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"A Vision of Arcadia"

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A Vision of Arcadia*

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For centuries the mythical land of Arcadia has been the romantic setting for stories of simple pastoral life. It has been the inspiration for poetry and music, painting and sculpture, architecture and landscape gardens; in fact it has found its way into all the arts. However, this essay will confine itself to the origins of Arcadia in classical writings and its influence on the literature of the Renaissance. Within this myth of Arcadia is to be found a profound philosophy that is rooted in the ancient world: while basically Platonic it is also part of what we have come to know as the perennial philosophy.

When we hear the word 'Arcadia', we probably think of an idyllic countryside peopled by shepherds and shepherdesses. The famous *Arcadia* written by Philip Sidney may come to mind: such a well known title and yet so little read! Or we may be reminded of the lover and his lass who passed over the green cornfields in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*, and the sheep-shearing scenes in *A Winter's Tale*. But before we can look at these in any detail, we shall have to go back to their origins about three thousand years ago.

Around 800 BC Hesiod, who was roughly contemporary with Homer, wrote his *Works and Days* in which he described the four great ages of the world. Of the first, the golden age, he wrote:

First of all the deathless gods who dwell on Olympus made a golden race of mortal men who lived in the time of Cronos when he was reigning in heaven. And they lived like gods without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief: miserable age rested not on them; but with legs and arms never failing they made merry with feasting beyond the reach of all evils. When they died, it was as though they were overcome with sleep, and they had all good things; for the fruitful earth—unforced—bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their

* This essay is based on a lecture presented to the Temenos Academy on 2 October 2008.

lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.¹

Four hundred years later Plato was writing about the death of Socrates in the *Phaedo*.² As he is about to die, Socrates tries to persuade his friends and pupils that the soul is immortal and that beyond this life a better may be attained. Having given five proofs for the immortality of the soul, he ends by telling a story that he calls the Myth of the True Vision of the Earth. This vision is very similar to that of the golden age described by Hesiod. Socrates explains how the world is seen by the gods and by those souls who have reached far beyond the ordinary life. The earth is spherical, he says, suspended in the middle of the heavens and balanced there in perfect harmony. From a distance it may be seen as having twelve faces of purple, gold, white and other vibrant colours. Trees, flowers and fruits grow to perfection and the gemstones found in the mountains are pure of colour, uncorrupted by the filth and disease of our own world. For the souls who dwell there the breath of life is aether, rather than air, while their lands float in air as if it were water. As Hesiod also says, the seasons are gentle, there is no disease and the inhabitants live long and happy lives. They surpass us in wisdom and keenness of the senses, they need little sleep and their deaths are blissful. They associate with the gods who dwell in reality in their temples and groves. Everything is seen as it truly is. This is the ideal earth, the Platonic idea of earth herself as it first existed in the mind of the Creator.

This ideal world is pristine and pure. It is the fit dwelling place of those souls who have spent their previous lives in purity and moderation. But, says Socrates, the majority of the human race inhabit the hollows of the earth, places of water, mists and air, the dregs of the pure earth where everything is corrupted. We believe that these shadow-lands are reality. It is as if we live in the sea and perceive the sun and stars through the water, imagining that to be the sky. But if we were to swim like fishes to the surface we might see our world as it really is. If the nature of a human being were sufficient for such an elevated survey, Socrates says, 'he would know that the heavens

1. *Works and Days*, ll. 109–20; trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White in *Hesiod, the Homeric Hymns and Homeric*, Loeb Classical Library (London: Heinemann, 1914).

2. Plato, *Phaedo* 109e–111c; trans. Thomas Taylor, *Works of Plato—Volume 4*, Thomas Taylor Series (hereafter TTS) 12 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1995), pp. 290–92.

which he there beheld were the true heavens and that he perceived the true light and the true earth'.³

Socrates' fable explains how one's perception of the universe varies according to the level of one's spiritual development. Most of us live in the hollows of the earth, the world perceived through the senses. Sometimes, maybe, we have glimpses of that pure higher world but mostly we live believing the world we inhabit to be the reality. Socrates ends by explaining that although it is only a fable, our souls are indeed immortal and we should hazard the truth of this. We should do all we can to participate in virtue and prudence in the present life so as to gain our proper habitation in the next for, he says, 'the danger is beautiful and it is necessary to allure ourselves with things of this kind'.⁴

This fable is the last Socrates tells before he dies, but Plato mentions it on several other occasions. In a similar description of the true earth or the golden age in the *Politicus* (*The Statesman*), he writes of 'the life of men under the reign of Saturn'⁵ and in the *Cratylus* he describes Cronos as intellect⁶. For like all myths, the golden age refers to a state of being and not to some period of time in the far distant past. It is the world of intellect or our higher minds to which Socrates wishes us to aspire; it is for this reason that both Plato and Hesiod describe it as being ruled by Cronos.

