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The Forest of Arden in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*: A Critique of the Pastoral

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Abstract:

Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is a romantic comedy. It combines the conventions of the pastoral with those of the romance. The forest of Arden is the place where both the pastoral activities and the love-games of the young lovers are enacted. Nature plays an important role in the action of the play. It is nature that authenticates the pastoral ideology the play has subscribed to. But Shakespeare also tests the limits of pastoral representation by consciously incorporating problematic elements. Through our reading "against the grain" of the pastoral devices and conventions, lodged inside the body of the text, the forest of Arden will emerge not just as an unstable semantic field, capable of generating multiple meanings, but also (inside and outside of the play) as an important ideological battleground. An added incentive to our project is the debate whether nature is an "object" of "representation" or a "subject" of "invention", a debate positioning our critique in relation to ecocriticism.

Keywords: Shakespeare, pastoral, nature, ecocriticism, counter-pastoral, eco-consciousness.

The Representation of the Forest: Deconstructing the Locale:

Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* is set in two different, and conceptually opposing, locales: the court and the forest. While the first act of the play uses the court and the country estate of Oliver (an extension of the court) as its setting, the remaining part of the play after 3.1 is entirely set in the forest. The second act, by alternating between the court and the forest, establishes the contrast between them. In Shakespeare's time, theatre-practices were largely non-illusionistic. Early Modern theatregoers were accustomed to austere stage settings, and the original productions of *As You Like It* marked no exception. At the visual

level, the shift in locale was not realistically indicated on stage. What possibly differentiated the forest scenes from other ones were the words in the script, the costumes, and the gestures of the actors. This must have invited the audience to experience the essential irony that characterizes all theatrical representations. The forest in the play is not a real forest, but a metonymic space assigned for role-play. The problem was probably intensified by the knowledge on the part of the spectators that the Duke's role could be doubled. Even the language within the text contributed to this "undoing" of the locale. A realistic stage setting could certainly have smoothed out the rough moments within the text that mark the gradual failure of the conceptual integrity of the 'forest'. But the question that we need to ask at this stage is: what formed and maintained the conceptual boundaries of the forest of Arden in the play? What organized and held together the failing discourse of the "forest"? The answer is: the conventions of the Pastoral. But Shakespeare was acutely aware of the limitations and contradictions that the pastoral mode of representation was susceptible to.

The representation of the forest of Arden in *As You Like It* is based on certain binary oppositions between the court and the forest. These oppositions are wittily hinted by Touchstone in 3.3:

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. (AYL 3.3.3-8)¹

Of course, there are other more important oppositions: immoral/moral, unsafe/safe, artificial/natural etc. But Touchstone's words bring out the basic relativity that always accompanies the processes of valuation. They also criticize the "epistemic" fiction that underlie the project of pastoral representation (initiated by the Duke in 2.1) by showing that all is not well with a country/forest life. Ironically, Touchstone's critical attitude is not "authentic" in so far as it comes from a court-jester accustomed to urban life, and not from a "neutral" observer. But, at least, it comes as a corrective to the other extreme, Duke Senior's pedagogical speech that moralizes on adversity:

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 tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,

Sermons in stones, and good in everything. (AYL 2.1.12-17)

Throughout the complete speech, the language plays with those other oppositions. But a more conscious project is apparent here. While Touchstone's scepticism is apparently unsuitable for a pastoral romance, the Duke's idealisation of the forest life is both within context and out of context. Though he has been forced to accept the Forest of Arden as his pastoral retreat, his epistemological response to it is affected neither by the social reality of the shepherds (which is excusable), nor, strictly speaking, by the emotional language of involvement that generally characterizes the poetry of the pastoral. In fact, there is no 'authentic' description of the forest landscape in his speech except what can be retrieved from a series of ethically driven personifications. The forest is valued either as a "life exempt from public haunt" (AYL 2.1.15) or as "More free from peril than the envious court" (2.1.4). Even the winds of winter become "counsellors" to the Duke (AYL 2.1.10). Thus, the court does not only form the subtext against which the forest has to be "read" but penetrates the very discourse of the forest. The very structure of knowledge that makes the representation of the forest possible is one that is conditioned by the court and the city life: the forest is a "desert city" and the animals "native burghers" (AYL 2.1.23-25). Duke Senior's essentially urban imagination repeatedly attempts at transforming landscape into discourse. However, such attempts are not limited to his character only: other characters do that as well, though in different ways. Interestingly, both Touchstone's and the Duke's versions of the forest life deflate our expectations of a pastoral utopia that were roused by Charles in the very first scene: "They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the golden world." (AYL 1.1.94-95) What does such a counter-pastoral discourse achieve, coming even from characters that live a relatively safe and privileged life in the forest of Arden? Certainly, it does not claim that pastoral utopias do not exist. On the contrary, it draws our attention to how the discourse of pastoral utopia is validated and circulated by conflicting or contradictory accounts of the forest life. The point is: what does not yet exist should exist.

