

The Real Protagonist in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*

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Abstract: The aim of this paper is to explore the real protagonist in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*; the element that changes all the evil characters in the play; namely, the setting. In the court, the evil characters conspire to steal, kill and banish their kinsmen. Duke Frederick usurps the dukedom of his brother and banishes him to the Forest of Arden. Oliver also conspires to murder his own brother, who flees to the Forest of Arden. In the forest, all the good characters meet. Nature has a magical power that changes all the evil characters into good ones. No sooner do they enter the forest than they are redeemed. It is nature that has the power to purify characters' souls. Through the course of the play, however, there are some incidents through which the playwright shows that nature can be dangerous. So, Shakespeare actually does not want all the people to leave the city and live in the country. The message that Shakespeare conveys to his audience is that every now and then people need to live the simplicity and purity of nature to redeem and purify their souls.

Keywords: *As You Like It*; Shakespeare; setting; court; forest of Arden

INTRODUCTION

The setting in any literary work is the location and time frame in which the action takes place. The concern of this study, however, will only be the location, and it will be argued that the location, the forest of Arden, has the magical power that can transform all the evil characters into good ones; thus, it is the real protagonist of the play. It is known that the protagonist is the leading character in a given literary work. In Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, no character interferes to change the evil characters into good ones; rather it is the setting, the forest of Arden (nature) that interferes and magically changes people's nature. Shakespeare's works still live with us today, so although the play was written more than four hundred years ago, its themes are still valid today. More than four hundred years ago, Shakespeare decided "to be". His plays were also written "to be"; to transcend time through their valid themes. Frank Kermode argues that "*As You Like It* may well have been a play written for the Globe." He adds, "it has slipped over our horizon" (2000, p. 82), and that is why *As You Like It* was made a film in 2009, the fourth version. Moreover, Andy Mousley explains that Celia and Rosalind "suggest that the binary opposition between past and present may be transcended in the name of more expansive, all-encompassing humanity" (2000, p. 152). That is why the time of the play will not be discussed in this paper because Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is valid for all times. The comedies "are dominated by a sense of place rather than of time" (Helen Gardener 2000, p. 155). Praveen Bhatia says that *As You Like It* is a pastoral comedy, and he defines the pastoral comedy as a "comedy set in a rural background, which describes the simple, unaffected life of the rural people" (1996, p.91). Marguerite Alexander (1979) says that *As You Like It* "may safely be dated

after 1598.” He also remarks that the plot of *As You Like It* was built on *Rosalynde: Euphues Golden Legacie*, a novel by Thomas Lodge, published in 1590. The pastoral setting is prominent in *As You Like It* when compared with the court setting. Richard Cody (1969) says that the pastoral play was invented by Poliziano around 1480. He adds that the pastoral setting is a symbol of a good inner life (1969, p. 5-6), but Alexander remarks that the pastoral has its “roots in classical literature” (1979, p. 73). The purpose of this study is to prove that the setting is the real protagonist of the play and to answer the questions, “Why is the pastoral setting prominent in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*?” and “What message does Shakespeare convey through the setting?”

M.C. Bradbrook says that “pastoral here is no world of escape but rather a conscious means of controlling and transforming ‘hard facts’ by imaginative play” (1978, p. 145). This play has twenty two scenes. Six scenes are set in the court, while the other sixteen scenes are set in the forest. Moreover, some of the court scenes are very short. Alexander says that *As You Like It* “juxtaposes two worlds.” He adds that “institutionalized self-seeking characterizes Frederick’s court and Oliver’s house, while the forest of Arden is the place of refuge from the evil of civilizations” (1979, p. 72). Bhatia remarks that Shakespeare wrote *As You Like It* after he had ended writing some English historical plays. He adds that Shakespeare himself “escaped from the court life to the forest of Arden” to have a rest after writing historical plays. Bhatia also remarks that Shakespeare brings his characters back to the court life because he himself had to write tragedies after *As You Like It* (1996, p. 92). Bradbrook also remarks that Shakespeare adventured in his own “country of the mind” in *As You Like It* (1978, p. 144).

