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”These trees shall be my book”: Reading Trees in As You Like It

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Jean-Louis Claret, « These trees shall be my book: reading trees in *As You Like it*. »

Keywords

Palimpsest – tree – graft – ages of man – garden – leaves

Abstract

Trees are given pride of place in Shakespeare's *As You Like It*. They are numerous and the characters are often compared to them. They occupy different functions and they also put the spectators in mind of some major concerns of the comedy. The play seems to undergo some vegetal growth and even to be the product of a sort of textual grafting. Like trees that lose their leaves then blossom, the characters and the play seem to shift from fullness to emptiness before a final regeneration takes place.

Biographical note

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Painters hardly ever resist the temptation to include trees in landscapes. Trees help them create the perspective effect and enable the viewers to feel the distance; in addition their shadows introduce time in the image. When the image is mental and produced by a text, they are also instrumental in providing a clear and intimate setting for the action. Literary descriptions hardly fail to provide a tree, as if the plots were anchored there, in the roots that reach deep into the ground. But the use of trees is not limited to the elaboration of a setting: comparison with a tree was a common device in early modern literature. If twentieth century westerners were asked what tree they would like to be no doubt they would be at a loss to provide a spontaneous answer but Prospero, Imogen, Adam, Timon or Posthumus Leonatus would always have one up their sleeves to answer the question. During the Renaissance, writers were particularly keen on this ancient exercise and early modern drama provides many examples of characters that compare themselves to trees. Shakespeare's plays are studded with moments when the characters resort to our vegetal friends to drive a point home or to make a mental image more vivid. So after considering some Shakespearean trees, we will focus our attention on *As You Like It* and try to identify the sorts of books the Arden trees constitute.

Shakespeare's trees.

It is quite clear that trees occupy a central place in western culture. The beautiful tree of life and the Tree of knowledge stood in the middle of the Garden of Eden and eating the latter's fruit caused humanity to be expelled from it. Alessandro Grossato declares that "The tree of the world, the tree of life is probably the myth whose circulation among men is the most ancient, the largest and the best documented." (96) At the beginning stood a tree... The

critic proceeds to say that “it represented the lost centre of the world or of the Edenic home, of the primal fount of life conceived as a stream at its foot or a beverage got from its sap, or even as an axis that connected the nether world with the upper one thanks to its roots and its trunk.” No doubt you noticed the presence of a stream by the side of Shakespeare’s tree. The film *Avatar*, by James Cameron, provides a brilliant illustration of the reactivation of the theme of the *Axis Mundus* or of “Jove’s tree” as Rosalind puts it in *As You Like It* (3.2.31). If trees stand for the origin, turning into one may boil down to returning to a prelapsarian state, maybe to the androgynous creatures evoked by Aristophanes in Plato’s *Symposium* (189.d-e)¹ since trees were believed to combine the masculine and the feminine.

At the end of *As you Like it*, Oliver describes himself “sleeping on his back” (4.3.100) under an old oak. Interestingly, in 2,1,31, Jaques is described lying “under an oak” too. One may also remember Boyet’s words in *Love’s Labour’s Lost*: “Under the cool shade of a sycamore / I thought to close mine eyes some half an hour / When...” (5.2.89-90) or Edgar’s in *King Lear* when he says to his blind father: “Here, father, take the shadow of this tree / For your good host. » (5.2.1-2)

In reported scenes, sleepers often lie under trees in Shakespeare’s drama. Couches are made under trees, graves are dug (*Titus Andronicus*), marriages are celebrated (*As You Like It*), actors meet (*A Midsummer night’s Dream*), lovers take their oaths, Dukes have drinks (*As You Like It*, 2.5.25-26) and runaways may find a shelter “in the happy hollow of a tree.” (*King Lear*, 2.3.2)² But the presence of the tree is more than a symbol or a mere writing device: it also serves a practical design. As a matter of fact, it enhances the visibility of the scene that is conjured up in the spectators’ minds. Indeed, it is very easy to picture mentally a character standing or lying in the shade of a precise species of tree... Such evocations abound in Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde* (109) in which one may read for example:

Ganymede, as soon as they were out of sight, led his flocks down to a vale, and there **under the shade of a beech tree** sate down, and began to mourn the misfortunes of her sweetheart. And Aliena, as a woman passing discontent, severing herself from her Ganymede, **sitting under a lemon tree**, began to sigh out the passions of her new love, and to meditate with herself in this manner.

