"I Like This Place": Race, Conduct, and Ownership in *As You Like It*

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The early modern era was a time of significant transformation in England. The population was booming, enclosure was altering people's relationship with land, and an increase in colonial projects marked a new level of globalization. These transformations expanded trade and shifted early modern understandings of the world, ultimately leading to more complex interactions with people from other places. As Jean Howard notes, the shift in population meant that "between foreigners and aliens, London must at times have felt like a city where… the mixing of different kinds of people was inevitable."[1] While there had always been some instability, this shift in wealth and population challenged previously restrictive sociocultural boundaries in the early modern era. Patricia Akhimie explains that this shift was not just about land and money, but identity as well, since "the potential for mobility—a shift in social status, or national or cultural identity—[was] revolutionary in the early modern period… an awesome opportunity as well as an anxiety-provoking prospect."[2] As space between different lands became more easily traversed, so did the space between class and the identity associated with it. Thus, the early modern population grappled not only with new ideas and cultures, but with how contact with these previously unknown entities would alter their own sense of identity.

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Shakespeare not only bore witness to this, but also responded to globalization by employing an "exotic other" in several plays, from Othello in *Othello* to the Indian "changeling" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. *As You Like It*, though, explores the "exotic other" of unknown territories, considering how characters interact when encountering new places. This exploration underwrites both a colonial and an aristocratic relationship with land. When Celia and Rosalind craft their escape plan in the first act of *As You Like It,* their initial hope is to find refuge in the forests of Arden. Yet, once in Arden, they not only purchase a small cottage but also hire the people who manage the land, with Celia saying, "I like this place / and willingly could waste my time in it" (2.4.93-94).[3] Celia and Rosalind do not view new territory as a place to explore and learn from—these pursuits could tarnish their noble status—but see foreign lands as something to be claimed for power and pleasure; Celia could "waste" her time there to gain control and uphold her status. Shakespeare portrays how early modern Europeans responded to an exotic "other," whether a person or a place, by seizing control to enable leisure. In my reading, Celia and Rosalind engage in an early form of gentrification, as they enter an "untamed" land and wield their power as gentry. *As You Like It* sustains a class-based racism rooted in the gentry's pursuit of power and control. The play reinforces the racialization of working-class bodies as dark and distasteful, rewards aristocratic conduct, and ultimately legitimizes the colonization of foreign lands, with Celia's desire to "waste" time in Arden becoming an ironic emblem of dominance secured at the laborers' expense.

As You Like It's plot revolves around the desire to regain stability and control. Duke Frederick has usurped the throne of his older brother, the aptly named Duke Senior, banishing him and, eventually, his daughter, Rosalind. Refusing to live without Rosalind, Duke Frederick's daughter, Celia, decides that they will run off to the Forest of Arden with their jester, Touchstone. Because Rosalind is concerned about the dangers of traveling as two young, beautiful noblewomen, since "beauty provoketh thieves sooner than gold" (1.3.107), Celia says she will dress in "poor and mean attire /…with a kind of umber smirch" on her face (1.3.108-109) so they may "never stir assailants" (1.3.110). Shakespeare draws clear distinctions between the gentry and the

working class; Celia's "umber" or darkened skin is meant to blend in with those of lower status, illustrating how racial distinctions overlap with those of class. Even Shakespeare's use of the word "smirch" denotes a "soiling" or "dirtying." Rather than simply denoting the application of color, it establishes darkened skin as separate from and beneath Celia's status. Celia further distances this darkened identity from her true self with her chosen name, "Aliena." The word "alien" derives from Anglo-Norman and Middle French, meaning someone from a foreign place. It also has origins in classical Latin, meaning "unnatural."[4] Celia's choice of name reveals beliefs about both the lower class and the inhabitants of Arden she is attempting to emulate. They are "alien" compared to her "former" self, and she must "alienate" herself to inhabit this new space. This leap to brownface perpetuates the early modern belief that Akhimie discusses; race and class are "imbricated," since "working bodies are marked bodies— bruised and beaten, wasted, hardened by toil, and darkened by exposure to the sun."[5] Akhimie notes that these "marked bodies… signify social rank or… differences in access to the means of production (working bodies as opposed to landed and leisured bodies)."[6] It is not enough to don poor-quality clothing; Celia's disguise must have brown skin to conceal a body meant for "leisure." Celia's whiteness is a key symbol of gentle status, and "Aliena" is a foil for an othered, darkened self.

