

“Fear of the Forest: Cultural Xylophobia from Pliny to Proulx”

(pre-publication version)

Chapter Two of *Disturbing Nature in Narrative Literature*

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Abstract

This chapter focuses on the ways in which trees and forests have featured as active antagonists at various moments in the European and American literary traditions. Whereas the emphasis in most ecocritical scholarship has been on the depiction of arboreal nature as fragile and threatened on one hand, and as therapeutic, enchanting, and nurturing on the other, the approach taken here focuses on the alternative tradition of perceiving the “wild wood” as frighteningly active, and as alien and hostile to human life. The first half of the chapter thus traces the motifs of xylophobia (fear of forests) and dendrophobia (fear of trees) from the literature of Roman antiquity through the medieval period to Shakespeare. The second half discusses the way in which these fearful dispositions came to be mostly ignored or left behind (or else confined to folk story and fairytale) within Anglophone literature between the Early Modern Period and the nineteenth century, only to make a striking return more recently: in fiction set at the margins of empire during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, in fantasy (most obviously in the novels of J.R.R. Tolkien), and in eco-fiction such as Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins* (2016) and Richard Powers’ *The Overstory* (2018).

“Fear of the Forest: Cultural Xylophobia from Pliny to Proulx”

We don't usually think of medieval churches as places that invite intimacy with the natural world. Yet it so happens that religious architecture during the Middle Ages provided a hospitable habitat for one of Europe's most durable – and most ambiguous – expressions of the emotional relationship between humans and nature: the Green Man.

This peculiar motif has persisted in architectural decoration for two thousand years, but it flourished with particular vitality in Europe's churches, cathedrals, and abbeys between the tenth and fifteenth centuries. In that context there are two main types. The first is called in French *tête de feuilles*, the foliate head, in which multi-lobed leaves form parts of the face, especially the hair, moustache and beard (Basford 15).¹ The other is the *masque feuillu* or *masque herbu*, more vividly known in English as the “foliage-spewer” because this version of the face has branches and leaves growing right into and out of its mouth (15-16).² There are even more extreme forms, which sprout tendrils and shoots from nostrils as well as mouths, and sometimes from eyes or ears.³

Green Men are found in all sorts of architectural niches. They protrude from columns or feature on capitals (the tops of columns) and corbels (protuberances from walls that support the weight of columns, statues, shelves). They crop up at the ends of pews, and under choir stalls and misericords (the latter are small shelves carved into the underside of fold-up seats, for leaning against during long periods of standing prayer). They flourish like weeds in tympana and spandrels, those curved and triangular extra spaces created by Gothic arches, and they spread over ceiling bosses at the intersection of rib vaults.⁴

The origins of the Green Man motif, although they may go back much further, can be traced as far as first-century Rome, where the face covered with vine leaves, or consuming or consumed by them, had a relationship to the worship of Bacchus or Dionysius, the god of wine and sensual ecstasy (Basford 9). In Christian and especially medieval architecture, the Green Man figure, although he might have lost his specifically Dionysian associations, remains a resilient continuation of certain forms of sensibility or affect that seem only partly assimilated into the Christian theological mode.

The orthodox reading of the Green Man's presence in churches is straightforward enough. "He represents the darkness of unredeemed nature as opposed to the shimmering light of Christian revelation", writes Kathleen Basford in her classic account (20). More specifically, some of these carved faces clearly evoke surrender by the human to the pleasures of the flesh, in particular to those impulses that register lower on the Christian hierarchy of affects even than animal lust or ferocity or appetite: the intoxicated assimilation of the self into the rhythms and raptures of mere vegetal being.

Yet, as sometimes happens when Christianity seeks to subsume previously potent non-Christian imagery, the Green Man also provided an opportunity for carvers and stonemasons to express themselves in ways that overspilt the bounds of the dogma they worked within. Very often the Green Men of European churches are livelier, funnier, more vital, more exuberant, and more potent than the staid, calm, and pious faces of saints and angels surrounding them. This probably has less to do with the survival of consciously pagan sensibilities among the church-builders of the Christian era – which seems unlikely – and more to do with the foliate head's continued ability to embody forceful emotional responses to material nature – the kinds of affect that would otherwise receive very little expression within ecclesiastical culture.

Accordingly, although some foliate faces are blank or passive, and a very few are serene, most are alive with intense emotional expressiveness. There are Green Men in medieval churches showing just about every major emotion, but especially the rapturous emotions – those we feel when, to use a telling dead metaphor, we are totally carried away: anger, fear, laughter, lust, bliss. The most recurrent expressions are an orgiastic ecstasy or an anguished despair.⁵ In these images, the seizure of human being by some kind of affective excess is represented by the eruption into exorbitant vegetal life of the face, the most sensually receptive and emotionally expressive part of the body. In the leaf-spewer faces it seems less as if the human is eating the leaves and branches, and more as if the vegetation is growing out of and feeding on the human. In some cases the face itself looks emaciated and terrified, as if its life force is being drained by the suckers spilling out of its orifices. As Basford puts it, these faces, "invaded and taken over by vegetation, [are] an image of death and ruin rather than that of life and resurrection" (8). Yet others seem to represent a human vitality replenished, revived to a point of frightening exuberance, by the interfusion of human and plant. A further expressive tendency should also be noted, which might accompany those

described above or else be shown as the primary characteristic of an otherwise expressionless foliate face: Basford calls it “[t]he penetrating glare, ... a persistent though not invariable characteristic of the antique leaf masks and ... a ‘family trait’, later inherited by the Green Men” (9). Of the famous foliate head in Bamberg Cathedral, for example, Basford writes accurately that “[a]ll the darkness and power and mystery of a vast forest seem concentrated in this majestic head of leaves” (17). In such instances, the Green Man anthropomorphically embodies a German aphorism quoted by Elizabeth Parker in her study of what she calls the “ecogothic”: “‘*der wald hat augen*’, ‘the forest has eyes’” (51).

In these ramifying associations we can identify traces of a complex of affects highly significant in European cultures in pre-modern times. In this chapter I want to focus on one set of these affects: the terror of immersion in wooded nature. Outside of his possible theological denotations, which often seem secondary, this is surely the Green Man’s most durable connotation. As Basford puts it, “[w]hile it is possible that some of these leafy faces might allude to ... the idea of the revival of nature in springtime, the Green Man more often evokes the horrors of the *silva daemonium*” (19). In what follows, I will survey the manifestation and development of culturally-based forms of xylophobia and dendrophobia: fear of forests and fear of trees.⁶ I will consider these dispositions as durable, shared, and widely-dispersed narratives, images, and evocations that recur over many centuries. My focus will be particularly on representations of the kinds of terror induced by trees and woods in literature in English and its medieval and classical antecedents.

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Elizabeth Parker offers seven theses explaining why “the forest manifests as a Gothic threat”: it is against civilisation, associated with the past, the setting for trials, somewhere we become lost, a consuming threat, associated with the unconscious, and an anti-Christian space (47). She draws on Simon Estok’s notion of “ecophobia”, which he defines as “an irrational and groundless fear or hatred of the natural world”, often arising from or manifesting as “the frustrated assertion of human agency in the face of what Terry Eagleton has called ‘the unfathomable agencies of Nature’” (10, quoting Eagleton 33). Simon Schama suggests a more specific source for the pervasive European opposition between forest and civilised space when he observes that ancient Roman culture “defined itself against the primeval

woods” (82). For the Romans, living on “the radically deforested Italian peninsula”, areas of dense woodland were especially frightening (82).