Discussion

Act one has three scenes. They are all set in the court. In the court, the two brothers, Oliver and Orlando, fight. Oliver does not treat his brother as he should. Oliver conspires to kill his own brother by moving Charles, the wrestler, to kill him. Oliver tells Charles:

I had as life thou didst break his neck as his finger. And thou wert best look to’t; ... he will practice against thee by poison, entrap thee by some treacherous device, and never leave thee till he hath ta’en thy life.
(*As You Like It* 1.1.137-42)

In the opening scene of the play, the audience also learns that there is a duke banished by his brother. The new duke steals his brother’s and his brother’s friends’ lands. Wrestling is the kind of sports which men enjoy in the court. Le Beau wants Rosalind and Celia to watch the wrestling. He draws a grim picture of this wrestling:

... Charles in a moment threw him, and broke three of his ribs, that there is little hope of life in him. So he served the second, and so the third. Yonder they lie, the poor old man their father making such pitiful dole over them ...
(*As You Like It* 1.2.117-21)

Orlando is a brave man, but in the court he is unable to express himself to Rosalind, and, aside, he says, “Can I not say ‘I thank you’? My better parts / Are all thrown down ...” (*As You Like It* 1.2.238-9). Later he says, “What passion hangs these weighs upon my tongue? / I cannot speak to her ...” (*As You Like It* 1.2.247-8). Later in the play, the forest changes Orlando into a

poet, and he textualises “the forest through his amorous verses” where the trees become readable “books containing books” (Keir Elam 1984, P. 137). Le Beau admires Orlando, but he says, “... in a better world than this, / I shall desire more love and knowledge of you” (*As You Like It* 1.2.274-5). Duke Frederick is not satisfied by banishing his own brother, he also banishes his niece. He orders her to leave the court within ten days, or she will be killed.

The second and third scenes in act two are both set in the court. When his daughter disappears, Duke Frederick thinks that his men conspire against him because conspiracy is likely to be in the court. He says, “Some villains of my court / Are of consent and sufferance in this” (*As You Like It* 2.2.2-3). Worse than this, Oliver wants to burn the house with Orlando in it, and if this plan does not work, he will try others to kill his brother.

Act three has five scenes. Act three, scene one is the last scene to be set in the court. The other four scenes in act three, act four and act five are all set in the forest. In this last scene of the court, the villains, Oliver and Duke Frederick, meet. Because he is in authority, Duke Frederick has the upper hand. Duke Frederick thinks that Orlando is involved in Celia’s disappearance, so he wants Oliver to find Orlando or, he says, “Thy lands, and all things that thou dost call thine / Worth seizure, do we seize into our lands” (*As You Like It* 3.1.9-10). To be excused, Oliver says, “O that your highness knew my heart in this. / I never loved my brother in my life” (*As You Like It* 3.1.13-4). It is ironic that Duke Frederick calls Oliver “villain” because Oliver does not love his brother. Duke Frederick, however, does not realize that he is worse than Oliver because he also does not love his brother and steals his dukedom. This scene serves as the climactic point of hatred in the court where the villain characters meet.

In the court scenes, Shakespeare draws a very ugly picture of the court where brothers conspire to kill their own brothers, and steal their brothers’ properties. Bhatia says that Duke Frederick and Oliver cannot be happy because they are bad people (1996, p. 93). But the case is not hopeless in the court because there are good characters like Rosalind, Celia and Orlando. Celia is willing to give back her uncle’s dukedom and money when her father dies. Celia also tells Rosalind, “... Rosalind, lack’st thou then the love / Which teacheth thee that thou and I am one?” (*As You Like It* 1.3.95-6). Celia also goes away with Rosalind. She willingly leaves the pompous court to be with her cousin Rosalind. In the court, there is also the good old man Adam who loves Orlando, warns him of dangers, gives him all the money he has saved and even goes with him to the forest endangering his life for the sake of his master. However, these good people are unable to live in the court because of its corruption. Rosalind, Celia, Orlando and Adam run to the forest looking for a better life. Bhatia says that “characters of the play escape to a world of shepherds and shepherdesses, dense woods and animals.” He adds that in the forest there “is an abundance of song and laughter, happiness and gaiety, and love occurs at first sight” (1996, p. 92).

Some people think that life in the forest is a wild life and that the people who live there are savages. In the opening scene of the play, Orlando thinks that a peasant does not have the qualities of a gentleman, and he is angry with his brother because he treats him like a peasant. He says:

You have trained me like a peasant, obscuring and hiding from me all gentleman-like qualities. (As You Like It 1.1.64-6)

Later, Orlando changes his mind about people in the forest when he meets Duke Senior. When he first enters the forest with Adam, Orlando does not expect to meet but savages. He says, “If this uncouth forest yield anything savage I will either be food for it or bring it for food to thee” (*As You Like It* 2.6.4-5). When he first sees Corin in the forest, Touchstone is rude because he thinks that Corin is also rude. Touchstone calls to Corin, “Holla, you clown” (*As You Like It* 2.4.63). Because Corin is a polite man, he answers, “Who calls?” (*As You Like It* 2.4.66). Corin, on the other hand, insists on being polite so he says, “Else are they very wretched” (*As You Like It* 2.4.67).