Rosalind and Celia's arrival in Arden reveals not just the difference between aristocratic and laboring bodies but also aristocratic attitudes towards land. The two noblewomen never appear concerned or even curious about the customs of the new territory they enter, nor do they wonder if or how they will fit in. Instead, they assume darkened skin will do that work for them. When the group exhaustedly stumbles onto a cottage where two Arden shepherds, Silvius and Corin, work, Rosalind does not stay inconspicuous and instead offers to buy the place outright (2.4.90-92). Celia, roused from her weary state, says that they will also "mend [their] wages" and pay the shepherds to continue keeping the cottage, declaring: "I like this place / and willingly could waste my time in it" (2.4.93-94). With this declaration, Celia reveals a common and essential aristocratic view of the land; there is no interest in how to care for or even live on the land. Instead, there

is only a desire to "waste time" on it, using local labor for upkeep and pleasure. This concept is further underscored by Corin's description of an absent, mismanaging owner (2.4.84-85), who clearly does not understand the responsibility to "properly" use the place. Rosalind and Celia have an aristocratic understanding of what must be done next. They must gain control of the land and use it for their own leisure. With enclosures still occurring in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, the connection between land and the accumulation of wealth became even more apparent, as the gentry were significant supporters and drivers of land privatization. Rosalind and Celia enact the same processes that were becoming increasingly essential in the early modern era. They establish wealth by purchasing land and labor in a foreign place. This accumulation of land and capital provides them with power and protection while also sharpening the disparity between their status and that of those whose labor they have just purchased.

This move also aligns with Rosalind and Celia's current financial situation. Although they belong to the noble class, they are exiled women who lack continued access to funds and power. As Robert Brenner observes, this "middling" or powerless gentry, which included younger brothers or lesser gentry, were more likely to become involved in colonizing projects, since higher-ranking gentry were often unwilling to take the risk.[7] Thus, Rosalind and Celia's purchase of the land in a new space, not a part of inherited family land, mirrors how a particular faction of the nobility participated in colonizing projects. This naturalizes colonial acquisition as something other than aggression. It becomes, instead, a reasonable response to dispossession. By casting Rosalind and Celia as sympathetic exiles rather than straightforward aggressors, Shakespeare makes the purchase of Arden's land and labor feel like resourcefulness rather than appropriation. The audience is supposed to root for their success, and in doing so, endorse the logic that undergirds it; those of gentle birth have both the right and the responsibility to take control of unfamiliar territory when circumstance demands it. These two characters engage in impersonation on several levels; they both feign the darker skin tone of the "natives" to gain trust; Rosalind impersonates a man who can own land; and then they use that land to engage in leisure activities they were previously unable to pursue. Despite being

separated from the source of their leisure, Rosalind and Celia understand how they should behave given their "natural" status and are rewarded for using any means necessary to realize it. With this purchase, Shakespeare reinforces the connection between race, class, and land ownership. As Akhimie discusses, class shapes not just how land was viewed, but also how those actions maintain power, since "leisure is more than just the privilege of those who can claim both the free time and the green space to enjoy it: leisure is a performance of power in which ruling elites demonstrate that they possess the mental agility and acuity that justifies their dominance."[8] Celia and Rosalind would never work the land themselves, but they are able to use the land as noblewomen; they see it as not only their right but also a demonstration of conduct befitting their status.

The gap between the gentry and the working class appears wider with Phoebe's introduction to the play. Phoebe, a native to Arden, arrives in the third act when she cruelly belittles Silvius and his declarations of love. Rather than accept him or politely turn him down, Phoebe debases Silvius in several long speeches until she is interrupted by Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede. Rosalind immediately chastises her, insisting she "has no beauty," since Phoebe's "inky brows [or] black silk hair" could not "entame [Rosalind's] spirits to [her] worship" (3.5.38-49). The condemnation is striking. Rosalind does not simply call Phoebe cruel or immodest; she grounds her judgment in Phoebe's appearance, and the appearance she attacks is dark. This conflation of darkness with unworthiness intensifies later when Rosalind, as Ganymede, describes Phoebe's "leathered hand… / a freestone-coloured hand. I verily did think / that her old gloves were on, but 'twas her hands. / She has a housewife's hand" (4.3.24-27). The phrase "housewife's hand" has dual meaning here. It marks Phoebe as a laboring body—roughened, discolored, shaped by toil rather than leisure—and uses that physical evidence to disqualify her from Rosalind's social world. Phoebe's darkness is not a neutral phenotypic observation but a verdict. *As You Like It* reinforces the racialization of working-class bodies as dark and distasteful, as Rosalind's disgust is animated by a mix of class and racial animus. To have a "housewife's hand" is to have a body that has been used, marked, and diminished by labor, and that body cannot be an