It is certainly the case that the literature of the Roman late Republic and early Empire is pervaded by xylophobia. In Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, written in the earlier half of the first century BCE, the terror of the wild woods provides the climax to a passage that describes the emergence of civilised thought from past chaos: “chattering Terror teems in mountain lairs, deep woods, dark groves – / The kinds of places as a rule we never need go near” (5.40-41). Several decades later, Virgil’s *Aeneid*, written in part to provide the first emperor Augustus with his regime’s founding epic, consistently associates forests with threat. It does so most obviously in Book Six, in which the desire of the hero Aeneas to visit his dead father in the Underworld requires him to pass through a “Stygian forest” (6.224). Before attempting this journey, as instructed by the Sybil at Cumae, the exiled Trojans prepare a funeral pyre for their drowned colleague Misenus, flinging themselves into the “[t]hicket of wild things”, the “unmeasured forest”, cutting down pitch pines, ilex, ash, oak, and rowan in a furious anticipation of the centuries-long Roman campaigns of deforestation that would follow (6.259-266). But, again as foretold by the Sybil, it is only the acquisition of the mystical golden bough that ultimately enables Aeneas to find the gateway to Dis, a cavern described as “profound, wide-mouthed, and huge, / Rough underfoot, defended by dark pool / And gloomy forest” (6.331-333).

Robert Pogue Harrison, in his magisterial history of forests in the Western imagination, connects this cultural sensibility with the Romans’ theological character as sky-worshippers: “[w]here divinity has been identified with the sky, or with the eternal geometry of the stars, or with cosmic infinity, or with ‘heaven’, the forests become monstrous, for they hide the prospect of god” (6, italics in original). But there were far more material factors at work as well. The enmity of the forest to Rome, Romans, and *romanitas* takes on a less mystical and more pragmatic form in the works of Virgil’s contemporary Livy. Recounting the history of early Rome, Livy describes the Ciminian Forest, where the Etruscans took refuge after their defeat at Sutrium in 310, as being, “in those days, more frightful and impassable than the German forests were recently found to be; not a single trader had, up to that time, ventured through it. Of those present in the council of war, hardly any one but the general himself was bold enough to undertake to enter it...” (Livy 9.36.1). As his phrasing indicates, by the time Livy was writing, during the reign of Augustus, the Ciminian Forest no longer existed, and it

was now the German Forests on Rome's northern border that epitomised Roman xylophobia. Not without reason: in 9 CE, the humiliating slaughter in the Teutoberg Forest of three Roman legions (ten or fifteen thousand soldiers) under Publius Quinctilius Varo made the immense German *wald* the traumatic focus of Roman forest-dread for centuries (Schama 8-9). In the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder, written seven decades later, the horror the Romans associated with this particular area seems as fresh as if the disaster had only just happened. Describing it as "untouched by the ages and coeval with the world", Pliny asserts that the German forest's monstrous oaks grow with such avid force ("*maxima aviditate*") that

when undermined by the waves or overthrown by blasts of wind [they] carry away with them vast islands of soil in the embrace of their roots, and thus balanced, float along standing upright, so that our fleets have often been terrified by the wide rigging of their huge branches, when they seemed to be purposely driven by the waves against the bows of the ships at anchor for the night, which thus were unavoidably compelled to engage in a naval battle with trees. (16.2)

Such is the enduring Roman terror of this forest that Pliny has no trouble believing its capacity to launch marine attacks on the imperial navy. Elsewhere in the same account he characterises the interior of the woodland, too, as a place of ceaseless dreadful turmoil – not because of its human or even its animal inhabitants, but because of cataclysmic conflicts amongst the trees themselves: "the collision of the roots encountering each other raises up hillocks of earth, or, where the ground has not kept up to them, their arches in their struggle with one another rise as high as the branches, and curve over in the shape of open gateways [large enough] to afford a passage to squadrons of cavalry" (16.2). In both these passages, Pliny transforms the underlying traumatic memory – in which three legions of Roman infantry were cut down by a German ambush – into nightmarish scenarios in which the trees take on a dark, violently inimical intentionality all their own. He ascribes to trees *en masse* certain physical powers that will often be reiterated in subsequent European literary and cultural representations of the forest. These include the exercise of earth-shattering strength and destructiveness by both roots and branches; the creation (and closure) of unexpected gateways and passages, resulting in a labyrinthine effect; and the distortion of regular (and especially geometrical) space, in this case demonstrated by the creation of grotesquely arched structures, the pushing upwards of earth, and the confusing of depth and height so that roots grow higher than branches.

Elsewhere in Roman literature of the first century AD, individual trees – even familiar garden trees – can become associated with the physical threat ascribed to the northern wildwood. The first individual transformation described by Ovid in *The Metamorphoses*, immediately following his narrative of the Great Flood, is that of the nymph Daphne, who in her flight from the rapacious Apollo calls out to her father, the river god Peneus. He responds by transforming her into a laurel tree. If this is supposed to be an escape it is described in horrifying terms: “a heavy torpor takes hold of her limbs, her soft breast is enclosed by thin bark, ... her feet, so swift a moment before, are held fast by sluggish roots, and her face is covered by the canopy” (1.547-51, my translation). Ovid saturates these lines with a distinctly Roman mingling of claustrophobia and dendrophobia, designed for maximum contrast with Daphne’s characterisation prior to her metamorphosis. The capacities she feels herself losing in the process of becoming a tree are the very ones she most values: Diana-like athletic liberty, emblematised especially by her fleetness of foot and her carelessly free-flowing hair.⁷ Here, too, we can identify other paradigmatic features of the ancient fear of trees and forests that will be repeated, over the centuries, right up to present day: the association of wood and of woods with suffocation, strangulation, crushing entrapment, or deadening torpor. “What does one see vertically or laterally in a dense forest?” asks Harrison, summarising this feeling: “[t]he mute closure of foliage” (4).

These attitudes, like so many other cultural substructures from the classical world, shaped medieval and Renaissance attitudes. Hence the Latin word for forest, *silva*, provided medieval French and in due course English with the word *savage*, while the word *forest* comes from the Latin root *foris*, meaning *outside*, which also supplies the word *foreign* (OED). To the Romans the vast, dense, and apparently primeval woodlands which they associated with (for example) Germany were, by definition, beyond “the writ of their law and the governance of their state” (Schama 83). This attitude, although it became increasingly atavistic and imaginary as the truly scary wildwood receded, became in medieval thought intermixed with Christian associations of evil with darkness and with wild nature, as well as with a whole array of local supernatural traditions. The result was the notion *silva daemonium*, the demonic forest of European myth, folk-tale, and literary fantasy.

