

THE JUDGEMENT OF TREES:

Shakespeare's Forest and the Theatre of the Green World

Lucia FOLENA

ABSTRACT • “The Judgement of Trees: Shakespeare’s Forest and the Theatre of the Green World”. Etymologically and historically, a forest is a quintessential Elsewhere, a space located “outside” the bounds of the human community and its rules and conventions, whether officially by a decree or psychologically by its essential unknowability and the potential threats it conceals. Hostile or dangerous beings – fierce beasts, wild men, outlaws, bandits, witches assisted by evil spirits, elves and fairies – roam its shadows. The literary forest, from the middle ages onwards, has the same features. In a number of plays Shakespeare rewrites this tradition, turning the forest into a variant of the “second world” or “green world” — a temporary setting that makes it possible for humans to imagine a society better than their own and to correct the iniquities and corruptions which afflict them in their normal existential contexts. In association with the frequent representation of the natural environment as a theatre, this has the effect of ideally including the audience in the action and of prompting its components to experience, no matter how vicariously, an analogous process of regeneration. *As You Like It* is particularly significant in this regard; moreover, the presence and function of trees in this comedy is so central as to invest vegetal life with the role of a protagonist.

KEYWORDS • Forests; Second World and Green World; *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*; *As You Like It*; Milton’s Eden.

the forest in Shakespeare is the usual symbol
for the dream world in
conflict with and imposing its form on experi-
ence
Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*¹

1. This Desert Inaccessible²

The medieval Latin word *foresta/forestis* began its existence in Merovingian legal documents to define largely uninhabited and uncultivated expanses that were set aside for royal hunting and placed under the king’s protection.³ Some 150 years later, in the capitularies of Charlemagne,

¹ 1990: 184.

² *As You Like It*, II.vii.110. Ed. Brissenden 2008 (henceforth *AYLI*).

³ “Differently from the *silva communis*, the great hunting forest is designated either by the Roman term of

foresta/forestis appears at times in conjunction with *silva*, one of the standard terms, along with *nemus* and *lucus*, for “wood” in classical Latin.⁴ Differently from both *silva* and “wood”, this neologism did not initially contain express indications as to the nature of the territory it referred to, which was not necessarily, at least not wholly, covered with trees but could comprise leas, marshes, heaths, wilds, and so forth.⁵

The likeliest etymology links *foresta/forestis* with the adverb *foris*, “out of doors, outside”,⁶ thus stressing first and foremost the area’s status as an open space “lying outside the walls of a park, not fenced in”,⁷ hence its otherness with regard to the closed or enclosed loci of everyday activity; and possibly — in light of the juridical nature of the appellation — its lying beyond the bounds of the common law and requiring separate norms and regulations, “forest laws”.

Even though the practice of creating hunting preserves for kings had presumably already started in the late Anglo-Saxon age, “it is only after 1066 that we have the first references to *foresta*” in England (Green 2013: 422); and it is from that time that the phenomenon of afforestation⁸ is recorded. William the Conqueror “loved the beasts of the chase as if he were their father. On account of this, in the woodlands reserved for hunting, which he called the ‘New Forest’, he had villages rooted out and people removed, and made it a habitation for wild beasts”.⁹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* records that William “set up a great deer frith and imposed laws concerning it. Whoever slew a hart or a hind was to be blinded. He forbade the killing of boars even as the killing of harts. He loved the harts as dearly as though he had been their father. Hares, also, he decreed should go free. The rich complained and the poor lamented, but he was too relentless to care that all might hate him”.¹⁰

By the middle of the 12th century, afforestation had remarkably changed the face of rural England:

The royal forest embraced not only wooded areas, but also large tracts of arable land and even towns and villages. Anyone dwelling or holding land within the forest bounds was subject to a complex set of regulations, implemented by royal officials answerable only to the king. They were prevented from hunting freely but, more importantly, the laws of the vert denied them the right to utilise their land as they saw fit. Amercements were imposed for offences falling into three main categories: waste, assart and purpresture. Waste, as the name implies, occurred when land was cleared. Individuals found guilty of waste were not only burdened with a punitive amercement but also had to pay a sum equivalent to

saltus, or by the juridical term of ‘forest’ (*forestis*), signalled in Latin in the Ardennes in 648” (Braunstein 1990, 3). An analogous meaning is contained in the expressions *foresta venationis*, “game preserve” and *foresta piscationis*, “fishing preserve”, cited under “Foresta” in Pianigiani 1907-26. Pianigiani also stresses that the verb *forestare*, originally “to ban, to interdict”, later came to signify “to create a forest”.

