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Andoni Cossio and Martin Simonson*

Arboreal Tradition and Subversion: An Ecocritical Reading of Shakespeare's Portrayal of Trees, Woods and Forests[1]

Abstract: This paper analyses from an ecocritical standpoint the role of trees, woods and forests and their symbolism in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Richard II* and *The Tempest*. The analysis begins with an outline of the representation of trees on stage to continue with a 'close reading' of the mentioned plays, clearly distinguishing individual trees from woods and forests. Individual types of trees may represent death, sadness, sorcery and premonitions, or serve as meeting places, while forests and woods are frequently portrayed as settings which create an atmosphere of confusion, false appearances, danger and magic. This reflects a long-standing historical connection between trees and forests and the supernatural in literature and culture. However, while individual trees largely reflect traditional symbology, conventional interpretations are often subverted in Shakespeare's treatment of forests and woods. From all this we may infer that Shakespeare was not only familiar with the traditions associated to individual tree species and forests in general, but also that he made conscious and active use of these in order to enhance the meaning of an action, reinforce character traits, further the plot and create a specific atmosphere. More subtly, the collective arboreal environments can also be interpreted as spaces in which superstitions and older societal models are questioned in favour of a more rational and reasonable understanding of the world.

Keywords: Shakespeare, trees, woods, forests, ecocriticism, tradition, subversion.

* University of the Basque Country (UPV/EHU), Spain.

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Twenty years ago, Scott Slovic wrote that: "Ecocriticism […] is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world" (161). A few years later, Catrin Gersdorf and Sylvia Mayer endorsed ecocriticism "as a methodology that re-examines the history of ideologically, aesthetically, and ethically motivated conceptualisations of nature […] in literary and other cultural practices" (10). These statements are still valid in 2020, and ever since ecocriticism emerged as a distinctive critical tool for the analysis of literature and culture, a thorough re-examination of most of the canonical works of English literature has been undertaken by scholars from all over the world.

The portrayal of nature in William Shakespeare's works has obviously been addressed before, but it may come as a surprise that so far, the representation of trees and forests in his plays has yet to be properly analysed and assessed. Gabriel Egan's seminal work *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (2006) offers an overview of the role of the natural world in the plays with an unprecedented and still unsurpassed rigour, but the attention paid to trees and forests is not the main focus, and very little discussion is devoted to their role and symbolism. Apart from Egan's book, no other specific study of the symbolism and role of trees in Shakespeare exists before 2006.[2] *Writing the Forest in Early Modern England: A Sylvan Pastoral Nation* (2009), by Jeffrey S. Theis, contains a first section wholly devoted to Shakespearean forests in *As You Like It* (1599-1600), *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1595) and *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (1597-1598). Theis's analysis reveals historical and cultural realities of the age hidden in those forests, such as their conceptual indeterminacy, parallelism to the stage, poaching practices and migrations, but it does not touch upon the symbolic value of the trees in Shakespeare's plays. Other works devoted to the study of nature in Shakespeare, such as Charlotte Scott's *Shakespeare and Nature: From Cultivation to Culture* (2014), focus more broadly on the interrelations between characters of the plays and the natural world, and while *Shakespeare and Nature* (2015) by Randall Martin discusses several environmental aspects in Shakespeare, the only reference to trees is made to address the issue of deforestation in the plays. *Wooden Os: Shakespeare's Theatres and England's Trees* (2013), by Vin Nardizzi, is mainly about the unparalleled wood and timber shortage during

[2] In Robert Harrison's *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (1993) six pages are devoted to forests in Shakespeare (100-105). As a way of introducing the section, a hasty reference is made to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, where the forest is said to play the same role as other conventional settings for comedies including: "disguise, reversals, and a general confusion of the laws, categories, and principles of identity that govern ordinary reality" (100). Harrison devotes the rest of his commentary to *Macbeth*, with an outline of the relationship between Macbeth and Birnam Wood, and the overall effects of its misunderstood prophecy (103-105). Harrison's contentions are sweeping, and the specific role and symbolism of the forests and trees in these three plays remain unexplored.

