

**JOHN
KERRY**

**AS YOU
LIKE IT**

**THE INSPIRATION
OF COMEDY**

WYOMING

**LIVING
SHAKESPEARE**

A collection of essays.

FOREWORD

CIARÁN

DEVANE

US Secretary of State, John Kerry, is the first among our *Living Shakespeare* essayists to have chosen to explore one of Shakespeare's comedies. While his tragedies command our attention through their existential weight, when reading Secretary Kerry's essay, pause to think of the importance of laughter and enjoyment, and the power of optimism.

From his role in international diplomacy in which all the world is his stage, Secretary Kerry acknowledges the challenges the world faces while drawing insights from Rosalind's successful pursuit of harmony in this profound and uplifting essay *As You Like It: The Inspiration of Comedy*.

This essay is part of a collection, for which we asked some exceptional public figures – Nobel Laureates and best-selling authors, musicians and politicians, actors and activists – to reflect on Shakespeare's continuing relevance to today's burning issues. The collection is part of *Shakespeare Lives*, our extensive, year-long programme marking the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's death.

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WILLIAM

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AMBASSADOR

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INTRODUCTION

SHAKESPEARE

IN THE UNITED STATES

An extraordinary connection with the Americas was made by Shakespeare himself when he drew on European settlers' accounts of a Bermuda shipwreck while writing *The Tempest*. Although some in the early American colonies brought printed copies of Shakespeare's plays with them to their new homes, stage performances were generally frowned on by early leaders who were Puritans. Indeed, Shakespeare was not acted anywhere in America until 1730, when an amateur company put on a production of *Romeo and Juliet* in New York City. After that, Shakespeare grew in popularity with American audiences and his plays were regularly performed in cities like Charleston, Philadelphia and Williamsburg.

Americans retained their taste for Shakespeare after the Revolution in 1776. In the late 18th century, Shakespeare was the most popular playwright on the American stage. Thomas Jefferson and John Adams were both avowed fans of Shakespeare and Americans maintained a burgeoning interest in his works throughout the 19th century. His plays were made into burlesques and comic operas and there was a regular flow of cheap editions from American presses. By the beginning of the 20th century, Shakespeare was part of the school curriculum in every state. Today, Shakespeare's plays and characters are ubiquitous in American popular culture across a range of media – film, television, comics and graphic novels, as well as the internet.

AS YOU LIKE IT: THE INSPIRATION OF COMEDY

by John Kerry

William Shakespeare has to be the UK's most enduring ambassador. Since the founding of our Republic for the United States of America, his work enjoyed tremendous popularity with the people of the United States and his insights have inspired our leaders. His genius still speaks to a global audience; his words are as relevant today as they were 400 years ago. With his gift of insight into the fundamentals of the human condition, his work continues to illuminate the complexities of our characters and the web of motivations that drive us all.

His works should be required reading for anyone in international relations because our work is, fundamentally, all about people. At any negotiating table, I build trust by showing my understanding of those with whom I am speaking – where they come from and what their life is about. On a global scale, as a predecessor of mine, Henry Kissinger, has written, 'Never before has a new world order had to be assembled from so many different perceptions.'¹

Our success in navigating this complicated world is aided by the understanding of humanity that artists like Shakespeare enhance in us.

Since my professional life has long been dedicated to political leadership and diplomacy you might think the great political plays, his histories and tragedies, would resonate with me most. But it is Shakespeare's comedies that give me greatest inspiration. American painter Francis B. Carpenter observed of Abraham Lincoln, a famous lover of Shakespeare, 'the spirit which held the woe of *Lear*, and the tragedy of *Hamlet*, would have broken, had it not also had the humour of the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, and the merriment of *Midsummer Night's Dream*.'²

It is not just that the opportunity to laugh sometimes is as important for all of us as it was for Lincoln. The great strength of the comedies is that they recognise the fallibility of mankind and yet they are eternally optimistic. They are about getting the diversity of mankind to come together, recognising what we have in common while celebrating our noble differences. Ultimately they seek harmony, through the great virtues of love, trust, friendship, loyalty and understanding.