⁴ For instance, “silvae vel forestes nostrae bene sint custoditae”, “let our woods and forests be well kept”, Capitulary *De Villis*, clause 36 (“Capitulaire ‘De Villis et curtis imperialibus’” 1998: 660).

⁵ Many forests, such as Dartmoor, had few or no woods: see Rackham 1982: 34.

⁶ See e.g. “Foresta” in Battisti & Alessio 1950-57. Alternative, and far less probable, etymologies are represented by the nouns *foris*, “door” – which would essentially suggest an analogous differentiation between opposed domains separated by a threshold of sorts – and *forum*, “court of law, judgment” – which would indicate the forest as land subject to special rules or jurisdiction. See Brosse 1989: 189-90.

⁷ *OED* [1971 ed.], “Forest, sb.”

⁸ I.e., the “action or result of converting into forest or hunting-ground” (*OED*). Disafforestation reverses the process.

⁹ Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum*, cit. in Winters 2020.

¹⁰ Cit. in Green 2013: 416.

the value of any trees or brushwood that they had cut down. The waste of forest land might be the result of the over-zealous collection of wood for fuel or building, but it was frequently a prelude to assarting, that is the creation of new arable land. As with waste the creation of an assart frequently resulted in a dual financial penalty; an initial amercement could be supplemented by an annual rent for the maintenance of the newly cleared ground. If the assarted land was enclosed or built upon, an additional amercement would be imposed for what was called a purpresture. Finally, there were payments connected with the grazing of livestock, such as pannage. (Winters 2020, n.p.)

From that moment onwards, and up to the late 17th century, the forest was a recurrent battleground in the ongoing conflicts between the nobility and the monarch, and between the commoners and the great landowners, conflicts which led to swinging phases of afforestation and disafforestation as well as to aristocratic revolts and villagers' riots.¹¹

In perfect keeping with the merely juridical origin of the category of forests, the procedure of afforestation in itself had of course very little to do with silviculture, since it 'created' a forest by simply 'declaring' a territory officially such. Silviculture, when carried out, was rather a corollary than an integral constituent of afforestation. Likewise, disafforestation did not entail the cutting of any trees, but simply consisted in freeing an area "from the operation of forest laws" and reducing it "from the legal state of forest to that of ordinary land".¹² On the other hand, along with the legal meaning, the Middle English term "forest" rapidly acquired the broader senses of a "wild and uncultivated waste; a wilderness" and of an "extensive tract of land covered with trees and undergrowth, sometimes intermingled with pasture", to the point where it also started being employed to indicate collectively the trees of a woodland district.¹³

In whatever way one regards it, the forest is a place of interdiction and exclusion, located as it is *foris* with regard to the human community and its usual rules, whether officially by a decree or psychologically by its essential unknowability and the potential threats it conceals. Hostile or dangerous beings – fierce beasts, wild men, outlaws, bandits, witches assisted by evil spirits, elves and fairies – roam its shadows. The literary forest, from the middle ages onwards, has the same features. In such an environment losing one's way, like the protagonists of many a fairy tale, like Dante in the *selva oscura*, or like the Redcrosse knight who literally falls into Error at the beginning of the *Faerie Queene*, is a trifling occurrence compared to the possibility of (at least temporarily) losing oneself altogether – through being divested of one's human peculiarities and prerogatives as happens to Orson, found and raised by a she-bear,¹⁴ or through being bereft of one's reason in the manner of Chrétien de Troyes's Yvain.¹⁵

¹¹ With Magna Carta the barons already imposed a series of limitations on royal privileges and abuses of office concerning forests. The original Latin text of the charter uses *foresta* and the verbs *afforestare* and *deafforestare* (1215 text, clauses 44, 47, 48, 53). For the social unrest caused by disafforestation between the Elizabethan age and the Restoration, see Sharp 1980.

¹² OED, "Disafforest".

¹³ OED, "Forest", *sb.*, 3 and 1, both attested since the early 14th century.

¹⁴ The most extensive English version of this popular Medieval legend about twin babies lost in a forest is entitled *Valentine and Orson* (Eng. trans. Henry Watson [1510], ed. Dickson, rpt. 1971).

¹⁵ *Yvain, ou Le Chevalier au lion*, ll. 2774-3016. Yvain's mental *égarement* produces exactly the same effect as the physical *égarement* of Orson, for it leads him to ramble through the "boschage / Comme hom forsenés et sauvage" (2827-28), "like a madman and a savage", all naked, killing the beasts in the forest and eating them raw. On Yvain's madness see Harrison 1992: 65-68. Sir Orfeo also undergoes a ten-year phase of self-loss in the forest, but without ever acquiring the aggressiveness of the typical Wild Man and feeding only on berries, roots, and bark (*Sir Orfeo*, 253-60, ed. Laskaya & Salisbury 2020).

