

CHAPTER I

Into the Woods

In March 2002, English newspapers reported that London had been granted official ‘forest’ status.¹ This pronouncement did not mean what it would have meant for Shakespeare, and for people living centuries before (and after) his time: that all beasts of chase in the area, especially deer (except those kept in private parks for which a royal licence had been granted), were now the property of the Crown and under the protection of special Forest Law. It merely signalled the appointment by the Forestry Commission of an official charged with looking after existing woodland in greater London – in Hyde Park, for instance, or Epping Forest – and also with planting new woods in what the officer himself – a Mr Melville – was quoted as calling the capital’s wastelands and ‘urban deserts’. Those ‘urban deserts’ for a moment surprised. Could the newly appointed Melville be remembering *As You Like It*, whose exiled Duke talks about the deer in the forest of Arden as ‘native burghers of this desert city’ (2.1.23)? He wasn’t, of course. He was using the word ‘deserts’ in its current sense: places barren of vegetation, like the arid sands of Arabia. Shakespeare’s Duke Senior, speaking in an Arden full of greenwood trees, had not meant that at all – nor did any of the characters either in this or innumerable other woodland plays of the period who regularly invoke ‘desert’ to describe their surroundings. Arden is a ‘desert’ simply because, as Orlando later puts it, it is ‘unpeopled’ (or so he initially thinks) and remote, two things the ‘urban deserts’ the Forestry Commission had its eye on most certainly are not.

‘Forestry’, the Commission’s official went on to say, ‘is now about people and not necessarily about trees’. But it had not necessarily been ‘about trees’ in this country for hundreds of years after the Norman Conquest. A ‘forest’ was primarily somewhere, rich in game, that had been subjected to the particular restrictions of Forest Law. It could designate such signally treeless regions as Exmoor, although in literature this is

¹ *Independent*, 31 March 2002.

almost never the case. As for woodland being important for ‘recreation and the environment, education and health’, as Mr Melville put it – that package would have been incomprehensible in Shakespeare’s time. It also happens to be a bit problematic in our own. In April 1995, almost seven years before London acquired its ‘forest’ status, one newspaper promised readers across the country that ‘the secure forest’ would soon become part of their everyday lives.² This bulletin was prompted by the announcement that thirteen new forests were to be created on fringe land just outside a number of major cities, and what it grappled with was the fact that although city-dwellers often liked walking in woodland, they were also – particularly the women – frightened of it. Those interviewed on a planned outing in the remnants of Robin Hood’s Sherwood near Nottingham tended uneasily to remember a recent murder on Wimbledon Common, certain nasty events in the very woodland where they were speaking, and to talk about darkness, hiding places for attackers, and an indefinable sense of being trapped among the trees. Hence ‘the secure forest’ – well-lit, sign-posted and patrolled, with provision for teddy-bears’ picnics, escorted wildlife walks, ‘Pooh-sticks’ adventures and only a very small amount of rigorously monitored ‘wild-wood’ for those few seeking ‘a wilderness experience’.

One wishes the Forestry Commission good luck. Its officials face, however, an insurmountable difficulty. It is the nature of forests, both in literature and life, *not* to be safe. That is not simply because they have always been, and remain to this day, favoured locations for rape and murder. Men and women innocently walking in them, or attempting to journey through to the other side, have never known what they might suddenly meet, whether animal, human or (still worse) a disconcerting mixture of the two. (A. S. Byatt’s ‘The Thing in the Forest’, published in 2004 in her *Little Black Book of Stories*, is yet another variant on the last.)³ Although woods may continue to shrink and be demolished all over the world, the dread of encounters there with the uncanny or even (as Actaeon discovered long ago, to his cost, when he surprised a goddess bathing) the divine, refuses to go away. In 1999, that somewhat overblown woodland film *The Blair Witch Project* owed much of its enormous box-office success to the fact that large numbers of cinema-goers believed that what they were watching was a documentary: that all of these horrifying events had really occurred and been clumsily filmed by the young and doomed student

² *Independent*, 9 April 1995.

³ A. S. Byatt, *The Thing in the Forest*, in *Little Black Book of Stories* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2004).

researchers investigating supernatural manifestations in the Maryland woods.

* * *

In an essay called 'Overture and Incidental Music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*', Angela Carter drew a distinction between the forests of Northern Europe and the English wood:

The English wood is nothing like the dark necromantic forest in which the Northern European imagination begins and ends, where its dead and the witches live, and Baba-yaga stalks about in her house with chicken's feet looking for children in order to eat them. . . . An English wood, however marvellous, however metamorphic, cannot, by definition, be trackless, although it might well be formidably labyrinthine. . . . But to be lost in the forest is to be lost to *this* world, to be abandoned by the light, to lose yourself utterly with no guarantee you will either find yourself or else be found . . . for the forest is as infinitely boundless as the human heart.⁴

In 'Overture and Incidental Music', Titania's changeling child, the Indian boy, has little sympathy with either place. Wrenched away from his mother's warm south of mango and lemon groves, he is appalled by dripping English woodland, and by fairies afflicted (like himself) with the 'damn occidental common cold'.⁵ His misery is considerable, yet he shows no signs of thinking he would be better off astray in the 'existential catastrophe'⁶ of Baba Yaga's sunless forest: that vast, unmapped terrain where, as Michel Pastoureau has written, in a brilliant essay on the mediaeval forest as symbolic universe,

les noms des lieux forestiers sont associés à la couleur noire, jamais à la couleur verte. C'est l'idée d'opacité, de ténèbres, de nuit terrifiante que prend en charge la toponymie, et non pas celle de végétation, de nourriture, de ressourcement. (forest place names are always associated with the colour black, never with the colour green. It's the idea of opacity, of shadows, of terrifying night which takes charge of the nomenclature, and not that of vegetation, nourishment, natural resources).⁷

In mocking Shakespeare's 'wood near Athens' – a place merely 'enchanted', not 'haunted', as forests are – Carter's principal targets were Victorian prettiness, Mendelssohn's music and what she saw as deplorable

⁴ Angela Carter, *Black Venus* (London: Chatto, 1985), pp. 67, 68. ⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 67. ⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 67.

