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**Fangorn Forest, Birnam Wood, and Other Sylvan Environments:
The Mythic Function of the Tree in Shakespeare and Tolkien**

by Victoria Gaydosik

I begin my remarks today with an anecdote from my undergraduate days, lo! these many years ago. At the University of Wisconsin at Madison I was shocked to learn, upon enrolling in a botany course, that I was expected to draw good representations of the plant and cell parts we examined twice a week under the lab microscopes. Since I have little skill in the visual arts, I frequently stayed after the end of the lab period fiddling with my rather sad little drawings. On one such evening, when we were finally working on flowers instead of algae or slime molds, the custodian came in and exclaimed over the tables covered with torn-up lilies, chrysanthemums, roses, and other blooms. She couldn't think why we were destroying these beautiful things. I gave her a look through my microscope, and she grudgingly admitted that a close-up of a flower ovary was a beautiful thing, too, but clearly she was still dissatisfied with the short-sightedness of a science that routinely dismembered the chief commemorative symbol of human joys and sorrows such as weddings and funerals, although she didn't express herself in quite those words. For her, the beauty of the whole was preferable to the knowledge of the parts uncovered through the dismantling of the whole—a knowledge not uncovered in any other way than by the destruction of the whole. As for me, I kept on cutting up plants for the rest of the term, and eventually I shifted over to cutting up literature. But the memory of the custodian's dismay stayed with me as a moment when I saw two ways of appreciating the world juxtaposed as competing value systems: we can either look at the forest and know few of the specific facts about its component trees, or we can tear apart the forest and then tear apart the trees and then even tear apart the tree's cells in the pursuit of ever more detailed knowledge. But we cannot simultaneously have both.

My anecdote serves as the introduction to the kind of examination that I will make of sylvan environments in Tolkien and Shakespeare: we will definitely be looking at the forest and

not tearing apart the trees. Furthermore, I come before you as a *custodian* of the humanities—or at least of a limited aspect of the humanities—intent on preserving and organizing existing knowledge rather than tearing things apart to create new knowledge. That task still lies ahead of me; therefore, I will not cite reams of researches nor quarrel with colleagues who have dared to offer a different opinion. I will draw on my training and on my observational skills to sketch the big picture with respect to trees, Tolkien, and Shakespeare.

The significance of trees to human beings cannot be over-emphasized: literary examples are legion, from the apple trees that fling their fruit at Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* to the Whomping Willow in the Harry Potter series. The Tree of Life and the Tree of Knowledge were forbidden to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, and in other religious stories, trees figure powerfully: Buddha sits under the Bo tree at the moment of his enlightenment; Odin dies on the tree of life to be re-born. In Ken Kesey's novel *Sometimes a Great Notion*, a tree being cut down "slabs," or splits vertically up the trunk, falling in two unpredictable directions, crushing everything in its path and severing the arm (and eventually killing) the patriarch of a family of lumberjacks—a terrible poetic justice. In *Jane Eyre*, the illicit nature of Mr. Rochester's love for Jane is symbolized when a lightning bolt strikes and kills the ancient tree under which he had declared himself to her. In a strikingly beautiful image from John Boorman's *Excalibur*, apple blossoms anoint King Arthur and his knights on their last ride into battle, re-emphasizing Arthur's identity as a symbolic representative of the cyclical seasons. And in addition to trees themselves, the artifacts that humans make from trees have powerful significance. The wooden cross of Christianity symbolizes both the death and re-birth of God. In Ursula K. LeGuin's *Earthsea* series, a mage may be known by the wooden staff he bears, cut to his exact height from the tree most appropriate to his supernatural gifts. And for every person buried, a wooden coffin becomes his or her final home (except for a few cases of coffins made of glass or other materials). Thus in traditional burial, each person so laid to rest becomes a kind of example of a kind of spirit residing in a kind of tree.