Act two has seven scenes. Two of them are set in the court, and five of them are pastoral scenes. The first scene in act two is a pastoral scene. Duke Senior seems happy in the forest. Duke Senior gives a beautiful picture of his life in the forest,

Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
 Than that of pained pomp? Are not these woods
 More free from peril than the envious court?
 Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
 The seasons' difference, as the icy fang
 And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
 Which when it bites and blows upon my body
 Even till I shrink with cold, I smile, and say
 ‘This is no flattery. These are counselors
 That feelingly persuade me what I am.’
 Sweet are the uses of adversity
 Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
 Wears yet a precious jewel in his head;
 And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
 Finds tongue in trees, books in the running brooks,
 Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (As You Like It 2.1.2-17)

The Duke draws an equation “between the natural scene and human discourse (‘tongues in trees, books in the running brooks / Sermons in stones’ (*As You Like It* 2.1.16-17))” (Elam 1984, p. 137). What the Duke says corresponds to what Amiens sings in act two, scene five,

Here shall he see
 No enemy
 But winter and rough weather. (As You Like It 2.5.6-8)

Later, in act two scene seven, Amiens sings,

Blow, blow, thou winter wind,

Thou art not so unkind

As man's ingratitude.

(As You like It 2.7.175-7)

Bhatia (1996) says that the forest of Arden has only one hardship which is “the vagaries of the weather. Once this is negotiated successfully, life becomes a pleasure” (1996, p. 93).

Scenes four, five, six and seven of act two are all set in the forest. The first two characters to appear in the forest are Corin and Silvius. Silvius is in love, and Corin has loved before. This foreshadows that there will be love affairs in the forest. Nature inspires people and opens their hearts and minds. Later, the audience discovers that although a forester, Silvius is a very sensitive man. He says,

Sweet Phoebe, do not scorn me, do not , Phoebe.

Say that you love me not, but say not so

In bitterness. The common executioner,

Whose heart th'accustomed sight of death makes hard,

Falls not the axe upon the humbled neck

But first begs pardon. Will you sterner be

Than he that dies and lives by bloody drops?

(As You Like It 3.5.1-7)

Silvius also knows what true love is. He describes it saying,

It is to be all made of sighs and tears,

.....

It is to be all made of faith and service,

.....

It is to be all made of fantasy,

All made of passion, and all made of wishes,

All adoration, duty, and observance,

All humbleness, all patience and impatience,

All purity, all trial, all obedience,

(As You Like It 5.2.80-93)

This proves that the forest is not inhabited by savages, but by people who know what true love is and are capable to love. When she first arrives in the forest, Celia says, “I like this place, / And willingly could waste my time in it” (*As You Like It* 2.4.93-4). Jaques is a philosopher who thinks that all city-women are silly. He asks rhetorical questions,

What woman in the city do I name

When I say the city-woman bears

The cost of princes on unworth shoulders?

Who can come in and say that I mean her

When such a one as she, such is her neighbour? (*As You Like It* 2.7.74-8)

When he first sees Duke Senior and his men, Orlando is rude with them and is ready to fight and take their food thinking that every man in the forest is a savage. He says, “He dies that touches any of this fruit / Tell I and my affairs are answered” (*As You Like It* 2.7.98-9). But the Duke says, “Your gentleness shall force / More than your force move us to gentleness” (*As You Like It* 2.7.102-3). When he hears this answer, Orlando is astonished and at the same time ashamed of himself. He says, “Speak you so gently? Pardon me, I pray you. / I thought that all things had been savage here,” (*As You Like It* 2.7.106-7).

Act three scene two, scene three, scene four and scene five are all set in the forest. In scene two, Corin asks Touchstone what he thinks of life in the forest, and Touchstone answers,

Truly, shepherd, in respect of itself, it is a good life; but in respect that it is a shepherd's life, it is naught. In respect that it is solitary, I like it very well; but in respect that it is private, it is a very vile life. Now in respect it is in the fields, it pleaseth me well; but in respect it is not in the court, it is tedious. As it is a spare life, look you, it fits my humour well; but as there is no more plenty in it, it goes much against my stomach.

