

e-Luminations: As You Like It

A BETTER WORLD THAN THIS

As You Like It begins in the court, where people must obey even the harshest decrees on pain of severe punishment. Then it moves to the realm of Nature, where people discover who they truly are, express themselves freely and learn to love.

Hereafter, in a better world than this,

I shall desire more love and knowledge of you.

—Le Beau, a courtier in Duke Frederick's retinue

The Forest of Arden is the "better world" Le Beau longs for. It is a charmed place, a refuge for the oppressed. Here wicked people are not allowed: Oliver's heart must change before he can stay, and Duke Frederick is not permitted to enter at all.

Those who come to Arden must pass through ordeals in the world outside—some are fleeing to save their lives and others are escaping lives made intolerable by unkindness. They arrive tired, hungry and unhappily convinced they are in "an uncouth forest." But as food, fellowship and the air of delight revive them, they expand into fuller human beings.

At Duke Frederick's court, status is everything: The strong abuse the weak, people lie, flatter, scheme and even kill for power, and good deeds are performed only in fearful secrecy. In Arden, a great diversity of people lives together in easy and accepting harmony, without a structure of domination. The only foes are "winter and rough weather" and some fairly easygoing wild animals. There is plenty of entertainment too—music, conversation and the endlessly diverting spectacle of people falling in love—while at court, rib-breaking wrestling is considered "sport."

The forest's name suggests several romantic sources. Ardennes is a region on the border of Belgium and Luxembourg. Part of Ariosto's poem *Orlando Furioso* takes place in "Ardena Woods," and Spenser mentions "Ardeyn" in *Astrophel and Stella*. In Shakespeare's native Warwickshire there is a district called Arden, and Arden was the birth-name of Shakespeare's mother Mary. Thus, as Ted Hughes points out in *Shakespeare and the Goddess of Complete Being*, in setting his play in the Forest of Arden, Shakespeare is placing his characters in the bosom of the nurturing mother. —Hilary Tate

The article above was excerpted from OSF's 2007 *Illuminations*, a 64-page guide to the plays in the 2007 season. For more information or to buy the full *Illuminations* [click here](#). Members at the Patron level and above and teachers who bring school

groups to OSF receive a free copy of *Illuminations*.