The forest is an oxymoronic “desert city” whose “native burghers” (AYLI II.i.23) are the deer, and disrupting its peace by hunting them turns humans into “usurpers” and “tyrants” (II.i.61).¹⁶ There the norms and conventions of social interaction lose their cogency and are often altogether reversed — “Those that are good manners at the court are as ridiculous in the country as the behaviour of the country is most mockable at the court” (AYLI III.ii.43-46) — and those institutions which ordinarily sanction and solemnize human relations are absolutely unavailable: “here we have no temple but the wood, no assembly but horn-beasts” (AYLI III.iii.44-45).¹⁷ Even the measurement (and commodification) of time, which had acquired such a central importance in the eyes of late-Medieval and Renaissance merchants,¹⁸ turns out to be either unfeasible, there being “no clock in the forest” (AYLI III.ii.291-92), or devoid of any practical function and conducive only to meditations on mutability and transience:

It is ten o'clock.
Thus we may see [...] how the world wags.
'Tis but an hour ago since it was nine,
And after one hour more 'twill be eleven.
And so from hour to hour we ripe and ripe,
And then from hour to hour we rot and rot,
And thereby hangs a tale. (AYLI II.vii.22-28)

Another time, another space, where one may stumble upon “[m]ore than cool reason ever comprehends”.¹⁹ As is the case with most of the rules and prescriptions which govern everyday life in civic milieus, the normally well-defined distinctions between genders and between social classes also lose perspicuity and even meaning in the sylvan context, so that little effort is required for the audience to accept not only Rosalind’s provisional metamorphosis into Ganymede, but also, in *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Queen Titania’s love affair with Bottom, who is not only a plebeian but has temporarily been reduced to the liminal condition of a half-animal.²⁰ Such happenings pertain to the category of the carnivalesque as delineated by Mikhail Bakhtin (1968), with its characteristic reversals of the accepted order of human and natural things; and in fact entering the forest is like gaining access to a looking-glass world, or to a dream,²¹ where many of the customary components of life remain perfectly recognizable but appear recombined according to a

¹⁶ This is the opinion Jaques voices in his lament over the wounded stag, but Duke Senior also expresses doubts in relation to the practice of hunting (II. 21-25). Neither character, if truth be told, is particularly believable in this regard, as is made manifest in IV.ii, where Jaques compliments the gentlemen who have killed a magnificent deer for the duke. Jaques’ irony there is aimed at the duke rather than at the hunters, and he shows no trace of the empathy and emotional participation in the animal’s suffering that he had previously seemed to overflow with.

¹⁷ “From an examination of the Teutonic words for ‘temple’ Grimm [in his *Deutsche Mythologie*] has made it probable that amongst the Germans the oldest sanctuaries were natural woods” (Frazer 1981: 57-58). See Chap. 6 in Brosse 1989.

¹⁸ See Le Goff 1980: 29-42.

¹⁹ *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, V.i.6. Ed. Foakes 2003 (henceforth *MND*).

²⁰ The wood in this play is also recurrently termed “forest” (II.i.25, 83; II.ii.72) and referred to as guarded by “foresters” (III.ii.390; IV.i.100, 105); it is, after all, a “palace wood” (I.ii.80), that is, the royal forest of Oberon and Titania and simultaneously the ducal one where Theseus enjoys hunting.

²¹ In this sense the bulk of *A Midsummer Night Dream’s* action, from II.i to IV.i. is true to the title in that it takes on a decidedly oneiric quality. The opposition between the two spaces, the urban and the sylvan, is

different logic and altered priorities. It is, to a remarkable extent, like seeking pervious paths through the labyrinth of the unconscious —²² a *shared* unconscious peopled by archetypes —²³ with no possibility of finding help in maps or landmarks.

2. A Better World than This

It is precisely on account of its being an antonomastic Outside that, despite the inconveniences and discomforts with which it confronts those who elect its shades, and shadows, as their abode (*AYLI* II.i.5-11), the forest may at times function as a “golden world” (I.i.113),²⁴ if the expression is taken to refer primarily not to a region where to retrieve the immaculate bliss that classical myth granted to humankind in the earliest stage of its earthly existence,²⁵ but to an appropriate environment for the reformation of things that have gone wrong in the ‘normal’ human milieu. This territory of desire and imagination is essentially what is evoked in a famous passage of Sidney’s *Defence of Poesie*: “Nature never set forth the earth in so rich tapestry as divers poets have done; neither with so pleasant rivers, fruitful trees, sweet-smelling flowers, nor whatsoever else may make the too-much-loved earth more lovely; her world is brazen, the poets only deliver a golden”.²⁶