In *As You Like It* these powerful evocations are instrumental in conjuring up the somewhat invisible forest in which the play is actually taking place. It is necessary to represent vividly to the mind’s eye what cannot be represented convincingly on the stage.

Characters are often compared to or associated with trees in early modern drama. For example, parents are conventionally described as trees and their children as good or bad fruit. “The royal tree hath left us royal fruit, / Which, mellow’d by the stealing hours of time, / Will well become the seat of majesty,” Gloucester declares in *Richard III* (3.7.166-68). The prototype for these comparisons is of course the Bible: “So every good tree bringeth forth good fruit, and a corrupt tree bringeth forth evil fruit,” the Gospel reads (Matthew, 7:17). They are so closely associated that some characters may even become trees like Ariel who was turned into a groaning cloven pine in *The Tempest* and whom Prospero offered to “peg in

¹ “In the first place, let me treat of the nature of man and what has happened to it. The original human nature was not like the present, but different. The sexes were not two as they are now, but originally three in number; there was man, woman, and the union of the two, of which the name survives but nothing else. Once it was a distinct kind, with a bodily shape and a name of its own, constituted by the union of the male and the female: but now only the word ‘androgynous’ is preserved, and that as a term of reproach.”

² It is difficult not to think of the symbolical use of trees in Soquette’s needlework representing “a medlar with a plum tree growing hard by it” in Cyril Tourneur’s *The Atheist Tragedy*. (4.1.2-3)

the knotty entrails” (1.2.295) of an oak if he did not obey him. So Ariel the pine might have become Ariel the oak.

But of course, trees change. *Cymbeline* provides an interesting example of tree comparison that relates the character to the seasons and their effect on trees. Belarius explains how he was banished:

Cymbeline lov'd me, And when a soldier was the theme, my name
Was not far off: then was I as a tree
Whose boughs did bend with fruit. But in one night,
A storm, or robbery (call it what you will)
Shook down my mellow hangings, nay, my leaves,
And left me bare to weather.

(3.3.58-64)

This scene is obviously echoed by the moment when Timon evokes his former friends in the *Timon of Athens*:

But myself,
Who had the world as my confectionary,
The mouths, the tongues, the eyes and hearts of men
At duty, more than I could frame employment,
That numberless upon me stuck as leaves
Do on the oak, have with one winter's brush
Fell from their boughs and left me open, bare
For every storm that blows.

(4.3.259-266)

As for Posthumus Leonatus in *Cymbeline*, he compares his body to a tree and his soul to its fruit:

Hang there like a fruit, my soul,
Till the tree die. (5.6.263)

The metaphor of the political tree runs through Shakespeare's plays and in *Macbeth* Duncan is responsible for the growth of his “vegetal” murderer.

I have begun to plant thee, and will labour
To make thee full of growing.
(1.4.28-29)

In *The Tempest*, when revealing to Miranda that he was betrayed by his brother Antonio the magician resorts to what seemed to be a conventional political metaphor:¹

(Antonio) set all hearts i'th' state
To what tune pleased his ear, that now he was
The ivy which had hid my princely trunk,
And suck'd my verdure out on't. (1.2.79-87)

Here, the ruler is a gardener. The tree can indeed be political... This is inverted pathetic fallacy in that the tree has contaminated the man!

¹ Shakespeare had already used the same sort of metaphor in the garden scene in *Richard II*: “Like an executioner / Cut off the heads of too fast growing sprays, / That look too lofty in our Commonwealth: / All must be even in our government. / You thus employed, I will go root away / The noisome weeds which without profit suck / The soil's fertility from the wholesome flowers.” (3.4.33-39)

As trees like it.

As You Like It includes discreet allusions to gardens. For example, Rosalind regards the “working-day world” (1.3.9) of Frederick’s Court as an ill-kept garden overgrown with briars. “They are but burs, cousin,” Celia says, “thrown upon thee in holy-day foolery; if we walk not in the trodden paths, our very petticoats will catch them.” (1.3.10-12) But Rosalind finally declares that the burs are in her heart. The burs are in the “sad rose’s” heart...

As for Adam, he is a pruning gardener and Orlando is a rotten tree.