Plotinus, living several hundred years after Plato, wrote of the same world, the true earth that through the power of their intellect human beings may enter. Some, those that claim rationality, never start on the course; others are urged forward by the better part of their soul but, unable to see what is ahead, they fall back to practical actions. But the third kind he says are

. . . godlike men who, by their greater power and the sharpness of their eyes as if by a special keen-sightedness, see the glory above and are raised to it as if above the clouds and the mist of this lower

3. *Ibid.* 109c–110a (TTS 12, pp. 290–91). 4. *Ibid.* 114d (TTS 12, p. 296).

5. Plato, *Politicus* 272b (TTS 12, p. 114). Taylor here refers to Cronos; he preferred to use the Roman names of Greek mythological figures, as was already the practice of the writers of the Renaissance.

6. Plato, *Cratylus* 396b–c; trans. Thomas Taylor, *Works of Plato—Volume 5*, TTS 13 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1995), p. 476; Taylor subsequently comments that 'Saturn therefore according to Plato is pure intellect' (*ibid.*, p. 528 n. 3). See also *idem*, trans., *Proclus' Theology of Plato*, TTS 8 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1995), p. 251.

world and remain there, overlooking all things here below and delighting in the true region which is their own, like a man who has come home after long wandering to his own well-ordered country.⁷

These are indeed great visions; but all who have passed them on to us stress that it is not so much the words themselves but how we perceive them that is important. As the vision of those who choose to follow a virtuous life and enter the world of intellect becomes clearer, so their perception of reality changes and they begin to see the earth in its full glory. This vision of the true earth has been called by many names in many traditions: the Garden of Eden, Atlantis, Utopia, Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land and—Arcadia.

And yet the Greek land of Arcadia in the central Peloponnese is nothing like the image of gently wooded hills, grassy meadows and sparkling streams that usually springs to mind. On the contrary it is a harsh landscape. The third century BC historian Polybius described his native land as 'a poor, bare, rocky, chilly country, scarcely affording food for a few meagre goats';⁸ although he does praise the Arcadians for their simple piety and love of music.

According to Hesiod and Plato the golden age inhabitants of the true earth live alongside the gods, who dwell in reality in their temples and groves. Two of the gods associated with Arcadia, Pan and Hermes, are both musicians: Pan is famous for his pipes and Hermes for the lyre that he made from a tortoise shell. We first hear their stories in the *Homeric Hymns*: these are hard to date, but traditionally they have been grouped with the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. They contain some of the earliest references to Arcadia as a land of music, shepherds and sheep:

Of Hermes sing, O Muse, the son of Zeus and Maia,
Lord of Kyllene and Arcadia abounding with sheep.⁹

7. Plotinus, 'On Intellect, the Forms and Being', *Ennead* 5.9.1, trans. A. H. Armstrong, *Ennead, Volume V*, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

8. Polybius is thus paraphrased by Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1955), p. 298.

9. 'To Hermes', ll. 1–2; trans. Apostolos N. Athanassakis, *The Homeric Hymns* (Baltimore MD: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 31.

The hymns to Hermes and Pan tell how Hermes 'came to the mother of flocks, Arcadia'¹⁰ and, although a god, tended the sheep of a human shepherd. He fell in love with a mortal woman who bore his child, a boy with horns on his head and the legs of a goat. His mother was so appalled at his monstrous appearance that she ran away, leaving him in the care of Hermes who wrapped his son in the skins of mountain hares and flew with him to the land of the immortals. The gods were delighted with their new addition and called him Pan, meaning 'All' because it was said he cheered the hearts of all. Thus Pan became the chief god of Arcadia:

Sing to me, O Muse, of Hermes' dear child,
 the goat-footed, two-horned, din-loving one, who roams
 over wooded glades together with dance-loving nymphs;
 they tread on the peaks of sheer cliffs,
 calling upon Pan, the splendid-haired and unkempt
 god of shepherds, to whose domain all the snowy hills
 and mountain peaks and rocky paths fall.¹¹

The theogony of the Greek gods can become very confusing when we find that they exist at different levels, for this goat-legged, pipe-playing god of shepherds is but one aspect of Pan. This is the form in which he presides over nature and all local gods and daemons: having the upper part of a man and the lower of an animal denotes that the rationality of a man presides over the irrationality of the animal nature. But in the Orphic tradition the highest aspect of Pan heads the first order of gods in what is known as the intelligible world, being equated with Phanes Protogonos, the first born and the first light. He is the primary force of the universe and in this aspect the name 'Pan' signifies that he is celebrated as all things.¹²

Pan is also analogous to Zeus, who lower down in the intellectual order of gods is the creator of the world. It is said that prior to creating the universe Zeus swallowed Phanes; in this way all things were held as one and from this the world was created. According to Hesiod, Pan's horns signify the 'mingling power' of the Creator while in the higher

10. 'To Pan', l. 30; trans. *ibid.*, p. 62. 11. *Ibid.*, ll. 1-7.