Far more than replicating a conjectured state of primeval perfection, the golden world here constitutes an ideal, synchronic antidote that the visionary power of “poets” produces to correct the inadequacy and fallenness of reality. One of such “poets”, in Sidney’s view, is Sir Thomas More, whose *Utopia*, instead of adopting the stance of the philosophical treatise and dictating principles and moral imperatives, puts forward the “feigned image” of an alternative way of life (par. 26), exemplifying the kind of fiction which remodels society and human affairs in order to make them better.²⁷ Historians also produce “examples”, but in most cases the primary requirement of

foregrounded in the comedy as symbolic of the conflict between reason/law and imagination/anarchy: “Athens, in tradition a city of wisdom and order, contrasts with the woods to which the lovers flee as a place of disorder and licence” (Foakes, Introduction to *MND*, 31).

²² Harrison stresses that in “literary history forests begin to appear early on as the scene for what later comes to be known as the ‘unconscious’» (87). The association of forest and unconscious is developed in Cirillo 1971: 19–39.

²³ Since many of its ‘contents’, as happens with the personal unconscious, “have at one time been conscious but [...] have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed”, this corresponds only in part to Jung’s collective unconscious, whose contents “have never been in consciousness, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity” (Jung 1968: 42). If what is here meant by ‘consciousness’ refers to a normal, ‘rational’ organization of life in the anthropized and sheltered environments of towns and villages, forgotten or repressed contents would correspond for example to those humans who for some reason or other have radically abandoned such spaces and ‘fallen out’ of civilization – wild men, hermits, fugitives, and so forth.

²⁴ Ll. 109-13: “[the old Duke] 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”.

²⁵ See the evocation of the Golden Age in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* I.89-112. According to Alan Brissenden, “Arden is not a golden world, though to those outside it may seem to be”, and yet “the sound of ‘Arden’ is close to ‘Eden’, and the forest is to an extent a recovered Paradise” (Introduction to *AYLI*, 42).

²⁶ Sir Philip Sidney, *Defence of Poesie*, ed. Price 1891, paragraph 12.

²⁷ The recurrent opposition is between the philosopher’s “precept” and the literary writer’s “example” (para-

adherence to actuality they are expected to abide by prevents their writings from performing the high didactic function, on the moral level, that Sidney ascribes to “poesy”.

Duke Theseus seems to agree with Sidney’s view when he speaks of poets giving “to airy nothings / A local habitation and a name” and declares that if imagination “would but apprehend some joy, / It comprehends some bringer of that joy” (*MND* V.i.16-20). This “bod[y]ing forth” (14) calls into existence, as a locale, a space situated outside the domain of everyday life, an Elsewhere, whether golden like More’s island or green like the Shakespearean forest:

The green world has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires. This dream world collides with the stumbling and blinded follies of the world of experience, [...] and yet proves strong enough to impose the form of desire on it. Thus Shakespearean comedy illustrates, as clearly as any *mythos* we have, the archetypal function of literature in visualizing the world of desire, not as an escape from «reality,» but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate. (Frye 1990: 183-84)

Green and golden worlds are not superposable, even though both belong to the realm of the imaginary.²⁸ For the latter places itself in direct antithesis to ‘reality’, offering itself as a ready-made global improvement on it, whereas the former does not necessarily possess a comparable inclusiveness and an equally ideal nature; rather than a ‘full’ picture, it often simply provides an ‘empty’ canvas, a setting or a laboratory where displaced humans may attempt to solve the problems that beset them in society.²⁹ In this sense, while the golden world is essentially static, positioned as it is beyond the reach of time, history and narrative,³⁰ the green one is dynamic, potential and progressive and demands the agency of time – as brought into the clockless forest by a human who draws “a dial from his poke” (*AYLI* II.vii.20) — and the development of a story, a plot, in order to reach its plenitude.

There is a category of fictions where, as in More’s *Utopia*, two worlds – one representing the ‘real’ one, with all its shortcomings, the other either golden or green – are set in antithesis. In that case the characters and the action move physically or mentally between the two poles, but the experience of the second world is transitional and entails a final return, whether bodily or just vir-

graphs 21-23; 82). In Edmund Spenser’s terms, “so much more profitable and gracious is doctrine by ensample, then by rule” (*A Letter of the Authors, The Faerie Queene*, 2nd ed., 1596, ed. Roche 1978: 16). I am here using the category of fiction extensively – much in the same sense in which Sidney speaks of poesy – without implying any distinction, for instance, between mimetic and diegetic genres.

