience during a representation, explaining precisely that he is an actor, although he is pretending to be another person in order to amuse the audience.

As an unpublished contemporary account of the festival relates, the singer was not in good voice: There was a Spectacle presented to Queen Elizabeth upon the water, and among others Harry Goldingham was to represent Arion upon the Dolphin's back, but finding his voice to be very hoarse and unpleasant when he came to perform it, he tears off his Disguise, and swears he was none of Arion, not he, but even honest Harry Goldingham; which blunt discovery pleased the Queen better than if it has gone through in the right way.

(Greenblat 2005:49)

Shakespeare incorporates this anecdote when Snug the joiner wears the invisible mask of the Lion, in the play "*The most Lamentable Comedy and most Cruel Death of Pyramus and Thisby*" (the play-within-a-play) which is played in Act V. Snug apologizes to ladies if his acting produces fear; they must take the play as the game it is, in the illusion of the moment. It is remarkable, though, that in that moment Shakespeare does not refer to him with his proper name (Snug) but with the name "Lion".

*LION: You, ladies, you whose gentle hearts do fear
The smallest monstrous mouse that creeps on floor
May now, perchance, both quake and tremble here,
When lion rough in wildest rage doth roar.
Then know that I as Snug the joiner am
A lion fell, nor else no lion's dam; (...)*

(2010:240. Act 5, Scene 1. 216-221)

The next play I must mention in relation to the *theatrum mundi* is *The Merchant of Venice*. It is precisely in this play that we can find some elements of the game of masks that we will also find in *As You Like It*. This strange comedy (because it could be

seen/read almost as a tragedy as well) has a revolutionary conception of the role of women: Portia dresses like a man and adopts the function of a judge in the trial that involves Shylock the Jew and the merchant Antonio. For a moment, then, the roles of men and women seem to be interchangeable; a court of justice can also be turned into a theatre where men and women play before each other, and where the most important matters come to be a result of their role-playing. This may come close to suggesting that all roles in life are not static, but moveable and changing, an idea that Shakespeare will develop as well in *As You Like It* with the “Seven Ages” Monologue.

Role-playing situations can also be found in historical dramas such as *Henry IV Part 1* in Act 2, Scene 4 when two friends of very different ages and social conditions – Prince Hal (the future Henry V) and Falstaff – pretend to do a masquerade where they will change their social roles for a while, in order to amuse and entertain their audience of drunken chaps. But what appears in this game is a glimpse of the future breach that will separate both men, due to the social roles and different conditions in which they were born. We can observe in this game Shakespeare’s hand, determining the nature of theatre and drama: this is a form of role-playing that in fact reveals aspects of the truth. He offers to the spectators the idea that they are watching a game, even when this game has a lot to do with the inner reality of the characters. The background of this “game” is the next: Hal will present himself to his father, the king Henry IV, and will have a conversation with him where he will be strongly reprimanded because of his dissipated behavior, so different to what is expected of a royal heir. And this event is directly anticipated in Falstaff’s and Hal’s role-playing:

FALSTAFF: Well, thou wilt be horribly child
tomorrow when thou comest to thy father. If
thou love me, practice an answer.

PRINCE: Do thou stand for my father, and
examine me upon the particulars of my life.

FALSTAFF: Shall I? Content! This chair shall be
my state, this dagger my scepter, and this
cushion my crown!

(2010: 529. Act 2, Scene 4. 362-369)

Another Shakespeare play related with the idea of *theatrum mundi* is the best known tragedy of them all: *Hamlet*. This tragedy of fatalist resolution has not just another play-within-a-play, but the very character of Hamlet appearing as a role-player who constantly changes his roles, without losing sight of who he really is: the prince of Denmark. Along the play the other characters see him as mad, ludicrous, comical, and suicidal: a huge range of personalities in a single body. Hamlet can appear as everybody and in the next moment as no one, not even as himself. Returning to the idea of theatre as a way of representing reality through the illusions of the stage, in *Hamlet* we have the metadramatic play *The Murther of Gonzago*, a tale about a false murder in which the spectator sees a version of the actual story of Hamlet's father and of Claudius, played before the court. The excitement of Hamlet when recognizing the truth in the illusion is perhaps similar to what Shakespeare's audience must have felt when witnessing the vertiginous effect of a story played within the same story that they were watching.