This imaginary external forest came to be paralleled by a complementary internal, spiritual domain, referred to by medieval theologians as the *errorem sylvarum*, the “error or danger of

the forests” (Saunders 21). This concept, too, was rooted in classical traditions, in this case Platonic philosophy. Corinne Saunders points out that whereas for Plato the word *hyle*, which literally meant “forest” (the equivalent of the Latin *silva*), also signified the primordial chaos from which order arose: “Aristotle made the concept of *hyle* more concrete, changing its definition to ‘the materials out of which’ everything is made”, and later neo-Platonic philosophers came to associate *hyle* with evil and its opposite, *cosmos*, with good (19-20). Saunders traces the emergence of a moral philosophy from this opposition, citing for example a fourth-century gloss on Virgil’s references to the forests encountered by Aeneas: “for by the forests, shadows and dark places are signified, where lust and unbridled passion rule” (qtd. in Saunders 21). By the High Middle Ages – the centuries during which most of the Green Men discussed at the start of this chapter were carved – the highly influential philosophers of the Chartres School had internalised the longstanding terror associated with the forest, expressing “an ever-present fear that the defects of *silva*, its savagery, formlessness and confusion, will manifest themselves in human behaviour” (Saunders 23).

This allegorised and psychologised representation of the forest infuses a great deal of classically-influenced literature through the Middle Ages and into the early modern period. Dante, of course, famously opens his *Divine Comedy* with his narrator, “At the mid-point of the path through life ... lost in a wood so dark, the way / Ahead was blotted out” (Dante 1.1-3). Such is the terror of this experience that even now, as he recalls and writes about it, “[m]erely to think of it renews the fear” (Dante 1.6). As Seamus Heaney puts it, “Dante may be writing about a mid-life crisis in terms of the allegory, but he is also writing about panic, the terror we experience in the presence of the god Pan, numen of the woods” (189). But Dante’s dark wood has also acquired a thicket of Christian associations to add to the old growth of Classical associations discussed above. “Sinfulness, error, errancy, alienation from God”, writes Harrison: “these are the allegorical associations of Dante’s *selva oscura*, or dark forest.... The forest of moral confusion is deviant, pathless, issueless, terrifying” (82). Dante’s poetic self is guided out of this terrain only by means of a detour through the most dismaying location of all, namely Hell. In this way Dante imagines his poetic avatar repeating Aeneas’ journey to the underworld, with none other than Virgil as his guide. Some way into that journey, however, he seems to be back in the *selva oscura* again: in the seventh circle, as though he and his guide have been wandering in some hideously labyrinthine circle, Dante again describes himself entering “a forest void / Of any pathway” (13.2-3). But it’s not actually the same place. In fact this wood is even more sinister than the first: “[n]o green

leaves, but dank, / Discoloured. No smooth boughs, but cloyed / With knots, warped. No sweet fruits, but just the blank / Stems and envenomed thorns” (13.3-6). From all around him Dante can hear the sound of lamentation, but he can’t see where it comes from – that is, until Virgil tells him to break off a sprig from one of the tormented trees:

I reached to pluck a twig from a great thorn
 Whose trunk cried: “Who are you to tear me so?”
 The trunk turned dark with blood as if more torn
 Than barely touched, and went on: “May I know
 Why you assault me?” (13.27-31)

The voice from the wounded tree goes on to explain that “[w]e who were men are now / Dead wood”, and the twig in Dante’s hand also continues to seep “a blend / Of blood and words” in the same way that a green branch “weeps / Both sound and sap when it burns from one end / And, from the other, hissing liquid seeps” (13.32-39).⁸ The trees in this desolate grove are the souls of those who took their own lives. It seems that the horror Dante associates with the tortuous growth habits of wild trees, combined with the sensually evocative details of oozing sap hissing in the fire, provides the best embodiment he can achieve of the particular affect, a combination of dismay and abhorrence, with which medieval Christendom regarded suicide.

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In England, too, prior to the Enlightenment, forests were “synonymous with wildness and danger”, according to Keith Thomas in *Man and the Natural World*, his influential history of changing attitudes to nature in that country (194). He characterises the pre- and early-modern English attitude to forests by quoting Joshua Poole’s 1657 *The English Parnassus*, a lexicon designed to assist poets. Of the list of “appropriate epithets for a forest” supplied by Poole only a few are neutral or potentially positive (“leavie”, “verdant”, “fragrant”), while the great majority evoke fearfulness (“salvage”, “gloomy”, “rough”, “wild”, “devious”, “uncouth”, “melancholy”, “unfrequented”, “sullen”, “pathless”, “unpeopled”, “beast-haunted”, “dreadful”) (Poole 98). Similarly, the emblem and accompanying poem for “Silvius” in Henry Peacham’s emblem book of 1612 describes “[a] shadie Wood, pourtraicted to the sight, / With uncouth pathes, and hidden waies unknowne / Resembling CHAOS ...” (Barton 51, quoting Peacham 182).

Such language demonstrates the influence on English literature and culture of the Classical topoi described above, but it also suggests that fear of the forest in England still possessed, at this time, material reference points as well. The term “beast-haunted”, for example, evokes the way in which forests were perceived both as the domain of dangerous wild animals – as indeed Dante’s *selva oscura* proves to be, since he encounters a lion, a leopard, and a wolf in it – as well as of feral human outlaws, both of which groups represented a threat to property (especially livestock) and life. In England, only the latter aspect of this anxiety remained relevant past the sixteenth century. The country’s bears were certainly extinct before the Norman Invasion, and probably before the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons, and the last of its wolves disappeared some time between 1300 and 1500 (Thomas 20-21) – whereas human bandits and outlaws continued to find shelter in patches of woodland well into the eighteenth century (195).

The second (putatively) material source of xylophobia and dendrophobia was medical, as indicated by Poole’s inclusion of the term “melancholy”, which signifies in this period something more like a diagnostic category than an environmental ambience. According to the immensely influential natural philosopher Albertus Magnus, writing in the thirteenth century, forests

always have a suffocating and a thick air, and they have much fog and many whirlwinds. Because the floor of the forest is moist, and that vapor becomes confined and dense beneath the thick growth of trees, wise men of old improved their localities by cutting down trees and groves. Especially noxious among the trees are the walnut, the oak and other trees which either by their bitterness, poison the air, or by their height confine the air, and do not permit it to escape and be purified. (89-90)

Albertus here draws upon the notion of miasma which dominated European theories of human physiology and psychology from Roman times until the Enlightenment. According to miasmatic theory, both physical contagion (in the case of infectious disease with no easily observable means of tactile transmission, such as plague) and supernatural influence (spell-casting, sympathetic magic and the like) were transmitted through the air itself, which was conceived as “a compound of tiny particles”, amongst which were included certain “mysterious motes that infected bodies, which then could infect the bodies of others” (Cole

28). Hence Michael Drayton's *Poly-Olbion* (1612), a long topological poem describing England and Wales, imagines the spirit of the Salisbury Plain declaiming "Away, yee barb'rous Woods", and asking to know "what pleasure can be found / In darke and sleepee shades? Where mists and rotten fogs / Hang in the gloomie thicks, and make unstedfast bogs?" (42). The Forests respond by cursing the Plain with "foule infectious dampes and poisoned aires" (43). The idea that forests – and indeed individual trees if they were big enough – could emit unhealthy air, or deplete healthy air, remained a source of anxiety for a surprisingly long time. It was in part to combat this idea that the Enlightenment chemist Joseph Priestley conducted his experiments using sprigs of mint during the 1770s. When Priestley conclusively demonstrated that plants actually restore the breathability of air, instead of exhausting it as animals do, his friend Benjamin Franklin wrote to him expressing the hope that "this will give some check to the rage of destroying trees that grow near houses, which has accompanied our late improvements in gardening, from an opinion of their being unwholesome. I am certain", he added, "that there is nothing unhealthy in the air of woods" (Franklin, qtd. in Priestley 94-5).