²⁸ Thus, like the appeasement of quarrels according to Touchstone (*AYLI* V.4.93-98), they hinge on an ‘if’, a hypothetical proviso which saves them from any possible accusation of falsehood: “the poet [...] nothing affirmeth, and therefore never lieth” (Sidney, *Defence*, par. 49). See Harry Berger, Jr. 1965: 42; Kuhn 1977: 44. Conditional clauses introduced by “if” occur as many as 134 times in the comedy; Rosalind is responsible for 39 of them, Touchstone for 24.

²⁹ See Berger 1965: 46.

³⁰ Here the term “narrative” has the restrictive sense of an account of actions and events, in opposition to mere description as exemplified by most of the second part of More’s *Utopia*. The provisional or permanent transformation of the golden world into the scene of this kind of narrative requires the presence of outsiders who import their own temporal dimension into it, as happens in the rare anecdotes related by Hythloday during the description of Utopia, notably the visit of the Anemolian ambassadors. The world of Milton’s Eden is at the same time literally green and ideally golden; history and narrative are introduced into it by Satan. See section 3 below.

tual, to 'reality' and the ordinary civil context, where the positive changes brought about by the previous relocation may be applied to inaugurate a better mode of existence. This is a recurrent pattern, in particular, in Shakespeare's comedies: "the action of the comedy begins in a world represented as a normal world, moves into the green world, goes into a metamorphosis there in which the comic resolution is achieved, and returns to the normal world".³¹

The contrast between the two and the need to abandon the first in order to rectify its deficiencies through an experience of the second are foregrounded in the initial scenes of *As You Like It*. "O how full of briers is this working-day world!" (I.iii.11-12), exclaims Rosalind, to whom it is the supposedly civilized, refined ambiance of Duke Frederick's court that appears as a wilderness of sorts; and even Le Beau, the foppish courtier, yearns for "a better world than this" (I.ii.269).³² Equally telling, perhaps, is the pseudonym *Aliena* chosen by Celia, whose true name already estranged her from her earthly homeland: she is out of place in both worlds.

3. This Green Plot Shall Be Our Stage³³

Milton's Satan also moves between two worlds, but his journey from Hell to Earth and back, pertaining to the sphere of tragedy, takes an entirely different form, in that it follows the irremediable loss of his original abode and is a consequence rather than the cause of his metamorphosis from archangel into king of demons; moreover, his stay in Eden alters it and its inhabitants disastrously but does not affect him in any way.³⁴ The seductive strategy he successfully implements vis-à-vis Eve and Adam results in separating them dramatically, not only from the garden and the bliss they enjoyed in it, but, more in general, from the natural context that they previously belonged to. They had ruled over animals and plants in the way in which the head, or mind, rules over the body, by virtue of a superiority grounded not in duality but in a fundamental unity. One of the immediate corollaries of the Fall consists in nature shaking off its former amenability and benevolence to turn wild and hostile. Before that moment, the magnificent "sylvan scene" surrounding the earthly paradise (IV.140), rather than an extraneous territory, had been a protection and a margin — an integral part of the blissful garden where the two humans lived. In Milton's narrative the dichotomy of anthropized Inside and the 'natural' Outside eminently represented by the Forest begins here.

By taking the apparently innocent position of the silent spectator, all eyes and ears, when he reaches the area, Satan turns Eden into a "woody theatre" (141), a stage enclosed in a "verdurous wall" (143) of trees, ready for the calamitous performance in which he will soon take an active

³¹ Frye 1990: 182. This, as Frye stresses, is not only the case with *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, but also happens in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Winter's Tale* (in relation to the pastoral environment of Bohemia rather than to its forbidding woods), and *The Merchant of Venice* (where, however, the second world is not, strictly speaking, 'green'); on the other hand, "this second world is absent from the more ironic comedies *All's Well* and *Measure for Measure*" (183).

³² See also Adam's lament over Frederick's and Oliver's perverse treatment of Orlando, "O, what a world is this, when what is comely / Envenoms him that bears it!" (II.iii.14.15); and Jaques' desire to "Cleanse the foul body of th' infected world" (II.vii.60).

³³ *MND* III.i.3.

