The Seven Ages of Man

William Shakespeare

All the world’s a stage,
And all the men and women merely players;
They have their exits and their entrances,
And one man in his time plays many parts,

His acts being seven ages. At first the infant,
Mewling and puking in the nurse’s arms;
And then the whining schoolboy, with his satchel
And shining morning face, creeping like snail
Unwillingly to school. And then the lover,

Sighing like furnace, with a woeful ballad
Made to his mistress’ eyebrow. Then a soldier,
Full of strange oaths, and bearded like the pard,
Jealous in honor, sudden and quick in quarrel,
Seeking the bubble reputation

Even in the cannon’s mouth. And then the justice,
In fair round belly with good capon lined,
With eyes severe and beard of formal cut,
Full of wise saws and modern instances;
And so he plays his part. The sixth age shifts

Into the lean and slippered pantaloon,
With spectacles on nose and pouch on side;
His youthful hose, well saved, a world too wide
For his shrunk shank; and his big manly voice,
Turning again toward childish treble, pipes

And whistles in his sound. Last scene of all,
That ends this strange eventful history,
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.

Making Meanings

First Thoughts

1. Jaques is a gloomy character, so it’s not surprising that he views people (especially men—he pretty much ignores women) as ridiculous. What characteristics of our lives has Jaques left out of his speech?

Shaping Interpretations

2. In the first two acts, what images help you picture childhood as Jaques sees it? What simile describes the schoolboy’s attitude toward school? How do you feel about these pictures of childhood?

3. In Shakespeare’s day, it was fashionable to compose serious love poems celebrating the perfection of a woman’s eyes, lips, or complexion. Find the lines where Jaques makes fun of this type of poetry. What simile describes the sighs of the person who writes it?

4. In lines 13 and 14, what does Jaques compare “reputation” to? What point about the permanence of a reputation is
What kind of people might seek reputation “even in the cannon’s mouth”? (he making by using this metaphor?)

5. If the justice’s belly is lined “with good capon,” what do we know about him? What details make the justice seem like a ridiculous character?

6. According to Jaques, what physical and mental changes take place as a man reaches the sixth and seventh ages?

7. These famous lines were written nearly four hundred years ago. Of all the seven ages of man that Shakespeare characterizes, which do you think remain true to life today?

8. Do you find Jaques’ descriptions of old age horrifying? What other, equally valid descriptions of old age can you think of?

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