⁷ Michel Pastoureau, 'La forêt médiévale: un univers symbolique', in ed. André Chastel, *Le château, la chasse, et la forêt (3^e Rencontres internationales d'archéologie et d'histoire de Commarque, 1988)* (Bordeaux: Sud-Ouest, 1990), pp. 81–98 (p. 84).

nineteenth-century nostalgia for something that has never existed, except in fiction: a green and harmless sylvan world. Shakespeare, she thought, was much to blame for this, the more so because he must have been aware that actual Elizabethan woodland, even if without the resonance of the Northern European forests, was unromantic and harsh. The wood of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, she complained, although 'the true Shakespearian wood', was 'not the wood of Shakespeare's time, which did not know itself to be Shakespearian, and therefore felt no need to keep up appearances'.⁸

The Oxford English Dictionary's entry for 'wood' occupies approximately six times as much space as that for 'forest'. (There is a similar disproportion, in the French Grand Robert, between 'bois' and 'forêt'.) The reasons for this are largely the same on both sides of the Channel, and they go considerably beyond the fact that, thanks to the axe and the saw, not to mention engrained and ancient human fears, both countries have for centuries been far less rich in forests than in relatively tamed and small-scale woods. The words 'bois' and 'wood' are unlike 'forêt' and 'forest' in that they signify not only an assemblage of living trees, but an indispensable and richly symbolic product: one which, as Pastoureau has shown, was long regarded as *materia prima*, heading the list of substances used or worked by man. Not until the fourteenth century did wood begin to be displaced in this symbolic hierarchy by cloth, the French 'etoffe', 'stuff' or 'material'.⁹ Forests were often metaphoric – Thomas Wyatt's 'the heart's forest', or the 'forêt de longue attente' (forest of long waiting) of Charles d'Orléans¹⁰ – but they have not penetrated human life and speech in the way that wood (both with and without the definite or indefinite article) for centuries has. Even today, we 'touch wood' to ward off misfortune, talk about not being 'out of the woods yet' or unable 'to see the wood for the trees'. The OED lists a vast number of such colloquialisms, many of which, such as the pun on 'wood' as 'enraged' or 'mad' – Demetrius' 'And here am I, and wode within this wood, / Because I cannot meet my Hermia' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream* 2.1.192–3) – have fallen into disuse. The French dictionary amasses its own equivalents.

⁸ Carter, *Black Venus*, pp. 68, 69. ⁹ Pastoureau, 'La forêt médiévale', pp. 87–8.

¹⁰ The standard English translation is prosaic; a more obviously fraught forest can be found in another of Charles d'Orléans' *ballades*, which begins 'En la forest d'Ennuyeuse Tristesse' ('in the forest of Grievous Sadness'). *The Penguin Book of French Verse 1: To the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Brian Woledge (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1961). The poet himself composed an English version: 'In the forest of noyous hevynes . . .'. See *The English Poems of Charles of Orleans: Edited from the Manuscript Brit. Mus. Harl. 682*, ed. Robert Steele (2 vols. (Early English Text Society) (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941–6), p. 81.

Both 'bois' and 'wood' are native words in their respective languages, 'wood' being Old English (*wudu*) in origin. 'Forestis', on the other hand, the source of 'forêt' and 'forest', is a Merovingian Latin intruder, and etymologically unclear. It may derive from *foris* ('outside'), a reference to the apartness of royal forests, which both in France and (for a much longer time) in England were subject to laws different from those in the rest of the kingdom. On the other hand, it may not. John Manwood, English author of *A Treatise and Discourse of the Lawes of the Forrest*, a comprehensive work first published in 1598, certainly knew that he was being whimsical (if imaginative) when he explained that the word *forest* was both Latinate, and compounded of the two English words, *For* and *Rest*: meaning 'a safe abyding and priuiledged place for the kings wild beastes for rest, which two woords (*For* and *Rest*) being put together and made one word, is *Forrest*, taking his name of the nature of the place'.¹¹ Despite such moments of whimsy, Manwood knew his forests and their laws: he had been a gamekeeper in Waltham Forest and a justice of the New Forest. His playful etymology only emphasizes the tendency of forests, not least in the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, to be so volatile, to shift so cunningly between the imaginary and the real, the distant and the close at hand, as to be difficult to pin down.

The actual wood of Shakespeare's time was, of course, a severely diminished entity. Already, in 1587, William Harrison was complaining, in his *Description of England*, that although 'there is good store of great wood or timber here and there even now in some places of England, yet in our days it is far unlike to that plenty which our ancestors have seen heretofore, when stately building was less in use'.¹² When the remaining English forests speak (as they often do) in Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1612–22),¹³ it is usually either to lament an ancient greatness now destroyed by enclosure, the axe and the plough, or to fret over a future which they recognize as desperately uncertain. The determined effort to clear woods, usually in order to produce arable land, goes back to time immemorial, and continues, with disastrous consequences, in third-world countries today. It was the Roman conquest, however, that significantly changed the landscape of Britain. After laying

¹¹ John Manwood, *A Treatise and Discourse of the Lawes of the Forrest* (London, 1598), D3. Manwood had previously published *A Breffe Collection of the Lawes of the Forest* (1592) for private circulation. An enlarged edition of the *Treatise*, printed posthumously in 1615, incorporated material from the earlier work.

¹² William Harrison, *The Description of England*, ed. Georges Edelen (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1968), p. 276.