12. See Taylor's comments on the Orphic hymn 'To Pan': *Hymns and Initiations: Translation of the Orphic Hymns and a Treatise on Orphic Theology*, TTS 5 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1994), p. 48 n. 1.

order the horned serpent is one of the heads of Protogonos or Phanes.¹³

Here, in this passage from one of the Orphic Hymns translated by Thomas Taylor, we find all three aspects of Pan being addressed:

Strong past'ral Pan, with suppliant voice I call,
Heav'n, sea and earth – the mighty queen of all,
Immortal fire; for all the world is thine,
And all are parts of thee, O pow'r divine.
Come, blessed Pan, whom rural haunts delight,
Come, leaping, agile, wand'ring, starry light.
Thron'd with the Seasons, Bacchanalian Pan,
Goat-footed, horn'd, from whom the world began.¹⁴

It was from these early hymns to the Arcadian gods that Greek pastoral poetry was born. As far as we know, its first exponent was Theocritus, who wrote his *Idylls* about rustic life in his native Sicily in the third century BC; during the next two or three hundred years the genre of poetry about shepherds in an idealised rural setting was established.

But why shepherds and not, say, woodcutters? The image of the Good Shepherd is archetypal and appears long before we find it in the Bible. Writing of the men of the golden age, Socrates compares the Divinity with a shepherd: '. . . the Divinity himself fed them, and was their curator; just as men who are of a more divine, are the shepherds of brutes, who are of a baser nature'.¹⁵ In an Arcadian setting the shepherd represents those higher souls of mankind who guide the multiplicity of natural forms across the world. In the same way, Orpheus is described as a herdsman since he draws the lower creatures of the natural world towards him with his music.

It was with these ideas in mind that Virgil wrote his bucolic poems, or *Eclogues* as they became known, in the first century BC. These were pastoral dialogues and verses, supposedly extemporized by shepherds often competing with each other in friendly contests. Virgil named his setting 'Arcadia' but, inspired by Theocritus, he moved the landscape itself to the wooded hillsides and lush pasturelands of Sicily. Thus the

13. *Ibid.*, n. 3. See also Taylor's remarks on the hymn 'To Protogonus', p. 36 n. 2.

14. 'To Pan'; *ibid.*, p. 47.

15. Plato, *Politicus* 271e; trans. TTS 4, p. 114.

sheep and the shepherds, the gods and the music of Arcadia were transported into the perfected beauty of nature, where shepherds and nymphs, in the company of the gods, spent leisurely lives falling in love and singing the songs of love.

More than any other pastoral poet, Virgil was inspired by the reality underlying the relationship of the human race to the world of nature. In the Introduction to his translation of the *Eclogues*, E. V. Rieu writes:

It was in his Arcady, the pastoral world of his memories and of his fancy, that Virgil found the window which gave him this vision of the truth, and sensed the spirit that pulsates in everything that is, and makes a harmony of man, tree, beast and rock. Nature is fundamentally at one with man, though towns and politics and war make him a refugee from her and her truth. It is the shepherd and his sheep that are her nurslings and her confidants.¹⁶

Through such a harmony between man and nature both the soul and the earth may become their true selves. In his eclogue 'Daphnis at Heaven's Gate' Virgil describes Daphnis, the young shepherd poet who as a perfected man has risen beyond death and is now the delight of Arcadia:

Clothed in new glory, Daphnis stands at Heaven's Gate, where all is wonderful, watching the clouds and stars below his feet.

It is for this that all things in the countryside, the woods themselves, Pan and the shepherds, and the nymphs of the trees, are pierced with keen delight.

The wolves contrive no ambush for the flocks, the nets are innocent of guile towards the deer. Good Daphnis stands for peace.

For very joy the shaggy mountains raise a clamour to the stars, the rocks burst into song and the forests cry 'He is a god!'¹⁷

After Virgil, the pastoral tradition and the knowledge it contains disappeared for many centuries. Although it is to be found to some degree in the medieval tales of chivalry and the exploits of Robin Hood exiled to Sherwood Forest, it did not re-emerge fully until the

16. E. V. Rieu, 'Introduction' to Virgil, *The Pastoral Poems* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1949), p. 13.

17. *Eclogue* v. 56-64; trans. *ibid.*, p. 49.

Italian Renaissance. Then Arcadia and all it stood for were reclaimed from the whole wealth of classical literature and philosophy that was coming to light at that time. The Platonic Academy, revived by Marsilio Ficino in fifteenth-century Florence, enthusiastically embraced the pastoral idylls of Virgil and, behind the tales of shepherds, gods and nymphs, discovered a philosophy with which they were familiar. The villa of the Academy's patron, Lorenzo de' Medici, became identified with Arcady and his circle with Arcadian shepherds. As Ficino's teaching spread across Italy so did the vogue for the pastoral, and in 1504 twelve short prose descriptions of rural life by Jacopo Sannazaro, alternating with eclogues in the manner of Virgil, were published in Naples under the title of *Arcadia*.¹⁸ The pastoral world it presented was as idyllic as Virgil's, although many of its verses were melancholy, mourning for a past world that was now lost.

