

# AS YOU LIKE THE QUEM QUAERITIS TROPE

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The title of Shakespeare's first major comedy, "As You Like It," lends itself to word puzzlements, even though it is doubtful that the author meant by this that everyone should take the title or the play itself simply as he or she sees it. The Epilogue reminds us of that, even as Rosalind urged the audience "to like as much of this play as please you" (12-13) [1], so the dramatist himself meant that he was writing as he hoped people would like it.

In any case, it is a commonplace that its Forest of Arden has a prelapsarian ambience, even as Orlando comments thereon ("He dies that touches any of this fruit" (2.7.98)), just as Duke Senior remarks matter-of-factly, "Here feel we not the penalty of Adam" (2.1.5), and inasmuch as the actual character called Adam (sometimes thought to have been played by Shakespeare himself, who then could have taken the part of William, the two not appearing at the same time) emerges in the drama. With this in mind, a decade ago I proposed that religious symbolism like that calls up name-play on Shakespeare's mother's maiden name. This is noteworthy at the outset with such a phrase as "Arden and ... merry" (1.1.108-9), specifically because of her Catholic family background [2]. What counts is not merely a certain inversion of the similar sounds of key words in this context, but along with this the wordplay on **Marry** earlier in the same scene (28-32). Her former name, of course, was Mary Arden.

It can now be added that support for such an interlinear reading resides in the applicability of the familiar **Quem quaeritis** trope, one of the most famous forerunners of British drama, with its own "three Marys," as it were [3]. This was a theatrical effect which Shakespeare readily would have known or certainly known about, it having been then appropriated even as an antiphon for the Easter Mass (see Matthew 28:1-7 and Mark 16:1-7). Implicitly, the three Marys in the play's opening scene would be **Marry** (used as an interjection there but also looking ahead connotatively to the marriages to take place at the end), **merry** (meaning glad), and, in conjunction with Arden, the forename of **Mary** (as both the dramatist's mother's name and the mother of Jesus, after whom she was baptized). The widespread belief that she was therefore born without Original Sin (a folk feeling which predated the Catholic dogma) neatly fits in with the overall prelapsarian milieu. And slight "Marian" vagaries in pronunciation, it might be added incidentally, are often enough blurred in speech, allowing for the net effect of three Marys on the boards of the stage.

If this interpretation sounds at first overly ingenious, it should be mentioned that it was even suggested by several students in a Shakespeare course I have been teaching. If the view now seems too naïve, it can be broken down some more. For example, the word **Marry** could relate specifically to the mother of James and Joseph (because she was married), **merry** could apply to Mary Magdalene because of her one-time life style, and a combination of the two seems implicit as **Mary**, thereby relating to the mother of Christ [4]. No claims, though, are made for any particular mystical overtones in this connection.

[1] Citations are to William Shakespeare: *The Complete Works*, gen. ed. Alfred Harbage, rev. ed. (Baltimore: Penguin, 1969).

[2] "'Arden and ... Merry': Mary Arden: Calling on Shakespeare's Mother ...," *Marianum* (Pontifica Facolta Teologica Marianum, Rome, Italy) 44 (1982): 171-77. The article was then slightly expanded and became the opening chapter in my collection *A Rose By Another Name: A Survey of Literary Flora from Shakespeare to Eco*, *Locust Hill Literary Stud.*, No. 5 (West Cornwall, Ct.: Locust Hill Press, 1989), 7-15.

[3] The **Quem Quaeritis** trope deals with the three Marys coming to see Jesus after his body was taken from the Cross and disposed of and their being met by an angel, who asks them whom they are seeking. When they answer that they are looking for Jesus, the angel responds that He is risen. The Latin words refer to the question asked by the angel.

[4] Cf. A. Ross Eckler, "Are Acrostic Messages Real?" *Names and Games: Onomastics and Recreational Linguistics*, ed. A. Ross Eckler (Lanham: University Press of America, 1986), 17-18. The point is made that Titania's name figures as an acrostic in a speech of hers in "A Midsummer Night's Dream," the odds being enormous against this having happened accidentally.