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ARDEN, "AS YOU LIKE IT": PROBLEMATIZING THE LOCUS AMOENUS

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ABSTRACT

A major part of Shakespeare's *As You Like It* takes place in the forest of Arden. Arden – the green haven, replica of arcadia and blissful refuge for the exiles - bears all the promises of 'locus amoenus' being an idyllic paradise and setting the mode for pastoral play. Arden serves not just as peaceful 'landscape of mind' rather fulfils the features of mythical 'locus amoenus' with all the flora and fauna. The peaceful façade (of locus amoenus) breaks when interactions among the denizens become complicated. The constant threat of hunger, wild beast, bitter cold and allusions to hunting and wounding do not make Arden a utopian 'locus amoenus', where 'man's dreams of a better world' comes true rather it at the same time turns out to be a 'locus horridus' where man's nightmares become reality. But this verdant 'locus amoenus' rather seems a 'utopian republic' challenging the existing power structure. This locus amoenus conceives itself as an alternative to the destruction of familial bonds and disruption of polity. Here "supreme power is vested in the people" - in their cross-dressing, choosing their own lifestyles and even partners. It is a place without a monarch or duke where they are free enough to do anything they like and also can voice their own opinions. Forest of Arden thus captures the essence of Republic in its true sense vesting power in the individuals to concretize their wellbeing. As if it turns out to be a microcosmic republic with Duke Senior as their chosen head. It seems to be a place run by the people and for the people. So Shakespearean 'locus amoenus' Arden is more political rather pastoral. In my paper I want to focus how the 'locus amoenus' turns out to be the reification of imaginary republic against the power struggle of the then society.

Key Words: locus amoenus, locus horridus, utopia, republic

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Written in the literary tradition of pastoral Shakespeare's genial comedy *As You Like It* aptly features both the comic spirit and qualities of pastoral. Set in a duchy in France the play presents a remarkable phase in the lives of the characters that flee the persecution of the cruel court.

The major part of the play sets in Forest of Arden where all the exiles and fugitives take refuge from the clutches of the law of court. "They say ... there they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him every day, and fleet the time carelessly as they did in the

golden world". 'Locus amoenus' is a literary representation of a sunny and lovely place providing physical rest and tranquility most often. It is a picture of friendly nature. To an onlooker Forest of Arden projects diverse expectations. The forest invokes the idea of the golden age with peace and friendliness. One is bound to assume the place as a merry retreat for the aristocrats from the hustle bustle of the court. In a sense Arden occupies the central stage as the play's main action unfolds - not only as the pastoral backdrop or microscopic golden period but as a sheltering abode for the fleeing characters. By convention such an idyllic setting is tagged as 'locus amoenus' - this Latin phrase ('locus' place, 'amoenus' lovely) bears the meaning in its true sense. Arden stands at the juncture of true pastoral and locus amoenus capturing the basic topographical details of the locus amoenus and constituting a starting point for pastoral description. Interestingly enough, although 'locus' has a mainly spatial connotation (a place of given topography) - carrying the temporal meaning: 'locus' as a certain moment in time - this seems to prove the interdependence between the concept of the 'locus amoenus' and the spatial and temporal versions of Arcadia. But if one drags out the tinsel of golden era Forest of Arden becomes just like any other forest with all sorts of problems and harshness. It does not seem any kind of *locus amoenus*.

Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
The season's difference, as the icy fang
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which when it bites and blows upon my
body
Even till I shrink with cold, I smile, and say
This is no flattery. (II,i, 5-10)

Duke's speech reveals not just the salubrious environment of Arden rather indirectly it shows the lashes of nature, hunger and life of hardship. Even Touchstone, Jacques, Celia and Rosalind feel the burns of hardship living within the periphery of this savior forest. So, the idyllic idea of prelapsarian era (with "Adam's sins" of "antique world") falls flat against the crude reality. These aspects of the locale contribute much to the dual character of the forest in AYL, because it upholds a new, threatening face of the place. Consequently its image of the 'locus