The new interest in classicism spread across Europe, and with it Ficino's writings on Christian Platonism. Into sixteenth-century English libraries came his translations from Greek into Latin and his commentaries, among them *De amore*, his commentary on Plato's *Symposium* with its philosophy of love.¹⁹ This philosophy became the inspiration for the poets, who often entwined their poetry of love with Arcadian idylls influenced by Virgil and Sannazaro. And thus was born the English pastoral tradition.

In the Platonic ascent of love, the lover should aspire to pass from the dissembling love of physical beauty to love of a virtuous inner beauty.²⁰ In the Arcadian landscape where men lived among the gods, the shepherd's simple love for his lass or woodland nymph was indeed virtuous and true, one from which higher born lovers might learn. Hence in Renaissance stories of Arcadia it became the convention for the nobility to constitute the audience for the shepherds' entertainments.

Every poet of the Elizabethan age wrote of shepherds and the pastoral paradise: Spenser's *Shepherds' Calender*, Marlowe's *A Passionate*

18. Jacopo Sannazaro, *Arcadia and Piscatorial Eclogues*, trans. Ralph Nash (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 1966).

19. *De amore* was first published in Ficino's *Opera Platonis* (Florence, 1484); cf. *Commentary on Plato's Symposium on Love*, trans. Sears Jayne (Dallas: Spring Publications, 1985).

20. Plato, *Symposium* 209b–212b; trans. Thomas Taylor, *Works of Plato—Volume 3*, TTS 11 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 2007), pp. 538–43.

Shepherd to his Love, works by Campion, Drayton and many others were all part of this genre. At court the ladies enjoyed appearing as shepherdesses, albeit in the most lavish costumes, in masques such as John Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess*. It was also popular in the playhouses, as we find in *Hamlet* when Polonius lists the actors' repertoire of '... tragedy, comedy, history, *pastoral*, *pastoral-comical*, historical-*pastoral*, tragical-historical, tragical-historical-comical-*pastoral* . . .'.²¹ Queen Elizabeth herself became a symbol of the Arcadian myth. One of the many titles she earned was Astraea, the Just Virgin of whom Virgil had written in his eclogue on the return of the golden age: 'Time has conceived and the great sequence of the Ages starts afresh; Justice, the Virgin, comes back to dwell with us'.²² What better title for the Virgin Queen of a new golden age!²³

The convention continued into the next century with the accession of King James the First. Samuel Daniel wrote a masque for Queen Anne called *The Queen's Arcadia*, in which she herself appeared, and on May Day 1604 the king and queen were presented with a pastoral entertainment, written by Ben Jonson and performed in the garden of Sir William Cornwallis's house in Highgate. The royal guests were met by Mercury who told them that here they were on Cyllene, the Arcadian hill where he had been born. And there in a bower scattered with flowers reclined his mother, Maia, the most beautiful of the seven sisters of the Pleiades. Beside her sat Flora the goddess of spring, Aurora the goddess of dawn and Zephyrus the west wind. Later the king and queen, encircled by a group of dancing satyrs, were introduced to Pan himself.²⁴

Describing the country home of the Countess of Pembroke in his *Brief Lives*, John Aubrey wrote that 'The curious seat of Wilton and the adjacent countryside is an Arcadian place and a paradise—Sir Philip Sidney was much here'.²⁵ For when the young Philip Sidney was inspired by Virgil's *Eclogues*, Sannazaro's *Arcadia* and the pastorals of

21. *Hamlet* II.ii.392–5. All references to Shakespeare are to the Arden editions.

22. *Eclogue* iv.5–6; trans. Rieu, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

23. Frances Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), p. 27; see also *eadem*, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975).

24. Ben Jonson, *Vol. 7: The Sad Shepherd; The Fall of Mortimer; Masques and Entertainments*, ed. P. Simpson and C. H. Herford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941), pp. 136–44.

25. *Aubrey's Brief Lives*, ed. Oliver Lawson Dick (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), p. 139.

his contemporaries to write a romance of his own, he borrowed Sannazaro's title and set it in the parkland of Wilton House, the home of his sister, the Countess of Pembroke. In true Arcadian fashion Sidney used to sit in the open air with the Countess and her friends and read aloud the latest instalment of his work, that became a lengthy five books and four eclogues. In the idyllic setting of Wilton they would have appreciated the line 'Do you not see how everything conspires together to make this place a heavenly dwelling?'²⁶

The story is an unlikely tale of high romance that often lapses into unintentional episodes of pure farce. Prompted by an oracle, the Duke of Arcadia leaves his dukedom in the hands of a counsellor and takes his wife and two beautiful daughters to lead a country life among the shepherds. Two adventuring young princes arrive in the land and fall in love with the princesses. In order to win their love one disguises himself as a shepherd and the other as a woman; the guise of the latter not only causes his princess to become deeply intrigued by her lover but also both her father and her mother to fall in love with him—or her. Are we beginning to see a certain influence on the young William Shakespeare? In *As You Like It* we have a banished duke living a rural life in the Forest of Arden and his daughter Rosalind, in this case a female cross-dresser, disguised as a shepherd boy who arouses the love of Phoebe, a real shepherdess. But with Sidney's characters the havoc created by their behaviour leads to such chaos and uprisings in the land that eventually the duke is murdered, apparently poisoned by his own wife, and the two princes are condemned to death both as accomplices to his murder and as rapists of the princesses. The duke however awakes since, in the manner of Juliet, the poison was but a sleeping draught causing the appearance of death. With the chastity of the princesses and the honour of the princes intact, the contrite duke and his wife return to their palace and the land of Arcadia is restored to peace and happiness.