Duke Senior's establishing a rival court in Arden, though not a clearly political gesture in the play, must be seen as symptomatic of a deep desire to replicate the political structure of his lost ducal authority. His authority is a patriarchal privilege, inseparably connected with his fatherhood and masculinity. One critic has rightly observed: "The forest of Arden includes a strong parental presence: Duke Senior's is the first voice we hear there. Moreover, the green world has a clear political structure." (Erickson 47) His daughter Rosalind's subversive if not transgressive actions develop a subtle counter-narrative against this narrative of hierarchy and power. If we push this gender motif to its logical and imaginative limit, we find that the forest is a "naturally" feminine space. Such gendering of the locale raises its own problems to which we shall come back later.

The Pastoral and Its Critique:

According to Terry Gifford, "Pastoral" can be used in three broadly different but interconnected ways: pastoral as a "historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry" dedicated to the idealisation of nature; pastoral as representing the countryside as opposed to the city, preoccupied with the celebration of nature; and pastoral as a critique of "the difference between the literary representation of nature and the material reality" which "would be judged to be intolerable by the criteria of ecological concern". (Gifford 1) Shakespeare's *As You Like It* is pastoral in all three senses of the term. But it is more than that. By now it should be clear that the representation of Arden in the play is palimpsestic. The traditional pastoral space has been superimposed on the wilderness in a very complex manner. The wilderness itself is a curious mix of the Old world woodland and the New World (by New World I also mean the African Continent) forest. It combines soothing natural beauty with terrible life-threatening dangers. At the literary level, the forest of Arden derives its existence from two different but parallel classical sources: the *Idylls* of Theocritus and the *Eclogues* of Virgil on the one hand and the *Georgics* of Virgil on the other. Similarly, Arden has its cultural roots in both the pagan legend of the Golden Age and the Judeo-Christian tradition of the lost Eden.

If our discussion forces us to confront the history of the Pastoral as something essentially heterogeneous and incongruous, it is because as a genre Pastoral could never be an evocation of "pure" nature. It could never stabilise the tension between nature and culture, a tension deeply rooted within its body. This tension is amply reflected in *As You Like It*. Michael Hattaway has pointed out a fundamental discrepancy in the representation of Arden:

“For the characters who have escaped from the court, the forest is a place imaginatively familiar and also a metonym for values, particularly those allied with nature; for those that live there, it has material associations with property and with work.”(Introduction 1) For Duke Senior and his fellow exiles, the forest is a place of retreat where they can reinvent their selves, or rather refashion their identities. For Corin and other shepherds, it is a place of economic production.

The problem is, however, far less simple. In the forest the exiled courtiers form an economy of hunting and food gathering which historically predates the pastoral economy of the shepherds. In a way, the life style of the Duke and his followers is closer to the Golden Age model than that of the shepherds. But in the mythical Golden Age, nature in its pristine form yielded its many gifts to men without the need for cultivation. It referred to a time when men had not colonised nature and the wild life as they did in the later ages. However, the play is sceptical of the validity of such myth as it portrays both the courtiers and the shepherds as colonizers. On the one hand, the courtiers celebrate their forest life with phallic exercises like deer-hunting (accompanied by songs), and Orlando kills a lioness without any compassion for the creature. On the other, Touchstone sardonically indicates that there is nothing “natural” about a pastoral profession which is, basically, “to be bawd to a bell-wether and to betray a she-lamb of a twelvemonth to a crooked-pated old cuckoldly ram out of all reasonable match.” (AYL 3.3.59-61) The play’s connection with the biblical story of Eden is equally fraught with paradox and ambiguity. According to Duke senior, Arden is a place exempt from “the penalty of Adam” (AYL 2.1.5), a version of Eden, lost and accidentally found. It is as if the effects of spiritual exile have been undone by a political exile. In the scriptures Eden was a “garden”, specifically “manufactured” for man who was given an unchallenged right of domination over other creatures. Thus, the forest, that promises to be a new Eden to the courtiers, must go through cultural processing (which inevitably entails domination and exploitation of nature) to become what she must be. Is Arden, then, a feminine space, a “desirable Other” or “a lover to be subdued by aggression”? (Garrard 51) Another critic has shrewdly pointed out that the only strong maternal presence in Arden is the lioness that is swiftly disposed of, thereby making the forest a self-sustaining male utopia “free of maternal interference”.(Erickson 55) Arden is clearly under “construction”.