In a remote past, hominid predecessors would have called trees their natural habitat, living and traveling among their boughs and feeding on their fruits, leaves, sap and bark. When early humankind walked upright onto the savannah, however, trees must have acquired symbolic ambiguity at the same time that they acquired even greater utility. In *practical* terms, they provided fuel, food, and shelter as forests gave way to orchards and woodlots, and as tree trunks were converted into houses, boats, bridges, carts, weapons, tools, and every kind of flame from campfires to bonfires. (And how appropriate to be delivering this paper in a location where wildfires can still demonstrate the power of nature to undo the works of humans.) But forests were also forbidding places, regions of wasted land that did not produce grain nor pasture livestock, but provided a home to unseen threats and dangers. In *symbolic* terms, trees were sacred symbols of an ancient fertility goddess whose worship generally predated the invention of writing (which, parenthetically, eventually leads to the latest conversion of trees into paper, books, and libraries full of the kind of specific knowledge acquired by tearing things down to the fundamental units). Stories of this goddess are inferred or read between the lines of recorded myths. Rightly or wrongly, scholars find her lurking behind the stories of male thunder gods, war gods, and knowledge gods. An advocate of the lost fertility goddess whose trace remains in writings by and about her conquerors would see her in stories such as that of Apollo and Daphne: when the virginal nymph, pursued by the passionate sun god of music and reason, seeks protection, she is turned not into earth or water or fire or air, but into a laurel tree. Apollo thereafter wears a ring of laurel on his head to commemorate her loss. The sacredness of trees throughout the ancient world, and the persistence into modern memory of customs rooted in the worship of trees, is documented in James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. My comments here barely scratch the surface of tree lore in general in order to make room for a broad examination of Shakespeare's and Tolkien's use of trees

I begin with Shakespeare. With a couple of exceptions, trees in Shakespeare are collected into forests and woodlands and are unambiguously positive. Forests are places of refuge for innocence wronged; they are the sites of magical force where the old nature powers continue to

hold sway. Shakespeare's own upbringing in Warwickshire would have placed him in contiguity to the last remnants of Arden Forest, where once upon a time a squirrel could run from tree to tree across the entire county and never be obliged to set his paws on land. Shakespeare also could not have escaped familiarity with the folk tales about Robin Hood, a folk hero represented as a wronged innocent who takes refuge in Sherwood Forest and then takes reasonable vengeance on the rich from the protection of his sylvan lair. These images of real and imagined forests would have provided Shakespeare with nurturing and sheltering associations. But the inauguration of the great age of sail that begins in the Elizabethan era with the exploits of Drake, Frobisher, and Raleigh spelled the doom of the vast English hardwood forests: the appetite for tall masts and stout planking furnished the ships that would carry the British Empire to every corner of the globe within a hundred years. In conjunction with the rise of factories and the spread of rail transportation, two innovations making tremendous demands on fuel resources of wood or coal, the vast forests dwindled, leaving their mythic roles enshrined in literature.

Shakespeare first uses the positive image of the forest as a refuge for wronged innocence in one of his earliest plays, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*. In Act VI, scene i, as a dispirited Valentine is making his way home after being falsely accused of plotting treasonous murder by his best friend, Proteus, he is accosted by a band of outlaws. In the words of Ruth from *The Pirates of Penzance*, "let me tell you who they are: they are all NOBLE MEN who have gone wrong." The outlaws are versions of Robin Hood's band of merry men, and they are lacking only a Robin Hood—a leader—to make their rustic waylaying of travelers complete. They instantly recognize Valentine's true merit and appoint him their captain if he will have them, threatening to kill him if he refuses. Valentine accepts their "offer" on the condition that they rob no "silly women or poor passengers." To this demand the outlaws readily comply, saying that they would never stoop to such ignoble dealings, saying "we detest such vile base practices." The conditions for the resolution of the story are set as all the key characters converge on the forest primeval, some fleeing and others pursuing. Valentine learns by eavesdropping that Proteus betrayed him in order to have Valentine's love, appropriately named Sylvia, to himself; and Julia, Proteus'

discarded love now serving him in the disguise of a boy, sees with her own eyes that Proteus courts another when Proteus goes so far as to attempt a rape on Sylvia. Perhaps only in a woodland wild could a story with such a reprehensible hero/cad as Proteus then find instant resolution and reconciliation for all. At Proteus' mere request for forgiveness, he receives it from Valentine, Julia, and Sylvia, and the four separate youths who entered the precincts of the forest go forth as two standardly-matched happy couples. The ancient and mythic role of trees as fertility symbols seems to provide the natural force that sorts out these tangled lives, while the folk-tale idealization of the forest as shelter provides the setting where true love can finally find its proper or standard path.