object of desire or legitimate social exchange. Akhimie's analysis of "working bodies" as "roughened, hardened, yellowed, browned and blackened, pinched and misshapen"[9] confirms that this racialization was not incidental but structural to early modern class ideology. Kim F. Hall further clarifies the stakes of Rosalind's contempt. As she says, "discourses of fairness were by and large shaped by this aristocratic class,"[10] and those discourses policed marriage and property by coding dark women as "the ultimate in undesirability," and unsuitable "objects of social exchange."[11] Rosalind's disgust, then, is not merely personal; it is the voice of a class asserting its boundaries through the body of a woman who has no right to cross them.

Rosalind's harsh judgment of Phoebe also highlights the nuanced distinctions that operated within the imbrication of race and class. In their Arden identities, "Ganymede's" supposed sister, "Aliena," appears dark like Phoebe. Yet Rosalind-as-Ganymede viciously debases Phoebe's complexion while making no mention of Aliena's appearance or questioning her worth because of it. The asymmetrical treatment is not accidental; it reveals that darkness alone is not what disqualifies Phoebe. What exempts Aliena from the same contempt is not skin color but conduct. Aliena, the audience knows, is Celia: a noblewoman who behaves like one regardless of her dark-skin-disguise. Phoebe, by contrast, is condemned not only for her darkness but for the behavior that accompanies it. Our introduction to Phoebe is her cruel treatment of Silvius and her subsequent dressing-down by Rosalind. Later, when Phoebe sends a letter declaring her love for Ganymede, Rosalind calls it writing so crude she cannot believe "women's gentle brain could not drop forth such giant-rude invention" (4.1.33-34), and dismisses Phoebe's words as "Ethiop words… blacker in their effect than their countenance" (4.1.24, 35). That comparison is precise and deliberately doubled. Phoebe's language is dark in the same way her body is dark, and both forms of darkness signal a deficit of moral and social worth. Shakespeare is not simply using darkness as a metaphor for evil; he is mapping a class-based moral hierarchy onto the body and the voice simultaneously so that Phoebe's appearance and her conduct become mutually confirming evidence of her lower status. This logic makes "Aliena" legible as a disguise rather than a true identity. Underneath the umber is a

body that knows how to behave, which the audience understands and which Rosalind's own conduct confirms at every turn. As Hall observes, "'black' in Renaissance discourses is opposed not to 'white' but to 'beauty' or 'fairness,' and these terms most often refer to the appearance or moral states of women," with whiteness "attached to values—purity, virginity, and innocence."[12] Akhimie's work on conduct clarifies the mechanism: "symbolic behaviors are 'taken to typify' aristocratic or base 'being,'"[13] and the discourse of conduct was "about the potential for transformation as it was about defining social categories as natural and immovable."[14] The point is not that dark skin is inherently inferior; it is that dark skin, combined with ungoverned behavior, confirms what the gentle class already believes: that the "right" people instinctively know how to act, and those who do not are marked literally and figuratively by that failure. "Aliena" may wear brownface, but she will never be like Phoebe, because innate conduct is the thing that cannot be faked.