The medical or miasmatic fear of trees endured, then, well into the Enlightenment. On the other hand, the associations of forests with both dangerous wild beasts and bandits, and with supernatural fears, receded along with the forests themselves. It is notable that the Northern and Eastern European cultures, where proximity to extensive "wild" forests remained a feature of everyday life for many in rural areas, were those that developed the fullest and most vivid mythological and folk-tale traditions in which the dangers of trees and woods remain most potent. By contrast, in England, according to Oliver Rackham, what he calls *wildwood* – that is to say, "vegetation before it was affected by settled human activities" – actually "ceased to exist in the Neolithic period (or before) and has left no record or memory" (20). Any "wilderness" or "wild" forests during the historical period, then, were fragments or regrowth areas of the primeval forests. And even these kinds of woodland – dense, remote, and largely beyond human inhabitation or control – amounted to something less than the fifteen per cent shown for woodlands in the Domesday Book of 1086, since that category included pasture-woodland mix areas. By the end of the thirteenth century, this category had shrunk to seven per cent (55-56). Moreover, "[a]s woodland declined, the remaining woodland gained in value and was more intensively managed" (56). In other words, extensive tracts of feral or outlaw woodland were very scarce in England by the late Middle Ages. As a result, in English literature from the medieval period onwards, fear of the forest is almost

wholly atavistic, rather than contemporary or immediate. And that, in turn, means that forest settings, especially when they evoke fear, often tend to be allegorised.

This transformation of the ancient powers associated with the *silva daemonium* into allegory is illustrated by the anonymous late-fourteenth-century poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, in which the inimical, nightmarish force of the forest becomes tamed and domesticated via chivalric and Christian narrative modes into a moralised and spiritualised competition between knightly contestants. Yet in the description of the primary antagonist, and the terrain through which the protagonist travels on his quest, vigorous elements of xylophobic and dendrophobic anxiety show through and remain unassimilated. The poem opens at King Arthur's court, in the midst of Christmas celebrations. Into this scene, which represents the apogee of Christian feudal civility, comes a wild, disturbing figure: the Green Knight. He is introduced as "a hideous figure, / Square-built and bulky, full-fleshed from neck to thigh", with "limbs so large and so long / I think he may have been half-giant" (ll. 136-7, 139-40). But more than his size, what astonishes the banqueters is that he is "bright green – / Green all over, the man and his garments as well!" (ll. 150-51). Nor is this colour merely heraldic, as might be expected, since not only his garments but the knight's skin and hair and eyebrows, along with the huge horse he rides, are entirely green. His treeishness, moreover, is further emphasised by his long trailing hair and bush-like beard, by the birds and butterflies embroidered on his clothes, and by the fact that he bears in one hand a huge axe, and in the other "a solitary branch of holly", the tree "that shows greenest when all the groves are leafless" (ll. 206-207).

The irruption of this figure into the courtly banquet produces a terrified silence as everyone waits to see what will happen. The Green Knight offers a challenge: if any knight present will agree to exchange one axe-blow with him, he will bend his bare neck to take the first blow, and then give his challenger a full year and a day before he returns the stroke. The outcome of the contest is even stranger. When the King's nephew, Sir Gawain, delivers the invited blow he cleanly severs the Green Knight's head, but with blood spurting from his "gross trunk", the Green Knight picks up his head by its hair and remounts his horse (ll. 441). As he turns his decapitated head to face the spectators, it speaks, instructing Gawain to meet him at the Green Chapel in a year and a day in order to receive the return axe-stroke. Still clutching his severed head, the Green Knight rides away. In his capacity to survive this injury and to regrow his head, as he does during the spring and summer that pass before Gawain next sees

him, the Green Knight again seems more a vegetal than a human or animal being. His challenge, too, has clear implications of seasonal regrowth. He appears for the first time at Yuletide, in the middle of winter, when he is decapitated by Gawain, and the two meet again a year and one day later. The day after midwinter marks the turning point in the direction of spring, as emphasised by a long and lush description, immediately following the Green Knight's departure from Arthur's court, of the coming of spring and summer in the world outside (ll. 500-508).

By contrast, the journey undertaken by Sir Gawain the following winter to keep his appointment exposes him to wild nature at its most hostile. Passing through North Wales he wades across water (presumably the River Dee) to the Forest of Wirral, a "wilderness" location that lives up to all the atavistic associations of the northern European fear of forests. At every turn Gawain has to fight savage foes: dragons, wolves, bulls, bears, boars, wodwos, giants (ll. 720-23). He rides on "[i]nto a dark wood, wonderfully wild" (741). After a long interlude in a castle in the middle of the forest, during which his spiritual commitment is tested by the attentions of the beautiful wife of the castle's lord while the latter is out hunting, Gawain rides off to meet the Green Knight, once again through wild woods. When he eventually finds the Green Chapel, it turns out to be an eerie grass-grown barrow, like a burial mound, with cave entrances from which steam rises and hot water bubbles. Despite its Christian-sounding name, the Green Chapel is suffused by powerful natural forces: subterranean heat, water, and lush vegetal growth. "What a desolation", mutters Gawain to himself, "With its sinister shrine, and tufts of weed everywhere! / A fitting spot for that fellow in his green gown / To do his devil's rites and unholy duties!" (ll. 2189-92). In fact, though, he finds the Green Knight acts honourably: indeed he proves to be a judge of honour himself. Because Gawain behaved with such integrity at their first meeting, and because he also (mostly) resisted the temptations of the beautiful lady at the castle – who turns out to have been the Green Knight's own wife – his opponent delivers a withheld blow that only just breaks the skin on Gawain's neck, and then releases him from any further obligations. The subsequent conversation emphasises the Christian morality imposed on the story: "You've clearly confessed and freed yourself of fault", the Green Knight tells Gawain. "You've paid your penance at the point of my blade; / I hold you absolved of all offence, and as fresh-made / As if, since birth, you had never sinned on earth" (ll. 2391-94).