This tale is interspersed with eclogues, the pastoral revels of shepherds whose audience includes the duke's family and the two princes. Like good Arcadians the shepherds are in the habit of meeting regularly to extemporize in songs and verses and to tell stories. According to convention, their songs of love are on an altogether

26. Sir Philip Sidney, *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia (The Old Arcadia)*, ed. Katherine Duncan-Jones (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 14.

higher level than the earthly frolics of their audience, and when the high-born lovers enter their domain they receive many lessons in true love. Both princes have been steeped in Platonic philosophy and know full well the steps to be taken if their souls are to ascend on the path of love. Having admitted their love for the princesses to one another, one advises, 'If we will be men, the reasonable part of our soul is to have absolute commandment against which—if any sensual weakness arises—we are to yield all our sound forces to the overthrowing of so unnatural a rebellion'.²⁷ Inevitably, although they come to see the virtue of the princesses, the rebellion of sensual desire does indeed overcome reason.

By contrast, the princes hear many examples of the love of virtue. One story of a higher form of love told to them by the shepherds concerns another pair of princes. Although these two have both fallen in love with an absent and unobtainable young woman they bear no jealousy or animosity towards their friend, rather their laments are with and for each other. And thus they reveal a love far deeper than that they hold for their fickle mistress.

So the path on which the philosophic princes have set off is, despite its pitfalls, that of love: a path that leads from earth to heaven, from the love of the beauty of appearances to the love of virtue and the love of mind, to final unity with the beloved who is the divine part of the lover's own soul. On the other hand, in his natural surroundings the duke discovers much about his own nature and finally with true understanding he is able to restore his country of Arcadia to its proper state.

This is an archetypal tale of a ruler who having been exiled from a land that has fallen into disrepute finds himself living in the countryside and having to adapt to the world of nature. His task is to understand his own nature, to 'know himself' and to harmonise his nature with the beauty of his natural surroundings so that his soul may be restored to its providential path towards the Good. It was said that Athena from her wisdom and virtue fashioned the veil of nature so that whatever is discordant and different in the universe may be brought into union and consent.²⁸ Once the ruler has become just and virtuous, thus enabling his return to the city, the whole country is restored to the peace and unity of its true Arcadian state.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 17. 28. Thus Thomas Taylor, TTS 5, p. 46 n. 1.

As long ago as Homer, we find a description of such a king in the *Odyssey*:

... a virtuous king who fears the gods and who rules a strong well-peopled kingdom. He upholds justice, and under him the dark soil yields wheat and barley; trees are weighed down with fruit, sheep never fail to bear young and the sea abounds with fish—all this because of his righteous rule so that thanks to him his people prosper.²⁹

Nor was the idea of the city as a place of harmony to which the king returns anything new. We hear from Proclus that after expounding the *Republic* to his pupils in the busy port of Piraeus, Plato moved back to Athens since 'the city is accommodated to a life unattended with tumult, and with philosophic tranquillity retiring into itself and quietly contemplating things which it surveyed with much trouble in a tumultuous place'.³⁰ An unlikely image of a city today!

Proclus goes on to suggest that Socrates is comparing the city with the aetherial region, in other words that of his vision of the true earth in the *Phaedo*.³¹ This brings us back to the one idea of the earth in the mind of the Creator that manifests in the form of a perfected landscape as the golden age—or Arcadia. The perfected inhabitants of this mythical country of which the Elizabethans were so fond often appeared in their poetry as legendary figures from previous centuries, such as King Arthur and Robin Hood. Thus Ben Jonson's pastoral play, *The Sad Shepherd*, is set in Sherwood Forest; and at the beginning of *As You Like It* we find Duke Senior and his followers compared with Robin Hood and his Merry Men:

They say he is already in the Forest of Arden, and a many merry men with him; and 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.³²

29. *Odyssey* xix.109–14; trans. Walter Shewring, *Homer. The Odyssey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), p. 230.

30. Cited by Thomas Taylor, *Works of Plato—Volume 1*, TTS 9 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1995), p. 533 n. 1. 31. *Ibid.*

32. *As You Like It* I.i.114–8.

Of all Shakespeare's plays with an Arcadian flavour, *As You Like It* follows most closely the pastoral convention; indeed its story is supplied by Thomas Lodge's pastoral romance, *Rosalynde*. But, like Socrates and Plotinus, Shakespeare had a bird's eye view of the world; the insight and understanding inherent in the play lift it far above the often laboured and contrived philosophic references that Sidney, Jonson and others tended to impose upon their work.