Shakespeare's time, and the second edition of *The Oxford Companion to Shakespeare* (2015), edited by Michael Dobson et al., provides some generally accepted references to the symbolic significance of some trees but dispenses with any in-depth analysis. Rune Tveitstul Jensen read in 2016 the MA thesis *The Role of Trees in Shakespeare, Tolkien, and Atwood* in which the first chapter is solely dedicated to Shakespeare. The analysis focuses mainly on *The Tempest* (1610-1611) and *As You Like It*, briefly mentioning *Macbeth* (1606) and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. The issue of timber and deforestation dominates the analysis, which leaves little to no room for other uses or symbols, highlighting only the connection of the oak with monarchy. Finally, Anne Barton's *The Shakespearean Forest* (2017) is the only serious study of forests in Shakespeare both on stage and in the texts. Although it sheds light on the use of trees as props in the Elizabethan stage and connects forests to the cultural background, the symbolism and specific uses of trees in the plots and characterizations remain untreated. Moreover, Barton's choice of plays (*As You Like It, Macbeth, The Two Gentlemen of Verona* [1589-1591], *Timon of Athens* [1606] and *Titus Andronicus* [1592]) only matches the present analysis in the scrutiny of *Macbeth*, and she adopts a different perspective.

Shakespeare's plays feature an ample catalogue of arboreal species, and this article does not attempt to provide a complete review of the role of every tree in all of Shakespeare's theatrical works. Instead, we have selected a few representative examples from the comedies, histories and tragedies, in order to see if the use of trees—on stage and in the texts—is incidental and random, or if special meanings are attached to them across the three subgenres. The selected plays range from 1595 to 1610, a time when most of his best-known works were created, irrespective of the connections among the plots and the natural world. After an outline of trees on stage, our analysis aims to distinguish the symbolism and role of trees both individually (specific species) and collectively (woods and forests), and to see if they conform to traditional roles and symbolism, or if the arboreal representations go beyond the conventional views on trees.

Trees on Stage

Concerning the presence of trees in stage directions, a short explanation is in order to clarify the intricacies of authorship and mise-en-scène in Shakespeare's plays. Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith explain that while it is true that a few stage directions appeared in the early quartos and the First Folio, most instructions regarding the setting were added by later editors such as Nicholas Rowe (1709), Alexander Pope (1725), Lewis Theobald (1726 and 1734), Thomas Hanmer (1743-1744) and William Warburton (1747), and that these remain in contemporary editions of Shakespeare (54). However, as George

F. Reynolds asserts, not all were later additions, as trees can also be found in the stage directions of the old quartos (153-154).[3]

Barton explains that although it is very difficult to ascertain exactly how Shakespeare's plays were staged in his time, it is known that a series of items were employed to set a scene ("Wild Man" 42).[4] Reynolds lists painted backcloths and props of great size such as rainbows and tombs (155), but also ersatz trees (160). We also know that trees were used as props in plays performed in Shakespeare's time through the inventory of all the properties belonging to the Admiral's Men theatrical company, as recorded in the diary of the contemporary theatrical entrepreneur Philip Henslowe (1845). On 10 March 1598, entries include "baye tree," "tree of gowlden Apelles," and "Tantelouse tre" (Henslowe 273). In some cases, in order to make the most of a limited budget, trees were rendered symbolically, and a small amount would represent a whole forest (Reynolds 162). In others, trees would be added merely for the viewer's delight: "Just as today properties not even required by the action were employed to make the scene more vivid and realistic" (Reynolds 159).

Contemporary accounts of trees on the Shakespearian stage, such as Simon Forman's, confirm these claims. Forman in his *Bocke of Plaies* (1610-1611) writes about a representation of *Macbeth* at the Globe on 20 April 1611: "ther was to be obserued, firste, howe, Mackbeth and Bancko, 2 noble men of Scotland, [were] Ridinge thorowe a wod" (qtd. in Chambers 337). Barton warns that though Forman, no doubt, saw *Macbeth* on stage, his spelling of 'Bancko' for Banquo, and the phrase 'Ridinge thorowe a wod' (Shakespeare does not mention a wood in that scene) may imply that he was embellishing the story from his reading of *Holinshed's Chronicles* (1577), the greatly popular history books also employed by Shakespeare (*Shakespearean Forest* 45). Assuming that Barton's claim is true (*Shakespearean Forest* 45), is it not sensible to expect Forman to comment or complain on the absence of the wood? The inclusion of the wooded area in his description must have been triggered by the remembrance of a physical manifestation of some kind. Forman's report proves that theatregoers paid attention to the portrayal of trees and forests, and alludes to the expectations concerning the adequacy of arboreal representations presented by the playwright. As we shall see, while satisfying such expectations formally on stage, Shakespeare occasionally subverted the received tradition in his use of trees in the texts.