Thou art not for the fashion of these times,
Where none will sweat but for promotion
And, having that, do choke their service up
Even with the having. It is not so with thee;
But, poor old man, thou prun’st a rotten tree,
That cannot so much as a blossom yield,
In lieu of all thy pains and husbandry.
(2.3.59-65)

This indicates that Orlando considers himself as a – rotten – medlar.¹ This metaphor conveys an obvious moral lesson: nothing will come of a poor man and the old servant’s efforts are vain. Yet the self-styled rotten tree will cause the real trees of Arden to bear strange fruit, that is love poems, that Touchstone calls “bad fruit.” (3.3.93) This is the moment when Rosalind, as an improvised gardener, proposes to graft the trees with... a medlar. She says to Touchstone (3.3.94-6):

I'll graft it with you, and then I shall graft it with a medlar;
then it will be the earliest fruit i'th'country, for you'll be rotten ere
you be half ripe, and that's the right virtue of the medlar.

In other words, both Touchstone and Orlando are medlars, that is rotten trees. But Celia has a different opinion because she declares that she found the young man “under a tree like a dropped acorn.” (3.3.196) And Rosalind concludes that this must be Jove’s tree (3.3.197). This image inevitably puts the scholarly spectators in mind of Ovid’s Golden Age (I.104-107) when

Men were content with nature’s food unforced,
And gathered strawberries on the mountainside
And cherries and the clutching bramble’s fruit,
And acorns fallen from Jove’s spreading tree.

So Orlando grew on an oak, which implies that the medlar may be an oak when seen through the eyes of love.

The tree metaphor is of course inherited from Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde*, where most of the characters are at some time or other compared to trees. Orlando and Touchstone are not the only characters compared to trees in *As You Like It*. As early as 1.1.67-8, Oliver – who

¹ The medlar was also slang for a prostitute. Lucio makes this clear in *Measure for Measure*: he says he didn’t want to be married to “the rotten medlar.” (4.3.173) See too, Middleton, *Women Beware Women*, 4.2: “he that marries a whore looks like a fellow bound all his lifetime to a medlar tree.”

interestingly roams the forest in search of “a sheepcote fenced about with *olive* trees”¹ (my emphasis, 4.3.72) – asks his younger brother a puzzling question: “Begin you to grow upon me?” (1.1.68) Then he adds threateningly: “I will physic your rankness.” (1.1.68-9) The words ‘grow’ and ‘rankness’ are obviously related to the vegetal world:² the younger brother is perceived as a “sap-thirsty” plant inching its way up the other man’s trunk, the way Antonio did to Prospero in *The Tempest*. Moreover, we feel that “the old oak whose boughs were mossed with age, And high top bald with dry *antiquity*” (My emphasis, 4.3.99-100) has an anthropomorphic dimension: it puts the audience in mind of Adam in whom “appears the constant service of the *antique* world.” (2.3.57) Trees are warlike at the New Duke’s court, but they are protective in the forest of Arden. As for Rosalind,³ she may feel wedged in Celia’s father’s world. In it, the old oak was uprooted and had to retreat into a forest while the new oak sank its roots into the holes his brother left. As for the beautiful rose, it broke its pot and moved to the forest in search for her father.

But of course, when one thinks about trees in *As You Like It*, one is immediately put in mind of the trees on which Orlando fixes his love poems. Tree carving may seem strange to us but it is part of an old tradition and the Elizabethan spectators were probably used to it, especially the well-read ones. Jean-Jacques Chardin (31) reminds us that this attitude can be found in Virgil’s *eclogue to Gallus*, in Spenser’s *Colin Clouts Come Home* (1596) and in *L’Astrée* by Honoré d’Urfé (1607). Nowadays, it is still possible to see hearts including pairs of names in tree trunks but few trees are turned into books.

The idea of tree carving was of course borrowed from Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde*. Poem hanging was so common in that world that Saladyne even hung his father’s hearse with poems so “that France might suppose him to be passing sorrowful.” (30) With this in mind, let’s turn to Orlando’s comment in *As You Like It*:

Hang there, my verse, in witness of my love;
 And thou, thrice-crownèd queen of night, survey
 With thy chaste eye, from thy pale sphere above,
 Thy huntress’ name that my full life doth sway.
 O Rosalind, these trees shall be my books,
 And in their barks my thoughts I’ll character
 That every eye which in this forest looks
 Shall see thy virtue witnessed everywhere.
 Run, run, Orlando, carve on every tree
 The fair, the chaste, and unexpressive she.
 (3.2.1-10)

Shakespeare’s text presents a soft version of this practice insofar as Orlando carves only the name of Rosalind on the trees while Rosader “engraves with his knife” a 16-line poem “on the bark of a myrtle tree.” (78) As for Montanus, he carved a 20-line poem “in the bark of a pine tree” (53) and 24-line one “upon the bark of the tall beech tree” (54) in Thomas Lodge’s narrative. Yet Jaques asks Orlando to “mark no more trees with writing love-songs in their barks” (3,3,219), which implies that Orlando and Montanus do the same thing: they turn trees into books one can read. Yet it looks as if carving long poems in tree trunks was no longer “for the fashion of those times,” (2.3.59) as it were... As a matter of fact, Jaques, the Elizabethan environmentalist, insists that no one should wound trees – or kill venison. His words echo those spoken by Duke Senior who “Finds tongues in trees, books in the running

¹ Olive trees traditionally stand for peace and reconciliation.

