



BROWSE



Shakespeare's Book of Genesis

Russell Fraser

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

1 COMPARATIVE ? ama Volume 25 Summer 1991 Number 2 Shakespeare's Book of Genesis Russell Fraser
 Criticism of As You Like It commonly treats the play as escapist fiction, "lighthearted comedy appealing to readers at all stages and in all lighter moods." Thomas Lodge's novel *Rosalind* (1590), an Elizabethan entertainment, conforms to this description, and before writing *As You Like It* Shakespeare inspected a later edition, seeing how it might and might not serve his turn. Critics of his play tend to read both play and novel as chips off the same block, however. But lighthearted doesn't mean inconsequential, and Shakespeare's comedy, sufficiently serious, sponsors an eccentric version of the Genesis story. The pastoral mode, a vehicle for licensed follies, obscures his reading of how diings are with us and why, diough, and most see a romantic fable, as they liked it. Turning away from die workaday world, Shakespeare set his scene in the Forest of Arden, né Arcadia, the Golden World all of us yearn for. Invented by old Greek poets widi an assist from Renaissance Italians, this pastoral place offers a refuge to people we aried of the human condition. Poems hang on trees, some of them palm trees, and the fairy-tale ruler resembles "the old

Robin Hood of England. You don't need books in the forest and don't have to go to church, there being books in brooks, RUSSELL FRASER, author of fifteen books and more than one hundred articles, is Austin Warren Professor of English Literature and Language at the University of Michigan. 121 122 Comparative Drama sermons in stones, "and good in everything." Back in society, men and women learn corruption. In the country, "exempt from public haunt," things go better. That is the Arcadian tradition and many take it for true. How Shakespeare took it distinguishes his play. Though the Court, our first venue, is corrupt and then some, quitting it we go from "the smoke to the smother," no difference. Shakespeare's young ladies are innocent of this, going, they think, to liberty, not banishment. But a winter wind blows through Shakespeare's forest, the bitter sky freezes, and even in Arcadia Death has dominion. Time, ticking inexorably, is his accomplice. Travelers in this uncouth desert faint with hunger. No one goes to church there, not a good thing. Beneath the melancholy foliage, wild animals lurk, and it wouldn't be Paradise without the serpent. "When I was at home," says one of Shakespeare's emigres, "I was in a better place." Dealing in absolutes, the Arcadian tradition says that God made the country, man made the town, disgraced with his tyrannies. But the country knows oppression too, personated by an absentee landlord. (This closefisted man isn't heard from in *Rosalind*.) If the Golden Age is what you're looking for, Lodge's nice old shepherd tells them, choose the life of shepherds. But Shakespeare won't let us choose, and his town vs. country setoff is fleshed out "in respect of" particular things. The shepherd's life is solitary, meriting praise, also lonely, deserving censure. Life in the country pleases but grows tedious, not being in court. This life is frugal, so far so good, "but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach." These tests or "touchstones" Shakespeare's clown applies, cancelling each other, discover that absolutes aren't for us. As Shakespeare's pastoral ends, all except his two malcontents leave the enclosed garden and rejoin "the full stream of the world." Romantic storytellers prefer a different resolution, and having got the hero through our vale of tears, dismiss him to happiness in "a nook merely monastic." But Shakespeare's good duke observes that men are "compact of jars," that is, made up of discords. If they grow "musical," harmonious through and through, discord in the spheres is sure to follow. Jaques, a gloomy philosopher, is the man in question, but plot and old cosmologies suggest that this concord-discord equation isn't peculiar to him. On Shakespeare's old-fashioned view, the music of the spheres depends on their colliding. In Elysium, however, Russell Fraser¹²³ all things are at peace and...

1 COMPARATIVE drama

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