¹³ See p. 8, and Chapter 5, pp. 112–15.

waste much of the original woodland of the Mediterranean (a catastrophe that turned out to be irreversible), the Romans briskly set about de-forested southern England too, cutting down trees in vast numbers as fuel for their iron works. The woods began to revive after their departure, but really took on a new lease of life only when William the Conqueror – a dedicated hunter said to love the stags as though he were their father – greatly extended the royal game preserves, often taking in whole counties and, as in the case of the so-called ‘New Forest’, obliterating entire villages in the process. For centuries, the forests of England would be a battleground between the nobles and the Crown, as forests were relinquished or their bounds curtailed, and then clawed back again, under successive monarchs. It was one of the things Magna Carta was about. Meanwhile, both Crown and nobles were storing up trouble for themselves in terms of ordinary people: subjects who lived within or on the outskirts of royal forests, or chases in private hands, and claimed traditional (but often unwritten) rights to pasture their cattle, sheep and pigs there at certain times of the year, to collect firewood, or even hunt on land that they owned within these larger domains.

England was still sufficiently well wooded during the reign of Henry VIII to be able to export large timber for building ships and houses, as well as considerable quantities of firewood, to Holland, Flanders and northern France. Then, under Elizabeth, the situation changed. In what many economic historians now regard as the real industrial revolution, furnaces for producing iron (largely used for arms production), copper smelting, glass and salt works all began quite literally to burn up the woods. The pace accelerated greatly under the Stuarts. It was a destruction compounded by an increasing use of oak, as opposed to cheaper materials, in the construction of private dwellings;¹⁴ the requirements of Elizabeth’s burgeoning navy, and a shift away from wood-pasture in rural areas in favour of arable fields, the latter increasingly created by grubbing up woodland in ways that did not allow it to re-establish itself.

The royal forests were to some extent protected, at least for a time. Elizabeth, every bit as keen a hunter as her father, was still personally slaughtering deer well into the last years of her reign and, although parsimoniously inclined to do so on land belonging to her subjects,¹⁵ she was scrupulous in the management of her own reserves. Her Stuart successor’s

¹⁴ Commented on by Harrison, *Description of England*: he laments that ‘when our houses were builded of willow, then had we oaken men; but now that our houses are come to be made of oak, are men are not only become willow but a great many, through Persian delicacy crept in among us, altogether of straw’, p. 276.

¹⁵ See p. 18.

passion for the chase verged on the pathological, arousing a good deal of criticism on the grounds that, meanwhile, his kingly duties were neglected. Charles I, although more fastidious than James – he did not, for instance, insist upon being lowered into the gaping bellies of dead stags, on the grounds that the blood would strengthen his weak ankles – nevertheless attracted criticism too for the amount of time he wasted chasing deer. The Crown, however, was suffering acutely in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries from Falstaff's complaint, 'an incurable consumption of the purse' (2 *Henry IV*, 1.2.236–7). Towards the end of her life, Elizabeth was forced to sell off part of the royal forests in order to raise money for her Irish wars. Both James and Charles followed her example. Almost invariably, the purchasers enclosed the land they had acquired, and then exploited it commercially, greatly to the detriment of the woods and, in most cases, that of common people in the area, whose way of life had depended on them for hundreds of years.

Under James, it became increasingly apparent that the country's woods and forests, and the game they sheltered, were no longer the envy of foreign visitors, as they had been during the reign of Henry VIII. Belated attempts were made to do something about this, including reviving the old forest laws, which in many parts of England had fallen into decay. Charles I has been severely criticized for trying to reinstate these laws, together with the special courts – the forest 'eyres' – which tried offenders against the 'vert' of the venison, but it seems likely, as Kevin Sharpe argued, that although the king certainly needed the revenue arising from fines, he was also genuinely concerned to halt the destruction of the forests.¹⁶ John Evelyn's *Sylva* of 1664 is sometimes cited as the first real plea for the value and importance of woodland in England. Even, however, under James, landowners had been urged, with varying degrees of success, to cherish or at least replace slow-growing timber trees, with the interests of the royal navy in mind, if nothing else. Arthur Standish's *The Commons Complaint*, the first recorded book of English forestry, went through a series of editions after 1611, all of them dedicated to King James. But it is also significant that, from roughly 1600 onwards, poachers of any consequence were increasingly prosecuted by the Privy Council sitting as the court of Star Chamber.¹⁷

There are no royal forests, in the legal sense, in Shakespeare. But he is remarkably alert to woodland facts and terminology, even if he often

¹⁶ Kevin Sharpe, *The Personal Rule of Charles I* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 13, 243–5.

¹⁷ Poaching is further discussed on pp. 16–18, 76, 78, 82.

employs them not to clarify but confuse. The forest in *Titus Andronicus*, scene of the emperor's 'solemn hunting', Lavinia's rape and the murder of Bassianus, is a place continually changing its character and identity.¹⁸ Sylvan nomenclature in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It* is more consistent. The word 'forest' makes only three appearances in the *Dream* – two of them referring to places elsewhere – against twenty for 'wood'. *As You Like It* reverses these figures: thirty-one mentions of forest, a mere three of 'woods' or 'wood'. And, indeed, these two locales are very different. The 'palace wood' of the *Dream*, a mere 'mile without the town' (1.2.101–2),¹⁹ is subject (as Egeus knows when the lovers are found there) to the same 'sharp Athenian law' that only a few leagues away Hermia and Lysander could escape. It stands, presumably, in the sort of proximity to the residence of Theseus and Hippolyta that Windsor Forest did to its castle in Shakespeare's time. This wood is by no means as cosy as Carter makes out, although it seems to have required Peter Brook, in his revolutionary production for the RSC in 1970, to persuade the proscenium-arch theatre of this fact. It is certainly large enough to get lost in, as Lysander and Hermia discover.