Shakespeare follows Sidney's pattern of a ruler who leaves his city for the countryside, and having learned to harmonise his soul with nature returns to a well ordered country. At the same time two lovers enter the forest, and through wooing two princesses follow the Platonic path of love. Orlando, having fallen in love with the beauty of the Duke's daughter, Rosalind, is in fear of being murdered by his elder brother so escapes into the forest with his old servant Adam, a name that gives us a flavour of Arcadia as the Garden of Eden. When he meets Rosalind disguised as a young shepherd he does not recognise her, for when he first saw her he had fallen in love with her outward appearance and has yet to recognise her inner beauty. This beauty is the beauty of his higher soul that Rosalind represents, and with her help in the Arcadian world of nature he learns to know his own nature and the beauty of his soul. He learns what it is to become virtuous and to be constant in love and courageous in spirit. His final lesson is in the forgiveness of his brother Oliver by whom he had been so much abused. Seeing him asleep in the forest and about to be attacked by a lion, Orlando might have been tempted to leave him alone but in the same moment he forgives him and kills the lion. His compassion and bravery complete the testing of his love and at last in the union of marriage Rosalind throws off her wedding veil and he sees his higher soul as she truly is.

Orlando's brave deed is also the salvation of his brother's soul. Oliver's repentance is so deep and the turn of his soul towards the good so strong that he immediately recognises the higher part of his soul in Celia, Rosalind's cousin, and his steps on the path of love are quickly accomplished. As Rosalind says: 'in these degrees have they made a pair of stairs to marriage . . .'³³

In the fashion of an eclogue, the higher born lovers and members of the court are entertained and instructed by the love affairs of the shepherds and learn to sing their country songs:

33. *Ibid.*, v.ii.36-7.

It was a lover and his lass,
With a hey and a ho and a hey nonino.³⁴

Two pages to the duke sing the above and from the court musician, Amiens, the outlawed courtiers learn how the shepherd's pipe imitates the sounds of nature:

Under the greenwood tree,
Who loves to lie with me,
And turn his merry note
Unto the sweet bird's throat.³⁵

At a higher level there is no greater expression of love to be found, even in Virgil, than that of the shepherd, Sylvius, for the arrogant shepherdess, Phoebe. In her affections he believes second place is better than nothing:

So holy and so perfect is my love,
And I in such a poverty of grace,
That I shall think it a most plenteous crop
To glean the broken ears after the man
That the main harvest reaps. Loose now and then
A scatter'd smile, and that I'll live upon.³⁶

Meanwhile, in the manner of all Arcadian rulers, Duke Senior has learned the lessons of nature, and with knowledge of himself he will soon return to rule his city in peace and harmony. He will be a wise ruler, having discovered wisdom in the contemplation of nature:

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 everything.³⁷

34. *Ibid.*, v.iii.14–15. 35. *Ibid.*, II.v.1–4. 36. *Ibid.*, III.v.99–104. 37. *Ibid.*, II.i.12–17.

By tracing the word 'good' to its final cause we reach the highest Good, the Platonic One or the Good itself. As is his custom, Shakespeare is referring all things to the Divine and this speech from *As You Like It* is a prime example of how we may discover the Divine through the exploration of nature. Shakespeare's contemporary, Francis Bacon, wrote in his *Advancement of Learning* that knowledge of God may be obtained by contemplating his creatures, so that the light thrown on the understanding of the natural world reveals that the knowledge thus obtained 'may be truly termed divine'; for nature herself is the light that reveals the object to be divine.³⁸ This is the work that takes place in the forests and fields of Arcadia.

So what is this nature that reveals the divine world and is a teacher of ascending souls? Again it is necessary to return to the Greeks who contributed so much to future ages, including that of Shakespeare, through the golden thread of wisdom. In his *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics*, Simplicius wrote that nature is the character of everything, including the character of soul, mind or even a god.³⁹ For his part Proclus, in his *Commentary on the Timaeus*, said that nature is a goddess and that she is the last of all that is incorporeal, after mind and soul, to be created. Thus everything after nature has a corporeal body: rocks and plants, the bodies of animals and men. Nature is said to descend from the great mother goddess Rhea for, as one of the Chaldean Oracles says, 'Immense Nature is suspended from the back of the Goddess'.⁴⁰ She is a goddess in that she governs the sensible world through her powers and contains the divine within herself. Ruling over generation and all that is multiplied, she is the life-giving force of the universe. She is full of productive powers and forms, through which she governs mundane things such as procreation and behaviour in the plant and animal worlds—and in mankind.⁴¹

Here, as always, we find three aspects: the essence of something, its power, and that which receives this power. The goddess of nature is the essence of nature herself, the one archetypal form. From this

38. Francis Bacon, 'The Advancement of Learning', in *The Essays of Lord Bacon including his Moral and Historical Works* (London: Frederick Warne, 1883), p. 188.