³⁴ His and his followers' momentary transformation into snakes (X. 504-84), more than an actual metamorphosis, is a physical rendering of the moral depravity which already characterized them. References are to *Paradise Lost* in *Complete Poems and Major Prose*, ed. Hughes 1981.

part as both director and chief actor. As happens in several of Shakespeare's comedies, the green world here provides a suitable site for an experiment in correction and change — with the difference that the course of such a transformation is the exact opposite of the customary comedic transition from worse to better. The inventive function assigned to the green world establishes an almost automatic analogy between it and the theatre, “whose end [...] is, to hold [...] the mirror up to nature; to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure”;³⁵ in other words, to create and make visible a universe which, being distant from ‘reality’, may disclose escapes from its contradictions. For, as Harry Berger observes,

the feature of virtue and image of scorn may be taken to refer to two sides of a green or golden world: pure good and pure evil, wish-fulfillment and nightmare, abstracted from the smokier atmosphere of actual life in which they are deceptively mingled and but dimly visible [...]. All together constitute the mirror – or, to put it in a way which emphasizes slightly different theoretical assumptions, all are included “in” the mirror. To hold the mirror up to nature is hardly possible unless we have first framed a reflecting or refracting surface which is different and at a distance from whatever nature we have in mind, a surface which can admit the image only on condition that it keeps out the original. (49-50)

In Shakespeare's *Merry Wives* it is the final part of the action (V.iv-v) that takes place in the second world – Windsor Park – and the characters' eventual return to their homes is merely announced. The sylvan milieu is immediately turned into a theatre, having been chosen by the wives as the perfect site where to put on a burlesque re-enactment of the legend of the Wild Hunt. The final trick the two women play on Falstaff consists in having him disguise himself as Herne the Hunter, with horns and chain, in preparation – allegedly – for a clandestine rendezvous with them in the woods. Their intention is that of exposing his greed and lechery by staging a sudden appearance of “urchins, ouphes, and fairies”³⁶ personated by their own children and acquaintances, who will “encircle him about”, “pinch” him (IV.iv.57-58, 62) and “burn him with their tapers” (IV.iv.63), enabling the wives themselves, along with their husbands, to “mock him home to Windsor” (IV.iv.65). The scheme is absolutely successful and leads to the farcical masque of the final scene, where the improbable fairies, led by their carnivalesque queen, the garrulous and nosy Mistress Quickly, triumph over the grotesque evil embodied by Falstaff (V.v.37-102).

‘Genuine’ fairies, led by their king and queen, take instead part in the masque which, preceded by the “bergomask” danced by the artisans, concludes *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; the Athenian characters' return home is thus completed by a further move, the benevolent intrusion of the green world into their ordinary sphere. The temporary disappearance of the boundary between urban and sylvan, anthropic and ‘natural’, ‘real’ and imaginary – no doubt directly related to the tradition of May Day celebrations –³⁷ is also implicitly proposed as an essential condition for the retrieval of peace and harmony within the formerly perturbed human community.³⁸

³⁵ *Hamlet* III.ii.21-24, ed. Evans 1974: 1161-62.

³⁶ *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, IV.iv.50, ed. Evans 1974: 315.

³⁷ An analogous invasion of town space by the green world and its presiding spirits – occasioned, moreover, by the same kind of festivity – occurs in a remarkable late-13th-century play, Adam de la Halle's *Jeu de la Feuillée*, where the latter term, which, taken literally, designates the pergola covered with tree leaves, *feuilles*, erected for the celebration of a summer ritual in Arras, significantly evokes at the same time the idea of folly, *folie*. Unlike the *Dream*, the *Jeu* presents a good deal of interlocution between the human characters and some representatives of the ‘other’ reality. Ed. E. Langlois 1923.

³⁸ All this can only happen after the reconciliation of Oberon and Titania has healed the tragic disruption in the natural order which their former disagreement introduced in the green world itself (*MND* II.i.81-117).

Even before the artisans' performance in the ducal palace and the final epiphany of the spirits, the *Dream* has an extremely metatheatrical quality, due to the largest part of the action taking place in the oneiric playhouse of the wood as well as to the fact that the three groups of individuals involved remain separate, to the point where the first two – young nobles and manual workers, both city dwellers but as distant as if they lived in different countries – are absolutely unaware of each other and of the third, formed by the fairies. Unaware, that is, with the meaningful exception of Bottom, the unlikely beneficiary of a mystical revelation, “a most rare vision” (IV.i.200) of the invisible world. The play's audience and (some of) the fairies thus share a more complete view of the situation than the Athenian characters can attain. This, by turning Oberon and Puck, in particular, into spectators in their own right, creates the condition for most of what happens in the wood taking the appearance of a play-within-the-play, with the further *mise en abyme* of the artisans' rehearsal at the Duke's Oak.