However, to reduce the structures of colonization to patriarchal domination, or to impose a straightforward gender role on nature and wild life may not be the sign of a

progressive political critique. It creates the illusion that an “untainted” nature can be retrieved by countering the forces of “patriarchal” colonization. Some of the ecocritical projects of our time are dedicated to “the biocentric point of view” that emphasizes the need for humans to “take responsibility for its ecological relationships and its ultimate survival”. (Gifford 164) What is wrong with this political optimism is that the patriarchal language of “protection” or “conservation” confidently supplants an earlier (to be specific the Post-Enlightenment) language of exploitation without undergoing any serious scrutiny. We should remember that postmodern eco-consciousness is itself a cultural construct that serves as an adjunct of global capital. In any case, the basic absurdity of such a project in literary criticism has been revealed by our reading of the Golden Age model.

The discourse of retreat and return becomes important in this very context. If the pastoral in *As You Like It* fails to live up to its proclaimed models (both Pagan and Christian), then we should perhaps consider such failures intentional. In fact, the critique of the pastoral conventions may actually end up validating the pastoral ideology of retreat and return. Pastoral is, then, a “provisional” space of retreat from where one must eventually return to the city and the court. The pastoral world does not need to be perfect; it just needs to be enlightening. Terry Gifford has identified this “essential paradox of the pastoral” that the retreat “delivers insights into the culture from which it originates” (Gifford 82). It is as if the forest of Arden in *As You Like It* prepares the Duke and his followers for their respective future roles in the public life of the kingdom. It does so by teaching the values of moderation and hardship to characters who are accustomed to wealth and luxury. But as Gifford shows us such a “critique of avarice” has “double edge”:¹“The retreat from the urban world of court and commerce, where riches are valued, not only provides an opportunity for criticising material values, but implies that others should not aspire to them.” (Gifford 52)

The pastoral, which was an integral part of the Renaissance self-fashioning, was to a great extent conservative in that it endeavoured to maintain class hierarchy and political status quo. But as a political critique it was not wholly ineffectual. Linda Woodbridge thinks that the Pastoral had “great potential for criticizing governmental abuses, the centralizing policies at the heart of the Tudor project, and the power ethic itself.”(Woodbridge 29). Corin’s straightforward confession of the hardships of the shepherds’ life (AYL 2.4.68-80) does not pretend to be a critique of pastoral ideology. But rather it draws our attention to the issues of economic change and administrative neglect. Corin is not concerned with class

mobility. He demands a separate treatment of the problems of pastoral life by pointing out to Touchstone that “those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court.” (AYL 3.3.29-31) No wonder Corin’s voice is often considered to be the only “authentic” pastoral voice in the play. And yet the sophistication in Corin’s language must be accounted for. Paul Alpers explains “the literary shepherd’s translation of experience” into songs and “stylish exchanges” of dialogue as a “pastoral phenomenon” rooted in the tradition of Classical eclogues. (Alpers 125) But Raymond Williams is critical of this pastoral project of lending voice to shepherds who are not “in a position to pay or to reply”. (Williams 22)

The Nature of Ideology and the Ideology of Nature:

We have already seen that pastoral as a literary form has never been stable. We have also seen that the two contrasting locales—the court/the city and the forest/the country—can be deconstructed. We are to examine, then, what relation a pastoral has with the socio-political reality on the one hand, and ecological reality on the other. In *As You Like It*, the forest of Arden is a place, both recognizably real and symbolic of certain values. The place bears resemblances to the Greenwood of the Robin Hood legend as well as the real forest in Shakespeare’s home county Warwickshire. It is also suggested that Arden is actually Ardennes in France near Belgium border. But the presence of both Jaques (English) and Jacques (French) has confounded our certainties about Arden as a real place. Arden is often seen as a classic example of locus amoenus, an idealized place. However C.L. Barber has nothing but praise for Shakespeare as he thinks that the playwright, while presenting the forest of Arden to us, had a “securely grounded attitude towards it” and was “sure of its relation to reality”. (Barber 10) What Barber is emphasizing here is the element of counter-pastoral that, as he claims, Shakespeare deliberately exploited in the play. The Marxist critic Raymond Williams, on the other hand, denounced Renaissance Pastoral in general for excising “these living tensions” (between representation and reality) “until there is nothing countervailing, and selected images stand as themselves: not in a living but in an enamelled world.” (Williams 18)