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[3] The plays that feature few or none original stage directions were written mainly at the unrecorded time Shakespeare was a shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men, later renamed as the King's Men (1594-?). Maguire and Smith contend that in Shakespeare's early and late plays, given his additional duties, he included more stage directions as he would not have been at hand to organize the setting of the stage (55-56).

[4] For a detailed account, see Barton's chapter two "Staging the Forest" (*Shakespearean Forest* 21-47), and the first half of John Leland and Alan Baragona's chapter seven "'The wood began to move' (*Macbeth* 5.5.34): stage greenery" (82-89).

Individual Tree Species

In Shakespeare's plays, a wide range of meanings and functions are assigned to different tree species. Willows, for instance, are frequently associated to death and loss. In Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (1600-1601) a willow tree is the cause of Ophelia's death. The willow intended by Shakespeare is not the now familiar weeping willow (originally *Salix babylonica* and nowadays *Salix x sepulcralis*[5]), which did not arrive in England until the eighteenth century (Laqueur 136), but probably the native *Salix fragilis* or 'crack willow.'[6] This subspecies always grows by the water and the branches break off easily. In fact, its popular name makes reference to the reproductive phenomenon that occurs when the fallen boughs are carried by the current and take root further downstream (Woodland Trust, "Willow, Crack [Salix Fragilis]"). It is one of the most common species of willows in Britain, and due to its twisted shape, deep fissures and dull colour, any specimen, regardless of its age, can be mistaken for an old tree approaching death (cf. Shakespeare's description of the willow in *Hamlet*: "aslant" and "hoar leaves" [4:7:138-139]). The fragility of the willow accounts for Ophelia's unlucky fate, and the appearance of the tree cunningly forebodes and reinforces the tragic episode.

Sadness is another related trait associated with willows in Shakespeare's plays, with a traceable cultural origin. Paul Kendall ("Willow") contends that willows may have started to convey grief under the influence of Psalm 137 in *The Bible*: "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof" (Psalms 137:1-2).[7] Kendall further holds that the association became particular to grief suffered by forsaken lovers during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ("Willow"; see also Thomas, "Plants" 116). This symbolism is overt in *The Merchant of Venice* (1596-1597), where Lorenzo echoes classical tradition by describing how a distressed Dido, abandoned by Aeneas, mourns his departure and keeps a twig of willow while imploring him to return:

> LORENZO. In such a night
> Stood Dido with a willow in her hand
> Upon the wild sea banks, and waft her love
> To come again to Carthage. (5:1:10-12)

[5] A hybrid between *Salix babylonica* and *Salix alba*.

[6] Although the action of *Hamlet* takes place in Denmark, Shakespeare is unlikely to have travelled outside of England, and the rest of the flora described in the play strongly resembles plants native to the British Isles, such as pansies (probably *Viola arvensis Murray*), fennels (*Foeniculum vulgare*) or daisies (Ox-eye daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare*).

[7] Psalm 137 is the source of the error of naming the weeping willow *Salix babylonica* (Laqueur 136), since the tree is native to northern China.

Thus, Shakespeare strengthens and heightens a contemporary cultural reference that the audience could grasp by elevating it to the heroic realm of myth.

Della Hooke highlights the connection between death and the yew, an association which most likely derives from the poisonous nature of this tree (209). Slips of yew are used by the Weird Sisters in *Macbeth* (4:1:27) to concoct a magic brew which helps them predict the future death of Macbeth (4:1:96-97, 4:1:108-109), and formerly, perchance, Duncan's (1:3:48). Historically, the connection is observable in the "Ankerwycke yew," a tree with which Shakespeare and his contemporaries were in all probability familiar. It was the trysting place of Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, whose marriage ended in bloodshed and death: "some reports suggest that he even proposed in its shadow" (National Trust, "Ankerwycke"). The toxicity of yew leaves for cattle and its associations with the tragic historical event could account for its specific inclusion in the fitting context of macabre black magic, supported by circulating superstitious beliefs regarding witchcraft.

