

# Can't See the Forest for the Trees: Confronting the Challenges of Arden

By Emily Wiley

In the forest of Arden in William Shakespeare's play, *As You Like It*, the banishment of several characters simultaneously creates restricting challenges and opportunities for liberation. Within the forest, these characters collide with the brutal and beautiful forces of nature and its current inhabitants. Rosalind comes into the forest with the lightness of youth, entering an adventure. Duke Senior welcomes the discomforts of Arden with open arms, craving any true feeling over superficiality. As Duke Senior describes his adoration for Arden in Act 2, Scene 1, his words are complicated by a conflicting view from the melancholy Jaques. While Duke Senior remains keenly aware of his own suffering, he glazes over the issues that afflict the deer, which are at the forefront of Jaques' mind. Through the pairing of Duke Senior's idealizing speech and Jaques' moralizing lamentation, Shakespeare crafts the two men as foils for one another. This comparison reveals Duke Senior's tendency to confirm his beliefs about Arden that benefit his positive perspective rather than adapt and understand the hardships of others and how Arden is actually a reflection of life outside at court.

In Act 1, Scene 3, directly before Duke Senior's speech in exile begins, Rosalind's optimism about her banishment frames

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Duke Senior's idealistic perspective of Arden and demonstrates the mutability of circumstance. Rather than wallowing in her misfortune as Duke Frederick exiles her, Rosalind instead chooses to use the forest as an opportunity for freedom from the restrictive life at court. Rosalind takes control of her narrative, disguising herself and running away with Celia, proclaiming: "Now go in we content, / To liberty, and not to banishment" (1.3.127-128). The contrast between freeing "liberty" and confining "banishment" reflects the high level of control that Rosalind has over her life by simply commanding that a change will be made and acting on it. Thus, Rosalind views Arden as a sanctuary rather than a prison. This power reinforces that the Arden for Rosalind exists in the ways she chooses to perceive it: the forest is mutable. By placing this line directly before Duke Senior's speech, Shakespeare intentionally creates a lens for viewing the Duke's perspective, helping readers understand that perceived reality is variable and may not accurately represent life.

Duke Senior's contrasting language between the artificial nature of court and the authenticity of the forest reflects that, with an escapist mindset, it is easy to distort reality into a more attractive alternative. Arden behaves as an escape from the corruption of court for the duke. In Act 2, Scene 1, he claims that his life is better in exile in Arden, praising: "Hath not old custom made this life more sweet / Than that of painted pomp?" (2-3). "Sweet" is typically positively associated with pleasurable or favorable experiences. Thus, the duke's use of this word implies that he is pleased with his new life in comparison to his past struggles at court. His reference to "painted pomp" suggests that the grandeur and flatteries of the court are artificial, contrasting the natural beauty of the forest. By tracking the word "sweet" further into the scene, Shakespeare inverts its typical meaning as the duke describes,

“Sweet are the uses of adversity, / which like the toad, ugly and venomous, / Wears yet a precious jewel in his head” (12-14). Shakespeare juxtaposes the word “sweet” with “venomous,” as the latter lends to ideas of poison and evil. By commenting that there exists some goodness within traditionally undesirable objects such as toads, Shakespeare asserts that the expression of ugliness is a natural consequence of seeking goodness, and this evil can carry hidden “jewels.” From Duke Senior’s exaggeratedly optimistic perspective, Arden is a place with underlying merits. Furthermore, by connecting the relief that Arden provides to the feelings of “adversity,” Duke Senior confronts Arden’s imperfections head-on, enthusiastically taking agency over his experience in exile because it directly affects him. Duke Senior benefits his egotistical self by behaving as though he gratefully accepts his fate in exile, despite how he was forced into this condition.

