

In William Shakespeare's opinion, the life of a person—who lives to old age—consists of seven stages. He poetically describes those phases of life in "All the World's a Stage," appearing in his play, "As You Like It." (See Act II, Scene VII.) Shakespeare's famous words are spoken by the character, Jaques, in the play).

Who is Jacques, the character who voices such sage words?

He's an exiled lord—a gloomy exiled lord—who lives in the Ardennes Forest. (That forest, parenthetically, was the scene of vicious military action during Hitler's Ardennes Offensive, resulting in WWII's Battle of the Bulge.)

On the other hand ... in keeping with Shakespeare's focus on the duality of things in this work ... maybe the play actually references the Arden Forest (a place not far from Will Shakespeare's hometown in Warwickshire).

In any event, Jacques hardly ever participates in whatever actions are taking place around him. He's more of an observer than a participant.

In this speech, however, Shakespeare gives this character some pretty profound words.

While we're examining the background of "As You Like It," we could ask another question. Was there a source for the plot, beyond Shakespeare's imagination?

The answer, to that, is likely "yes."

Thomas Lodge's popular Rosalynde, which the Englishman wrote between 1586-87—and published, in 1590—was certainly known by Shakespeare. It seems as though he used the basis of that story for his "As You Like It" plot, although he made lots of changes.

Some of Shakespeare's changes helped him to express his displeasure with certain aspects of British life, such as "primogeniture" (which allows the older brother to inherit everything).

There is likely another source which Shakespeare used (via Lodge's Rosalynde). It's the Middle-English Tale of Gamelyn, recognizable as a reference point for the exploits of Oliver and Orlando, the ducal brothers in "As You Like It."

The words hereafter, though, are purely Shakespeare's. Have a read (or a listen) to this bit of Shakespearean wisdom.

All the World's a Stage

By William Shakespeare

*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 pantaloone,
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.*

For a different way to experience these famous Shakespearean words, have a look at Benedict Cumberbatch performing "All the World's a Stage." In the background (and foreground) are clips of famous scenes from various dramas in this trailer for "A Lifetime of Original British Drama on the BBC."

See if you agree that Benedict's voice and Shakespeare's words are a *really* good match.

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Credits:

"All the World's a Stage," by William Shakespeare. Read by Carole Bos (creator of Awesome Stories).

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