If this ending seems to the reader bathetic, it is because the sense of ominous, unyielding, mysterious power embodied by the Green Knight remains in excess of his now-revealed identity as Bertilak de Hautedesert, the lord of the castle whose hospitality Gawain has recently enjoyed, who declares he was prompted by Arthur's sister Morgan le Fay to adopt his wild disguise and test the virtue the King's nephew. The chivalric Christian morality he expounds also seems out of proportion to the exorbitance of the Green Knight's qualities – his gigantic size, the vernal energy associated with his colour, his apparent invincibility against human force, and his seemingly immortal powers of regeneration – which by the time he reappears at the Green Chapel have accumulated the force of all the other dendrophobic and xylophobic fears evoked in the course of Gawain's journey. Like the Green Man foliate heads of medieval churches, the vegetal potency that both characterises and surrounds the poem's antagonist demands a vigorously nature-centred interpretation which both underlies and overflows the manifest Christian allegory. Scholars have suggested that the story may well represent a Christian attempt to assimilate an older pagan myth of propitiation of nature, so that Gawain's surrender to the power of the Green Knight at the Green Chapel parallels, and in some sense pays for, his earlier subjection of the tree-like giant to his own axe-blow in the first part of the poem.⁹

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During the Early Modern period, the Green Man's various avatars continued to appear in the English literary and cultural tradition, but less and less frequently, and in ways that demonstrated more fully the figure's loss of direct relation to material natural forces as he became increasingly allegorised. An extravagant pageant laid on by Sir Robert Dudley at Kenilworth during the 1575 visit of Queen Elizabeth I included a scene during which, in the words of a contemporary eyewitness, "oout of the Woods ... rooughly came thear foorth Hombre Salvagio, with an Oken plant pluct up by the roots in his hande, himself forgrone all in Moss & Ivy" (Laneham 20). Demonstrating his submission to the sovereign, "this Savage ... brake hiz tree asunder [and threw] the top from him" (22). Despite the painstaking choreography behind the Kenilworth extravaganza, this moment came close to enacting the destruction of human sovereign power by the woods, rather than the subjugation of the latter to the former. The top half of the oak tree, flung away by the Green Man, came so near to hitting Elizabeth's horse that the animal startled, causing her courtiers to be (understandably) "much dismayd" (23). It seems that Green Men and the material agencies they represent –

woods, and wood – were not always as well-behaved as an early modern choreographer of garden entertainments might expect.¹⁰

However, moments like these are exceptions to the more thoroughgoing attenuation of the older tradition of fear of the forests which is characteristic of Early Modern English culture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the works of the most famous of Elizabethan writers. The best-realised woodland setting in William Shakespeare's plays occurs in his sunny mid-career comedy *As You Like It* (1599). As Katherine Duncan-Jones points out, the "Forest of Arden", the name he gives the setting for most of the play's action, was actually the name of the area of Warwickshire in which Shakespeare was born and brought up (13). In that context, however, "the word 'forest' did not denote unbroken woodland, but described large tracts of uncultivated wooded land where game could be hunted, intermingled with areas of pasture"; the region was also well supplied with villages and towns (13).¹¹ By the 1560s, when Shakespeare was born, the dense, wild, and extensive woodlands of England had "all but vanished" (14). Duncan-Jones cites the lines spoken by Drayton's personification of the Forest of Arden in *Poly-Olbion*: "when the world found out the fitness of my soil / The gripple [avaricious] wretch began immediately to spoil / My tall and goodly woods, and did my grounds enclose ..." (Drayton 214, qtd in Duncan-Jones 14).

Accordingly, it is a highly domesticated sense of what a "forest" might be that shapes the representation of Arden in *As You like It*. Initially, to be sure, each of the characters exiled to the forest expresses some trepidation. "Alas" says Rosalind in response to her cousin's suggestion that they go to find Duke Senior in the forest, "what danger will it be to us, / Maids as we are, to travel forth so far!" (1.3.107-108). But no sooner do they enter the forest than Celia and Rosalind find themselves in a highly conventionalised pastoral environment bursting with love-struck shepherds, scornful shepherdesses, and rustic clowns. Similarly, at the start of the first scene set in the forest, Duke Senior refers to "[t]he seasons' difference, as the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter's wind", yet within a few lines he transforms the forest, through moralising metaphor, into a place of self-improvement rather than a location of danger, mystery, or ill-health: "this our life, exempt from public haunt / Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in every thing" (2.1.6-7, 15-17). The mocking description that follows, of his counsellor Jaques deriving melancholic philosophical lessons from the suffering of a hunted stag, confirms that Arden belongs to the English tradition of the allegorised location, rather than carrying any but the

most attenuated traces of the anxieties that elsewhere, and earlier, attached to wild forests (2.1.25-66). And later in the play, when Orlando and his elderly servant Adam enter the Forest testifying to its “uncouth” and “savage” nature, the audience is likely to find their exaggerated fears amusing – especially since, within a few moments, Orlando stumbles upon Duke Senior’s courtiers about to enjoy a sumptuous banquet set out on tables beneath a tree (2.7.6-7, 88-135). The wicked Oliver, pursuing Orlando into the woods, is no sooner threatened by a lioness than he is rescued by (and so reconciled to) his younger brother; Duke Senior’s usurping brother Frederick ventures into the woods only to be promptly converted by “an old religious man” to a life of pious contemplation (4.3.101-49, 5.4.149-60). The pattern is clear: repeatedly the hostile, atavistic associations of the wild woods are concisely established in order that the play’s action and dialogue can promptly transform them into the idealised “Greenwood”, the woodland equivalent of pastoral fields in the Arcadian tradition.

Only the briefest glimpses of cultural xylophobia and dendrophobia can be identified in Shakespeare’s other plays. The torturous incarceration of the spirit Ariel in *The Tempest* offers one instance. As Prospero recalls, the “witch” Sycorax, to punish Ariel for his refusal to serve her, confined him

in her most unmitigable rage
 Into a cloven pine; within which rift
 Imprison’d thou didst painfully remain
 A dozen years, within which space she died
 And left thee there; where thou didst vent thy groans
 As fast as mill-wheels strike. (1.2.276-81)

Prospero’s own power over Ariel – whose agency he deploys to enact every main event of the play – depends entirely upon the spirit’s combined gratitude for his rescue from this incarceration, and the magician’s often-repeated threats to re-imprison him.

It was mine art
 When I arrived and heard thee, that made gape
 The pine and let thee out....
 If thou more murmur’st I will rend an oak
 And peg thee in his knotty entrails till

Thou hast howled away twelve winters. (1.2.289-96)

Prospero's threatened punishment will replace the more easily split pine tree with the oak, which is not only an iconic English tree but also notorious for the iron-hard and densely knotted texture of its wood. In other respects, as Gabriel Egan points out, *The Tempest* associates Prospero's tenure over the island with the establishment of a colonial-style transformation of nature through deforestation. From his repeated demands for cut wood, through to his claim to have magically "rifted Jove's stout oak / With his own bolt! / ... and by the spurs plucked up / The pine and cedar" (4.1.45-48), Prospero seems intent on denuding the island of its vegetation, a drive that Egan compares with the clearing of Ireland's forests by the English military both for use (as fuel and construction material) and to prevent the resisting Irish from accessing woodlands for purposes of cover, escape, and ambush (155-57). Such tactics, of course, recall the sources of Roman xylophobia – and the Romans' response to it.

As for the ancient fear of forests in general, among Shakespeare's plays it is *Macbeth* that provides the clearest evidence of its survival into early seventeenth-century English culture – albeit only in the most ambiguous, vestigial, and atavistic of forms. When one of the ghostly apparitions summoned by the witches predicts that "Macbeth shall never vanquished be, until / Great Birnam Wood to high Dunsinan Hill / Shall come against him", Macbeth responds with relief, taking the prophesy as an assurance from nature itself: the fixed, rooted, and predictable nature of trees guarantees that he himself "[s]hall live the lease of nature" (4.1.114). Macbeth's response also anticipates full-blown modern scepticism: an attack by the forest upon his fortifications "will never be", he says, for "[w]ho can impress the forest, bid the tree/ Unfix his earth-bound root?" (4.1.94-96).