Prefiguring Duke Vincentio/Friar Lodowick in *Measure for Measure* and Prospero in *The Tempest*, as well as Milton's Satan, Oberon, not content with his passive task as looker-on, becomes – while remaining invisible to his fellow-players (II.i.186) – both an actor, along with Puck (III.i.62-63), in the “fond pageant” (III.ii.114) he is witnessing and its secret director or playwright. In the latter capacity it is he who determines, to a considerable extent, the course taken by the existences and loves of the living puppets he manoeuvres. Like Vincentio and Prospero – not to mention Satan – he has a cogent reason for investing himself with such a demiurgic task; his motivation, however, residing exclusively in his desire to assert his superiority over Titania, who is located on his own level of being, leaves him free to act out of pure kind-heartedness towards the humans, creatures belonging to an alien reality.

4. Let the Forest Judge

One of the immediate effects of the relocation in the green world is the form of self-knowledge arising from the contact with the unmitigated austerity of the natural environment and the eloquent lessons it offers to those who are prepared to receive them:

Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
 Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
 More free from peril than the envious court?
 Here feel we not the penalty of Adam,
 The seasons' 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. These are counsellors
 That feelingly persuade me what I am.”
 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. (AYLI II.i.2-17)

Orlando later gives body and visibility to the Duke's metaphorical evocation of arboreal eloquence by providing poetic tongues to be hung “on every tree” (III.ii.122). While Macbeth places moving stones and speaking trees in the hypothetical picture of a radical, direful subversion of the

legitimate order of things, a rebellion of nature against humans,³⁹ here such phenomena are not only current, but conducive to self-betterment and personal growth.

The green world is transitional in two senses – temporary or intermediate, in that it does not generally provide a destination but only the passage leading to it, and simultaneously transformative, being by definition a site of regeneration, metamorphosis and conversion. In the Forest of Arden, contrary to what happens in the Athenian wood of the *Dream* and on Prospero's island, neither supernatural beings nor magicians contribute in 'writing' the plot, though both are in a sense there, the former represented by the god Hymen in the last scene (103-35) and the latter evoked by Rosalind to prepare her final self-revelation (V.ii.57-59, 67-68). Physical metamorphosis of humans into animals becomes merely metaphorical: "I think he be transform'd into a beast; / For I can nowhere find him like a man" (II.vii.1-2) says Duke Senior about Jaques, who has just been singing "If it do come to pass / That any man turn ass [...]" (II.v.46-47).

Nonetheless, two actual conversions do take place in Arden – leaving aside Phoebe's redirecting her love from Ganymede to Silvius (V.iv.144-45) – and they are crucial for the amendment of the first world's defects. Two evil brothers, Oliver and Frederick, are led to repentance and atonement precisely by the forest itself – by their entering a region where they are forced to lay aside their claims to human superiority over the rest of nature on the one hand and to dominant positions within society on the other, coming to terms with human fragility and with their own personal weaknesses. Oliver's stay in the wilds before his encounter with his brother Orlando has been long enough to turn him into a "wretched, ragged man, o'ergrown with hair" (IV.iii.107), subjecting him to a physical dehumanization comparable to those experienced by Yvain and Sir Orfeo⁴⁰ but parallel, in his case, to the previous lack of humanity which made him "the most unnatural / That lived amongst men" (123-24). "Was't you that did so oft contrive to kill him?" asks Celia after hearing how Orlando saved him from a hungry lioness. He replies that he is no longer the same man, the experience in the Outland⁴¹ having dug out an abyss between his past and his present: "'Twas I; but 'tis not I. I do not shame / To tell you what I was, since my conversion / So sweetly tastes, being the thing I am" (IV.iii.135-38).

The second 'Cain' who had upset the harmony and order of life at court as well as in the city undergoes an even more radical transmutation; unlike the other characters, he finds in the forest his ultimate residence:

Duke Frederick, hearing how that every day
Men of great worth resorted to this forest,
Addressed a mighty power, which were on foot,
In his own conduct, purposely to take
His brother here, and put him to the sword.
And to the skirts of this wild wood he came
Where, meeting with an old religious man,

³⁹ *Macbeth* III.iv.122-25, ed. Evans 1974: 1327: "Stones have been known to move and trees to speak; / Augures and understood relations have / By maggot-pies, and choughs, and rooks brought forth / The secret'st man of blood".

⁴⁰ See n. 15 above.

⁴¹ The term "inland", used as an adverb and an adjective, occurs twice in the play in relation to the "good manners", "civility" and "nurture" (II.vii.92-97; see also III.ii.331) that should characterize life in the anthropized world – court and city – in ideal opposition to what lies outside it.