Shakespeare repeats this use of the forest in *As You Like It*, but in a considerably more skilled presentation. This time, the wronged Orlando takes his refuge in the forest after raising the ire of both his brother and his duke. Orlando is the favored youngest son of the departed but appropriately-named Sir Rowland de Boys, no doubt an Anglicized form of "du Bois"—of the wood. When no other avenue seems available to him, Orlando of the wood takes *to* the woods, there to join his mimetic double, Duke Senior, another wronged innocent. To this same forest come Rosalind, disguised as a boy, and her cousin Celia. The setting makes the sylvan and the pastoral virtually interchangeable: Duke Senior and his followers, like Robin Hood's band, except for the criminal activities, reside in the forest in idyllic ease, while Rosalind and Celia support themselves by pasturing sheep, having purchased a farm. The forest/farm is clearly a positive, nurturing, and fertile environment where true love may grow in every heart.

Shakespeare now allows language and love to take precedence over plot devices, and his villains merely give up their wicked ways when they enter the forest and love calls them—either the mortal love of Celia, in the case of Orlando's brother, or the divine love of God, in the case of Duke Senior's brother. As in *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, the woodland setting seems to make a plot unnecessary: one goes to the forest, and there whatever *should* happen *does* happen.

Shakespeare's third use of the forest as a refuge for wronged innocence occurs in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The chief variation on the story I have already rehearsed twice for

you is the addition of an explicitly mythic supernatural element. In this play, the forest has its resident spirits on display even before the arrival there of the lowly humans of the story, as Titania and Oberon carry on the quarrel that will spill over into the affairs of two sets of mortals—the Athenian lovers and the rude mechanicals. The folk tale associations with Robin Hood have disappeared—no one is coming to live in the forest and carry on a fight for justice from within its sheltering shade. Instead, Shakespeare turns from folk tale to myth to bring the forest alive with legions of fairies—ancient gods reduced to diminutive stature by Christian redactions of their stories, but restored to their old powers by Shakespeare’s art. Plot assumes greater importance, and each mistaken action has a clear motivating force (usually Puck). The forest recedes to form a backdrop against which the interaction of the mortal and supernatural worlds can occur. But significantly, this interaction must occur *in* the forest, in the environment where the old fertility religions had their most important rites. There, true love still finds its proper course.

The use of the forest in the three plays I have just reviewed forms what I think of as the quintessential Shakespearean deployment of sylvan mythic elements. But there are three noteworthy exceptions to this typical treatment. Perhaps significantly, none of these exceptions occur in romantic comedies. In *MacBeth*, Birnam Wood becomes a camouflage for the army that will bring about the downfall of the story’s corrupted central character. In *Pericles, Prince of Tyre*, a tree bough becomes the symbolic shield that Pericles bears into a tournament where he will compete in honor of Princess Thaisa; the bough thereby associates Pericles with the mythic King of the Wood described in detail in Frazer’s *The Golden Bough*. And finally, in *The Tempest*, a tree serves as the prison first of Ariel, who is penned there by Sycorax, and then of Sycorax herself when Prospero defeats and banishes her. Only in this last case is a tree available to the uses of evil powers, and even in this case, the tree is recovered to serve the positive purposes of white magic. Up to the end of his career as a dramatist, Shakespeare continually identifies forests and the trees that comprise them as Edenic shelters for innocence. Only at the close of his career, in the play that many scholars have taken to be his farewell to the stage, does

he provide a hint that trees can be made to do the devil's work, too. But he places this corruptible tree in the exotic New World, where things never suspected to exist have been found, and he allows it only a temporary subjugation to an evil power. Shakespeare's treatment of trees is thus a fairly simple and straightforward presentation: they form a location where any of us might delight to find ourselves.

In contrast to Shakespeare's sylvan bowers, Tolkien's trees are more varied, more ambiguous, and more complex. An examination of the map of Middle Earth as it was configured during the War of the Rings shows where the key concentrations of trees have persisted: the Old Forest just beyond the Shire's eastern borders; Mirkwood, beyond the Misty Mountains; Lorien, hidden away east of Moria; and Fangorn, to the east of Isengard. Additionally, there are important individual trees or species, such as the White Tree of Gondor and the Mallorn trees of Lorien. Looking further back into the histories of the first and second ages, trees were so important as to be sources of light before the sun and moon came into being, and to serve as the cause of the great estrangement of the Valar from the affairs of Middle Earth. I will concentrate my attention at present on the trees and forests that play a key role in the trilogy of *The Lord of the Rings*.