The wood near Athens has two radically different aspects: the daylight wood and the wood at night, the latter occupying most of the play. In this, as in almost every other regard, it is unlike the Forest of Arden, which certainly has its discomforts and dangers, but where it never seems to get dark. Shakespeare inherited *As You Like It's* forest from Thomas Lodge's *Rosalynde*, which is set in France's 'Ardennes',²⁰ but, as is well known, 'Arden' was also the maiden name of Shakespeare's mother Mary, a surname derived from the ancient Warwickshire forest within which her family had lived. Once so great, it was said, that a squirrel could travel the entire length of the county without once needing to touch the ground, Arden in Shakespeare's day was only a shadow of its former self. Michael Drayton makes it – or rather, her – lament in *Poly-Olbion* the rapacity of 'those gripple wretch[es]' who spoiled 'my tall and goodly woods, and did my grounds enclose'.²¹ By 1599, Arden was largely confined to the north side of the Avon, where patches of dense woodland were interspersed not only with the occasional village, but (as Camden reports) included pastures, and even a few cornfields and iron mines. Because it had never been

¹⁸ See Chapter 6, pp. 124–5.

¹⁹ On the 'palace wood' and its distance from the town, see also Chapter 6, p. 125.

²⁰ See the longer discussion in Chapter 6, pp. 128–30.

²¹ Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*, in ed. J. William Hebel, *The Works of Michael Drayton* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1933), vol. IV, p. 276.

a royal forest, enclosure, tree felling and clearing had proceeded there virtually unchecked, with the result that isolated clumps of woodland remained in the sixteenth century (Anne Hathaway's cottage in Shottony abutted on one of these), but only place names – Henley-in-Arden, or Arden's Grafton – to indicate that such villages had once been wholly encompassed by trees. Local memories, however, of the past greatness of Arden had been handed down over generations, and remained potent. Villages *in* a forest, frequently encountered in early modern drama, were a very English phenomenon. Actual French forests, not just those of romance, sometimes concealed a chateau in their depths. But French villages tended to stay outside; they marked forest limits, as opposed to being incorporated.²²

Reaction, beginning in the second half of the twentieth century, against what might be called the Quiller-Couch view of Shakespeare's Arden ('he who knows Arden has looked into the heart of England and heard the birds sing in the green midmost of a moated island' etc.)²³ was inevitable. But it may have gone too far: readers and audiences are now likely to be told that the play consistently dispraises the country, that in Arden, the local women are vain and foul, the clergyman illiterate, the backwoods dialect lacking in grace and beauty, and that Duke Senior and his entourage, passively enduring what they know, despite the songs and the stoic rhetoric, to be a very nasty place, just can't wait to leave it behind. Richard Wilson's new historicist approach, in his book *Will Power* (1993), is more intelligent. But perhaps he is so concerned to politicize Arden, seeing it only as a nexus of Elizabethan social disorder and discontent – all of this radicalism, of course, ultimately defused and contained in the usual Foucauldian manner – as to lose touch with the play, and with the meaning in context of the individual lines he so ingeniously wrests to a narrow purpose.

Shakespeare's Arden is certainly memorable, but neither as nostalgic rural England, anti-pastoral, nor Wilson's complex of dark allusions to contemporary food and enclosure riots. At once imaginary, remembered, and a real, contemporary place, the forest of *As You Like It* presents many different faces, depending to some extent (as woodland always does) on the time of year, but also on the way different characters experience and come

²² On chateaux in forests and villages on their borders, see Gabriel Fournier, 'Forêts et châteaux aux XIII^e et XIV^e siècles', in ed. Chastel, *Le château, la chasse, et la forêt*, pp. 39–66, and Philippe Ménard, 'Le château en forêt dans le roman médiéval', *ibid.*, pp. 189–214. See Chapter 5, pp. 95–7.

²³ 'Introduction' to *As You Like It*, ed. Sir Arthur Quiller-Couch (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1926), p. xi.

to know it. It refuses, in fact, to stay still. When first mentioned in Act 1, by Charles the wrestler, Arden looks ostentatiously fictional: the home of a peculiarly English legend that has met up with a classical myth. Here, we are assured, the banished Duke lives 'like the old Robin Hood of England', many young gentlemen flocking to him every day to 'fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world' (1.1.116–18). But the place itself, when we ultimately get there in Act 2, isn't like that.²⁴

Although Duke Senior's exile in *As You Like It* appears to be a comparatively recent event – he is 'already in the forest of Arden' (1.1.114), Charles informs Oliver – it is clear in Act 2 that these banished men have actually experienced 'the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter's wind' (2.1.6–7) in the open air. Orlando and Adam come close to starving after they arrive in Arden, and the first impressions voiced by Rosalind, Celia and Touchstone are anything but ecstatic: 'Ay, now am I in Arden, the more fool I. When I was at home, I was in a better place' (2.4.16–17). Considering what Duke Frederick's court was like, that says a lot. An 'uncouth forest', 'desert place' or 'desert inaccessible / Under the shade of melancholy boughs' (2.5.6; 2.4.72; 2.7.110–11), Arden initially strikes all the strangers who enter it as uninhabited and desolate. Even Duke Senior, despite the daily increase of his retinue (he seems to be equipped with pages too by the end) is still talking about 'this desert city' (2.1.23) in Act 2 as though Arden were some early monastic *desertum-civitas*: a loosely organized settlement in the wilderness formed by disciples imitating the original – and essentially solitary – desert saints. Only gradually does it become apparent, to such characters and to the theatre audience, that this is not the way things really are.

Editors of *As You Like It* tend to be much exercised by the fact that Duke Senior's 'banquet' is set out, in full view of the audience, during the fifth scene of Act 2, even though no one actually eats it until 2.7. Why don't Orlando and Adam, those lost and famished travellers, notice the food sitting there unattended in scene six and help themselves? The New Arden editor's suggestion, that this *al fresco* meal should be removed almost as soon as it appears, then re-introduced after an intervening scene only eighteen lines long, seems theatrically impractical, and unlikely. The whole point, surely, is that this bounty spread out on the stage, plainly visible to the theatre audience, is something that the newcomers to Arden cannot yet see. For Orlando and Adam, this is still a primitive and trackless forest, like Brocéliande: a 'desert', Orlando tells Adam, in which he is not

²⁴ See the discussion of Robin Hood in Chapter 4, *passim*, and in Chapter 6, pp. 131–2.

even sure that savage beasts can survive (2.6.6–7), let alone a banished duke. We, on the other hand, are being silently reminded how easy it is for Arden to seem less civilized than it is. Yet we too still have a good deal to learn about this place.

