

## CHAPTER I

*Into the Woods*

In March 2002, English newspapers reported that London had been granted official ‘forest’ status.<sup>1</sup> 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

<sup>1</sup> *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.<sup>2</sup> 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.)<sup>3</sup> 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

<sup>2</sup> *Independent*, 9 April 1995.

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

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researchers investigating supernatural manifestations in the Maryland woods.

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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.<sup>4</sup>

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’.<sup>5</sup> His misery is considerable, yet he shows no signs of thinking he would be better off astray in the ‘existential catastrophe’<sup>6</sup> 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).<sup>7</sup>

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

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

<sup>7</sup> Michel Pastoureau, ‘La forêt médiévale: un univers symbolique’, in ed. André Chastel, *Le château, la chasse, et la forêt (3<sup>e</sup> 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'.<sup>8</sup>

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'.<sup>9</sup> Forests were often metaphoric – Thomas Wyatt's 'the heart's forest', or the 'forêt de longue attente' (forest of long waiting) of Charles d'Orléans<sup>10</sup> – 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.

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

<sup>10</sup> 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’.<sup>11</sup> 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’.<sup>12</sup> When the remaining English forests speak (as they often do) in Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion* (1612–22),<sup>13</sup> 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

<sup>11</sup> John Manwood, *A Treatise and Discourse of the Lawes of the Forrest* (London, 1598), D3. Manwood had previously published *A Brefe 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.

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

<sup>13</sup> 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-foresting 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;<sup>14</sup> 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,<sup>15</sup> she was scrupulous in the management of her own reserves. Her Stuart successor’s

<sup>14</sup> 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.

<sup>15</sup> 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.<sup>16</sup> 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.<sup>17</sup>

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

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

<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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),<sup>19</sup> 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',<sup>20</sup> 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'.<sup>21</sup> 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

<sup>18</sup> See Chapter 6, pp. 124–5.

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

<sup>20</sup> See the longer discussion in Chapter 6, pp. 128–30.

<sup>21</sup> 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 Shottery 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.<sup>22</sup>

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.)<sup>23</sup> 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

<sup>22</sup> On chateaux in forests and villages on their borders, see Gabriel Fournier, 'Forêts et châteaux aux XIII<sup>e</sup> et XIV<sup>e</sup> 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.

<sup>23</sup> '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.<sup>24</sup>

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

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