

Birnam Wood Comes: Shakespeare's forests as agent of transformation

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"A great work of art is like a dream; for all its apparent obviousness it does not explain itself and is always ambiguous."

-C.G. Jung, CW 15, 161

"I like this place and willingly could waste my time in it."

-William Shakespeare

Introduction

The forest is a central metaphor in many of Shakespeare's plays. It is a place of mystery where unknown forces dwell: lovers flee, murderers hide, faeries lurk, and animals hunt. It is the place in which logic becomes entangled in chaos, and the best laid plans are pushed aside, making room for inchoate mischief. It is distinct from the ordered embodiment of civilization. In many instances the forest is a separate character that, while does not precisely speak, influences all with whom it comes in contact. It can be an ally or foe. This paper examines these themes of transformation of Shakespeare's characters as a result of their encounters with the boundary of the forest, as explored in the one act play *Birnam Wood Comes*.

Birnam Wood Comes

In this script, the forest's edge is where Shakespeare's characters engage the archetype of the Trickster/Fool in a parallel to our own modern transitory zeitgeist of uncertainty and swift

change. Thwarted by the transition, these characters move into new trajectories, revealing the counterpointal themes of their own existence. By allowing Shakespeare's characters to express themselves in one another's language we pry open and engage the texts with new meanings and frames of reference.

This short piece echoes its forebears in structure and pace, but invites Shakespeare's main characters from a multitude of plays to encounter the liminal space between chaos and order. In this place we find a solitary man, Sylvio, encamped. Sylvio is rural, and is stamped with the attributes of the trickster and the wild man. The etymology of the name echoes the forest, and his camp sits off the path from the city: that is, between the logical, Apollonian realm of order and the Dionysian realm of transformation (Vinayak, 2016). Shakespeare used both of these traits as tools to drive his characters into plots and out again.

The Language

Shakespeare's language provides a window into the mind of the past. It can be especially difficult for modern audiences to parse, given the forced and intricate cadences at play. In *Birnam Wood Comes*, this style is tempered with modern and ironic forays into more familiar English both to give a modern audience a playful context, but also as a nod to antecedents. The playwright Tom Stoppard (2001) used a similar method in his popular work featuring two of the most insignificant characters in *Hamlet*: Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. By taking them out of the context of the play and imaging their lives in full and robust scenarios, his creation echoes Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* (1986), where two nobodies while away their lives waiting for a power that never manifests itself. In *Birnam Wood Comes*, much like Sondheim's forest world (1993), words are shared and swapped. Story lines tangle and create new meanings. We engage new perspectives on old and well known characters and tales. Ultimately, we are able to cultivate

new relationships to established understandings, leading to a refreshed appreciation. Peter Brook (2003) observed of Shakespeare's famous lines about holding "the mirror up to nature,"

This implies...human beings within human life are being reflected. But that doesn't mean that they are reflected naturalistically, like in real life, not even artificially...A true mirror of life is never cultural, never artificial, it reflects what is there. (pg.22)

The working title of this script was "The Forest's Edge." It initially had over a dozen characters from six different Shakespeare plays parading through the scene. The main character had been joined by 'Foris,' in a commonly used, high/low status relationship with Sylvio. This began to slide into gimmick territory, and did not allow either these or any other characters to develop meaningfully or explore transitions. Once I abandoned that structure and focused on parallels between modern life and the liminal space of the forest's boundary, things became much more interesting and quickly reduced in size to a cast of six. This allowed Sylvio to establish himself as the stable, albeit mercurial force of the script. His jabs recall Falstaff, Trinculo, Lear's Fool, and even Hamlet, at times. Hillman (1992) cites scholarship of the Trickster archetype pointing out he lives in these liminal spaces, "at the boundaries of order," which also serves to define his abilities (pg. 15). Even the great scholar Anne Barton (2017) emphasises the literary power of the forest in Shakespeare's England:

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. (pg. 3)

This script starts with Sylvio singing Shakespeare's sonnet number ninety (Wells, 1986, pg. 104). This poem, "Then hate me if thou wilt, if ever, now," hits plangent tones throughout, echoing life's sorrows, woes, and how all will seem fine when compared to the heartbreak of lost love. This sets the scene for one of Shakespeare's grumpiest old men, (an example of the senex archetype,) to arrive: *Timon of Athens*: a riches to rags tale ending in abject, self-imposed poverty and the abjurement of his fellow human kind. He flees the city and undergoes a transition from civilized patron to a sylvan recluse (Baron, 2017, pg. 66). I chose Timon because of the severity of his arc. This is a character that seems very salient now, given our current political climate and conservative personalities and powers. What does it mean for a wealthy, respected man to pay his due and fall from grace? What is wealth? Sylvio, by contrast, is content, living in the wild, but not chaotic space between worlds. Timon comes in contact with this force and is tempered. Many of Shakespeare's characters follow the dramatic path because it emphasises their humanity. I wanted to create a spiritual dilemma for them, by placing in their path an example of simplicity and acceptance of the push and pull between order and chaos.

While Timon is lured by the Socratic detachment of Sylvio, three characters from *As You Like It*, Rosalind, Celia, and Touchstone enter. These are examples of fate-bound characters for whom the forest will transform completely. We know where they are going and must allow them to do so. But they are here to provide Timon with the opportunity to observe his own exile firsthand. There is nothing overtly unlikable about this trio, in fact they are comic, beautiful, and bring a vitality to their scenes borne of earnest optimism in classic examples of the *puer aeternus* archetypes. This is a stark contrast to Timon's curmudgeon façade. As they come and go, Timon is quenched in the tempering oil of their innocence.

Finally we introduce evil and power to Timon's experience: the shadow archetype exemplified in Macbeth. The play imagines the Scotsman having just left the castle, his wife dead, dreams of blood, and the weird sisters' prophecies lingering in his ears. Upon encountering Sylvio and Timon, he is also touched. He has doubts. He examines briefly his trajectory. But finally he doubles down before moving on. Emphasising the maxim about absolute power, Timon is ultimately swayed by these examples and enters the forest himself, paraphrasing Hamlet's lines about intention: "My thoughts be clarity, or be nothing worth." With this, he departs and we sense he has gained some measure of hope. Sylvio is now, blessedly alone. As he contemplates his solitude, the forest behind him, speaks: it howls, cackles, and screams. As it should.

Conclusion

"The Space Between" might have been a better name for the play. I felt myself held between two worlds in the writing. This was an exercise in treating myself to an expansive view of the world of Shakespeare's characters and plots, and of my memories of acting and reading scripts over the last forty years. As I wrote the lines, inhabiting the characters as they came through, I found that random bits of dialogue from my working knowledge of the plays offered themselves to me as options. Much of the process progressed this way, the words seemed to jump into the script of their own accord, much like the journey of memorizing and performing my assigned monologue. Once the character is found, the words' meanings coalesce.

There is a certain hubris associated with putting my characters at the crossroads of every play where the Bard thrusts his imaginary forces into the woods, but the conceit is short lived, and ultimately has produced something that, with more work, I'm sure may prove entertaining to

some, and potentially enlightening to others. For now, it will have to suffice as an exercise of discovery and imagination. I have put myself into these characters and Shakespeare has put some of his into me.

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