

The Forest of Arden in As You Like It

The comedies of Shakespeare are generally set in natural and romantic surroundings, far away from the din and bustle, (the fever and the fret) of city life. They transport us to a dreamland of romance, beauty and peace. As You Like It is set in the Forest of Arden. As A. Nicoll says, "The settings are all imaginative- an unhistorical France, Ephesus, Thebes, Arden, Illyria and Venice- each are conceived in the glow of a strange and beautiful fancy." While moving through them we breathe the semi-romantic air a la Keats's poetry or Scott's novels. The idyllic pastoral world of the Forest of Arden has been used as a convention in As You Like It.

The first mention of the Forest occurs in Act I, sc I, where in response to Oliver's query Charles says that Duke Senior is already in the Forest OF Arden, and a many merry men with him; and there they live like the old Robinhood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." It is again mentioned in the 3rd scene of this Act. Celia wishes to seek out her uncle in the Forest of Arden, in the company of Rosalind. Act II leads us into the Forest of Arden itself. Shakespeare describes it through the lips of different characters.

Apparently the Forest is located far away from the Duke's palace- at a distance of more than 20 miles (Act I sc iii). As A. Quiller -Couch points out : "They all in turn reach it dead -beat." Rosalind sighs: "O Jupiter, how weary are my spirits!" Touchstone retorts , "I care not for my spirits, if my legs were not weary." Celia entreats, "I pray you, bear with me. I cannot go further." Later, old Adam echoes, "Dear master, I can go no further." Oliver arrives footsore. Rosalind speaks of it abounding in young plants, brambles and hawthorns. Palms, oaks and olives also grow there. Rosalind discovers Orlando's love-verse hung on a palm. The forest is a rich reserve of deer and other games for hunters and shepherds to shoot and feed on. Duke Senior asks the lords in Act II ,sc I whether they would go to kill venison. The same scene refers to "an oak whose antique root peeps out upon the brook that brawls along this wood, "where a poor sequestered stag hurt by a hunter came to languish. Although the season's difference brings on "icy fangs", "churlish chiding" of the winter's wind Arden is, after all, a lovely place.

Act IV, sc iii locates Rosalind's lodgings very vividly, "A rank of osiers by the morning stream" leads to the spot. The forest however, is not free from the terrible animals like lions and snakes. A snake wreathes itself round Oliver lying asleep under an oak and unlinks itself only at the sight of Orlando. Such is the forest of Arden, an ideal land of imagination, "possessed of a flora and fauna that flourish in spite of physical geographies."

The sylvian life is faithfully represented by Corin's confession: "Sir, I am a true labourer. I earn that I eat, get that I wear, owe no man hate, envy no man's happiness: glad of other men's good, content with my harm, and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck." The same freedom from envy and malice and spirit of contentment pervade the life of the exiled Duke and his companions. In Act II, sc I, the Duke admires the forest life in a spirit of joy and safety: "Are not these woods/ More free from peril than the envious court?/ Here feel we not the plenty of Adam."

The forest of Arden , like Egdon Heath in Hardy's Return of the Native plays an important part in the play. It is more than a mere stage-setting, it is a character in its own right like Rosalind- a spiritual force that has a subtle effect upon all human personalities that come under the spell. The Duke's band of exiles find life here sweeter than the painted pomp of court and discover "Tongues in trees, book in running brooks/ Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

The co-existence of joys and sorrows makes the world of Shakespeare's romantic comedies. H.B. Charlton observes very aptly, "But though the ultimate world of Shakespeare's comedy is romantic, poetic and imaginative it is by no means unsubstantial and fantastic. The Forest of Arden is no conventional Arcadia. Its inhabitants are not exempt from the penalty of Adam. Winter, rough weather, season's differences, the icy fang and churlish chiding of the winter's wind invade Arden as they invade the hemisphere of ours. Romance and realism meet in a happy fusion here. Realism is sufficient to provide that willing suspension of disbelief for the moment which constitutes poetic faith.

The forest of Arden thus lies at the centre of As You Like It and at the heart of the pastoral convention. It is a place of ambiguity. Things are not always what they seem to be. It is a place of gaiety, charm and innocence, but also a place of cruelty and suffering. Above all it is a place of growth and change, a place where people discover what is true. Finally when all the problems are resolved, it is a place that everyone leaves to go back to the real world of the reformed court.