In his overheated mood of hyper-confidence, Macbeth clearly intends this as a rhetorical question, but to Shakespeare's audience, it would actually have suggested, on the contrary, a range of possible affirmative answers. For one thing, certain occult qualities of nature continued to be widely accepted in Shakespeare's time – *occult* in this context meaning *hidden* rather than supernatural, for these were forces regarded as natural in origin, but beyond the current capacity of natural philosophers to explain or predict: magnetism, electricity, volcanism, seismic activity, and so on. *Macbeth* takes place in an environment pervaded by such effects: during the action of the play there are reports of unprecedented

storms, floods, and earthquakes, and Macbeth admits to himself, during a jittery moment, that “stones have been known to move, and trees to speak” (3.5.122). The possibilities for unexpected forms of liveliness amongst trees, then, might well have seemed impossible to rule out according to the natural philosophy of the day. So, to some in the audience, would supernatural causes. The behaviour of the play’s “sisters three” corresponds to contemporary reports of “real-life” witchcraft. Many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries (including King James I, for whom the play was most likely performed if not actually written) believed that witches existed and were capable of raising storms, creating darkness, riding through the air, bringing disease, and enacting other manipulations of material nature. Reginald Scot’s *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* (1584), upon which Shakespeare drew (Muir 167, 216), reports that woods (“where men resort not”) and individual trees were popularly believed to be the favoured haunts of witches and their demons (Scot 153, 165, 393), and notes that one of the better-known familiars was thought to have the ability to make “trees ... bend and incline, according to the conjuror’s will” (390).¹²

Even for those who might have scorned such beliefs, there were ample poetic and narrative antecedents for perambulating trees within literary contexts. The figure of Orpheus was at the time commonly invoked by writers, often in association with the occult powers of nature, because as everyone knew, the legendary beauty of the mythical hero’s music and songs inspired not just animals and birds, but also trees and rocks, to move closer to the musician. As Anne Barton notes, “[w]hen Orpheus, in Book 10 of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, begins to play his lyre on a ‘wide-extending plain ... devoid of shade’”, no fewer than 26 species of tree are named as being drawn by the music to “walk, some from great distances, to assemble around him, becoming a strangely improbable forest as he sings” (Barton 23, quoting Ovid 10.86-8). Thanks to this precedent, as Leah Knight writes,

trees are often distinctly singled out by early modern English writers for their apparently special sensitivity to poetry and their remarkable consequent mobility. The wonder of a moving tree is, of course, considerably more impressive than the ordinary activities of any footed or finned thing; at the same time, a moving tree is much less farfetched than a moving rock, since branches naturally bend in the breeze and petals and leaves unfurl, flutter, and fall. It is precisely this intermediate quality about the mobility of vegetation, a quality seeming to place plants on a middle ground between agency and objecthood, that may have made greenery a particularly attractive locus

for fantasies about enhancing some earthly inhabitants with an additional degree of liveliness. (66)

To the audience of Shakespeare's time, then, there were several ways in which Macbeth's question – "[w]ho can impress the forest?" – might have been answered; several reasons to imagine that the trees of Birnam might pose an active, even a motile, threat to his power.¹³

Of course when Birnam Wood does eventually move, Shakespeare's audience knows exactly why it does so: they have already witnessed Malcolm's command to his attacking forces that "every soldier hew him down a bough / And bear't before him" in order to "shadow / The numbers of our host" from those holding the castle (5.4.4-6). Nevertheless, when the scene switches back to Dunsinane, the vestigial fear induced by the play's many references to both occult natural forces and "supernatural soliciting" (1.3.130) allows the audience – at least for a brief, spine-tingling moment – to identify with the horrified dismay felt by the watchers on the battlements, including Macbeth himself, as the surrounding woods seem to advance. Only a little earlier, finding himself little moved by the sudden scream that betokens his wife's death, Macbeth has declared himself immune to fear: "Direness, familiar to my slaughterous thoughts, / Cannot once start me" (5.5.9, 14-15). Yet now he hears something that frightens him deeply. A messenger enters who is so dismayed by what he has seen he can hardly describe it:

Gracious my lord,
I should report that which I say I saw,
But know not how to do it....
As I did stand my watch upon the hill,
I look'd toward Birnam, and anon, methought,
The Wood began to move. (5.5.29-34)

"Liar and slave!" barks Macbeth, but the messenger holds his ground: "[w]ithin this three mile may you see it coming; / I say, a moving grove" (5.5.34-37). In the reactions of Macbeth and his messenger, the playwright invites his audience to identify, in the moment, with the particular kind of fear produced by the perception that the forest is actually marching towards the castle. And this perception is combined, in Macbeth's case, with the awareness that this report fulfils one of the witches' prophecy's apparently impossible signs of his impending

downfall and death. For Macbeth the advancing forest, whatever its cause, signifies the turning against him of the entire world, human, natural, and supernatural: “If this which he avouches does appear, / There is nor flying hence, nor tarrying here. / I ’gin to be aweary of the sun / And wish the estate o’ the world were now undone” (5.5.46-49). In these lines, Macbeth voices with ultimate weariness precisely that mood of “frustrated agency” in the face of “the unfathomable agencies of Nature” which Estok defines as characteristic of ecophobia and tragic literature alike (Estok 10, quoting Eagleton 33). “Tragedy”, Estock writes, “dramatizes the unseating of the preeminent subject from a position of an imagined singular embodiment of agency, subjectivity, and ethical entitlements” (10).¹⁴

Nevertheless, of the various possible answers to the supposedly rhetorical question – “Who can impress the forest?” – the correct one is hidden in plain sight, in Macbeth’s phrasing: here as elsewhere Shakespeare uses the word *impress* to mean “enforced service in the army” (OED n2). This is also the answer most compatible with the kind of calculating rationalism that would come to dominate modernity in the centuries to come, because it supplies an explanation that denies the possibility of the moving grove as a manifestation of nonhuman agency, and instead reduces the forest to a passive resource or instrument for human agency. By the time Shakespeare wrote *Macbeth*, this rationalism – although its most influential philosophical expression was some decades in the future, and its cultural dominance would take another century or two – was already pervasive in practice, in the treatment of English woodlands.

