



THE SHAKESPEARES OF ARDEN

*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 every thing.*

—Duke Senior, *As You Like It*



As *You Like It*, one of Shakespeare's most delightful comedies, is set in the Forest of Arden, a vast area lying to the north and west of Stratford. Today only small remnants of woodland remain, but in Shakespeare's time it was richly clad in trees and dotted with villages, farms, and the isolated houses of minor gentry. The forest was only a short walk from Shakespeare's home in Henley Street, and he never lost his love of his early surroundings. When he wrote *As You Like It*, probably around 1600, Shakespeare was a successful playwright and actor living and working in London. But at heart he remained a countryman, returning to Stratford every year. A few years before the play's performance, he had bought one of the finest houses in the town, New Place, not far from the house where he was born in 1564 and the fields and woods where he had roamed as a boy. Although he was caught up in the bustling life of the great city, the sights and sounds of the Forest of Arden remained vividly present in his imagination.

Arden was in Shakespeare's blood. Both his parents, John and Mary, came from forest villages and had possibly known each other from childhood. In the 1520s, John's father, Richard Shakespeare, had left his family roots around Wroxhall (north of Warwick) and leased a house and about 80 acres of land at Snitterfield, a small village about five miles north of Stratford. His landlord was Robert Arden, a prosperous farmer living at Wilmcote, a hamlet a few miles west of the town. Robert farmed about 135 acres and another 60 acres, called Asbies, near his home. Part of Asbies included a paddock opposite his farm and a cottage built at the same time at his house, in 1514. John Shakespeare was even more enterprising than his father. He realized that town life offered more opportunities for making money than the countryside, particularly for those engaged in trade. So, probably around 1550, he left the



Sheep still graze in the meadow below the site of Richard Shakespeare's farm on the corner of Bell Lane in Snitterfield.

Snitterfield farm to apprentice himself to a glover in Stratford. It is likely he rode over the fields to Wilmcote to woo and win Robert's daughter Mary at the completion of his apprenticeship in 1557.

William Shakespeare never knew his paternal grandfather, Richard, as he died in late 1560 or early 1561, four years before William was born. But John's brother Henry continued to farm at Snitterfield on land his father had leased in the village from a manor belonging to the Hales family. Henry remained a farmer until his death in 1596. He gained a reputation as the black sheep of the family, perhaps because he was thrown out of the church for refusing to pay his tithes (part of one's income claimed by the church). Young William must often have visited his Uncle Henry and Aunt Margaret. Perhaps he helped with farm work. His plays reveal that he knew all about the need to care for the land and keep down weeds. In *Henry V*, the Duke of Burgundy compares the ravages of war in France to neglected land:

The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth
The freckled cowslip, burnet, and green clover,
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,
Conceives by idleness, and nothing teems
But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burs . . .

Among many references to the weather, so important for farmers, we find Don Pedro questioning his sad companion in *Much Ado About Nothing*:

Why what's the matter
That you have such a February face,
So full of frost, of storm, and cloudiness?

No doubt William Shakespeare's father talked to him about his early days in the Forest of Arden and possibly shared with him his interest in plants and wildlife.

In *As You Like It*, Arden is partly depicted as the traditional forest of romance where it would come as no surprise to find a lioness behind a bush and palms and olive trees flourishing among the oaks. But sensitive though Shakespeare was to the old tales, in this play he depicts Arden as a real place, a recognizable English forest with typical English weather. Duke Senior, banished by his younger brother, Frederick, and compelled to seek refuge with his followers in the forest, must suffer "the churlish chiding of the winter's wind." Their lives as outcasts are difficult; they must hunt the deer for food, not pleasure.

The forest surroundings allow Shakespeare to introduce his favorite imagery, using small details drawn directly from nature. When Duke Senior's daughter, Rosalind, is also banished, she and her friend Celia find their way into the forest. Celia discovers the love-sick Orlando "under a tree, like a dropped acorn." Shakespeare

also drew a great deal of his imagery from everyday life, and *As You Like It* contains some charming instances. Rosalind tells Orlando that men must beware a woman's wiles: "make the doors upon a woman's wit, and it will fly out at a casement; shut that, and 'twill out at the key-hole; stop that, 'twill fly with the smoke out at the chimney."

One of Shakespeare's greatest strengths lies in his ability to maintain a balanced viewpoint, wherever his own sympathies may lie. He allows his people to react in their own way to each other and their surroundings. A shepherd, Corin, describes the simple hardworking life he leads in the forest: "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 own; and the greatest of my pride is to see my ewes graze and my lambs suck." This could be Shakespeare's grandfather or uncle Henry speaking! But the forest, like everywhere else, has its share of unlikeable people. Phebe, a shepherdess, mocks and taunts her devoted lover, Silvius, so spitefully that Rosalind grows angry upon overhearing her. "Down on your knees," she commands Phebe, "And thank heaven, fasting, for a good man's love."

Although the Duke and most of the other fugitives in the play find comfort and peace in their new surroundings, not everyone is so happy. Touchstone, the Duke's fool (in Shakespeare's day, fools were licensed comedians employed to amuse and entertain their lords with their wit) is quick to let us know how much he dislikes the forest, commenting sourly, "Ay, now I am in Arden; the more fool I." One of the Duke's attendants, Jaques, finds his unaccustomed solitude ideal for indulging in melancholy, one of the "humours" fashionable among the aristocracy at that time. This involved him in deep reflection on the life he must now lead. Saddened by the sight of a wounded stag deserted by his fellows, he compares the animal's suffering to that of a poor man deserted by his friends: