

Into the Woods

Jay Griffiths explores the way in which the wildness and freedom of the Forest of Arden speaks to the characters that inhabit it.

If you bend a willow branch back and let it go, its rebound is like elastic. So it is for characters entering the Forest of Arden. Rosalind, in particular, finds a release of sheer exuberance in the forest: she is made of rubber – as a boy, she is buoyant and boisterous, made to bounce, cocky as a sapling sprung in green.

The court speaks the language of intimidation and imperative, its trappings are constrictive, inhibiting and cruel. The forest speaks of freedom and the characters move from inhibition to exhibition, from restriction to a gentle wildness as the forest ripples its openheartedness out, ever out.

Away from the threatening court, the forest energises the characters with explosive dynamism at once tough and tender. Arden is a place of encounters and chance meetings: serendipity may (almost) be expected because there is constant movement in the forest like wind blowing through innumerable leaves.

Arden is ardent and asks human nature to align itself with forest nature, for this play is not an idealised pastoral but an idealised portrait of the human heart – open, ancient, friendly and deeply gentle.

In a paradox of belonging, the characters are banished from unnatural cruelty to come home to a natural kindness, to a sense of true humanity, a shelter offered ever to the grumpy Touchstone and the restless Jaques, a temporary but trustworthy refuge. The lovers find their trysting places among the trees and make their betrothals there. (In one of my favourite pieces of etymology, the word 'tree' is related to 'true' and 'truth', 'trust', 'tryst' and 'betroth'. Arden holds them all.)

Yes, there is dispute and disaffection here, but tougher than that is kindness, not as a milky meekness but kindness as a force of nature so strong it will fight a lioness and win: fierce kindness, ferocious kindness, kindness that re-finds kinship relationships with even those – like Oliver – less than kind. Kindness kindles humanity to see itself akin to nature so Rosalind can identify with a rabbit, saying she is native to Arden as much as 'the cony that you see dwell where she is kindled' and Jaques empathises with the dying stag. Gentleness in Arden has a generous, flexible strength. It overcomes Orlando's aggression at

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the Duke's feast: gentleness, the forest suggests, is the heartwood at the core of humanity.

People thrive like trees in the forest: with a sense of sheer vivacity, the forest invites verve, encourages élan, the wordplay of many characters a verbal ricochet in a forest which resounds with many voices – including its own. For the forest is an actor in the play, it has a speaking part: there are 'tongues in tree, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones, and good in everything.' It is a mindful place, a philosophical one. It is a playful place and it invites characters to play.

It also suggests a serious magic. The forest guides, teaches and reveals. It is not a backdrop but an ethical place of transformation with its particular grace of light-hearted gravity. The characters may joke that Jaques is transformed into the stag, but the forest itself transforms Oliver, shocking him into his truer and better self. Duke Frederick is transformed at 'the skirts of this wild wood' where he met 'an old religious man' who deflected him from his plans and converted him to a kinder path.

A light shines through – a dancing, changing light of sunshine through spring leaves like light through stained glass, radiating on the radiant. Some force, some power like a heartbeat at the core, emanates from the centre of Arden, the core of it and the cœur of us all, the heart, reaching ever outward, touching even those previously estranged from the magnetic, ancient heartwood of Arden which is – still – where it always has been: within us all. And Arden's glowing green spreads ever outwards inviting not just the characters but the audience to belong, to be a playful part of the ardent forests of the human heart.

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