It is a common feature of Elizabethan and Stuart plays with forest settings that all sorts of unlikely people are drawn to the woods in the final act. This is true of Arden, with its sudden incursion of Duke Frederick, and the second son of Sir Rowland de Boys – as it was, for that matter, of the woods in *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.²⁵ What is special about *As You Like It* is its gradual revelation, to the strangers and to the audience, of a forest society that was there long before the arrival of the various exiles from farmland and court: one that will go on in something approximating to the old way after the aristocratic visitors have left. When Orlando nervously asks Duke Senior and his fellow foresters in Act 2 if they have ‘ever been where bells have knoll’d to church’ (2.7.114), the Duke assures him that indeed, once upon a time, they have. What he doesn’t point out – presumably because he doesn’t yet know it – is that there is in fact a chapel in the forest, ‘in the next village’, of the kind often supplied to remote, sylvan parishes, even if its vicar, Sir Oliver Martext, a man happy to join together singularly ill-sorted couples under a tree and without any calling of banns, leaves much to be desired. William, Audrey’s disappointed suitor, thanks God that he was ‘born i’th’ forest here’ (5.1.22–4), and so presumably was the tellingly named Silvius. Phebe, Audrey, Corin, and his master the ‘old carlot’ (3.5.108), gravitate between its ‘purlieu’ (4.3.76) – Shakespeare introduces the legal term for a cleared area on the edge of a forest retaining certain privileges within – and Arden itself.

As the play unfolds, this forest becomes increasingly populous – and not just because of all the immigrants. Pastoral since Theocritus and Virgil had usually combined fields with woods, a tradition carried over into Renaissance drama: in Italy generally *drammi dei boschi* (‘woodland dramas’) appears to have been a term used interchangeably with *commedia pastorale*. Rather like winter and rough weather, foresters and shepherds are ‘sure together’, and indeed rivalry between them informs a number of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English plays, in some of which (Sidney’s *The Lady of May*, for instance, or the anonymous *Maid’s Metamorphosis* of 1600)²⁶ a woman must declare her preference for one occupation or the other, after she has heard the arguments of suitors on

²⁵ See Chapter 6, pp. 122–4. ²⁶ See Chapter 5, pp. 97–101.

both sides. An antagonism mirroring, at several removes, the real-life conflict in rural areas between the requirements of deer and of sheep (or, less prettily, pigs and cattle) it also harbours an acknowledgement that shepherds and foresters exploit, and are obliged to share, what is basically the same environment.

In *As You Like It*, Shakespeare conjoined a timeless, essentially literary tradition with something nearer to home: memories of the largely disafforested Warwickshire parish in which he grew up, merged with a recreation of the vanished sylvan community that Arden had enfolded hundreds of years before. Rosalind, Celia and Touchstone have been in the forest for only a few minutes before they stumble upon shepherds – Corin and Silvius – and immediately feel much better. ‘I like this place’, Celia is saying a few moments later, ‘and willingly could waste my time in it’ (2.4.94–5). At no time, of course, were palm trees and olives, serpents and lionesses, features of Warwickshire Arden. Especially towards the end of *As You Like It*, Shakespeare seems to be trying to cut his play historically and socially adrift, deliberately fictionalizing a place that before Act 5 had also been shadowing a joint fifteenth- and late sixteenth-century reality. Then, all at once, we are given love at first sight between Celia and Oliver, the latter a wild as well as bad man abruptly reformed; an improbable spate of marriages, presided over by a god, Hymen himself; and finally, Jaques de Boys’ revelation that wicked Duke Frederick, coming to Arden with the intention of doing everybody in, has suddenly been converted by an ‘old religious man’ (5.4.160). Who would have suspected that so persuasive a hermit was living quietly all this while on the outskirts of the forest? It all seems calculatedly unreal. But you have to watch Shakespeare like a hawk.²⁷

* * *

On Midsummer Day 1509 in what Edward Hall described as a ‘triumphaunt Coronacion’,²⁸ Henry VIII became king of England and Katherine of Aragon, his brother’s former wife, England’s queen. A state banquet and then jousts followed at Westminster Palace. On the next day, six mounted knights calling themselves the scholars of Pallas, who had issued a challenge to all comers, were answered by eight servants of Diana, who explained that

²⁷ Hermits and Arden are further discussed in Chapter 6, pp. 132–5.

²⁸ Edward Hall, *The Union of the Two Noble and Illustre Families of Lancastre and York* (London, 1550), ‘The firste yere of Kyng Henry the viij’, fol. 4^v (a4^v). In this and subsequent quotations, contractions have been silently expanded.

beeing in their pastyme of huntyng, newes were [sic] brought unto them, that Dame Pallas knightes, were come into these partes, to doo deedes of armes: wherefore, they had lefte their huntyng and chase, and repaired also thether, to encounter with the knightes of Pallas, and so to fight with them, for the love of ladies to thutterance.²⁹

These knights of Diana, clad in green, ornamented with ‘Bramble branches of fine Golde, curiously wroughte’, rode into the lists to the sound of many horns, accompanied by foresters, and by

[a] Pagente made lyke a Parke, paled with pales of White and Grene, wherein wer certain Fallowe Dere, and in the same Parke curious Trees made by crafte, with Busshes, Fernes, and other thynges in lykewise wroughte, goodly to beholde. The whiche Parke or diuuse, beyng brought before the Quene had certayn gates thereof opened, the Dere ranne out thereof into the Palaice, the greye houndes were lette slippe and killed the Dere: the whiche Dere so killed, were presented to the Quene and the Ladies, by the foresayd knightes.³⁰

