

# Shakespeare's anti- utopianism: the forest of arden in as you like it



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In the pastoral setting of the Forest of Arden in William Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, the characters are physically removed from society, and thus from the political, economic, and sexual rules that govern social life. If Arden is a paradise, however, it is an illusory one. Shakespeare initially represents Arden as a sanctuary where the characters can re-invent themselves in roles that were unavailable to them in society. The experience of inhabiting different personae, however, only renews the characters' dedication to their traditional societal roles. Shakespeare thus presents the Forest of Arden as a commentary on the permanent influence of society on individual identity. In Arden, both Rosalind and Oliver have a chance to reinvent themselves.

Rosalind, having fled the corrupt society of court, approaches the Forest of Arden as a place where she may be able to be free to be herself. In a move that suggests the particular oppression of women in Renaissance England, Rosalind re-imagines herself as the mythological male figure of Ganymede: a Trojan boy of great beauty and Zeus' cupbearer (II. 1. 123). In Rosalind's attempt to shed her identity in outside society as the daughter of Duke Senior, she chooses the identity of a strong male. Underneath her disguise, however, she clings fiercely to her femininity. Even in her man's apparel, Rosalind insists that she can "cry like a woman" (II. 4. 5). Oliver is presented initially as a greedy, evil character who denies his brother the right to an education. When the Duke orders him to enter Arden to find his brother who has fled, Oliver has a chance to redeem himself. After being saved from the lion and snake by his brother Orlando, Oliver comes across Rosalind and Celia. Upon asking who he is, Oliver announces to the women: "I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion / So sweetly tastes, being the thing that I am" (IV. 3. 134-136). Removed from the pressures of <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-anti-utopianism-the-forest-of-arden-in-as-you-like-it/>

court, Oliver has the opportunity to judge his own character and redeem himself as an authentic person (“this thing that I am”). However, Oliver’s redemption – presented in distinctly religious terms – is one that fulfills the Duke’s order and thus renders Oliver more suitable to court life. For Oliver, Arden is not an escape from society, but a temporary opportunity to redeem himself in the eyes of the social world. Similarly, Touchstone and Duke Senior remind the reader that Arden is merely a temporary respite from human society. Its utopian character is illusory: Arden is not part of another world. Although Touchstone is one of the fools of the play, he is one of the only characters who resists folly in believing Arden to be a type of paradise. Indeed, Touchstone reminds us that in Arden, “from hour to hour, [they] ripe and ripe, / And then, from hour to hour [they] rot and rot” (II. 7. 26-27). Provocatively, Touchstone suggests that Arden is not a supernatural realm: in Arden as in nature, nothing lasts forever. While Arden’s pastoral landscape may appear fantastical and ideal, time moves on and things are always changing. Duke Senior also demystifies Arden. The Duke tells of the wonders of Arden; how the woods are free from the perils of court and the penalty of Adam. He refers to the Biblical Garden of Eden and the fall of man, contrasting it to Arden: a golden world wherein the fall of man never happened. However, as he continues, the Duke reveals an ambivalence about Arden’s status as the mythical “golden world”. He states that with “the icy fang/ And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind, / Which, when it bites and blows upon [his] body / [...] [He shrinks] with cold” (II. 1. 6-9). In this description of the harshness of nature, the Duke suggests that Arden changes with the seasons and the weather will not stay perfect forever; it is the same in Arden as it is in human society. Like Rosalind, Touchstone takes <https://assignbuster.com/shakespeares-anti-utopianism-the-forest-of-arden-in-as-you-like-it/>

advantage of his time in Arden to re-invent himself in a role that would not be available to him in society. Significantly, both characters pay for transgressing their societal roles. Rosalind's disguise as Ganymede enables her occupy a masculine role in the process of courtship. She attempts to woo the man she loves and teach him how to be a better lover. In her time as Ganymede, she and Orlando form a homosocial bond and with this, a homoerotic attraction to one another. Rosalind cannot, however, take part in a sexual relationship with Orlando while in disguise. Upon realizing that a homosexual relationship will not be accepted in outside society, she abandons her disguise and submits instead to her future husband (V. 4). Similarly, Touchstone attempts to re-invent himself as a married man for his own ends. When he is made aware by the vicar that marriage in Arden is unlawful, he responds: "[He] is / not like to marry me well; and not being well married, / it will be a good excuse for me hereafter to leave my / wife" (III. 3. 83-86). Touchstone suggests that he does not believe in the bonds of marriage; yet in Arden, he is not afraid to follow through with the ceremony. He thus carries out his distorted fantasy of marrying Audrey in Arden in exchange for the promise of a void marriage back in human society. The Forest of Arden emerges as a realm where one's fantasies of escaping societal roles ultimately lead to a re-inscription of those roles. Shakespeare represents the Forest of Arden not as an ideal world, but rather a sanctuary where one can go to act freely, learn, and return to society with a new understanding of the permanence of individual identity. In Arden, people change, time changes and fantasies are fulfilled only temporarily. Ultimately, Shakespeare criticizes utopianism as an impossibility. Individuals re-enact

their societal roles even in the absence of society. Works Cited Shakespeare, William. *As You Like It*. Ed. Alan Brissenden. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998.