



# INTO THE WOODS

Although most of the characters in *As You Like It* originate in the court, they all end up in the Forest of Arden over the course of the play. In our adaptation, scenes have been rearranged so that the play stays in the woods once the setting is introduced.

**But how does Arden relate to other woodland settings in Shakespeare?**

In myth and folklore, forests are often associated with magic. Many fairy tales are set in the forest, where spirits, elves, and witches dwell. The woods can be scary, whether it is because of wild animals or simply because it is easy to become lost. Trees and forests are also important symbols in religions around the world, referring to life, human society, or the world itself—as in the case of Yggdrasil in Norse mythology.

In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, fairies populate the forest at night, ruled by Oberon and Titania. Shakespeare later parodies this magical wood in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (produced at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival last year), where the townsfolk disguise themselves as fairies to play a trick on Falstaff. Forests have mystical characteristics in other plays as well. The witches in *Macbeth* prophesize: "Macbeth shall never vanquish'd be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him." Of course, there is a rational explanation for the moving trees, but to *Macbeth*, it appears that the forest itself is out to get him.

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WRITTEN BY:  
KEE-YOON NAHM  
(FESTIVAL DRAMATURG)

THIS ARTICLE IS ABOUT:  
**AS YOU LIKE IT**

Compared to these magical (or haunted, depending on your perspective) woods, the Forest of Arden seems more down-to-earth. Devoid of magical creatures, this is a quiet place where the world-weary can bask in luscious nature and contemplate their lives. Shakespeare may have been thinking about an actual forest he knew well when he wrote the play. While the source material for *As You Like It*—Thomas Lodge’s 1590 novel *Rosalynde*—is set in the French part of the sprawling Ardennes Forest, Shakespeare changes the name to Arden, referring to the English wood near Stratford-upon-Avon, his birthplace. His mother’s maiden name was also Arden, a prominent family in the region. Shakespeare further “localizes” the French wood from the original novel when Duke Frederick says that the outcasts in the Forest of Arden “live like the old Robin Hood of England.”

Yet Arden has its own brand of magic—the miraculous ability to make people fall in love and change their lives. Oliver, who had been hunting Orlando at the order of Duke Fredrick, has a truly fantastical encounter with a snake and a lioness in the forest, which precipitates his reconciliation with his estranged brother. People live freer, more flexible lives here, pursuing their desires and meeting people that they would normally not come across. The humorous scene in which Touchstone and Corin compare the ways of the court and country is a good example. Rosalind tries out different roles and gender identities before she finally marries Orlando and reunites with her father. In the Forest of Arden, characters—and Shakespeare’s audiences—experience a kind of pre-civilization paradise, the Arcadia of Greek myth or the Garden of Eden in the Judeo-Christian tradition. As Duke Senior notes: “Are not these woods / More free from peril than the envious court? / Here feel we but the penalty of Adam.”

Do not be fooled by the rustic setting of *As You Like It*. The Forest of Arden may not be enchanted, but extraordinary things can still happen in these woods.