² Rosalind speaks about « a rank of osiers » in 4.3.74.

³ Rosa Linda, means ‘beautiful rose’ in Spanish.

brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything.” (2.1.16-7) In other words, there is no need to carve the trees. In the Forest of Arden, the Duke *reads* the brooks and *listens* to the trees while the lovers *read* the trees. But in the forest of love, you do as you like it!

The line and the cycle.

We have seen that Shakespeare’s characters like to think of themselves as trees and to consider their pilgrimage on earth as the growth of a plant. Some are uprooted and must leave their soil like Duke Senior, Rosalind, Celia and Orlando, while others sink their roots into the holes the exiles left behind them; “only in the world (they) fill up a place, which may be better supplied when (they) have made it empty.” (1.2.151-2) Some of the characters symbolically bear leaves and some do not, some bear fruit and some do not, depending on their inner season: the characters’ efforts to turn their spring into winter and their winter into spring are mere illusions. But they are all submitted to the seasons of love (4.1.117-119): “Men are April when they woo, December when they wed; maids are May when they are maids, but the sky changes when they are wives.” Trees do perfectly what men are unable to do: the former regenerate themselves each spring while the latter die after returning – misleadingly – to infancy. As Petrarch reminds his readers in his *Secretum* (1342, 180), life is a short dream and men try desperately to make it seem long and solid by dividing it into distinct ages:

Certains divisent leur vie, même la plus courte, en quatre, en six, en plus encore. Ne pouvant allonger la durée de la vie, vous la divisez le plus possible. À quoi bon ? Imagine autant de sections que tu voudras, elles disparaissent toutes en un instant.

In other words, dividing life into a series of sections does not make it fuller. It remains linear though man strives to make it appear as cyclic. Though he is the memory of his old father (2.3.3), which means that he bears Sir Roland de Boys’s wrinkled face,¹ – winter in spring, as it were – Orlando remains a young man; though “his age is as a lusty winter” (2.3.52) – that is spring in winter – Adam’s weak trunk collapses in the forest of Arden. You cannot escape the laws of Nature in the forest of love.

This endeavour to substantiate the empty dream of life is echoed by the genesis of *As You Like It*. As a matter of fact, our comedy was inspired by a book that helped Shakespeare fill his blank page. Thomas Lodge’s *Rosalynde* is a narrative that he ‘digested,’ then made into a play. The original words were symbolically erased from the page and replaced by new ones that Shakespeare wove into a ‘new’ version of the old story. *As You Like It* is a palimpsest: there is “no new news” in this new world of words... (1.1.78) Lodge’s full pages became empty pages that were filled again by the dramatist and this process may put one in mind of the leaves that grow upon the branches of a tree, then fall to the ground in autumn to be replaced by new leaves in spring. Thus all men, Jaques declares, also pass from infancy to maturity and then to infancy again. *As You Like It* is haunted by this cycle that stands at the core of its structure – an old world is replaced by a new one until the old world returns – and incarnated by some characters: for example, Orlando’s life was written down by his father in his will but it was ‘unwritten’ by his elder brother, Oliver, who replaced this written

¹ This is confirmed by Duke Senior’s words to Orlando in 2.7.200-1 :”And as mine eye doth his effigie witness / Most truly limned and living in thy face.”

“something” by a “nothing that he so plentifully” gave him (1.1.12). Once filled with emptiness by Oliver’s cruel autumn, the sapling found himself full of nothing, “a rotten tree / That cannot so much as a blossom yield” (2.3.63-4). Orlando became a barren tree. He was also symbolically turned into a woman insofar as women were regarded as “made of nothing.” In George Chapman’s *Bussy d’Ambois*, one can find the surprising assertion: (4.1.15-16):

So women, that of all things made of nothing
Are the most perfect images of the moon,

Once womanised by his brother, Orlando has to be filled up again with new sap. New leaves will grow on his bare branches thanks to the graft Rosalind proposes to make: “The little strength that I have,” she says, “I would it were with you.” (1.2.153-4) “And mine to eke out hers,” (155) adds Celia who wishes too to pour herself into the fair gentleman. The two ladies propose playfully to empty themselves in order to fill the young man again and restore his masculinity. Writing love poems that he fixes to the branches of trees is another way for him to fill the blank page of his life: “these trees shall be my books” (3.2.5) he states and we understand that they are books he *writes*, not books he *reads*. Rosalind will read them.

