

“And this our life, exempt from public haunt,  
Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,  
Sermons in stones, and good in everything.”

-Duke Senior (II.i.1–17)

*As You Like It* is a traditional Shakespearean pastoral comedy about how “all the world’s a stage and all the men and women are merely players”. Pastoral comedies are written in a genre that compares the simplicity of life in the country with the complexities of life in the city, especially around themes of morality and what it means to be alive and true to oneself. The city, especially in this style of writing, is seen as a corrupting force that requires the country, as a restorative space, to bring equilibrium back to humanity. Shakespeare utilizes these tropes throughout his body of work—almost as a warning to human beings to not get too far from ourselves—but none more acute than in his play *As You Like It*. William Shakespeare was an English playwright and poet who wrote, arguably, at least 39 plays and 154 sonnets and is said to be the greatest writer in the English language. English novelist D. H. Lawrence claims that “when [he] reads Shakespeare [he is] struck with wonder that such trivial people should muse and thunder in such lovely language.” Queen Elizabeth was so fond of Shakespeare’s work that *As You Like It*’s first performance was thought to have taken place at her court at Richmond Palace, located in Richmond, England, in 1599, but its first performance in America was on July 14th, 1786 at the John Street Theater in New York, NY. This theater was sometimes called “The Birthplace of American Theatre” and was the first permanent theater in New York City.

*As You Like It* forces its audience to take a step back from the world and examine themselves to ask whether they are living authentic lives or if they are “merely players” of society and in doing so, Shakespeare raises this question in his characters. In *As You Like It*, the characters enter and then exit the Forest of Arden as completely different people. Stepping away from the world for a while can open one’s eyes and free them from the misconceptions constructed by city life. As French philosopher Simone Weil suggests, “attachment [to the world] is the great fabricator of illusions; reality can be obtained only by someone who is detached”. This prolonged detachment from their world allows Rosalind and Celia to understand themselves and others through the use of disguise and Orlando and Duke Frederick to learn by taking advice from someone in the country they usually would not in the city. These characters are able to be open to each other as human beings in ways that living in the city would normally close people off from doing in an effort to protect themselves and their material possessions. This time away from the court allows the characters to toy with their perceptions of self and others. Professor Lynnette Leidy Sievert explains that “our species depends on the ability to empathize with others as the foundation of our very social lives, and thus, the ability to understand the experience of others, and compare it to our own experience, is a basic human ability”. When the characters begin to empathize with people who are different from them, they foster a greater understanding of others as well as themselves. Shakespeare demonstrates this through the character of Jaques by showing that humans physically, emotionally, and mentally change and that these changes are normal and should be embraced throughout life, however, these changes can only come about when one is separated from their highly technology-based world and able to think for themselves in nature, alongside other people, and without the influence of corrupting city life. These changes are what cause the characters to veer from who they were when they entered the Forest of Arden and transform into a new, convalescent version of themselves.

In order to bring this point home for his audience, the rate of change is unnaturally fast for Shakespeare’s characters in the Forest of Arden. Rosalind and Celia immediately enter the forest under false identities, Oliver learns to love both Aliena and his brother within minutes of entering, Phoebe’s love is quickly affected by Ganymede’s persuasion, and Duke Frederick has a revelation after one conversation. Shakespeare used the swiftness of the characters’ change as a hyperbole of the rate at which the world changes, since one small spark of recognition eventually fuels an entire revolution. Author Michael Bassey Johnson claims that “the world is changing rapidly, and everyone changes along with the world”. However, before the world could change, each character had to make a change of self to see the error of their ways.

This expansion of their human experience fed their underlying desire to make a greater change of the world outside of the forest.

In what ways are we able to separate ourselves from the world? Our “Arden experience” may be simply logging off from social media and taking a break from technology for a day. British journalist David Amerland states, “social media is addictive precisely because it gives us something which the real world lacks: it gives us immediacy, direction, a sense of clarity and value as an individual”. Disconnecting from social media and the rest of the world for a while encourages us to connect with our true selves and forget the image that we display to our followers on Instagram and Twitter. This much needed break from society allows us to identify the unhealthy behaviors that we exhibit and forces us to make the necessary changes to ourselves, thus fueling a change in the world. So, are you willing to disconnect and leave the outside world or are you satisfied with being merely a player of “the envious court”?

-Hannah Arnold, *Assistant Dramaturg*

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