Diana’s servants then stipulated that the scholars of Pallas, if victorious in the ensuing combat, should have ‘the dere killed, and the grey houndes that slewe them’.³¹ They themselves, should they conquer, would be content to take only their opponents’ swords. Something about this proposal disturbed Queen Katherine and she sent to the king for advice. Henry too proved less than happy. ‘Conceyvyng’, Hall records, ‘that there was some grudge and displeasure between them, thynkyng if suche request wer to them graunted, some inconuenience might ensue’, he not only ruled it out of order, but commanded the two parties should now tourney together only briefly, ‘geuyng but a certayn strokes’, after which the jousts were to be broken up and ended.³² It is possible that Henry and his consort were aware of some smouldering personal animosity between two or more of the contenders that might render this mimic battle unacceptably violent. There had been no sign of this, however, on the first day’s tilts, when exactly the same knights confronted each other (until darkness interrupted them), a golden spear and a crystal shield being the prizes to be won. On that occasion, the adversaries of the scholars of Pallas gave themselves no collective name or identity. The more elaborate scenario of the next day, on the other hand, was fraught with tensions unusual in courtly tournaments of this kind.

As ‘scholars of Pallas’, goddess of wisdom and learning, the challenging knights were linked with a long humanist tradition, its roots in classical

²⁹ Ibid., fol. 5^v (a5^v). ³⁰ Ibid., fol. 5^v (a5^v). ³¹ Ibid., fol. 5^v (a5^v). ³² Ibid., fol. 6 (a6).

antiquity, that deplored hunting not only as a waste of time, but an activity harmfully inuring men to bloodshed and cruelty. Thomas More's was only one voice among many when he made his Utopians despise blood sports:

How can you possibly enjoy listening to anything so disagreeable as the barking and howling of dogs? And why is it more amusing to watch a dog chasing a hare than to watch one dog chasing another? In each case the essential activity is running – if running is what amuses you. But if it's really the thought of being in at the death, and seeing an animal torn to pieces before your eyes, wouldn't pity be a more appropriate reaction to the sight of a weak, timid, harmless little creature like a hare being devoured by something so much stronger and fiercer?

So the Utopians consider hunting below the dignity of free men, and leave it entirely to butchers, who are, as I told you, slaves. In their view hunting is the vilest department of butchery, compared with which all the others are relatively useful and honourable.³³

It was not for expressing sentiments like these that Henry, twenty-six years later, had More's head cut off. Yet the king was himself a passionate hunter, certainly not inclined to be squeamish about watching terrified, captive deer run down and slaughtered by hounds within an enclosed tiltyard, or to sympathize with anyone who chose to avert his eyes from the spectacle. Others felt differently.

Hunting (of deer, above all) anywhere in England was supposed to be the prerogative of the aristocracy or at least, after 1430, of gentlemen possessed of an annual income of forty shillings or more from freehold land. (The Game Act of 1603 would raise it to ten pounds.) One defence commonly invoked against humanist objections was that hunting provided young men of the right social class with invaluable training in the management of horse and weapons, cultivating endurance and battle skills of potential value in the nation's defence. This idea went back to the *Cyropaedia* of Xenophon, and its continuing strength can be seen in the knightly display of the 1509 coronation tilt. By enclosing their animal victims within a pageant made like a pale deer park, rather than an unenclosed forest like that of a later pageant in 1511,³⁴ the servants of Diana the huntress (scarcely associated with parks herself) made a statement about their own social status and that of hunters like them. Not only were private deer parks very costly to create and maintain, they required an expensive licence from the Crown. Wealth, rank and martial

³³ Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Paul Turner (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965), Book 2, p. 95.

³⁴ See Chapter 2, pp. 21–4, 28.

prowess: all three were being advertised by Diana's knights. Their opponents, the scholars of Pallas, although also gorgeously attired, made lesser claims. An insult, moreover, was implied by the announcement of the hunting party that, if victorious, they would strip the scholars of swords they were (by implication) unworthy to wear. If themselves defeated, they would simply hand over their hounds and slaughtered deer. That was potentially awkward, not only because the kill had already been formally presented to Queen Katherine and her ladies, but because venison in England, officially a commodity that would neither be bought nor sold, was a highly charged gift, usually underlining the superiority of the donor, whether it was the king distributing bucks and does at his pleasure from the various royal forests, or landowners using presents of venison from their estates to cement local alliances and loyalties.

Given such history, precedents, and complex and enduring tensions, it is unsurprising that hunting scenes, often involving real dogs, are ubiquitous in Elizabethan and Stuart drama. They were attractive for symbolic reasons, as well as for the spectacle and sound effects they could provide. Although deer are sometimes imagined, in non-dramatic works of the period, as complaining about their persecution by man – as in Gascoigne's *Noble Arte of Venerie*, or 'wyl bucke his Testament'³⁵ – it is rare, on the whole, for human characters in plays to express any sympathy for the hunt's victims. Sir Ralph's lady in Henry Porter's *The Two Angry Women of Abington* does point out that 'Life is as deere in Deare as tis in men': it is 'bad play, / When they are made to sport their liues away / . . . The stoutest of you all thats here, / Would runne from death and nimble scud for feare'.³⁶ Her plea, however, has no effect on the hunters. She is left to take herself home in disgust, while her husband pots away (quite illegally, in the gathering dark) at some roe deer he saw earlier, 'downe by the groves'. Shakespeare is quite unusual in the kind of compunction he makes many of his characters express, nor is it (as Jaques and Duke Senior attest) by any means an exclusively feminine reaction. Arden's weeping stag, the doe in *Titus* that has 'receiv'd some unrecuring wound', poor Wat the hunted hare in *Venus and Adonis* or the reluctance of the Princess of France in *Love's Labour's Lost* to do what is expected of her and

³⁵ John Lacy, *Wyl Bucke His Testament* (London, ?1560), STC 15118.5; see also Oxford Rawlinson MS C.813 and British Library Cotton Julius A V. The attribution to Lacy is conjectural; he signs the last page, but could be the scribe or the author of the recipes for venison which follow the 'testament'. See Edward Wilson, 'The Testament of the Buck and the Sociology of the Text', *Review of English Studies*, 45 (1994), 157–84.