After some question with him was converted
 Both from his enterprise and from the world,
 His crown bequeathing to his banished brother,
 And all their lands restored to them again
 That were with him exiled. (V.iv.149-60)

The theatrical aspect of Arden's green world is as apparent as that of the wood in the *Dream*, though for different reasons. Duke Senior, seconded by Jaques, voices one of the many Shakespearean variations on the *theatrum mundi* theme:

This wide and universal theatre
 Presents more woeful pageants than the scene
 Wherein we play in.
 JAQUES All the world's a stage,
 And all the men and women merely players;
 They have their exits and their entrances;
 And one man in his time plays many parts,
 His acts being seven ages. (II.vii.137-43)

Also, in a number of scenes someone is under the gaze of unseen observers.⁴² But neither of these elements contributes in giving this forest the dimension of a theatre as significantly as the recurrent references to the fact that the characters meet, interact and change in a world peopled by trees and vegetation. This is all the more striking in light of the negligible role played by arboreal life in the *Dream*, where one encounters an abundance of flowers, herbs and even bushes but no actual trees other than the Duke's Oak, mentioned only once as the artisans' meeting point. Characters and spectators, contrariwise, are repeatedly reminded that Arden's trees do not only constitute a silent presence, but are virtually endowed with the power of speech, since they possess tongues, and that they are also books, if one learns how to read them: "O Rosalind! these trees shall be my books, / And in their barks my thoughts I'll character, / That every eye which in this forest looks / Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere" (III.ii.5-8). Writing returns to one of its ancient forms in the natural context: for the first objects to which the Germanic term "book" was applied were wooden writing tablets, and the word itself is etymologically relatable to the name of the beech-tree.⁴³

It is in fact within the magic "circle" of the forest as a whole (V.iv.34) that the action unfolds, as within a gigantic version of the "wooden O"⁴⁴ which represents the Shakespearean stage. But Arden, however reminiscent of Eden even in the name,⁴⁵ is more than a "woody theatre" comparable to that where Milton's Satan puts his fatal design into execution: its trees, potentially capable as they are of expressing themselves, also provide the play and interplay of the human intruders with a constantly vigilant audience, seemingly always ready to decide on the worth of their performance: "You have said; but whether wisely or no, let the forest judge" (III.ii.117-18). And, conversely, the forest finds its mirror image in the human spectators placed outside the 'magic' circle

⁴² Jaques is watched by other courtiers in II.i; Corin and Silvius by Rosalind, Celia and Touchstone in II.iv; Orlando by Celia, then Orlando and Jaques by Celia and Rosalind in III.ii; Touchstone, Audrey and Martext by Jaques in III.iii; Silvius and Phoebe by Rosalind, Celia and Corin in III.v; Oliver by Orlando in IV.iii.

⁴³ OED, "Book, sb."

⁴⁴ *Henry V*, Prologue, 13. Ed. Evans 1974: 935.

⁴⁵ See n. 25 above..

in the playhouse. Both audiences are enormously distant from the characters – who, differently from them, are creatures of the imaginary first world, as opposed to actual ‘reality’ on the one hand and to the second world of fiction on the other, and will eventually resume their places in it – and simultaneously both get ideally involved in their vicissitudes and are asked to round them off with their verdicts.⁴⁶

The final words in *As You Like It* are uttered by a Rosalind who has already stepped out of first and second world alike to claim her belonging, as a boy actor personating a woman, to the same physical sphere as her listeners (16-19). She compares the epilogue she is delivering to the bush advertising good wine outside a tavern – an appendage which has no influence on the quality of the product but is nonetheless necessary to complete it (3-7). If the concluding ‘bush’ will not substantially alter the play, the forest, on the contrary, is so present and significant in it as to acquire the relevance of a protagonist.

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⁴⁶ See J. Dusinberre, Introduction to *As You Like It*, ed. Dusinberre 2006: 61.

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LUCIA FOLENA • Associate Professor of English Literature, Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures, University of Turin. Principal research fields: Renaissance and early modern literature, theory, cultural studies, literature and philosophy, literature and the visual arts. Recent publications: William Shakespeare, *I sonetti*, traduzione, introduzione e note di Lucia Folena, Torino, Einaudi, forthcoming; "Ageing and the Attainment of Form in Robinson Crusoe", in *Imagining Ageing*, ed. by C. Concilio, Bielefeld, Transcript Verlag, 2018; "Contrées sans culture: 'Nature' across the Anthropological Rift", *Simplegadi XV*: 17, 2017; "Playing with Shadows: Time, Absent Presence, and The Winter's Tale", in *Word and Image in Literature and the Visual Arts*, ed. by C. Concilio & M. Festa, Mimesis 2016; "All that May Become a Man: Macbeth and the Breakdown of the Heroic Model", *Simplegadi XIV*: 15, 2016.

E-MAIL • lucia.folena@unito.it