In life and in diplomacy, I would far rather try and fail, than fail not trying. For those of us who strive to bring peace and security to the world, these plays provide a guiding path and encouragement that with the will, determination and faith, we can find resolution to the most complex, and even absurd, situations.

¹ Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (Simon & Schuster, 1994)

² Francis Bicknell Carpenter, *Six Months at the White House* (Hurd and Houghton, 1866)

Of the comedies, I am still drawn to my favourite of all Shakespeare's plays, *As You Like It*. Rosalind, who 'promised to make all this matter even',³ stands out as perhaps the greatest diplomat in all literature. She navigates her own personal traumas of exile, banishment and disguise with tenacity, patience and good humour. Not content to walk in another man's shoes, she takes on the persona of Ganymede and walks in another man's clothes and character. She brings her unique understanding of everyone's particular situation and interests to bear with patient preparation and negotiation, extracting commitments from all parties to an acceptable end game. Then, she decides to 'weary you, then, no longer with idle talking'⁴ and succeeds in bringing about a resolution, creating couples from singletons and marriages from love affairs.

As she brings concord through her force of personality, the triumph of a dislocated society restored is Rosalind's triumph. She inspires great affection, and the audience is granted the unusual sight of her as a woman getting the epilogue – the final press conference, as it were. In workaday prose rather than fancy verse, she ends the play alone on stage chatting with us, her friends. In this she epitomises for me the vital power of personal relationships in international diplomacy. Edward R. Murrow, the great American journalist, summed it up by noting the real crucial link in the international exchange is the last three feet, which is bridged by personal contact, one person talking to another. Rosalind's success in the play, and with us, the audience, demonstrates just how important this personal rapport can be.

Another facet of the drama that applies directly to the work of a negotiator is the theme of time. Although it is true that 'There's no clock in the forest'⁵ as the action unfurls there is a real sense of the importance of timing. Seizing the moment is often key for attacking seemingly intractable stand-offs in diplomacy. Move too soon, and the situation is not ready. Be unprepared, and you risk missing the moment when the stars align. We must always recognise that

'... from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot,
And thereby hangs a tale.'⁶

Whatever success or failure we experience, our work is never over. It does not finish from one administration to another. Our role is to witness and participate in transformation. 'And therefore take the present time,'⁷ to make progress where we can.

³ *As You Like It*, Act 5, Scene 4

⁴ *As You Like It*, Act 5, Scene 2

⁵ *As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 2

⁶ *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7

⁷ *As You Like It*, Act 5, Scene 3

Rosalind at one stage laments 'Oh, how full of briars is this working-day world!'⁸ Some people look at the daily headlines and see a chaotic world doomed to disorder. I prefer to be an optimist. Yes, there are challenges. The starting point for a diplomat's work is that sadly,

'... we are not all alone unhappy:
This wide and universal theater
Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
Wherein we play in.'⁹

The world does have problems, serious ones, which demand our involvement and leadership, and yet this play points to grounds for hope, rather than pessimism.

What is probably Shakespeare's second most famous speech follows on immediately from the lines above. Jaques tells us 'All the world's a stage',¹⁰ setting up a metaphor that endures to this day. Although international strategy is crucial on the global stage, it is still not as important as the very human performances that the world players give on their stage with 'their exits and their entrances'.¹¹ As I travel and talk to foreign ministers, prime ministers, presidents, and people from all walks of life all across this planet, I don't sense an unravelling of the global fabric.

On the contrary: I see a world that is coming together. I see a world where more infants than ever before are surviving to 'Mewling and puking',¹² more school boys and girls than ever with 'shining morning face'¹³ are going to school. More lovers – regardless of their gender and orientation – are 'Sighing like furnace'¹⁴ without fearing for their lives. Despite turbulence and tragedy in our world still, there are fewer soldiers 'quick in quarrel'¹⁵ and more of us than ever are living to a ripe old age with or without teeth.