³⁶ Henry Porter, *The Pleasant History of the Two Angry Women of Abington* (London, 1599), E4-E4^v.

‘spill / The poor deer’s blood, that my heart means no ill’:³⁷ it all makes one wonder about that Stratford legend according to which Shakespeare in his youth, ‘having fallen into ill Company . . . made a frequent practice of Deer-stealing’.³⁸

Rowe, who got it from the actor Betterton, who presumably had been listening to local Stratford gossip, first publicized this story in 1709. But, as Samuel Schoenbaum points out in his *Documentary Life* of Shakespeare,³⁹ it had already been jotted down by Richard Davies, in the late seventeenth century, in notes neither Betterton nor Rowe could possibly have seen. Seized on with delight by the Baconians (there’s the man of Stratford for you, a common poacher sneaking around with other local louts in Sir Thomas Lucy’s Charlecote Park), it’s been something of an embarrassment, ever since the nineteenth century, to Bardolators. Not because of the slaughter, but because of its illegality, and the apparently low company young Will kept. Shakespeareans, for their part, eager to discredit the tale, have been quick to point out that, in the late sixteenth century, Sir Thomas did not as yet have a licence to empark, though he did possess rights of free warren: meaning rabbits. But, of course, there were plenty of Warwickshire deer running free in the neighbourhood, and no reason to believe that the Lucys didn’t encourage them to take up residence near the house, where they could easily be got at by themselves – and others.

Roger Manning’s *Hunters and Poachers: A Cultural and Social History of Unlawful Hunting in England 1485–1640* (1993) sheds considerable light not only upon the young Shakespeare’s rumoured escapades, but upon many plays in the period, including his own. Manning, drawing on a great deal of previously unpublished material in the Public Records Office, makes a number of important points. In the first place, it is clear that, however illegal, poaching was not regarded as socially disreputable. In England, especially during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it was an activity cheerfully engaged in by an overwhelming number of the gentry and even nobility, including (on at least one occasion) Queen Elizabeth herself. For such people, venison for dinner, or the black market, tended to be a secondary consideration, if indeed it figured at all. Heavily armed, in

³⁷ *As You Like It*, 2.1.36f.; *Love’s Labour’s Lost*, 4.1.34–5; *Titus Andronicus*, 3.1.90; *Venus and Adonis*, 679ff. Unless otherwise stated, all Shakespeare quotations are taken from *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1974).

³⁸ Nicholas Rowe, ‘Some Account of the Life, &c. of Mr. William Shakespear’, in Shakespeare, *Works*, ed. Rowe (1709), vol. I, p. v, quoted in Samuel Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare: A Compact Documentary Life* (rev. ed.) (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 97–8.

³⁹ Schoenbaum, *William Shakespeare*, p. 98.

many cases, as though going into battle, accompanied by a remarkably democratic mixture of friends, eager household servants, and people from the local village (sometimes including the vicar), men who often possessed well-stocked deer parks of their own, regularly broke into those of their neighbours, viciously assaulting keepers and killing more game than they could carry away. They did it for fun, although (as Manning demonstrates) family vendettas – some of them extending over half a century and more – might also be involved. Poaching, then as now, encouraged male bonding and machismo conduct. It had also become, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, a substitute for military activity, something denied many of these people by Elizabeth and the pacific James. There is evidence to suggest that it was subtly encouraged by the queen.⁴⁰

Poaching, of course, apparently a deeply atavistic male urge, still goes on. The classic account of why men who need neither the food nor the money, and often have shooting rights of their own, nevertheless cannot resist the temptation of unlawful hunting, is Richard Jefferies' book *The Amateur Poacher*, first published anonymously in 1879. Jefferies, however, was talking about something relatively thoughtful and restrained, and requiring considerable skill. He would have been appalled by the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century practice of 'havocking'. Deer were said to have been 'havocked' when poachers with greyhounds – not the sort that run around the track at White City, but something more formidable, like the modern Scottish deerhound – broke into someone's park or chase and systematically slaughtered everything in sight: stags, does, fawns, indiscriminately and in such number that the carcasses could not be collected and were simply left to rot. The OED at present has no entry for the verb 'to havock' in this sense, recognizing it only as a military command to give the enemy no quarter. But, as Manning has discovered, from at least 1572 onwards, 'havocking' appears both in Star Chamber complaints and elsewhere to describe another kind of warfare: the wholesale and wanton annihilation of somebody else's deer.⁴¹

Forests and deer parks had always been particularly vulnerable in England during periods of popular unrest. They were attacked in 1381 as part of the peasant revolt against Richard II, and again in 1549 and 1569, when pales and fences were torn down and game destroyed. In the next century, the outbreak of the Civil War was heralded by riotous poaching,

⁴⁰ Roger B. Manning, *Hunters and Poachers: A Cultural and Social History of Unlawful Hunting in England 1485–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), pp. 55–6, and see Chapter 2, 'Poaching as a symbolic substitute for war', pp. 35–56, *passim*.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8.

first in Suffolk and then, by April 1642, in Windsor Great Park and Windsor Forest. Although some of this venison was eaten, that was by no means the only statement being made. The commons, however, were neither the only nor the worst offenders. In 1572, the havocker was Queen Elizabeth herself. Accompanied by the Earl of Leicester, she rode unannounced into Lord Henry's park near Berkeley Castle during the owner's absence and killed twenty-seven red deer stags on the first day alone. After that, the keepers lost count. When Lord Henry, who was proud of his harts and hinds, returned to confront the carnage, he impetuously disparked – returning the land to open country. Elizabeth wasn't going to find anything to kill when she next came that way on a progress. He thought better of it, however, after receiving an anonymous letter reminding him that his family was under a cloud (his brother-in-law had recently been executed for treason), and that Leicester, who had taken quite a fancy to Berkeley Castle, would be glad of any excuse to have it added to his own domain.