While Duke Senior attempts to maintain an idealized perspective on Arden, there are clear limitations on the duke’s responsiveness to adversity in the forest. Through Shakespeare’s Edenic allusions, it is evident that Duke Senior is aware of the obstacles of the forest, yet he still wears an illusory veil about the purity of Arden. During Duke Senior’s praise for his life in Arden, he alludes to the Bible, boasting that “[he feels] not the penalty of Adam” which Duke Senior likens to the changing of the seasons in Arden (5). In this line, the duke claims that he is not bothered by the harsh realities of the forest. The story of Adam and Eve is particularly relevant, as the two live in a perfect bubble until they eat the forbidden fruit and are banished from the Garden of Eden. It is only then that Adam and Eve are exposed to the truth that they are naked and flawed humans. This banishment mirrors that of the duke as both characters endure an epiphany-like state and removal from the known. What distinguishes these stories is that,

despite how the duke admits to the “icy fang” of the winter weather, he still outwardly maintains that he resides in an oasis-like place where he is happier than at court (6). Yet the darkness of the word “fang” is threatening and predatory, and this imagery of the bitter cold diverges from the lush scenery of Eden. Thus, Arden is not an Edenic place, but a locale where suffering exists. By neglecting to accept this, Duke Senior is still not fully accepting of or adapting to life in Arden.

Duke Senior’s rosy perspective on the forest and its advantages contrast with Jaques and his melancholy attitude. Through their diverging responses to the hunted deer in the forest, Duke Senior and Jaques act as foils for one another, revealing the simultaneously nurturing and neglectful behaviors of humans. In the recounted story from *Lord One*, Jaques uses milder diction towards the individual deer in the forest. As Jaques watches a deer be hunted, he cries: “Poor deer” (47). The use of the term “deer” focuses on the living animal and provides a level of respect. The genuine dismay in Jaques’ tone further relays his care for the animal. Jaques criticizes the “fat and greasy citizens,” the other deer who ignore their dying companion (55). The word “citizens” evokes equality between the deer and people, and Jaques perceives the animals as active agents that he interacts with, reinforcing the interconnectedness of humans and nature. Thus, his angry criticism stems from the unjust actions towards the deer and the cruelty that typifies a slaughterhouse rather than a natural sanctuary. By acknowledging this gruesome interaction with the deer, Jaques maintains a more somber perspective about Arden, but he appreciates the forest on a deeper level because he sees the truth.

While Duke Senior acknowledges and claims to rise above his own obstacles in the forest, Shakespeare further employs the deer to act as an allegory for the tendency of

humans to neglect the needs and pains of others. After praising Arden for its beauty and authenticity, Duke Senior suggests to his men, “shall we go and kill us venison?” (21). The word “venison” is poignant because it refers to the meat of the deer and not the animal itself. Instinctually, Duke Senior reduces the deer to something hunted and eaten –

prey. In contrast, Jaques focused on the animal rather than the game meat, connecting with the forest on a more emotional level. Unlike Jaques, Duke Senior continues to lack respect for the “poor dappled fools” as he admits that he feels pity for the deer being slain in their own homes (22). By calling the deer “fools,” Duke Senior degrades the animals and pities them, similar to how Touchstone the clown is often called a fool throughout the play. He is not taken seriously, and likewise, neither are the deer by Duke Senior. The Duke further refers to the deer as “native burghers” (23). According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the definition of burghers means “an inhabitant of a burgh, borough, or corporate town” (def. 1). Thus, this new reference to the deer humanizes the animal and elevates its status slightly. However, this later switch of terminology illustrates how proper treatment of the deer is an afterthought, and Duke Senior prioritizes his own struggles, namely his next source of food or game, over those whom he affects. The recount of Jaques’ thoughts about the deer and Duke Senior’s verbalizations distinguishes between those who genuinely care about the well-being of others and those who feign concern like Duke Senior. Arden is not an Edenic land where humans and animals live in harmony, but one like the world outside at court where individuals are constantly cast aside and disregarded, like Duke Senior banished into the forest.