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Under the Tudors and Stuarts, English woodlands were cut with ever-accelerating speed, writes Thomas, primarily to make way for “grazing and cultivation, but also to meet the expanding demand for building materials and industrial fuel, whether for iron manufacture or salt-boiling or the production of glass and pottery” (192). As he remarks dryly, “[i]t was not on Tower Hill that the axe made its most important contribution to English history” (193). Citing those who bore witness to this “general contraction of woodland for the sake of pasture or tillage in response to market forces”, he alludes to Drayton’s *Poly-Olbion*, in which the decimation of forests becomes a repeated motif. In the passage dealing with Dorset, for example, the Forest addresses the river Stour, advising her to be grateful that humans are greedy only for her fish, rather than for her waters themselves: otherwise her

“chanel they would leave as barren by their spoile, / As they of all our trees have lastlie left our soile” (Drayton 26). And in the debate between Salisbury Plain and the Forests, mentioned earlier, the Plain warns the remaining woodlands of England of their impending demise: “But Forests, to your plague there soone will come an Age ... / So senselesse of the good of their posterities, / That of your greatest Groves they scarce shall leave a tree / (By which the harmelesse Deere may after sheltred bee)” (43). “By 1800 there were no more than two million acres of woodland in England and Wales”, according to Thomas, and two centuries later “the percentage of the United Kingdom occupied by woodland (4 per cent) would be the lowest in Europe” (194). He goes on to chart the rise of increasingly instrumentalist attitude to trees and woodlands from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, motivated in part by the very fear of forests that preceded it: to most early modern English people, the reduction of “wild” forests “symbolized the triumph of civilization” (194).

In due course, however, this almost vengeful instrumentalism would itself, inevitably, be answered by a contrary disposition: that of nostalgia for the lost beauty of wild nature. One form of this later feeling, characteristic of the eighteenth century, is what Thomas calls “tree worship”: “[a]s the woodlands shrank in area they ceased to terrify and became instead valued sources of pleasure and inspiration” (212). By 1712, the essayist and poet Joseph Addison could cite with approval the assertion by a *Spectator* correspondent that “[t]he Love of Woods ... seems to be a Passion implanted in our Natures the most early of any”, while to Alexander Pope a tree was “a nobler object than a prince in his coronation robes” (Pope, qtd. in Spence 162).

Throughout the latter part of the eighteenth century and into the nineteenth, especially with the emergence of Romanticism, writers in English became increasingly habituated to the portrayal of trees and woods as virtuous, venerable, but above all, vulnerable. The demonisation of the *silva daemonium* was replaced with sympathy for the suffering wood; fear of the forests with fear on their behalf. To the extent that a more-than-human power continued to be granted to trees, it was envisaged as a holy, and wholly benign, force: mystical but not occult, religious rather than supernatural. Thomas recounts William Wordsworth’s approving story about a “magnificent tree” that stood near the house of a yeoman in the Lake District, “which a neighbour of the owner advised him to fell for profit’s sake. ‘Fell it,’ exclaimed the yeoman, ‘I had rather fall on my knees and worship it’” (Wordsworth, *Guide* 146, qtd in Thomas 216). For poets, veneration of trees and lament for

their destruction now becomes an especially intense and durable point of reference. In 1784 William Cowper laments the felling of a field of poplars, bidding “farewell to the shade / And the whispering sound of the cool colonnade” (67). Wordsworth’s “The Excursion” (1814) includes a description of trees cut down to supply timber to shipyards, factories, and mines (*Excursion* 272-273). A few years later, John Keats imagines the legendary woodland hero Robin Hood’s distress if he could see the state of contemporary England: “[h]e would swear, for all his oaks, / Fallen beneath the dockyard strokes, / Have rotted on the briny seas” (40). In 1820 John Clare registers his grief “to see the woodman’s cruel axe employ’d, / A tree beheaded, or a bush destroy’d” (159). And so on, through the century, up to and beyond Gerard Manley Hopkins’ “Binsey Poplars” in 1879: “O if we but knew what we do / When we delve or hew – / Hack and rack the growing green!” (78) The apotheosis, as it were, of this attitude finds its expression in James Frazer’s monumental work of comparative religion, *The Golden Bough* (the first edition of which appeared in 1890), in which the worship of trees and forests occupies a central part of Frazer’s attempt to synthesise a universal history of religious phenomena.¹⁵

Meanwhile, the aesthetic appreciation of trees and woodlands was developing in rather different ways, perhaps more closely in a dialectical relationship with Enlightenment rationalism than in resistance to it. In 1765 the watercolourist Paul Sandby painted a “striking portrait of an old ash pollard in Luton Park” at the request of the park’s owner, the Third Earl of Bute: Fiona Stafford describes this painting as demonstrative of a cultural turning point, since it depicts the tree “in its own right – neither as background, nor framing device, nor accessory for figures, but right there at the centre, commanding full attention ...” (15). Over the ensuing decades, many other artists began to “specialize in portraits of trees and devoted much time to studying their silhouettes”, and many books were published “on handsome trees, famous trees, ancient trees and how to draw trees” (Thomas 213). This “obsession”, as Thomas calls it, culminated “in the writings of John Ruskin” (213).

Kim Taplin identifies an important tension in Ruskin’s discussion of trees. On the one hand, he is interested less in “the history of ideas” than “the archaeology of feeling[s]”: his aim is “to show what woods have meant to us imaginatively and emotionally” (75-6). On the other hand, “[i]t is true that he is forever trying to categorize ...” (76). Two inheritances, then, exist in dialectical relationship in Ruskin’s descriptions of arboreal form: the first is the taxonomising, anatomising, calculating, and calibrating traits of Enlightenment science; the

second is the emotionally and aesthetically radical energy of Romanticism. So it is that in “Leaf Beauty” (1860), the section of *Modern Painters* devoted to tree aesthetics, Ruskin writes in a way that, although he declares it “inconsistent with absolute scientific precision”, nevertheless draws wherever possible on the epistemological authority of biological and mathematical discourse (6). For his organisational model he borrows back from phylogeny that discipline’s appropriation of tree growth as a classificatory metaphor: Ruskin’s chapter headings include “The Leaf Orders”, “The Bud”, “The Leaf”, “The Branch”, “The Stem” (xiii). Architecture provides the dominant idiom: vegetation is divided into “TENTED PLANTS” and “BUILDING PLANTS” (8). Both the forms taken by plants and their spatial coordinates are described in strictly mathematical and especially geometrical terms. Thus the oak tree – a species that surely seems capable of assuming the most irregular and idiosyncratic of shapes – turns out to be an amalgam of predictable geometric forms. Ruskin admits these forms are only “nearly regular”, since “there are subtleties of variation in plan”, but dismisses the significance of the latter as “merely tiresome to enter into” (14). He insists that “[a]ll that we need care about is the general law, of which the oak spray furnishes a striking example, – that the buds of the first great group of alternate builders” (here he means those trees on whose branches the buds occur in alternating rather than opposing patterns) “rise in a spiral order round the stem ... And this spiral succession very frequently approximates to the pentagonal order, which it takes with great accuracy in an oak...” (14).

Ruskin relies on geometry not only for his descriptions of the shapes taken by trees and leaves, in which he finds a series of variations of regular two-and three-dimensional figures (trifoils, quatrefoils, cinquefoils, planes, angles, curves, funnels, spirals), but also for his conception of the forces at work. He imagines that the growth of trees and leaves occurs as the result of interrelated geometrical vectors. A force of deflection governs the emergence of smaller leaves and leaflets so that they grow always away from larger ones, according to “the gentle law of respect and room for each other” (23), creating the radiating shapes typical of leaves and trees. A force of succession disciplines the upward and outward growing shoots so that larger and smaller leaves alternate, creating symmetrical patterns that maximise exposure to the sun (23-26). And a force of resilience ensures that every leaf, even if its position on a bough faces downwards, grows to face upward (26-29). The entire treatise demonstrates the thorough disciplining of aesthetic response – indeed of perception more generally – by the kind of geometrical regime of space typical of Enlightenment modernity.