It is, of course, impossible to know whether the young Shakespeare had seen, or even perhaps become involved with, a havocking. Even in an age far less squeamish than our own, it cannot have presented a pretty sight. What *is* clear is that on a number of occasions in the plays, he uses the word in this special sense only recently recovered, and that we can now restore to the passages in question a precision and resonance long obscured. Philip Brockbank was characteristically acute when he remarked, in a note to his New Arden edition of *Coriolanus*, that Menenius' plea to the tribunes in Act 3 – 'Do not cry havoc where you should but hunt / With modest warrant' (3.I.273–4) – has echoes in *King John*, *Julius Caesar* and *Hamlet*, in all of which 'havoc' is associated with hunting. 'But there is', he puzzled, 'no independent evidence of its use in sport'.⁴² We now know that there is. Nor was Shakespeare the only poet to exploit it. 'See with what heat these dogs of hell advance / To waste and havoc yonder world'. That, for instance, is Milton's God in Book 10 of *Paradise Lost*. The whole passage suddenly comes into focus when you realize that Milton is thinking of the world as a once paradisaical deer park, broken into by 'hell-hounds' who now are 'crammed and gorged, nigh burst / With sucked and glutted offal'.⁴³

Brockbank's list of Shakespearean examples can be extended. In *Coriolanus*, Menenius is trying to prevent the tribunes from whipping the Roman crowd into a murderous anti-patrician frenzy, when they might

⁴² *Coriolanus*, ed. Philip Brockbank (Arden Second Series) (London: Methuen, 1976), 3.I.272n.

⁴³ John Milton, *Paradise Lost*, ed. Alastair Fowler (revised second edition) (Harlow: Pearson Education, 2007), 10.616–7, pp. 630–3. Fowler notes only the more familiar military sense of 'havoc', citing *Julius Caesar*.

proceed against Caius Martius legally and with restraint. A smashing of deer-park pales by the populace, and resulting mayhem may or may not be what Henry IV has in mind when he talks, just before the battle of Shrewsbury, about ‘moody beggars, starving for a time / Of pell-mell havoc and confusion’ (5.1.81–2) – the hunting image here is less distinct. But there can be no mistaking it in *Julius Caesar* – ‘Cry “Havoc!” and let slip the dogs of war’ (3.1.273) – in *Henry V*, where the ‘weasel’ Scot is accused of creeping into England to ‘havoc more than she can eat’ (1.2.170, 173), or in the last scene of *Hamlet*:

This quarry cries on havoc. O proud death,
 What feast is toward in thine eternal cell,
 That thou so many princes at a shot
 So bloodily hast strook? (5.2.364–7)

‘Quarry’ was the technical term in the period for a heap of slaughtered deer. Even without it, it seems obvious that Fortinbras is revolted by a spectacle that, however inevitable as a consequence of military action, ‘shows much amiss’ in the palace of Elsinore. That was probably what Lord Henry felt too, as he surveyed what was left of his red deer at Berkeley Castle. Hunting may have been a quintessentially aristocratic, even royal pursuit, with its own laws, tropes and language, but (as Fortinbras’ response to the ‘havoc’ of *Hamlet*’s denouement demonstrates, as much as Queen Katherine’s in the tiltyard in 1509) it was not necessarily a civilized one, not least etymologically. As such, it reflected the ambiguities, as much as the attractions, of its own forest, or woodland, setting. The way in which the hunt could, at a word, transform from a courtly ritual (however cruel and macabre it might seem to modern eyes) to a scene of apparently indiscriminate slaughter reflects the properly liminal status of the forest itself, its symbolic and mythic density, its allusive thickness and uneasy mysteries.

* * *

All over the world, forests themselves have since time immemorial been destroyed, felled, and then grubbed up to prevent regrowth, not just for economic reasons, to obtain timber and create arable land, as with the rainforests of Borneo and the Amazon today, but out of fear. Yet fear is one major source of their attraction, their grip on the human imagination; they can occasion deep-seated anxiety, which the rational mind cannot dismiss out of hand. The giants, wild men and outlaws that lie in wait there can claim a very extensive English and European mythology as mysterious

woodland inhabitants and hazards. The 'safe' and predictable forest of twenty-first-century London, even (or especially) one carefully programmed in small areas to deliver the 'wilderness experience', is not a forest at all, but a contradiction in terms.

This book is about much earlier and variously amenable forests and how they were regarded and used in English drama of the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, including, but by no means limited to, that of Shakespeare. It deals with forest symbolism, with ideas of the forest as a sentient being, capable of listening and even responding to some of the things humans do and say in it, and with the relationship, sometimes harmonious, more often troubled, between the forest and its neighbour and opposite, the city. As has already been seen, hunters and poachers, as well as people who for one reason or another make their home in the woods – wild men, outlaws, exiles and solitaries – populate a surprising number of plays. So do more ordinary people, those charcoal burners, smiths, woodmen and game wardens for whom sylvan residence was a professional necessity. Some among all these woodland dwellers moved freely between the woods and the town. Others could not, or else chose to stay hidden among the trees. Forests themselves, whether native or foreign, imaginary or real, seem to have fascinated Elizabethan, Jacobean and Caroline audiences and haunted the imaginations of dramatists who wrote for them. The latter were doubtless prompted in many cases by their source material: a body of literature extending over many countries and ages which frequently suggested or demanded forest settings. The predilection of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century English theatre for woodland scenes is nonetheless striking, given the problems attendant upon staging them. Were public and even private theatre audiences expected merely to 'think, when we talk of [forests], that you see them' – as with the invisible horses conjured up by the opening Chorus of *Henry V* (Prologue line 26)? How realistically and to what extent were trees – whether single or grouped – physically represented on stage? It is with an exploration of this still fiercely debated issue that the present study begins.