A third association between individual tree species and death occurs in *Richard II* (1595), where the Welsh captain establishes a parallel between the withered bay trees and the dead king (Egan, *Shakespeare* 83): "'Tis thought the King is dead. We will not stay. / The bay trees in our country are all withered" (*R2* 2:4:7-8). Historically, bay leaves are known to have crowned the heads of Roman emperors, a period that haunted Shakespeare's imagination, as shown by the several plays he set in Roman times. The evergreen bay trees, with their shiny leaves as symbols for power, cannot have escaped Shakespeare. Hence, a withered bay tree can be taken as the ultimate symbol of defeat.

Further uses and symbolism of particular tree species in Shakespeare are found in *The Tempest*, when Prospero destroys and uproots a number of trees as a sign of his tremendous power:

> PROSPERO […] to the dread rattling thunder
> Have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak
> With his own bolt; the strong-based promontory
> Have I made shake, and by the spurs plucked up
> The pine and cedar […]. (5:1:44-48)

As implied by Egan, the contemporary audience would probably take these feats metaphorically (*Green* 167), yet the use of these specific species in a figurative way for Prospero's display of power is significant. The tree which is rifted is an oak, which is one of the strongest types of wood that can be found in England, and among the trees that are "plucked up" we find the cedar, which has very deep roots, and the pine, which can be enormous in size. These connections would not have been lost on the contemporary audience, which was more than familiar with the qualities of different types of trees and wood, a widely used

material for the construction of buildings, making of tools, and other everyday objects in the early seventeenth century.

Concerning the symbolic use of other individual species, oaks are common meeting places in Shakespeare. For instance, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, the group of craftsmen who are to perform a play for Theseus meet specifically at the so-called "Duke's oak" (1:2:103). Herne's Oak in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* is another meeting place, where Sir John is deceived. In English history trees and groves are common points of reference for gatherings, and among these, oaks have a special significance. According to Sylvie Nail, the Parliament Oak in Sherwood Forest, for instance, was said to be the place where Edward I held his Parliament in 1290 (317), and it is reasonable to assume that Shakespeare was familiar with this tradition.[8] However, as we shall see in the next section, in Shakespeare's works the solemn character of the gatherings is exchanged for informal encounters which ultimately yield comical situations.

Woods and Forests

Wooded areas have been subject to given traditional associations that, though mutable, have retained their core values. As a form of cultural memoir, literature has preserved those constructs. Beyond the walls of cities,[9] woods and forests have frequently evoked supernatural atmospheres. Harrison is of this opinion, claiming that "in the forest […] the ordinary gives way to the fabulous" (x), while Richard Hayman goes as far as to assert that the "woodlands were one type of wild place where the boundary between the natural and supernatural worlds could be crossed" (20). Forests have also acted as symbolic spaces for various trials. As Bruno Bettelheim explains, in literature all over the world and in all ages, the setting of the forest has provided an archetypal location for trials and obstacles that, once overcome, prompts a return to reason and order (94; see also Simonson 12, 21 and Cossio 415-416).

In Shakespeare, the most famous use of woods as a setting for supernatural events is, naturally, the forest where the fairies dwell in *A Midsummer Night's*

[8] The historical veracity of this event has been questioned by Rev. James Orange (179), yet it was (and still is) a widely accepted popular belief that the mentioned Parliament took place under an oak. This would have been Shakespeare's main concern, writing, as he was, to entertain rather than ascertain historical facts.

[9] Although ecocriticism advocates for Natureculture, which "suggests continual interpretation and mutual constitution of the human and non-human worlds" (Garrard 208), it is also important, as Timothy Morton points out, that this new uniformity does not erase the present otherness (244). The idea is to bestow equal importance upon each and value and understand their reciprocity.