To conclude this section, I will briefly refer to one of his Shakespeare's plays, the romance *The Tempest*. This play has different examples of situations in which the world becomes a stage, within the very stage where the whole play is acted out. For example, Caliban, an island native, sees some humans that he has found (Stefano and Trinculo) and considers them to be gods: through this misinterpretation of the situation, Caliban adopts a theatrical view of the other two characters. The theatrical conception of an event is not just in the action of the doer but in the gaze of the onlooker, or, for that matter, of the audience (in this case, the role of the audience is enacted by Caliban).

Another example of *theatrum mundi* in this romance is the use of magic in order to create illusions for the characters to see, in order to confuse them. This is what Prospero does through Ariel against the newcomers to the island. In this play the combination of theatre, life and illusion (or magic) is stronger than in any other Shakespearean plays.

We could also refer to other moments of *theatrum mundi* in other plays written by the Bard, such as *King Lear*, *Othello*, *Macbeth* or even an early tragedy such as *Romeo and Juliet*. Unfortunately, and because of space restrictions, we are not able to write about all of them here. However, it is useful to know that the subject also occurs in Shakespeare's poetry; we may remember, for instance, the beginning of sonnet 23:

As an unperfect actor on the stage
Who with his fear is put besides his part...

(2010:1366. Sonnet 23)

It is clear then, that Shakespeare's use of the concept of play-within-the-play and of its relation with the central concept of *theatrum mundi* was long and deep. His job as an actor and playwright influenced his whole written work, including the poems; and if it contributed to develop his manner of conceiving the art of literature, it is most likely that it influenced his life and his manner of perceiving existence as well.

3. *Theatrum Mundi* in *As You Like It*.

When we begin to focus our attention in *As You Like It* we easily find elements of *theatrum mundi*: it seems that in this play, to a certain extent, all the major elements seem to mirror themselves. Shakespeare's purpose involves not just a mere attempt of describing society, but a desire to improve it in some way. In order to achieve this purpose, Shakespeare shows in the play's plot many different moments influenced by events in real life that, once staged, become a reflex of the society of his era. At the same time, we will discover that these situations are metaphors of life created by the

playwright to provoke critical thinking in those who can go beyond the mere surface of the plot. As Schechner put it in the article “What is Performance Studies?” in the *Rupkatha Journal On Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* :

In Renaissance Europe the widely accepted notion that the world was a great theatre called the *theatrum mundi* was well put in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It* when Jacques says, “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” (...) To people living in the *theatrum mundi* everyday life was theatrical and, conversely, theatre offered a working model of how life was lived.

(2013:6)

3.1. Jaques’ Monologue and the “Seven Ages”.

When scholars decide to comment on the subject of the world as a stage in this particular comedy, they always use the same speech: Jaques’ monologue in Act 2, scene 7. It is probably the most famous of the monologues ever written about this theme.

JAQUES: All the world’s a stage
And all 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.

(2010:289. Act 2, Scene 7. 139-143).

This first sentence sums up all the ideas that we have been discussing. People in their every-day lives are intended to play several roles in society (at work, in the family, in ideological terms) in order to get a living and achieve their purposes. Acting and role-playing are seen in this monologue as basic, essential parts of our nature, far from being only an activity reserved for professionals like Shakespeare or his company. It is a universal aspect of humanity, and it connects us to the deeper roots of our condition. The monologue is also known as “The Seven Ages” because Shakespeare divides human life in seven stages; seven different existential periods that all humans have to experience. Every stage implies new forms of behavior that people have to adopt, and sometimes the evolution from one age to another can bring contradictions in behavioral

patterns. Every person is supposed to behave in a certain manner or has to follow certain specific rules when he reaches one age or another. Infants cannot behave as teenagers, who, in turn, cannot behave as mature or older people. Every stage has its own purpose in the natural order of society, and people change their attitude when they grow up: in other words, people naturally change the roles that they play through life.

