

The effective roles of prose and verse in shakespeare's as you like it



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Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is made up of two distinct forms of dialogue: prose and verse. Shakespeare's verse is rhythmic and poetic, while his prose is simple and does not have a distinct beat. Although Shakespeare's choice of prose or verse may seem arbitrary, there are actually distinct motivations behind Shakespeare's choice of mode. In *As You Like It*, one of the ways Shakespeare utilizes prose is to signify romantic connection between Rosalind and Orlando. Additionally, Shakespeare's use of verse is significant in its role of characterizing Orlando and Oliver as virtuous. Throughout this play, Shakespeare deploys two distinct modes of dialogue for specific purposes of characterization.

Shakespeare uses prose to establish the romantic chemistry and connection between Orlando and Rosalind, while Rosalind is disguised as the man Ganymede. As Rosalind disguises herself as Ganymede to toy with and get closer to Orlando, she speaks almost exclusively in prose. When Ganymede first meets Orlando and asks him the time, he responds, in prose, "You should ask me what time o'day. There's no clock in the forest," to which Rosalind responds "Then there is no true lover in the forest, else sighing every minute and groaning every hour would detect the lazy foot of time as well as a clock" (Shakespeare, 3. 2. 294-296). Their interaction begins with Ganymede playfully questioning Orlando's dedication to his love; already, it is clear that there is a deeper romantic level to Ganymede and Rosalind's relationship.

Later in the play, when Ganymede is impersonating Rosalind, she continues playfully trying Orlando's devotion, telling him, "Well, in her person, I say I will not have you." Orlando keeps up his profession of love, telling

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Ganymede “ Then, in mine own person, I die” (4. 1. 84-85). Once again, this entire exchange is written in prose. Shakespeare chooses prose for Ganymede and Orlando’s dialogue because it comes across as more natural and emotional than verse. The connection and chemistry that Rosalind and Orlando share is clear, in part, due to the use of prose. More evidence for the deliberacy of Shakespeare’s choice of prose can be found in the relationship between Silvius and Phoebe, a pairing that lacks romantic connection and speaks almost entirely in verse. As they bicker, this lack of chemistry is clear. Silvius complains, in verse, that one day Phoebe will fall in love and “ know the wounds invisible That love’s keen arrows make.” Phoebe keeps up her bitterness, telling him “ But till that time Come not thou near me.” (3. 5. 28-32). Shakespeare’s choices between prose or verse add a level of nuance to the romantic relationships between his characters, and helps make the chemistry, or lack thereof, between these pairings clear.

Shakespeare’s use of verse in dialogue helps to characterize Orlando and the reformed Oliver as virtuous. Throughout *As You Like It*, dialogue written in verse signals moral virtue, particularly within the dialogue of the brothers Orlando and Oliver. Orlando, when his actions or temperament are particularly virtuous, speaks in verse. After Orlando threatens Duke Senior for food, he is embarrassed and regretful of his savage actions. In this moment, as he apologizes for his lack of manners, his virtue shines through, as he proclaims “ Let gentleness my strong enforcement be, In the which hope, I blush and hide my sword” (2. 7. 119-120). This dialogue, entirely in verse, draws attention to Orlando’s gentle and kind nature. Orlando does not always speak in verse, as he often speaks in prose with Rosalind; however,

when his moral virtue is on display, his dialogue is in verse. Oliver is not always so gentle and kind; in the first act, he hates Orlando, and, while speaking in prose, tells Charles that “ I hope I shall see an end of him; for my soul – yet I know not why – hates nothing more than he” (1. 1. 154-155). After Oliver’s reformation, when he is telling Rosalind how Orlando saved his life and that he “ From miserable slumber ... awaked” (4. 3. 130), he is speaking in verse. Oliver’s shift from prose to verse is distinct, as his mode of speaking shifts with his personality. Shakespeare utilizes verse to characterize Orlando and Oliver as virtuous; this choice helps showcase Oliver’s kind nature, and makes the contrast between the old and reformed Oliver clear.

Throughout *As You Like It*, Shakespeare skillfully utilizes both prose and verse to add a level of nuance and detail to his characters’ personalities and relationships. Within such a complex plot, full of many unique characters and relationships, this extra level of characterization allows the reader or audience to develop a fuller understanding of the plot and development. As one of the many literary tools that Shakespeare masterfully deploys, the choice between prose and verse plays a small but important role in *As You Like It*.