Phoebe's juxtaposition with Aliena also serves to portray Arden's inhabitants as people who, even when educated by their noble visitors, fail to understand how they are supposed to conduct themselves. Silvius refuses to relinquish his affections for Phoebe, leaving Rosalind to conclude that he deserves no pity since he has been "made a tame snake" (4.3.69). Improper conduct signifies lower status, since nobility means understanding that one's behavior matters. Instead, the working class is "marked by a devastating lack: an inability to be better and even to know better— that is, to know that they *should* be better."[15] Shakespeare creates a juxtaposition between those who know how to manage both land and people—Rosalind and Celia—and those who are haplessly unaware, like the people of Arden. This lack of understanding is then imbricated with darkened skin, further entwining race, class, and conduct. This attempted "education" of conduct also aligns with how the English saw their role when among "darkened others." As Arthur Little observes, the English were acutely aware that "[they] were once an atavistic people before being chastised, cut off from their barbaric past," and needed to similarly "cut out" the barbaric from the civil in other cultures.[16] This cutting off often involved sacrifice, but, instead of sacrificing bodies, *As You Like It* insists that its less-civil characters sacrifice land to those who can model its proper

usage. This cession of land is presented as a fortuitous event early in the play, when Corin negotiates the cottage sale on behalf of an absent, negligent owner; the land passes not through physical force, but through the quiet logic of "better" management. Rosalind and Celia do not engage in common violence, but in the "civilized" act of purchasing land from people who, the play suggests, were never equipped to steward it. The transaction is framed as mutually beneficial, one example of how colonial acquisition justified itself on a larger scale. Thus, *As You Like It* reinforces a class racism that subsists on the gentry's need for power and control.

The play not only reinforces a gap between the leisured and working classes, but also incorporates colonial mindsets; the cousins are not only experiencing the ignorance of the working class but are doing so in a place to which they journey, rather than from their own land. While Celia may exhibit gentle behavior, she is still in brownface for much of the play. This disguise creates what Derrick Higginbotham calls an "enmeshing of classism and racism in… impersonations… that are linked disturbingly to an effort to blend in with the local inhabitants."[17] Celia and Rosalind never doubt that their appearance or assumptions could be seen as problematic in this new land; they confidently assume darkened skin and poor attire will allow them to fit in. Thus, Celia's brownface disguise "simultaneously destabilises and reinforces distinctions between ruling class and working class, racialised whiteness and brownness, alien and native, thereby encouraging audiences to attend to these distinctions and their conflation."[18] While "Aliena" conducts herself as a gentlewoman, she looks more like Phoebe than a member of the gentry. This impersonation reminds us that power and control are not simply about skin color, but about conduct connoting a level of worth that is insurmountable, even when the "inferior" group is native to the land. Rosalind and Celia's brownface does not represent a desire for dark skin, but is employed as a tactic to gain control and thereby maintain power. *As You Like It* imbricates notions of race and class, and weaves in beliefs about who lives in "exotic" spaces. To inhabit one of these untamed forests is to be dark and alien; it means possessing a body marked as different from the gentle class. Shakespeare applies early modern racialized concepts of class and overlays them onto a story that mirrors the colonial projects in which England was engaged, thus furthering

beliefs about class and worth in populations newly engulfed by colonial projects.

While *As You Like It's* plot explores the ramifications of entering new territory, it draws a clear distinction between acceptable and unacceptable exposure to "foreign" land. This contrast is embodied in Jaques, a melancholic lord who follows Duke Senior into the forests of Arden. Jaques is frequently taunted for his melancholy (2.1.26, 2.5.10, 3.2.285, 4.1.3), particularly when he weeps over native deer killed so everyone, including Jaques, can eat (2.1.26-66). He admits that he can "suck the melancholy out of a song as a weasel sucks eggs" (2.5.11), and that his sadness stems from "the sundry computation of my travels, in which my rumination wraps me in the most humorous sadness" (4.1.17-18). Rosalind's response is not sympathetic; it is diagnostic:

> [Travellers] have a great reason to be sad
> I fear you have sold your lands to see other men's.
> Then to have seen much and to have nothing is to have rich
> eyes and poor hands …
> And your experience makes you sad …
> Look, you lisp and
> wear strange suits; disable all the benefits of your own country;
> be out of love with your nativity and almost chide God for
> making you that countenance you are (4.1.19-22, 24, 29-32).