Apart from this, the monologue can be seen as entering into an inter-textual dialogue with other dramatic traditions: especially, with the tradition of the Italian *commedia dell'arte*. Several critics have observed the presence of traits from the Italian comic tradition in this text; it is even possible to distinguish here references to very stereotypical characters, such as those that usually occur in the *commedia*:

“All the world’s a stage” is scarcely any more novel or exciting an observation in Shakespeare’s time than it is in our own. But, in theatrical terms, the speech is not merely a skillful variation on a well-worn metaphor, it is also part of the play’s ongoing dialogue with theatre tradition and with familiar modes of representation. The roll-call of figures is not just, perhaps not even primarily, an encapsulation of the ages of a man’s life; it is also a sequence of recognizable theatrical characters (lover, soldier, old man, and so on), which the term “pantaloon”, with its explicit allusion to the *commedia dell'arte*, underlines.

(Dillon 2005: 8)

In this way, the speech combines two essential facts about the reality of the world as a stage. On the one hand, role-playing is described as a natural fact, a necessary factor in the development of human beings through their life. But, on the other hand, the roles that men and women assume in this process are quite conventional, quite fixed by the tradition and by society, almost like the ones in the *Commedia dell'Arte*. The monologue establishes play-acting as both natural and cultural; because of biological reasons and contextual factors, human beings are forced to turn their life into a constant performance, and this role-acting not only occurs from childhood to old age: it is actually the basic condition that allows humanity to exist within time and

within culture. There is no clear-cut opposition between nature and nurture here, no opposition between the spontaneous and the cultural: both aspects of reality converge, for human beings, in the essential factor of role-playing. It is not only that the world is a stage; it is, rather, that human beings need it to be one, in order to fulfill their entire potential. And at the same time, in yet another mirror-effect, the characters in actual plays imitate, and are imitated by, the audience. The active feedback between the stage and the real world is, in the end, one of the basic mirroring effects of the *theatrum mundi*. The necessity of creating a real personality from sources that are pure fiction corresponds to a simple, basic human need: the desire of pretending that we are something other than what we really are.

3.2. Pretending in *As You Like It*.

If we read the play with the idea that theatre and life can influence one another, we will find in its very beginning (Act 1, Scene 1) a reference to pretending (one of the most important duties of the actors on stage), presented as one important social technique, to be used in everyday life. Olivier pretends to love his brother Orlando in front of Charles; but the audience knows that this is not true because, right after the conversation between Olivier and Charles, Orlando is despised by his brother and the audience can clearly feel the hate between them. This is an example of this character's tendency to use a key strategy in civilization (and indeed, especially essential in the civilization of the English Renaissance): pretending. It is very clear that this character is using an emotional/intellectual activity that inevitably reminds us of the performer's job: to be taken seriously by others, even when one is blatantly lying.

When Rosalind dresses like a man in order to escape, she is also pretending, because she is playing a part that she is not supposed to perform in society: that of a

man. At the end of Act 4, Rosalind (who answers to the masculine name of “Ganymede”) swoons when she sees her lover wounded, and she is softly reprimanded because a man is supposed to be able to withstand this kind of situations serenely. The ensuing comic situation is due to the lack of information that Oliver has about “Ganymede” (whose proper name is, as we all know, Rosalind).

OLIVER: Be of good cheer, youth. You a man!
You lack a man’s heart.

ROSALIND: I do so, I confess it. Ah, sirrah, a body
would think this was well counterfeited. I pray
you tell your brother how well I counterfeited.
Heigh-ho!