The continuation of the hunting symbolism reflects how Arden bears striking similarities to the suffering of the outside

world. Jaques' concern for the animals continues as Lord One details how Jaques witnessed the death of a deer being hunted: he "moralise[d] the spectacle...into a thousand similes" (44-45). The act of "moralizing" is deeply contemplating the morality or ethics of a situation. This word also relates to the "moral" or meaning of life. By taking this deeper look, Jaques is able to see the duality of beauty and torment that afflicts the inhabitants of Arden, demonstrating Jaques' conscientiousness and care for those other than himself. Yet telling Jaques' story indirectly through the Lord One's lens strips Jaques of his voice and vision, instead amplifying voices of individuals like Duke and his lords who prioritize hunting "venison." The characters intentionally ignore Jaques' perspective because it bears parallels to the outside world at court – a world that Duke Senior wishes to leave behind. Life at court is where Adam alerts Orlando of the danger he is in with his brother. Adam warns that "this house is but a butchery" where his brother will desert and brutalize him in order to maintain his control (2.3.27). The word "butchery" echoes the hunting ground of deer in the forest and represents the danger on which humans subject other living creatures. The culture of court persists in the forest through the actions of people who "hunt" others or are truly only looking out for themselves. While the duke asserts that Arden is a sanctuary entirely different from the "old custom" of court, the remnants of this predatory behavior remain.

In contrast to Jaques' "moralizing," Duke Senior perceives Arden in a superficial sense, outwardly projecting the improvement in social customs while in reality, old habits from court persist. According to Lord One, Jaques claims that Duke Senior is more oppressive than Duke Frederick, who banished him. As Duke Senior attempts to mask the hardships he faces after losing his dukedom, he refers to the other men in Arden

as his “co-mates and brothers in exile” (1). These titles suggest a level of equality between the men, as they have been stripped of their former rankings and all exist as mere humans in the forest. Nonetheless, Duke Senior fabricates this fraternal bond because there still remains a distinct hierarchy in the forest, as the Duke is the so-called leader and most of the men still hold onto titles such as “Lord.” The discrepancy between Duke Senior's words and behaviors in Arden reveals that he continues to be disingenuous about the ease of his adjustment to life in Arden and his true adaptability. Duke Senior only welcomes change when it is to his benefit, holding onto his authority. Beneath the surface, he resists adjusting to the egalitarian world of nature, where change is a hallmark of life.

Duke Senior continues to lack a full transition into the natural world of Arden. The duke's use of figurative language such as alliteration and personification when describing nature reveals how the flora and fauna of the forest are alive, but not fully appreciated or understood. Nature is only relevant to Duke Senior when it affects his well-being. As Duke Senior applauds the beauty of Arden, he exclaims that he “Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks” (16). The blur between nature and human objects is significant. By personifying the brook to have the human action of running, it first appears that Duke Senior views the forest as intertwined with humans as equals. The alliteration of the consonants “t” and “b” further bring nature to life by letting the sounds ring clearly off the page. Yet, Duke Senior complicates this idea by how he essentially perceives nature as objects or tools to use. A “tongue” only makes up a part of the body and therefore does not have the whole significance of a human. Similarly, Orlando gushes how “these trees shall be my books” as he falls in love with Rosalind (3.2.5). The books are simply the mechanism that Orlando uses to convey his love for Rosalind. This echoes how

Duke Senior perceives nature as a book and how the two men liken nature to inanimate objects. Orlando even goes further, using the possessive pronoun “my” when describing the trees, claiming them as his own to control rather than embracing an intertwined relationship with nature. Thus, Duke Senior and Orlando remain at a surface-level relationship with Arden when interacting with the forest, praising its beauty when it benefits their own conditions. They do not feel the wracking pain and moralizations that Jaques feels. By truly connecting with the forest on an intimate level, Jaques finds beauty within hardship.

Duke Senior and the majority of the banished individuals in the forest possess a trivial understanding of Arden and appreciate the superficial beauty of Arden rather than understanding its flaws. Yet Jaques is an illuminating exception. The other characters in *As You Like It* consider him “melancholy” because they do not understand his perspective. Jaques does not see a perfect Edenic world, but a complex, diverse, and stunning Arden that has many layers and needs to be understood in its entirety – even the ugliness – to be fully appreciated. Thus, it is poignant at the end of the play when Duke Frederick allows the outcasts to return to court that Jaques remains behind. While Duke Senior immediately discards the Arden he had previously worshiped, Jaques chooses to stay in this forest that brought him heartache with the death of the deer. Rather than glazing over the obstacles and grievances of the forest, he finds beauty and solace within Arden. It is amidst this natural mix of hardship and charm where Jaques finds refuge.



## WORKS CITED

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