THE FOREST OF ARDEN – REAL OR IMAGINARY?

John Macpherson, Illus. "The Land of Shakespeare". London: John Bumpus, 1889. AART Vol f 94

"And there they live like the old Robin Hood of England ... and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." (1.1)

In *As You Like It,* the Forest of Arden is where several characters find solace; an exiled duke along with an entourage of devoted men; a newly banished lady of the court and her equally noble cousin, in disguise; and a disenfranchised brother bearing his aging servant. The Court, on the other hand, is where injustice, vindictiveness, hypocrisy, deceit, ambition, envy, malice, false friendship, and flatterers exist. For director Derek Goldman, the brutal and violent court is an "insignia of power" represented by dark, monochromatic colors. Compared to the danger of the court, Arden represents a colorful paradise, for this pastoral dwelling is described as "more free from peril than the envious court" (2.1.4), and its inhabitants are free from "the penalty of Adam" (2.1.5). As time passes, Arden becomes a transformative playground of discovery yielding as its byproduct new relationships and love. Yet with all of its beauty and mythological power, the main characters decide to leave Arden and return to the court from which they originally fled.

Perhaps the returning characters, equipped with fresh experiences, come to understand that qualities such as love, happiness, security, and contentment do not exist in the tangible but are qualities that develop and are grounded by one's understanding of self. Now that the returning characters are armed with fresh vision and wisdom, it is possible that their view of the world will be different as they look inside out.

MEN PLAYING WOMEN PLAYING MEN

In *As You Like It*, Rosalind and Celia disguise themselves as men so they can travel safely alone through the forest of Arden. However, women were not allowed to be actors in Shakespeare's time, so teenage boys would have played the women's roles. That means that Shakespeare was writing a play where women pretending to be men were performed by men pretending to be women!

Derek Goldman, the director for Folger Theatre's production of *As You Like It,* also decided to play with the idea of switching men and women's roles. In this production, some of the characters who are traditionally played by men will be played by women.

Mrs. H. Johnston as Rosalind in "As You Like It". Handcolored engraving, 1813.