The speech is more than a rebuke of melancholy; it is an articulation of the purpose of travel. The failure Rosalind diagnoses in Jaques is not that he traveled, but that he traveled without acquisition; he has "sold his lands to see other men's" and come back with nothing to show for it. "Rich eyes and poor hands" is the play's verdict on unproductive engagement with foreign territory. Jaques has looked without taking, observed without owning, and in doing so has forfeited both capital and identity. He has gone "out of love with his nativity," abandoning the "countenance," meaning both face and status, to which he was born. The implicit standard against which Jaques is measured is precisely the model Rosalind and Celia enact. Enter new territory, purchase what can be purchased, employ the local labor, use the land for leisure, and leave with more than you had when you arrived. Duke Senior, too, understands this. While he mourns the slaughtered deer, he grasps that game must be consumed to sustain the exiles' encampment, and never loses sight of his role as a displaced nobleman rather

than a convert to forest life. Jaques, by contrast, becomes what Hall describes as a traveler who fails at "exercising the requisite control over the culture without becoming seduced by or implicated in it."[19] He has been absorbed into the melancholy of Arden rather than mastering it. As Leah Marcus notes, "'License of free foot' suggests freedom to travel but also that such freedom is inherently licentious, subject to contagion," and Jaques embodies precisely this danger—the nobleman who loses himself in the exotic rather than colonizing it.[20] His invective against the courtly exiles as "usurpers [and] tyrants" who "fright the animals and kill them up / in their assigned and native dwelling place" (2.1.61-63) is the final irony; he condemns the very colonial logic he is himself participating in, unable to acknowledge, as Marcus notes, "his participation in the culture of exile."[21] Shakespeare uses Jaques not to critique colonialism but to police it, to distinguish between the kind of engagement with foreign lands that produce power and the kind that produce only sentiment. The play again warns, "Rich eyes and poor hands," and provides Rosalind and Celia as its counterexample.

As You Like It resolves with a "happy" ending: the god Hymen reveals true identities and blesses weddings that fall along respectable class lines, all while resolving family differences. Eventually, Duke Frederick returns the land to Duke Senior after becoming a "religious man" in a startling turnabout (5.4.165). Thus, the instability featured at the beginning of the play returns the characters to stable ground, as is typical of comic conventions. While the play indeed meditates on the dangers of colonization—Duke Frederick, as an unworthy and cruel usurper certainly calls into question the ethics of colonial projects—*As You Like It* ultimately rewards aristocratic conduct and the colonization of foreign lands. Rosalind and Celia return to their noble lives with the status they mean to inherit; they marry, which provides the societal power needed to maintain authority.[22] They bring their acquired land into new conjugal bonds,[23] and in so doing, expand the boundaries of land under noble control. Celia's desire to "waste" time is ironic for it exposes the logic of gentle-class dominance. Their leisure, secured at the expense of the laborer, is not wasteful at all; it is the performance and extension of privilege itself.

Notes

1. Jean E. Howard, *Theater of a City: The Places of London Comedy, 1598-1642* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 11.

2. Patricia Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference: Race and Conduct in the Early Modern World*, Routledge Studies in Shakespeare (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018), 12, https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351125048.

3. William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre, Arden Shakespeare Third Edition (London: Bloomsbury, 2015).

4. "Alien, Adj. & n.," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/6235244187.

5. Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 27.

6. Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 14.

7. Robert Brenner, *Merchants and Revolution: Commercial Change, Political Conflict, and London's Overseas Traders; 1550-1653* (Verso, 2003), 114.

8. Akhimie, Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference, 34

9. Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 27.

10. Kim F. Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1996), 18.

11. Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 22.

12. Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 9.

13. Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference,* 18.

14. Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 12.

15. Akhimie, *Shakespeare and the Cultivation of Difference*, 5.

16. Arthur L. Little, *Shakespeare Jungle Fever: National-Imperial Re-Visions of Race, Rape, and Sacrifice* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 20), 126.

17. Derrick Higginbotham, "Desert," in *Logomotives: Words That Change the World, 1400–1700*, ed. Marjorie Rubright and Stephen Spiess (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2025), 122, https://doi.org/10.1515/9781399544535-012.

18. Higginbotham, "Desert," 123.

19. Hall, *Things of Darkness*, 59.

20. Leah Sinanoglou Marcus, *How Shakespeare Became Colonial: Editorial Tradition and the British Empire* (London: Routledge, 2017), 79.

21. Marcus, *How Shakespeare Became Colonial*, 86.

22. James Daybell, ed. *Women and Politics in Early Modern England, 1450-1700*. (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), accessed March 2, 2026. ProQuest Ebook Central, 3.

23. Amy Louise Erickson, *Women and Property in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Taylor & Francis Group, 1995), accessed March 2, 2026. ProQuest Ebook Central, 3.