39. Simplicius, *Commentary on Aristotle's Physics* II, 193b, trans. Thomas Taylor, *Works of Aristotle – Volume 1*, TTS 19 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 2000), pp. 265–6.

40. Trans. Thomas Taylor, *Oracles and Mysteries*, TTS 7 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1995), p. 29.

41. Trans. Thomas Taylor, *Proclus' Commentary on the Timaeus of Plato*, vol. 1, TTS 15 (Dilton Marsh: Prometheus Trust, 1998), p. 20.

goddess proceed her powers, the life-giving, generative and creative forces, and with these powers she endows and governs the nature of everything that has a material body. Of all embodied things, the human soul alone has the power of choice over its nature. In *As You Like It*, Oliver chooses to deny the natural goodness of his own nature by keeping Orlando in servitude and denying him both his birthright and his inheritance. But when Orlando, with every reason to wish his brother dead, saves him from the lion, the nobility and virtue of this act cause Oliver's true nature to assert itself and claim the divine part of his soul.

When the soul uses reason in its approach to the natural world, it may realise its own divinity and the natural order is reinstated. This is the allegory of the rightful ruler returning to his own country where he re-establishes a well-ordered state. Shakespeare uses this theme not only in *As You Like It* but also in such plays as *The Tempest*, *The Winter's Tale*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Measure for Measure*.

Most Arcadian rulers who lose their kingdoms enter the world of nature in person, but this is not always necessary. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Duke Theseus does not lose his dukedom but since all is not well between him and his bride to be he remains in Athens, while the lovers wandering in the natural surroundings of the Athenian wood represent his soul lost in nature. Through the agency of the spirits of nature they fall in and out of love until they learn to know themselves and recognise their true soul mates.

Oberon and Titania, the rulers of the fairy kingdom within the world of nature, are the alter egos of Theseus and Hippolyta. They too have quarrelled, and their 'forgeries of jealousy'⁴² have come to a head over the Indian boy stolen from Titania by Oberon. Their disharmony affects their kingdom and, as we always find in Shakespeare, this is reflected by disruptions in nature: with devastating floods, contagious fogs and the seasons reversed, until

the mazed world,
By their increase, now knows not which is which.
And this same progeny of evils comes
From our debate, from our dissension;
We are their parents and their original.⁴³

42. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.i.81. 43. *Ibid.*, II.i.113–17.

An apt comment on the devastation mankind can cause in nature!

With the reconciliation of Oberon and Titania, the harmony of nature is restored. Through both the fairies and the lovers Theseus has entered Athena's veil of nature and brought 'whatever is discordant and different in the universe . . . into union and consent'.⁴⁴

Although there are no shepherds in the *Dream*, the pastoral element is introduced when Oberon has behaved as though he were a shepherd and Titania describes him as having slipped away

And in the shape of Corin, sat all day
Playing on pipes of corn, and versing love
To amorous Phillida.⁴⁵

The emotional collapse of the ruler's good nature, and the disruption this causes in his kingdom, take over the whole first half of *The Winter's Tale*. But, like Theseus, Leontes remains in the city while his soul, represented by his daughter Perdita, is regenerated in the countryside of Bohemia. The pastoral scenes in the second half serve as an eclogue, before the action returns to the city for the conclusion. And like an eclogue, the bucolic antics of the local shepherds at the sheep-shearing festivities, their songs and country dances with their lasses are performed for a princely audience. But not all is as it seems, for their king is in disguise and his son, Florizel, who is pretending to be a shepherd, is wooing Perdita, the mistress of the feast but in reality a princess brought up as a shepherdess: the true stuff of Arcady!

Perdita and Florizel's language of love is of the highest, for they are not there as part of the audience with his father but rather as performers in the eclogue from whom the king may learn. Unlike Sidney's princes who allow lust to overcome reason, Florizel can say honestly to the one he loves:

my desires
Run not before my honour, nor my lusts
Burn hotter than my faith.⁴⁶

For lovers following the spiritual path of love, Shakespeare always stresses chastity until their souls become one in the union of marriage.

44. Cf. n. 28 above. 45. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* II.i.66–8.

46. *The Winter's Tale* IV.iv.33–5.

Florizel remains true to his honour and even after their long sea voyage home her father recognises that it was not 'o'erthrown by his desire'.⁴⁷

True to his Arcadian landscape, Shakespeare ensures that the gods are ever present. Florizel calls Perdita by the name of Flora, the goddess of spring, and adds:

this your sheep-shearing
Is as a meeting of the petty gods
And you the queen on't.⁴⁸

He represents himself as Apollo, who had also assumed the attire of a shepherd; he compares the change in his appearance with the metamorphoses of the gods who

Humbling their deities to love, have taken
The shapes of beasts upon them: Jupiter
Became a bull, and bellow'd; and the fire-rob'd god,
Golden Apollo, a poor humble swain,
As I seem now.⁴⁹

Running through these scenes is the roguish pedlar, Autolycus, whose name has a strong connection to Hermes or Mercury, another of the Arcadian gods: 'My father called me Autolycus who being as I am, littered under Mercury, was likewise a snapper-up of unconsidered trifles'.⁵⁰ Hermes was a trickster from the time he was born; after making his tortoise shell lyre his first act as a baby had been to steal cattle from Apollo. One of his sons was Autolycus, who was known as a rogue like his father and whose grandson was Odysseus, famous for his cunning.