There may be a jaundiced view of politics in the play – a sense that the court is prone to corruption and intrigue. 'There's no news at the court, sir, but the old news'.¹⁶ Yet, there is also an examination of how to fix it. The government of Duke Senior is exiled to the forest where they find a

'... life more sweet
Than that of painted pomp'.¹⁷

There they have freedom, that founding principle of the United States and a goal common to all humanity. With that freedom, they discover a place of transformative learning, a questioning of assumptions about what matters and what doesn't, and experimentation with new, more imaginative government.

⁸ *As You Like It*, Act 1, Scene 3

⁹⁻¹⁵ *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7

¹⁶ *As You Like It*, Act 1, Scene 1

¹⁷ *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 1

It is here that the optimism and incredible modernity of *As You Like It* truly shines. The play explores some of the very changes in attitudes that have slowly over the last four centuries helped more and more of the seven billion players on this planet enjoy those famous seven ages of man – and woman – than ever before.

It deals with questions of social diversity in its treatment of the distinction between the rural, urban, and courtly folk. It celebrates the powerful role of women and subverts restricted views of gender. It recognises that might is not the answer to all situations, that,

‘... gentleness shall force

More than your force move us to gentleness.’¹⁸

In its setting in the Forest of Arden, the play embraces what may be the defining challenge of our age: the sustainability of the very environment in which we all live. If we are to preserve our world for future generations, we can be guided by the image that,

‘... this our life...

Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,

Sermons in stones, and good in everything.’¹⁹

The play’s theme – the importance of love, loyalty and trust – clearly shows the strands that bind us as humans to each other. The virtues that make our world work, that give hope for politicians and diplomats the world over, are here embodied in the characters Shakespeare has left for us: in Oliver, a man filled with hate who is transformed by human kindness and the experience of falling in love; in Celia, the true friend who will abdicate anything to seal her friendship; and in Adam and Orlando, both loyal and loving (‘of all sorts enchantingly beloved, and indeed so much in the heart of the world’).²⁰

As You Like It is surely one of Shakespeare’s most idealistic and uplifting plays. It posits a universe where authentic happiness, through tolerance and acceptance, diversity, understanding, and cooperation, can lead to a fulfilled and harmonious life. By recognising the universal appeal and opportunity of such values, it provides a vision of a truly ‘golden world,’²¹ an enduring source of insight, enjoyment, and inspiration for us all.

¹⁸ *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7

¹⁹ *As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 1

^{20, 21} *As You Like It*, Act 1, Scene 1

ABOUT THE

WRITER

JOHN

KERRY



John Kerry is the 68th Secretary of State for the United States. He was the Democratic nominee for President of the United States in the 2004 presidential election.

In 2009, Secretary Kerry became Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, assuming a leadership role on key foreign policy and national security issues facing the United States, including Afghanistan and Pakistan, nuclear nonproliferation and global climate change.

In 2010, Secretary Kerry was instrumental in the ratification of the New START (Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty) Treaty, a vital nuclear arms reduction agreement with Russia that helps steer both countries away from dangerous nuclear confrontations.

In his 28 years on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Secretary Kerry chaired the Asia and Middle East subcommittees where he authored and passed major legislation on international drug trafficking, international money laundering, humanitarian aid, and climate change, and he helped negotiate the UN's genocide tribunal to prosecute war crimes in Cambodia.

The British Council has commissioned a collection of essays by eminent thinkers around the world, from politicians to Nobel Prize-winning writers, interpreting themes in Shakespeare's work for today.

Living Shakespeare is a dialogue between exceptional public figures and Shakespeare's works in relation to the burning questions which each writer faces. The collection demonstrates Shakespeare's relevance, from the stage, to our homes, to the staterooms of power.

The issues raised include optimism in diplomacy, female empowerment, listening, racial integration, and a response to extremism.

The essays are part of *Shakespeare Lives*, a global celebration of the influence of William Shakespeare on culture, language, education and society.

The British Council, the GREAT Britain campaign and an unprecedented number of partners are commemorating the 400th anniversary of his death with a series of initiatives including a unique online collaboration, performances on stage and film, exhibitions, public readings, conversations, debates and educational resources for people all around the world in 2016.



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