If there is any viability in our approach, it is in steering clear of these two extremes. At best, we can find only an asymmetrical and largely disrupted connection between pastoral representation and historical reality in *As You Like It*. There is no denying the fact that all was not well with Early Modern English countryside. In the play countryside, represented by

Oliver's estate, is a dangerous place where the eldest brother, beneficiary of the law of primogeniture, does not hesitate to attempt murder on his own brother. Oliver abuses his privilege as the eldest brother in a most abominable way, and Orlando, the victim, has nothing but complaint against such injustice. This may well be an exception. England was rapidly changing. The growing mercantile and capitalist interest was transforming social life radically. G.M. Trevelyan found the law of primogeniture quite useful as it supposedly encouraged social mobility and balance of population between the country and the city. (Trevelyan 140-41) Trevelyan's attitude was influenced by an economic optimism typical of the Victorian period. Therefore, the consequent social displacement and unrest do not appear in his narrative. Similarly, in the countryside, agriculture was becoming more individualist and more specialized, leading to increased enclosing of lands. Population was on the rise. There was a "surfeit of labour in proportion to the land available", and this resulted in "increased deforestation" and the problem of "sturdy beggars" in the Tudor age. (Trevelyan 134) Another problem was the transformation of arable land into pasture as sheep-farming on a "rentier system" was more lucrative. Thomas More, who lived under the early Tudor rule, deplored vehemently the practice of enclosure and the ousting of agriculture by sheep-farming in his *Utopia*. (More 12-14) But the economic condition of the shepherds were as bad as that of the agricultural labourers. They were, basically, hirelings who were at the mercy of a rent-based pastoral economy. Yet, Trevelyan complacently concludes: "The forest, the field, and the city were there in perfection, and all three are needed to perfect the poet. His countrymen ...were craftsmen and creators at will." (Trevelyan 154) Shakespeare, however, presents a more disturbing picture of the socio-economic crisis of his time. The landowners were reducing the number of their retainers. These masterless men joined the sturdy beggars who often took shelter in forests. Adam accompanies Orlando in his journey to Arden, not only out of his loyalty, but also out of desperation. Corin, on the other hand, faithfully depicts the poverty of the shepherds living at the outskirts of the forest. (AYL 2.2.68-79) But he has no broader understanding of the economic problems of his time as he attributes his condition to the "churlish disposition" of his master. (AYL 2.4.73) At the face of change, the exiled characters in *As You Like It* appeal to a happy past: "The constant service of the antique world" as Orlando puts it (2.3.57) or "old custom" as Duke Senior invokes it (2.1.2). But it is not clear whether this "happy" past that they refer to was any different for the poor than the unhappy present. The society that the Duke builds in Arden is not just a "recreation" of this past, but an attempt at building a utopian future. And yet they leave the forest for the court without doing anything about the problems of the shepherds.

In Shakespeare's time there was little environmental consciousness, if we go by the modern sense of the term. During the reign of the Tudors, deforestation took pace and the project of recovering the fenland started. These must have caused severe damage to the local ecosystems. But even in that age there were efforts to protect the forests and the wild life. These efforts were motivated by two very different factors. Nature, in its supposedly unpolluted form, had an aesthetic appeal to the urban population of the time. London was ugly and polluted. Literary images of pristine nature were particularly pleasant to Londoners. More importantly, forests were royal/ducal demesnes, reserved for hunting by the aristocrats. Thus, the wild creatures were protected as games. There was another logic behind those efforts. As Simon C. Estok has shown us, much of the idiom of environmental protection was based on the fear that supply of timber would be jeopardized in future. (Estok 10) But in Shakespeare's time forests were also home to criminals and outlaws. Poaching was an inseparable part of country life. The Tudor administration saw the forest as a place that encouraged sedition and lawlessness, and sought to control it. Therefore, it is absolutely impossible to determine whether the subversive activities of the foresters were more responsible for environmental degradation than the encroachment of urban culture upon the forest. The political is inextricably connected with the ecological. In any case, the enclosure may have been beneficial to the preservation of the forest and the wild life. (Garrard 47)

Of all the characters in *As You Like It*, Jaques is, perhaps, the only one who has some sort of eco-consciousness. Jaques, whose purpose as a satirist is to "Cleanse the foul body of th'infected world", is hardly at ease with the actions of the exiled courtiers in the forest. (AYL 2.7.60) One of the exiled lords communicates Jaques's criticism of the so called pastoral life to the Duke in his own words:

