# Abstract

## Emeritus Professor Chris Wortham – ‘Personal Relations: *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* in the Life of William Shakespeare’

In the middle decades of the twentieth century, the writing of an author’s personal history in relation to their work was held up to question. The New Criticism (made famous by Cleanth Brooks and his friend, I A Richards) demanded a divorce between author and work, or at least a judicious separation. However, this reactive phase soon lost popular appeal: from the early 1980s a reconciliation was affirmed. A more inclusive approach began to reconsider not only the work and its creator but also its reception. This renewed inclusiveness applied particularly to dramatic work. A more sophisticated and theorised view of composite identity featured largely both in New Historicism (as with Stephen Greenblatt) and with Cultural Materialism (as represented by Jonathan Dollimore). Both approaches were somewhat left of centre, but diversely so! They became part of a broader revisiting of cultural perception, as promoted by Michel Foucault. Foucault took the view that almost everything matters: so that race, gender, religion, political stance and performative context may all contribute to what a work means. Since then many others, including some prominent feminist theorists, have come to see text as being deeply inscribed in context.

Tonight, I’ll be talking about two wonderful comedies from Shakespeare – *As You Like* It and *Twelfth Night* – as being great fun both to read and to interpret. Both plays invite perceptive analysis and self-critique, but they also offer intensely enjoyable evenings at the theatre. Are they really comedies, though? They are and they aren’t. Half-hidden within *As You Like It* and *Twelfth Night* there are some amusing and yet also agonising confessions of deep personal relationship. William Shakespeare’s first audience would have been able to glean that he was writing about love and loss within his own family. In these two plays, what has gone from life may be renewed through art and regained with more than a little laughter.