Each of these gods plays a part in helping to bring about the return to Sicilia and the final union of the soul. Flora or Perdita's love for Florizel also represents the spring rebirth of the soul of her father, Leontes, after its descent into the darkness of winter—hence the play's title. For this reason she has been compared with Persephone. As a lover in her own right she is the heavenly part of Florizel's soul, and together they return to her father's home where their souls will be united in the

47. *Ibid.*, v.i.229. 48. *Ibid.*, iv.iv.3–5. 49. *Ibid.*, iv.iv.26–31. 50. *Ibid.*, iv.iii.24–6.

harmony of marriage. At the same time her father welcomes her as his soul who had been lost, in company with Florizel who had earlier compared himself with Apollo, the ruler of human souls and the god of harmony. Although Hermes is better known for conducting souls to the underworld he is also the guide of souls across the earth, hence his importance as an Arcadian god. So his trickster son, Autolycus, performs a higher role by assisting Florizel and Perdita in their flight to Sicilia and also by bringing the shepherds who had adopted Perdita to her father's court, so that she might be identified by the jewellery they had found with her as a baby.

The flowers Perdita offers to her guests represent the beauty of nature's bounty. She prefers the flowers in their wild natural state to those from the garden, but one of her guests, Polixenes who is Florizel's father in disguise, explains that while a gardener may tend a plant any improvement or change is the work of nature herself:

You see, sweet maid, we marry
A gentler scion to the wildest stock,
And make conceive a bark of baser kind
By bud of nobler race. This is an art
Which does mend nature – change it rather – but
The art itself is nature.⁵¹

But Polixenes fails to learn from the shepherdess or even to follow his own gardening advice, for he forbids the marriage of his son, 'the bud of nobler race', to a shepherdess, 'a bark of baser kind'. However there is truth in his words, for man is the gardener of his soul's nature and when he tends his soul like the flowers, nature will indeed mend itself.

While Perdita was growing up during the sixteen years of Leontes' repentance, she had been tending his soul in the Arcadian garden of nature. So when she arrives home with her bridegroom, he receives them with the loving kindness of his renewed soul. Finally he is reunited with his wife, the heavenly part of his soul who he thought was dead, when she is restored to life. Thus heaven returns to earth and Sicilia once more has a true and just king. The vision of the true earth is realised.

51. *Ibid.*, IV.iv.92–7.

All human souls are lovers and kings. We all have the opportunity to follow the path of love and wisdom and by entering Athena's veil of nature to enable whatever is discordant and different in the universe and in ourselves to be brought into union and consent.

In his vision, Socrates saw the true earth as a place of bliss; and for those enlightened souls who live there it is heaven on earth. But the human soul can pass through many states of being, and Socrates was looking from the point of view of the gods, as if from above. The earth knows its own divinity but for the soul to realise this it has to move beyond the temporal world into the eternal. Seeing the earth from this standpoint it will realise its own immortality.

Like Socrates, Ficino urged his pupils to seek themselves beyond this world: 'To do so and come to yourself you must fly beyond the world and look back on it'.⁵² Then the true earth will be recognised and, rejoicing in its beauty, the soul will know beauty herself. At that point, as Diotima tells Socrates in the *Symposium*, 'he would become a favourite of the gods, and at length would be, if any man ever be, himself one of the immortals'.⁵³

In the passage from Virgil's *Eclogues* quoted above, Daphnis paused at the gates of heaven to look back on an Arcadia whose inhabitants rejoiced to see him there. As a shepherd who had died in Arcadia, this episode has been linked to a series of paintings that appeared shortly after Shakespeare's death: the first, by the Italian painter, Guercino, was followed by two more by Poussin. They all show a similar scene of two or more shepherds gazing at a skull set upon a tomb: the tomb bears an inscription that has become famous—*Et in Arcadia Ego*. There has been much speculation over the meaning of these words and they have often been interpreted as 'Even in Arcadia I, Death, am.' But in view of all I have written, I would suggest that this is no *memento mori*, it is not Death who is speaking. The shepherds are looking beyond death to the soul that has transcended the mortal body. For to look as a god upon the earth, like Daphnis at heaven's gates, is to see oneself and all human souls as gods, to see nature as divine and to serve her as a goddess. *Then* the human soul can say: 'And in Arcadia—I am'.

52. *The Letters of Marsilio Ficino*, trans. Members of the Language Department of the School of Economic Science, London, vol. 1 (London: Shephard-Walwyn, 1975), p. 165.

53. *Symposium* 212a, trans. TTS 11, p. 543.