amoenus' changes: it adopts the threatening features of 'locus horridus'. Even if the distinction between the two words is clear-cut the latter being the opposite of the former, the question of clearly defining the latter's nature is complicated. Utopian literature employs the concept of both places amoenus and horridus. 'Locus horridus' is where man's worst nightmares came true. Being a desolate, dark and hostile spot, not only does such a place give rise to horror and a feeling of fear in anybody who enters it, but it can pose a real danger to the newcomers' health and well-being. A peaceful solitary space of contemplation is now perceived as a desolate space where there is nothing to enjoy. There is always the subtle reminder of the "home" back at the French court. But none can negate that the Forest of Arden presents a place where all the people are 'free'. This single word 'freedom' suffuses the place with enough charm and enchantment to overcome the hard feelings or diverse problems. The unfulfilled desire of every human being to find a place of freedom; obviously a utopia - which opens the magic casements to the world of imagination and helps one to escape from the harsh reality - as one likes it. It immediately harks back all ideas of liberty, emancipation, free will that empower a man from all the bondages. Freedom should always come from constraints. One may ask why not 'freedom for'? 'Freedom from' actually leads to 'freedom for' if one wants to have a place with values and moral integrity. 'Freedom from' is more tangible, palpable - the life of 'freedom for'. Both these ideas are related to 'republic' where affairs of state are 'public matters' not the private concern of the rulers, better say where the head of the state is not a monarch. It is a place where supreme power is vested in the people. This basic idea of republic can aptly be juxtaposed against the Forest of Arden. Not to repeat again Arden shelters those who have freed themselves from the clutches of tyranny and injustice of the cruel Dukedom. Arden provides a refuge from the ills and cruelties of the autocracy of the dukedom. Being emancipated the former courtiers choose the old Duke Senior as their chosen representative during their stay at Arden. So 'freedom from' the tyranny leads to 'freedom for' a more peaceful and

just social space – that is the woodland of Arden. As *You Like It* poses a grave challenge to the power struggle of the French Dukedom through the manifestation of a utopian republic that is – the Forest of Arden. This green haven conceives itself as an alternative to the destruction of familial bonds and above all disruption of polity. It is a place without a monarch or a duke (that is a nagging moral watchdog or a guardian), where they are free enough to do anything they like and also can voice their own opinions more freely. They can put forward their viewpoints and ideas without any fear of being snubbed by the eyes of the law. Forest of Arden thus captures the essence of Republic in the true sense of the term vesting supreme power in the individuals – in their cross dressing, choosing their own life styles and even partners – to concretize their well being. It seems to be a place run by the people and for the people (the ‘freedom from’ and ‘freedom for’ duality rings again). This place liberates them from the strangles of laws of the court. Be it Duke Senior, Rosalind, Celia or Orlando – they actually come to “Liberty not to Banishment’.

So, one may easily ask whether the Bard has presented the Forest of Arden as the reification of the imaginary republic against the power struggle of the society. This projects man’s search for a state or a space where he or she can enjoy the bliss of freedom which begets various rights empowering one. The forest-space turns out to be the replica of the imaginary republic where the difference between the royal and the commons is abolished; rather the supreme power of the state (the duke in this case) turns out to be the chosen representative to maintain them. Unencumbered by the duty, care and responsibilities of a kingdom, a duke makes for a better (and politically safer) representative in this nature space. “A utopia is an idea or an image that is not real but represents a perfected version of society” (wiki) – that is what Arden is – a utopian republic (a perfected version of state which may sound ludicrous to the ears of the Elizabethan era). So, here Arden holds such a position where the noblemen’s “recognized authority is compromised and” creates “a natural space that acts as or represents a powerful entity in negotiating power balances among different groups” (Weixel, 58). Here

I must mention the magical woods of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Both the ambiguous forests of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *As You Like It* creates a particularly “intensified representation of trans formative space, rife with social possibilities” (Wiexel, 62). So question does arise whether the idea of this utopian republic is really potent in the context of Arden or not. Along with this one may also place – how does the forest-space confuse or disrupt agency and power? How do the noblemen and the forest define each other in this new power structure? It is true that within the boundary of the green woods, the fugitives “discover socially destabilizing space that obviously denies exclusive authority to the highborn and ennobles a degree of freedom from the limitations of degree” (Wiexel, 64). Even the relationships among the couples are free from the stereotypical constraints and limitations.