The graft the women propose to carry out is parodied in the scene when Rosalind proposes to graft the trees with Touchstone the medlar (3.3.94-6). This playful allusion is central in that it refers to the process of creation that Shakespeare undertook: Lodge’s text is a seed that Shakespeare planted in his brains, foreign words that he made his and let blossom. This idea surfaces now and then and one may suggest for example that Rosalind decides to graft manliness to her body by cross-dressing: “I thank God I am not a woman” she declares in 3.3.291. The end of the play consists of marriages, which may be regarded as the grafting of male onto female. The obsessive repetition of sentences at the end of the play (“and so am I” is spoken twelve times in act 5 scene 3, for example) may be reminiscent of the same sort of process: the words are saplings sunk into the mother earth of the play’s fabric. “How that a life was but a flower,” a final song goes (5.3.30).

Other empty and full characters interestingly inhabit the world of *As You Like It*: “either too much at once or none at all” as Celia says in 3.3.167-8. Jaques is presented as being “full of matter” by Duke Frederick. (2.1.68) As for Touchstone, he is a wise man posing as a fool, that is a full mind that pretends it is empty. And the motley fruit, the “venerable burden” (2.7.167) he bears is plucked by the hearers who find in him a whetstone to the(ir) wits (1.2.44).

The play with full and empty is also echoed by the speech on the ages of man. As a matter of fact, Jaques’s long speech in act II scene 7 may be viewed as filling a dramatic blank that corresponds to Orlando’s walk back to the place where he left Adam. By filling it up with a dense speech on a fashionable topic that was sure to grip the spectators’ attention,¹ Shakespeare succeeded in turning the public’s attention away from the main action, that is to say Orlando’s imminent return with the old servant. When the two characters’ appear again on the stage, their return produces a dramatic shock insofar as the spectators have been made, as if by magic, to forget about them. In other words, Jaques’s speech operates as some sort of diversion.² It is not unlike the techniques used by conjurors to deceive their observers. The fullness achieved thanks to the use of the numerous vivid images corresponding to the various

¹ The spectators spontaneously select the section that corresponds to their age.

² The same sort of process is at work in *Richard III* when Buckingham reappears after leaving the stage for a few minutes in act 4 scene 2. Richard asked him to kill the two boys and he needed a pause to divest himself of his humanity. The King gave major information in the meantime and the spectators were made to forget about Buckingham’s ordeal.

ages of man is nothing but a colourful screen, a theatrical diversion that seduces¹ the spectators. It is a plentiful nothing. This speech is a waking dream from which the public wake up when Orlando and Adam reappear.

Conclusion

This demonstration gave pride of place to the interactions between fullness and emptiness that pervade many aspects of *As You Like It*. It showed that trees constitute both a practical device that helped conjure up vivid scenes destined to the spectators' minds' eyes but also that they serve as illustrations for a major concern of the play, namely the passage from full to empty. Thanks to them, Shakespeare succeeded in getting the green world of Arden to spring to life in the public's mind and in preserving the aesthetic coherence of his comedy. New words sprouted where the old ones had grown the way spring leaves replace those that fell to the ground in autumn. Forests are natural palimpsests. They achieve what man dreams to achieve, that is to say the cyclic perpetuation of life. Yet by bearing their parents' faces, men finally succeed in becoming and incarnating what they have lost. The last words of this paper are a palimpsest too. I erased my own words and replaced them by those of André Suarès (1990, 50) who, like Petrarch, was fascinated by the forest of love:

As You Like It semble l'œuvre d'un dieu déesse, Psyché sans doute. (...) *Comme il Vous Plaira* est bien la forêt d'amour.

Tous les arbres, qui sont des amants, parlent d'amour. Le vent les fait murmurer d'amour, à tout instant ; et sur leurs lèvres, les mots d'amour sont comme les feuilles qui tremblent et se caressent. La lumière est tendresse et la brise désir.

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¹ To 'seduce' – from the Latin *seducere* -- means primarily 'to isolate, to set apart.'

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