Dream. In this play the forest is pictured as a place beyond the boundaries of a normal perception of reality, where imaginative possibilities are unleashed. Most of the action takes place in a wood outside of Athens, and merges magic with confusion as prosaic business considerations mingle with dreams. In act 2, when Lysander loses his sense of direction and goes astray with Hermia, both cross the boundary of the unknown (2:2:42). Coincidentally, after going to sleep and waking up, a border is also crossed in Lysander's mind, as his passion magically shifts from Hermia to Helena (2:2:119). Prior to this, turning the wood into a potentially dangerous place, violence and madness take hold of Demetrius, plainly seen in his threats to Helena: "I'll run from thee, and hide me in the brakes, / And leave thee to the mercy of wild beasts" (2:1:227-228). Violence and madness escalate when Demetrius threatens Helena again: "[…] I shall do thee mischief in the wood" (2:1:237). This scene recalls canto XXII of Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1532), which was well-known to Shakespeare, when Orlando begins to lose his wits in the forest due to jealousy. The trope of madness in the forest has long associations, but Shakespeare, as with love, whimsically activates and deactivates this condition by means of fairy magic, resulting in a humorous device which guides the plot accordingly. While this is a narrative strategy, the intervention of the fairies also allows a reassessment of the capricious and often dangerous human nature which starkly contrasts with the ideal lover's good heart and steadfastness. This enchanted forest is thus both material and psychological, triggering a sudden change of heart in the male characters that could not have occurred believably elsewhere.

James Shapiro has discussed the presence of the paranormal in Shakespeare's most prominent tragedies such as *Julius Caesar* (1599), *Othello* (1603-1604), *King Lear* (1610), *Hamlet*, and *Macbeth* (96). However, in *Macbeth*, the supernatural and the notion of the forest as a magical place is used as a starting point only to be subverted and rationalized afterwards. First, the eponymous hero witnesses the apparition of a crowned child with a tree in its hand, who prophesies that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinane Hill / Shall come against him" (4:1:108-109). This prophesy in isolation seems as ludicrous as "[…] none of woman born / Shall harm Macbeth" (4:1:96-97). Later it is discovered that in both cases Shakespeare ostensibly naturalizes the supernatural, but without invalidating the visions. If caesarean delivery accounts for "none of woman born," so does Malcolm's strategic camouflage that his army adopts to explain the mobile wood:

> MALCOLM. Let every soldier hew him down a bough
> And bear't before him. Thereby shall we shadow
> The numbers of our host, and make discovery
> Err in report of us. (5:4:4-6)

It appears that the paranoiac Macbeth, having controlled all the worldly variables, believes that only the supernatural can defy his power, promptly accepting the predictions. For Robin Headlam Wells, fate is employed by Shakespeare to mock gullible characters in his tragical and historical plays (147). Macbeth is an epitome of this, marked as he is by tormenting and deep-seated insecurities, which he tries in vain to mitigate by resorting to supernatural sources of prediction. Paradoxically, although these prophesies seem encouraging at first because of their apparent impossibility, their fake realisation ultimately becomes Macbeth's doom. The seeming but, in actual fact, staged mobility of Birnam Wood is what marks the onset of his rapid mental deterioration; ultimately, it is Macbeth's credulity that prompts his downfall. Moreover, it might be asserted that Macbeth's simultaneous fear and worship of the forces of destiny are related to a fear of the female body and its capacity for procreation, perceived by this character as a mystical vehicle of his personal doom, since Banquo will sire a line of Kings and Macbeth nought (3:1:59-71). This is subsequently subverted by a much more prosaic reality, in which a Caesarean operation (5:10:15-16), a consequence of rational medical science, is what has caused the original survival of Macduff, who actually brings about Macbeth's demise.