But this utopian haven seems mere castle in the air if judged more critically. This forest is no golden world but is only compared to it. If we think the mythical ‘merry men’ of Robin Hood can be placed against the ‘merry men’ of Duke Senior, then we are kind of on a wrong track. Robin Hood’s (a peasant leader or an exiled aristocrat) motto to do justice to the have-nots cannot be compared to Duke Senior who is actually using Arden for his own purpose not for any upliftment of others. So we cannot place him in the place of the mythical Robin Hood who also took shelter in heart of a forest. Apart from the subtle similarities the duke and the mythic hero are poles apart. The duke and his party have come here just for the time being, not to challenge or change the power structure existing outside the jungle. In the lap of lush nature their condition cannot be marked as the state of nature that precedes governments. Rather through the eyes of the melancholy philosopher Jacques we can see the Duke and his party (along with Orlando, Celia and Rosalind) are the usurpers actually encroaching the living space of the natives of the forest fringe. As if they are exploiting the “native burghers”, living off their labour. The idea of utopian republic vanishes when we see the social inferiors of the Duke party serve the Duke killing animals and preparing his meals. The announcement of equality

and brotherhood in the lap of nature sound ludicrous hearing the song celebrating the hereditary privilege of killing to feed one's stomach:

... wear the horn

It was a crest ere thou wast born

Thy father's father wore it

And thy father bore it. (IV, ii, 17-20)

Even Rosalind and Celia have enough gold to 'buy entertainment' and remain totally different from the common peasantry of the forest fringe. Even disguise is not enough to hide the marked differences between the gentry and the foresters. The lack of naturalness in the accent and behavior of the disguised courtiers make the strata of hierarchy evident. These differences become more prominent through the words of Touchstone only who cannot shed off the motley of the court. He remains as a constant reminder of the courtly culture that looks down upon the 'vulgar', 'boorish', 'common' native people. With the elegant courtly sophistry he tries to mock the simple Corin on whose cattle he lives off. So it shows there is always a subtle demarcation line between the aristocrats and the natives. Even if they gloat over the 'freedom' that Arden offers them, they do not integrate into the existing social structure of the country side. In this way the forest supports a social structure capped by a legitimized aristocracy. Arden does not seem as their 'home' - it is an 'antique world' - being always compared to the joys of the court. The duke always harbors a sense of nostalgia for the pleasures of a not-so-distant past, "for beneficent local rule, for authority that can establish place in the midst of wild human and non-human nature" (Wiexel, 58). So, it is not the republic with concepts of equality and brotherhood as the duke kind of relies on the setting of the forest to authorize his status and power. So under the scrutinizing eyes Arden does not seem the perfected space of Utopia as the Duke and his comates demonstrate dominance over the people and animals in the forest. But they cannot control Arden as it changes and purifies the minds of those who enter there. On the other hand Arden with its cleansing power can not change the subterranean power structure that resides at the heart of the play. Rather it seems to me Foucauldian 'heterotopia' - "a space of otherness, which is neither here nor

there, that is simultaneously physical and mental" (wiki). It carries more layers of meaning or relationships to other places than immediately meet the eyes of the audience. Arden bears the duality and contradiction of hetreotopia showcasing the imaginary or utopian condition that does not exists but at the same time it shapes the way they relate to their own images.

I must say the play remains a bit conservative in the conclusion maintaining or even restoring the status quo of social stratification and power. In this connection Elliot Krieger's idea seems utterly important (though he said it in connection to *A Midsummer Night's Dream*): "fantasy, wish fulfillment, and improbability in the dramatic resolution ... dramatizes the aristocratic fantasy of, and strategy for creating complete social poise" (67). He even marks out that it is not only fantasy but also "the forces of nature certify and bless the aristocratic predominance and autonomy" (69). So considering all these points Arden hardly seems as a utopian republic. I forcefully use the term 'imaginary' to point out the existing power structure of Dukedom just outside the periphery of this forest space (from which the dramatist himself cannot break free). So, in the end his view remains conservative, yet changing. Arden subtly hints "to the fluid process of social change and the local (as in *locus*) basis on which such change could be imagined (if not yet politically effected) in early modern England" (Wiexel, 65).

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