OLIVER: This was not counterfeit; there is too
great testimony in your complexion that it was a
passion of earnest.

ROSALIND: Counterfeit, I assure you.

OLIVER: Well then, take a good heart and
Counterfeit to be a man.

ROSALIND: So I do; but i’faith, I should have
Been a woman by right.

(2010: 301. Act 4, scene 3. 162-173)

In this case, the *theatrum mundi* is made visible as well: a form of acting and pretending is taking place before some of the characters of the play, while we, the audience, watch it from the stalls. A performance is taking place within another performance, and at the same time it is calling attention to the limits of what can be actually performed and done, both inside and outside of the theatre. In the English Renaissance theatre women were not allowed to play any role on the stage, and feminine roles had to be played by young actors, that had softer and higher voices. As Briggs states, “there were numerous other anomalies associated with the theatre: women’s roles were always played by boys” (Briggs 1983: 161). But Rosalind is not just mirroring the actual theatrical

conditions of Elizabethan drama; she is subverting them from within, and offering to the audience one of the most celebrated scenic games of the period: the image of an actor, who is playing a girl, who is playing a boy. For a moment, gender barriers and sexual distinctions are erased; and even though this effect lasts for only as long as the play does, it is one of the most remarkable consequences of the *theatrum mundi* theme that is enacted in it.

All of this has important ideological consequences. If we take for granted that the purpose of any artistic form (literature included) is to improve life significantly (in terms of beauty, in social terms, etc.), then the use of the *theatrum mundi* theme is probably the best tool that can achieve this purpose. In the Elizabethan era, the theatre was the most popular form of art that citizens could enjoy: it therefore offered enormous opportunities for enhancing intellectual debate, and for challenging the cultural preconceptions of the audience. We find a clear clue to this in Act 2, Scene 1, when Duke Senior refers to the great importance of the moral of a fable. But at that moment he does not use the word 'fable', but 'spectacle':

DUKE SENIOR: But what said Jaques?
Did he not moralize this spectacle?

(2010:284. Act 2, scene 1, 43-44.)

It is all, after all, a matter of the functions, moral and social, that the spectacle of theater could play. The context in which Shakespeare was working is an important element when we try to understand the novelty of these elements. Shakespeare and his contemporaries were trying to reach, through arts and literature, towards a new conception of the human being, based in part on the classicism of ancient Greeks and Romans; they were trying, as well, to distance themselves from the Middle Ages. Although they lived in the late Renaissance their objectives were very close of the first

Renaissance artists. Through the “spectacle” they practiced (and though the spectacle within the spectacle that was the *theatrum mundi*) they were trying to reveal the limitations of their society. As Briggs states:

The drama was to develop into an exact and sensitive register of the age’s most characteristic issues: the proliferating viewpoints, the consciousness of a gap between what men said and what they did, the increasing complexity of moral conflict, and new ideas about man’s role in the universe, in society, and his sense of selfhood.

(1983: 160)

3.3. The wedding ritual in *As You Like It*.

The most controversial effect produced by the theme of role-playing in *As You Like It* is the representation of marriage and wedding. The play goes so far as to mimic the sacramental union of love, in a place where it is not supposed to occur (the forest), and in a scenery and situation that seems to relativize, or to question, the importance of this union. Shakespeare evokes the institutional ritual of marriage, but in a way that seems to place it in an entirely incongruous, new context. On the one hand, this ritual seems to lose part of its liturgical significance, but, on the other hand, it seems to acquire new and challenging meanings.

The first time in the play that two people are supposed to marry, the ritual is not completed. It is set to take place in the forest, with a proper priest to direct the ceremony; the groom and the bride (Touchstone and Audrey) do not seem to be firm lovers, and they do not seem to take the decision of marriage very seriously. But the ceremony is not completed because of the intervention of a hidden observer (Jaques), who does not wish to be a simple spectator of the scene, and becomes an active part of it. In fact, this episode seems more a *divertimento* than a response to any firm necessity, on the part of the lovers, of linking their souls to each other forever.

Then, and far more importantly, there is a rehearsal of a wedding in Act 4, scene 1; the groom is Orlando and the bride is Rosalind, dressed as Ganymede and calling herself so. They play a game, imagining how a wedding between them would be. Orlando, who does not know that Ganymede is in fact Rosalind, rehearses how it would be to marry the woman who he loves, who in fact is in front of him, dressed as a boy. The ceremony takes part in the forest as the chapel, and with Celia as a fake priest. This is all done as a joke, because Orlando does not know he is faking a marriage with the very woman he wants to marry: he acts with Rosalind as if she was Ganymede in reality and Rosalind in fiction. Once again a fiction is disguising reality in the play, while, for the whole of Shakespeare's audience (and for his readers), all of this process is framed in a setting that also suggests a fiction: the theater itself. Once again the stage is like the world, with its role-playing and dissimulation, and this inevitably reminds us that the world is also like a stage.

When we go beyond the surface of the funny or superfluous anecdote, we find a social criticism that it would be wrong to ignore. I am not suggesting that Shakespeare tried to emphasize this aspect at the cost of others, but as twenty-first century readers who are aware of gender issues and who have learnt to question institutions, we need to consider it. In fact, the whole ceremony is represented as a farce, and whenever it is staged or read, it brings important questions to our minds. Is the clergy absolutely indispensable in rituals of love? Do they really have the power to bind two people that already have made their personal vows of love and mutual respect? In this case, Celia unwittingly revolutionizes the established rules that situated the church (whether Catholic or protestant) as a mediator of love among two individuals, and, by doing so, she questions the power of religious institutions over human passions.

And, beyond this, the play gives us another idea to consider. Celia is a woman, and the clerical rule establishes that the priest (a man) has to marry the couple; but in this case it is a woman who directs the ceremony. In this way, the mirror effect that is staged, and which the Elizabethan audience would recognize as establishing a clear parallel with the actual ceremony of marriage, seems to interrogate the latter even while it is reproducing it. Shakespeare thus invites us to question firmly established social rules and rituals. Is a marriage ceremony the inevitable outcome of courtship? How are marriages organized and arranged? What role do coincidence and manipulation play in them? Are conventions, rather than love, a quintessential part of any marriage union?

All of these questions arise as an effect of the representation, and of the staging of the *theatrum mundi* that occurs in *As You Like It*. By showing us rituals that mirror or repeat rituals in real life and by showing us that this repetition is a fiction, Shakespeare invites us to think about the validity of real life institutions and actions. Is our reality valid and authentic, or is it also a theater? Are our institutions more than a simple staging? Critical thought is thus put in motion by the comedy. This is a basic part of what makes *As You Like It* such an important play.

4. Conclusions

Social conventions are subtly interrogated in this play by Shakespeare. As a dramatist, he proves here that the imperturbability of some traditions that we consider unmovable and unchangeable is constructed, in fact, as part of social conventions and forms of group behavior. His play offers, at several moments, the possibility of rethinking several rules that society has imposed a long time (especially, the institution of marriage and the established gender roles), and which have come to be seen as untouchable and natural, when in fact they are neither.

The “Seven Ages” monologue can be understood as playing a central function in this process. As we have seen, it is not the only example of the use of *theatrum mundi* in the play, but it allows the audience (or the reader) to understand the significance of this concept, in all the other moments in which it is presented. The monologue shows that role-playing is a basic element in all human life, and that culture is permeated with it. The world is a stage, but it can also be said that the stage is a world: one acts as a mirror image for the other. Both aspects are equally indispensable when we try to understand this Shakespearean play.

I would like to conclude by saying that this play is a very innovative work. Shakespeare takes a topic that was already established in the tradition and offers to his audience, through it, the possibility of thinking critically about their society. This process can occur again every time that the play is staged, and this makes it a classic work.

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