(*As You Like It* 3.2.13-21)

Corin thinks that nature is the best teacher. He says,

... that he that hath learned no wit by nature nor art may complain of good breeding or comes of a very dull kindred. (*As You Like It* 3.2.28-30)

Corin also describes the simple life in the forest and how good-hearted a forester is by saying,

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. (*As You Like It* 3.2.71-5)

Nature teaches its foresters all these good qualities. This is foreshadowed at the beginning of the play especially the easy victory of Orlando, the unschooled country youth, over Charles, the court's professional wrestler. This victory, Maynard Mack (1994) argues, epitomizes “the superiority of all those in the play who are blessed with Nature's goods over those who possess Fortune's”. Life is so simple in the forest with people having nothing to care about since “There's no clock in the forest” (*As You Like It* 3.2.294-5). Duke Senior himself is so humble

that he can afford to address his companions as brothers when he is freed from the constraints of courtly decorum (Peter B. Erickson 1991, p. 158). If one lives such a life, he should thank God for it. When Touchstone asks William if he was born in the forest, William answers, "Ay, sir, I thank God" (*As You Like It* 5.1.23). Another example of people living in the forest is Audrey, who asks about 'poetical', "Is it honest in deed and word? Is it a true thing?" (*As You Like It* 3.3.14-5). What Audrey cares about is being honest and dealing with honest things. John Erskine Hankins says that Audrey and William "seem completely lacking in any story impulses of their own and are content to do Touchstone's bidding" (1978, p. 121). They are simple people who lack knowledge of the sophisticated city life. Not having much to care about in the forest does not mean that man lives in an absolute freedom; there is law to govern things. When Touchstone wants to marry, Sir Oliver Martext tells him, "Truly she must be given, or the marriage is not lawful" (*As You Like It* 3.3.63-4). Another example of law being practiced in the forest is in act four scene one where there is "the pretended union of Orlando and 'Ganymede' with Celia officiating as priest," but the audience knows that this is a plaything since there is no real priest nor father to give, but it is nature that spreads this playful mood (David Bevington 1984 p. 142). Thomas Cartelli wonders whether this plaything represents a fallback on behalf of the lovers (1999, p. 176). Actually it is not a fallback, rather it is the pastoral setting which creates a gay atmosphere and makes people feel free of the ties of complicated city life.

Act four has three scenes, and they are all set in the forest. The most important event in this act is that Oliver comes to the forest looking for his brother Orlando to take him to Duke Frederick or kill him. Orlando sees his brother about to be attacked by a lioness. Orlando saves his brother from being killed and is injured for this. Only in the forest is Oliver able to see his brother's good nature. In the court, however, Oliver wants to kill his brother, but in the forest, they reconcile. Moreover, in the forest, Oliver is able to love. He falls in love with Celia at first sight; "a match that some critics have found hard to defend, but which is at least a guarantee that his redemption is authentic" (Andrew Dickson 2005, p. 28). The forest cleans Oliver's heart. Again, in the court, Oliver steals his brother's property, but in the forest he willingly wants to give everything to Orlando and live with his beloved Celia in the forest. The forest is able to change Oliver completely.

Act five has four scenes. All of them are set in the forest. In the last scene of the play, there are eight people to marry. This reflects the good effect of nature on people. Nature brings people together, and makes them realize their potential. It is as if the force of nature overwhelms the rational powers. Nature has a supernatural power which can bring these eight people together. Bhatia says that the characters who escape to the forest of Arden are "immediately aware of the enormous capacity of the forest to take away pain. The power of Arden to bestow blessing is conferred to those who come to it to seek refuge from the pressures of the urban world" (1996, p. 93). Dickson argues that "love becomes so prolific in Ardenne that even Touchstone longs to leave the incurably single life of a Shakespearian fool and develops a crush on Audrey. He adds that it is nature that has the "power to draw even the most unusual of couples together" (2005, p. 28). When he hears that people gather around Duke Senior, Duke Frederick wants to attack his brother and kill him with all his men. As he enters the forest, Duke Frederick meets a religious man who convinces him not to fight his brother. Moreover, Duke Frederick gives the dukedom back to Duke Senior. In the court, Duke Frederick is a thief and a murderer, but in the forest he is a good man. Erickson argues that Oliver and Frederick are