Thus most invectively he pierceth through

The body of country, city, court,

Yea, of this our life, swearing that we

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

To fright the animals and to kill them up

In their assigned and native dwelling-place. (AYL 2.1.58-63)

What is remarkable in this quotation is that Jaques makes no critical difference among the locales of the play. But, more importantly, he marks the forest as a place “assigned” for the animals: a term that rings a legal note. This same gesture at “legalizing” nature is repeated later in the play when Jaques demands liberty that has “as large a charter as the wind”. (AYL 2.7.48) Ironically, Jaques’ idiom is closer to that of the present day environmental activists than one can believe possible. In both cases, nature has been subsumed into the discourse of law and power. Michael Hattaway has rightly assumed:

Ideas of nature in the play define those ideological concepts of the natural which contemporaries used in order to fix identity and legitimate the social and political order—the natural ... generally designates what one social or political group takes to be the normative, or antithetically, the primitive and authentic. (Introduction 4)

The case is no different in our time. Nature has always been “natural”: the adjective has always already replaced the noun. Notwithstanding the claims of Duke Senior, nature cannot speak. She can only be represented by men who subscribe to certain ideologies. When we say that nature is at stake and must be protected, we are actually playing by the rules of discourse: an unending play of containment and subversion.

The Invention of Nature:

Nature poses a crucial paradox in *As You Like It*. On the one hand, it authenticates (in its pedagogical role) the political self of the exiled courtiers and the subversive (in terms of both class and gender) romance of the young lovers. On the other, it presents itself as a threat to everything that culture stands for. As Gabriel Egan shows us, even in the heyday of Renaissance men were afraid that the “natural” might eventually reduce human nature to its bestial side as the line of demarcation between the human and the animal was fuzzy and confusing.⁽⁹⁴⁾ Orlando’s desperate conversation with Adam about his education which he compares with “the stalling of an ox” (AYL 1.1.8) is evocative of this fear. (Egan 94) Orlando thinks that only culture can save him from falling into the state of animality. When Orlando enters the forest of Arden with Adam, he is forced to accept the laws of wilderness: “If this uncouth forest yield anything savage, I will either be food for it or bring it for food to thee.” (AYL 2.6.4-6) Egan thinks this fight for survival emphasizes “the essential quality of animals and humans”. (Egan 99) Ironically, in the very next scene he finds a banquet ready for him in the middle of the “uncouth forest” and an authoritarian Duke ready to teach him

civility. When the forest finally yields “anything savage” in the form of a lioness, it becomes a scapegoat to Orlando’s superior moral ego. It seems the ghost of nature has been finally exorcised. But Orlando has already used an interesting simile: “like a doe, I go to find my fawn/And give it food”. (AYL 2.7. 28-29) The question is: why invent “nature” when it can be so easily contained? The answer, perhaps, lies in the role that “nature” plays in the construction of human values, as a factor of both identity and difference. Even after the Enlightenment established the superiority of humankind over all other forms of life beyond counterargument, nature still served as a potent aesthetic construct to be praised and as an alien territory to be traversed and accounted for. The logic of exploitation as well as the logic of conservation owes its existence to this very invention of nature.

This is where the charm of pastoral resides. This makes the genre so very fascinating, so very durable. Time and again the pastoral has invented nature, and it continues to do so. As of now, we cannot do without it. But the ecocritic’s claim, that “the court is not the real world but the literary convention” and “Arden, the literary convention, now stands for the real world we inhabit”, (Garrard 148) would have appeared to Shakespeare and his contemporaries (who were completely unfamiliar with Deconstruction) inordinately naive. This paper does not deny validity to such scientific facts as global warming and water crisis. It, rather, reminds us that science itself is a perspective. We cannot ignore the existence of “a world that nevertheless exists before our discursive construction of it, and will no doubt exist in some form or another long after we are gone.” (Estok 124) But so long we are positioned within culture, “nature” as a form of unmediated truth is nothing but a Lacanian real, always referred to but ultimately inaccessible. Shakespeare was aware of this problem. That is why, in *As You Like It*, Time and Death, two aspects of nature that can only be indirectly understood, form the “real” subtext to the “imaginary” text:

‘Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,

And so, from hour to hour, we ripe and ripe,

And then, from hour to hour, we rot and rot,

And thereby hangs a tale.’ (2.7.26-28)

Notes:

1. All quotations from *As You Like It* are made from the New Cambridge edition of the play, edited by Michael Hattaway (New Delhi: Cambridge UP, 2012). The standard abbreviation of the title of the play (AYL) has been used in the citations throughout the text.

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