Woods affect some of Shakespeare's characters in such ways by virtue of their inherently uncanny nature. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the supernatural is connected to Windsor Forest by means of an old tale:

> MISTRESS PAGE. There is an old tale goes that Herne the hunter,
> Sometimes a keeper here in Windsor Forest,
> Doth all the winter time at still midnight
> Walk round about an oak with great ragg'd horns;
> And there he blasts the trees, and takes the cattle,
> And makes milch-kine yield blood, and shakes a chain
> In a most hideous and dreadful manner.
> You have heard of such a spirit, and well you know
> The superstitious idle-headed eld
> Received, and did deliver to our age,
> This tale of Herne the hunter for a truth. (4:4:27-37)

The place bears some resemblance to the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and although in *The Merry Wives of Windsor* the story is almost literally an old wives' tale, Sir John Falstaff believes it and later allows it to condition his response to the events taking place in the forest: "They are fairies. He that speaks to them shall die. / I'll wink and couch; no man their works must eye" (5:5:46-47). As in the case of Macbeth above, Falstaff takes the presence of the supernatural, fairies in this case, at face value because of the setting. In the popular and literary imagination, inherited both from folklore and from medieval

and contemporary romances such as the anonymous *Sir Orfeo* (c. 1330) and Edmund Spenser's *The Fairie Queene* (1590-96), woods and forests were places where ordinary reality was interrupted and in which supernatural creatures were liable to appear. The forest setting here is crucial to facilitate the correct development of the plot, as the conditions for the deceit could have hardly been possible in the crowded and mundane city, and Falstaff's credulity, scorned once more by Shakespeare as Macbeth's, plays again an essential role. It might be added that the way in which the woods in both plays blur the characters' distinction between love and hate turns them into a subtle reflection of the misogynistic worlds of both Athens and Windsor, in which relationships between men and women were seldom based on love only. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor* this is not displayed by Falstaff solely but by most male characters, especially Ford and Page, at the end of the play (5:5:131-237). In this, too, Shakespeare's use of wooded environments subverts the received tradition; the forests mirror a painful and problematic reality through the apparently frivolous lens of humour, in which the 'magic' has a very direct bearing on the re-evaluation of contemporary reality.

Conclusion

In Shakespeare's plays, the presence of both individual species of trees and collective communities such as groves, woods and forests add important layers of meaning to the texts, that in some cases determine the development of the characters and even the overall outcome of the plot. By and large, the symbolic significance attached to particular trees or woods and forests in Shakespeare's plays show that both the playwright and the editors, who later added stage directions, were very much aware of the conventional cultural and literary associations given to the different tree species, and consciously used them with these specific functions in mind. A particular species may be used to represent death or melancholy (willow), sorcery and premonitions (yew) or serve as meeting places (oak). Plays such as *The Merry Wives of Windsor* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* would hardly work if the wooded settings were removed from the lines and scenery, while *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, *The Merchant of Venice*, *Richard II* and *The Tempest* would lose some essential imagery and meaning if the trees were not there to reinforce key scenes related to events and characterization, such as Ophelia's passing (willow), Macbeth's maddening superstitions (yew) and Prospero's powerful magical abilities (oak, pine and cedar). However, the analysis has shown significant differences between Shakespeare's depiction of specific trees, on the one hand, and collective arboreal environments on the other.

While Shakespeare remains largely bound to tradition in his portrayal of individual trees and species in the plays under study, the collective presence of trees seems to have provided him with an opportunity to break free from conventional imagery and symbolism, putting them to a more innovative and subversive use. Woods and forests are often portrayed as settings which create an atmosphere of confusion and danger (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*) or magic and false appearances (*Macbeth* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), and this certainly adheres to traditional interpretations, but Shakespeare frequently adapts these tropes to his own purposes, occasionally subverting them in the plays. These subversions enable the playwright to explore the contradictions of the fickle human disposition (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*), or satirize the tendency of some individuals to gullibly believe the impossible (*Macbeth* and *The Merry Wives of Windsor*), which irrevocably leads to catastrophe.

Thus, we may tentatively conclude that Shakespeare's portrayal of trees and forests not only reflects conventional symbolism and plays a fundamental role for characterization and plot, but that the occasional subversion of received tradition also reflects the well-known (and well-attested) tensions of the Elizabethan period. The inherited and long-standing religious certainties were vigorously questioned and subverted during the violent upheavals of the Reformation, and superstitious belief was gradually giving way to a new humanist understanding of the world based on reason. Nevertheless, a more exhaustive study of the portrayal of trees in the entire body of Shakespeare's dramatic output, which is beyond the scope of the present article, would be needed to confirm this.

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