

## Now I am in Arden

**Heading home to Stratford-upon-Avon in the summer of 1599, Shakespeare, like Celia, Rosalind, Touchstone and the rest of the cast of *As You Like It*, left behind the world of court and city and entered Arden.**

The London Shakespeare rode out from this summer was threatened with a Spanish invasion, roiled over a costly campaign to suppress an Irish rebellion, and rife with political uncertainty – circumstances that may have coloured his play’s surprisingly dark political frame.

Other contemporary playwrights who were London born and bred gravitated to comedies set in contemporary London. Shakespeare preferred distant lands and times. But in *As You Like It* he would offer a more realistic and contemporary setting, the Forest of Arden. When Shakespeare saw that his main source for the play, Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalind*, was set in Arden (that is, the French Ardennes, though spelled Arden), the temptation must have been overwhelming to domesticate it to a familiar English landscape, at the same time making it accommodating enough to embrace all kinds of associations with Arden’s domestic and foreign, past and present.

Shakespeare had long lived in the heart of the old forest of Arden.

Shakespeare’s mother even bore the name of Arden and through her he could trace his English roots to a time before the Norman Conquest. Like the old faith, Arden had been central to the world of Shakespeare’s ancestors, the stuff of family legends; yet all that now remained were traces of what had been. The great Forest of Arden had been cut down, pasture and mixed woodland having replaced the dense forest rich in mystery and folklore.

Writing about it in *As You Like It* must have stirred conflicting feelings in Shakespeare, for the play, in its shifts between woodland and pastoral landscapes, juxtaposes the romanticized Arden that stirred his imagination as a child with the realistic Arden that Shakespeare witnessed as an adult.

This may help explain the play’s different Arden settings. Four scenes are set in the woods, the forbidding terrain where Orlando and Adam stumble upon the Duke and his men – the forest of ancient oak, streams, caves, deer, and ‘the old Robin Hood of England.’ Twelve other scenes set in the Forest of Arden offer an alternative landscape, a world of enclosure, of sheep and shepherds, landlords and farmers, landed peasants and the less fortunate wage earners. When Oliver seeks Rosalind he does so ‘in the purlieu’ – Shakespeare here using the technical term for parts of royal forests that were no longer wooded.

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By medieval times, enclosure had already cleared most of the Arden forest. One reason was that Arden had never technically been a forest – and therefore protected under forest law. When John Leland rode through Warwickshire in the 1530s, the great forest had virtually disappeared: the area north of the Avon is ‘much enclosed, plentiful of grass, but no great plenty of corn,’ a view confirmed in 1586 by William Camden: the area was woodland, but ‘not without pastures, corn fields, and iron mines.’ Those iron mines, a sign of early industry, were hungry for fuel. Shakespeare’s portrayal of Arden in *As You Like It* acknowledges these economic and environmental transformations.

Shakespeare could easily have represented the shepherd Coridon as Thomas Lodge had in *Rosalind*: a successful tenant farmer who made a living tending to his landlord’s sheep and tilling the land adjoining his rented cottage. What he offers instead is a Corin who is so impoverished that he can’t even feed or lodge his guests. Corin apologetically explains that he is ‘shepherd to another man / And do not shear the fleeces that I graze.’ It gets worse, for his master’s cottage, ‘flocks, and bounds of feed / Are now on sale.’ Shakespeare reduces Lodge’s tenant farmer to a wage earner who will be homeless and unemployed as soon as his master can sell off the cottage and the enclosed ‘bounds’.

Yet Shakespeare also romanticizes Corin as the epitome of country virtues. Here, as elsewhere in the play, pastoral vies with anti-pastoral. Celia’s offer to buy the farm and mend Corin’s wages is all that stands between him and the highway. *As You Like It* reminded contemporary audiences that the new economy could be ruthless: there were more Corins around than ever. Elizabethans understood what it meant when old Adam staggers onstage in the second act exhausted and starving in the Forest of Arden, and tells Orlando ‘I can go no further. Oh, I die for food!’ The early acts of the play circle back time and again to the problems caused by vagrancy and hunger, including Orlando’s angry words: ‘What, wouldst thou have me go and beg my food? / Or with a base and boist’rous sword enforce / A thievish living on the common road?’

What we are offered in this play, then, is a much grittier comic landscape than Shakespeare had ever offered, one that provides a subtle source of conflict in a play largely devoid of it, and at times casts a shadow over an otherwise relatively sunny comedy.

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