“villains whose hardened characters are unable to withstand the wholesome atmosphere of the forest and instantly dissolve” (1991, p. 163). Bhatia says that the Forest of Arden has only the good people. He adds that even “those who are bad are magically transformed into goodness as soon as they set their eyes on it” (1996, p. 93). As a way to thank nature, Duke Frederick does not want to go back to his dukedom until the rites of marriage are performed. He says, “First, in this forest let us do those ends / That here were well begun, and well begot.” (*As You Like It* 5.4.168-9) Bhatia says that life in the forest of Arden is “innocent, simple, genuine and real. It is a golden world where the characters lead their life in complete carelessness” (1996, p. 92). The conclusion of the play is so fantastic that it recalls the “fierce vexation of a dream” (John Russell Brown 1981, p. 27).

Shakespeare, however, does not want to give the audience the notion that nature is a kind of utopia. For example, people in the forest do not follow the rules to protect the environment. They kill the animals and cut the trees. Jaques believes that these people

Are mere usurpers, tyrants, and what's more,

To fright the animals and to kill them up

In their assigned and native dwelling place.

(*As You Like It* 2.1.62-4)

When she is banished, Rosalind has to wear men's clothes to show people in the forest that she is strong. Weak people cannot survive in nature. Erickson argues that the costume not only gives Rosalind the liberty and power to talk to Orlando but also “serves as a protective device, which temptingly offers excessive security” (1991, p. 156). By the same token, it takes one great effort to go to live in nature. When they go there, Adam and Celia are very tired and are dying for food.

The suitable manners in court may not be suitable in nature and vice versa. Corin gives the next example:

You told me you salute not at the court but you kiss yur hands. That courtesy would be uncleanly if courtiers were shepherds.

(*As You Like It* 3.2.47-9)

When asked about the reason, Corin says,

We are still handling our ewes,. And their fells, you know, are greasy ... Besides, our hands are hard ... And they are often tarred over with the surgery of our sheep;

(*As You Like It* 3.2.51-61)

When in the forest, Oliver is about to be bitten by a snake and is about to be attacked by a lioness. Nature is very dangerous, and one has to be very alert. Bhatia argues that there are no dangers in the forest because the snake and the lioness are half as dangerous as Duke Frederick (1996, p. 102). Actually the lioness and the snake are more dangerous than Duke Frederick because, at the end of the play, Duke Frederick is a good man, but a lioness or a snake in the forest will always be dangerous. On the other hand, it is the feeling of ingratitude which mostly affects someone when treated badly by his brother, but it is expected from a lioness or a snake to always attack anyone they see.

Conclusion

The country life is simple and easy. One does not have much to care about in the country. If one lives in the country, however, he must be alert. On the other hand, life in the city is complicated, and there are more bad people than in the country. Peter Alexander says that the pastoral “charm gives the play its peculiar appeal” (1964, p. 72). The city, however, may have good people. Bhatia argues that in this play Shakespeare emphasizes “the ambiance of the forest” and sharply contrasts it with the “ruthlessness and heartlessness of court life.” He adds that all those who live in the forest have no “envy, hatred, falsehood, flattery and deceit,” but the court has “the capacity to harm through jealous and hateful rivals” (1996, p. 92-3). Kermode argues that “virtuous shepherds could love, where in cities love gave way to lust” (2000, p. 79). He also draws another comparison between the city and the country saying that “shepherds, were closer to some original state of virtuous life than city dwellers could be.” He continues to say, “city and country were becoming continually more estranged, while the city sank ever deeper into vice” (Kermode 2000, p. 80). All those in the forest are able to love. The forest becomes like a home for those who can love. Those in the forest have conflicts with those in the court. Those in the forest win at the end of the play. The message behind the setting is that people can solve their problems through love and not revenge. Cody argues that pastoralism means that “the wisdom of passionate folly leads to a union of lover with beloved in a moment of cosmic harmony” (1969, p. 114). However, Shakespeare does not want people to live forever in the forest. Nature is there for people to be redeemed and purified. Shakespeare realized that people want to enjoy the advancements of the city, but every now and then people need to feel the purity of nature. At the end of the play, all the characters go back to live in the court. Shakespeare, through his play, wants people to take the good of both the court and the forest. Mousley argues

Celia and Rosalind take the best from both worlds: the dynamism of the one, the loyalty of the other; the one’s scope for innovation, the other’s traditionalism, and so on. And these they combine to create what is arguably a richer and more authentic vision of the human than either social formation taken in isolation is able to produce” (2000, p. 154).

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