The story essentially opens under a tree whose significance is not known until it is lost: under the ancient Party Tree Bilbo makes his farewell address to the hobbits of the Shire before vanishing dramatically. The opening of the story pays no special attention to this tree; however, upon the return of Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin, the sight of the felled tree brings tears to the eyes of Samwise Gamgee. The tree had served as the focal point of the social life of the hobbits living in its vicinity. It was massive and old, casting a welcoming shade that formed a natural gathering place for the naturally sociable hobbits. It formed a link to a past so far gone that it predated memory. The Party Tree is a single example of the Shakespearean forest that shelters innocence. Going beyond the uses Shakespeare made of trees, however, Tolkien makes it become a sacrifice to the wounded vanity of Saruman. The courageous actions of innocent, carefree hobbits thwarted his ambition, and the Party Tree pays the price as a sacrificial victim.

The Party Tree was perhaps the last remnant in the Shire of the Old Forest where the hobbit travelers first encounter the raw power of nature. Although Frodo, Sam, Merry, and Pippin know that they shouldn't listen to the trees in the Old Forest, much less sleep there, they soon find themselves overwhelmed by the heat, the exhaustion, and the murmur of the leaves. Tolkien places Merry and Pippin against a tree for a nap, and soon the tree has engulfed them (although only Merry's lower half makes it in before Sam discovers them). In this image of living creatures taking up residence in a tree, we are reminded of Ariel and Sycorax. But Tolkien goes farther in exploiting mythic symbolism: with the arrival of Tom Bombadil, the tree is forced to relinquish its captives in a kind of birth scene (with Merry as a breach baby). Even though Tolkien explicitly names the tree "Old Man Willow," the reader cannot help but be reminded of the mythic tree of life sacred to a primeval fertility goddess. Merry and Pippin are reborn with new knowledge about the threats they may face, and with new respect for the powers that living things may wield. But all is not danger: they also learn that help, too, will come from unexpected quarters.

The next arresting encounter with trees occurs in the woods of Lothlorien. There, the hobbits must take the terrifying step of climbing up into trees and living on tiny platforms—the *flets* of the elves—in their highest boughs. The trees of this wood are sacred to Elves and ruled by the Lady Galadriel. She is both merciful and stern, powerful and benevolent. Her gifts help the hobbits to succeed in the task of destroying the ring, and then help assuage the damage in the shire when Sam replaces the Party Tree with a Mallorn grown from the special seed and soil given to him by Galadriel. This sacred grove was also the location where Aragorn and Arwen plighted their troth. It is a center of ancient power that nourishes life and love—all that is antithetical to the intentions of Sauron.

Perhaps Tolkien's greatest imaginative use of trees is in his creation of Fangorn Forest and the tree-shepherding Ents who care for it. Tolkien carries the idea of trees as sentient beings to its extreme when he endows the trees with the powers of intelligence and mobility. The outcome of the battle at Helm's Deep could have only been disaster had the Ents not decided in

their moot to send the trees into battle. Isengard is destroyed, Saruman is neutralized, and his legions of Orcs and Uruk-hai disappear into the trees that have migrated to their flanks, never to be seen again. These trees fully embody the ancient notion of living spirits—even deities—in trees. It is also among these ancient trees that Gandalf is restored to the fellowship in his reborn incarnation as Gandalf the White. Fangorn Forest seems to be a place still stamped with the original fingerprint of the gods, pre-dating humans, dwarves, and Elves, and still harboring all the creative power poured into it at the dawn of time.

My final example is the White Tree of Gondor, symbol of the true Numenorean kings. Aragorn claims his right to the kingship in many ways, but one of them is his restoration of the White Tree to its place of honor in Gondor. His association with the tree makes him an example of the King of the Wood—the warrior, priest, king, and bridegroom of a goddess, or if not, then the closest thing to it in Middle Earth—and gives him power over the living and the dead. Indeed, it is his army of the dead that secures a pivotal victory for him and makes it possible to sustain the distractions of the war against Sauron long enough for Frodo to reach Mount Doom with the ring of power. Aragorn's White Tree is a direct descendant of a supernatural tree created by the Valar, and so it is a link to the very origins of life, joy, and light in Middle Earth.

My survey of trees, Shakespeare, and Tolkien is but a cursory examination that I fear merely rakes up a few of the outermost leaves and twigs that have fallen in my path. There are still the stories of Mirkwood Forest in *The Hobbit*, of magically protected forests and divine trees in *The Silmarillion*, and numerous other examples from mythology and literature to consider. I invite your suggestions. Thank you for your attention.