Yet Ruskin's purpose is more than simply aesthetic: by this stage in his career he was an ardent critic of industrial capitalism. He asserts, not without prescience, that "[t]he day will assuredly come" when the impact of the natural world on human life will be recognised as "a grave question", although at the time of writing "the movements of the world seem little likely to be influenced ... by any other considerations respecting trees, than the probable price of timber" (6). The moral and ideological implications of his understanding of vegetative life are implied in the anthropomorphisms that pervade his descriptions of leaf behaviour. The "concessions" by which the leaves assume their places in the overall pattern demonstrate their "exquisite sensibility":

[t]hey do not grow each to his own liking, till they run against one another, and then turn back sulkily; but by a watchful instinct, far apart, they anticipate their companions' courses ... and in every new unfolding of their edged tissue, guide themselves by the sense of each other's remote presence, and by a watchful penetration of leafy purpose in the far future. (28)

The overall interaction between these exquisitely communal sensibilities creates a complex harmony, whose principles Ruskin does not hesitate to apply to human society. "Every leaf", he writes, "connects its work with the entire and accumulated result of the work of its predecessors", in such a way that we humans, "who live for ourselves, and neither know how to use nor keep the work of past time, may humbly learn ... from the leaf, reverence. The power of every great people, as of every living tree, depends on its not effacing, but confirming and concluding, the labours of its ancestors" (66). From deepest root to highest bud, from single leaf to entire forest, Ruskin's trees are the embodiment of harmony and fellow-feeling: in their form and their behaviour they offer moral lessons of humankind, fusing beauty and goodness to express a faith in order and tradition. Such a picture of trees and forests is possible for Ruskin because he admits no trace of chaos, disorder, or risk. His trees are creatures of the light, not creators of darkness. In keeping with his lifelong advocacy of gothic aesthetics as a corrective to what he perceived as the de-natured abstractions of post-Renaissance classicism, Ruskin's forest is a cosmic generalisation of the idyllic Greenwood of medieval fantasy, the descendent of Shakespeare's Forest of Arden, where fellowship and amity are the governing dispositions.

Yet something else is at work too. In Ruskin, unexpectedly, the post-Romantic artistic veneration of trees, in spite of itself, finds itself in agreement with the industrial-age instrumentalism that dreams of a geometrically harmonious forest. Insofar as Ruskin's aesthetic and moral idealisation of arboreal forms depends upon geometry, it unwittingly participates in the same regime of perception that determines the value of trees according to what he calls "the price of timber". In other words, what Husserl called modernity's "mathematization of nature" (23), as discussed in my previous chapter, produces both Ruskin's geometrical tree aesthetics and the kinds of calculations that enable extractive capitalism to exploit forests most efficiently. Oliver Rackham describes the latter vividly when he suggests that throughout the period of modernity, scientists and foresters and politicians yearned for "an ideal world" in which trees would "fit into the affairs of human society" – "fit", that is, in a literal sense.

They would grow close together in forests, each tree forming just one straight cylindrical trunk provided by a beneficent Providence for the north European timber trade: genetic modification might even induce them to grow square trunks.... This world sprang from the imagination of the scientists and savants of the Enlightenment in the eighteenth century. It captured the imagination of nineteenth-century governments, who sought to make their trees (and their people) live in that world.... But in the real world of Earth, trees are wildlife just as deer or primroses are wildlife. Each species has its own agenda and its own interactions with human activities. (15-16)

The arboreal forms, contours, and angles preferred by forestry capitalists might differ from those judged beautiful by Ruskin, but the pervasive geometricisation makes their perception of trees surprisingly compatible with his.

This seems less remarkable when we recall the pervasive influence on European rationalism of René Descartes, for whom geometry was the most reliable form of knowledge of the external world. Descartes's assertion, in the "Discourse on Method" (1637), that "all things that can be understood by men" can be approached by imitating the "long chains of reasoning, so simple and easy, which the geometers customarily [use] to arrive at their most difficult generalizations", is itself accompanied by a xylophobic trope: he compares his method to the action of "travelers who, finding themselves lost in some forest, ... must

always walk as straight as they can in a single direction” (20-21) – a comparison that might raise doubt about whether Descartes had ever visited an actual forest.

At the most general level, the story told by cultural historians like Thomas and Taplin about changing attitudes to trees and forests in England from the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries perpetuates what I have described above as the replacement of European cultures’ ancient fear of forests with two opposed dispositions. Xylophobia is replaced with xylophilia, fear of the forests with fear on their behalf. Meanwhile, scientific and industrial instrumentalism perceives forests as a passive resource: the remaining woods are merely stocks of yet-unfelled wood; trees are no more than timber awaiting harvest.

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But fears die hard, and return easily from apparent extinction – not least longstanding cultural anxieties such as the terror of forests and trees discussed above. Like the Romans, British writers during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, responding to the marginalisation of such fears in their increasingly industrialised and deforested native countries, relocated them to the peripheries of empire. Robert Louis Stevenson, a writer especially sensitive to unhomely terrors of various kinds, rediscovered his own culture’s supposedly outgrown xylophobia on the opposite side of the planet, in the Pacific, where he spent the last years of his life. In the remarkable late story “The Beach of Falesá” (1892), Stevenson’s narrator Wiltshire, a bluff trader in copra who takes pride in his (supposedly typical) English scorn for native superstitions, finds himself quite unmanned when he ventures into the wild woods – the “high bush” – in the hilly interior of an invented Pacific island:

[b]ut the queerness of the place it’s more difficult to tell of, unless to one who has been alone in the high bush himself. The brightest kind of a day it is always dim down there. A man can see to the end of nothing; whichever way he looks the wood shuts up, one bough folding with another like the fingers of your hand; and whenever he listens he hears always something new – men talking, children laughing, the strokes of an axe a far way ahead of him, and sometimes a sort of a quick, stealthy scurry near at hand that makes him jump and look to his weapons. It’s all very well for him to tell himself that he’s alone, bar trees and birds; he can’t make out to believe it; whichever way he turns the whole place seems to be alive and looking on. (270-271)

Here, returning in force, are several of the fundamental ingredients of literary xylophobia: the closing-off of vision in all directions, the uncanny confusion of tree limbs with human ones, the disconcerting sound of unexpected voices, the sense of being watched by unseen eyes. A few years later Joseph Conrad – a writer profoundly influenced by Stevenson – reproduces the same elements in a key passage of *Heart of Darkness* in which his narrator, Marlow, describes his boat journey up the Congo:

Going up that river was like traveling back to the earliest beginnings of the world, when vegetation rioted on the earth and the big trees were kings. An empty stream, a great silence, an impenetrable forest. The air was warm, thick, heavy, sluggish.... The long stretches of the waterway ran on, deserted, into the gloom of overshadowed distances.... And this stillness of life did not in the least resemble a peace. It was the stillness of an implacable force brooding over an inscrutable intention. It looked at you with a vengeful aspect. (35-6)

Two decades further on, D. H. Lawrence evokes the Australian bush in terms remarkably similar to Stevenson's and Conrad's in his novel *Kangaroo* (1922). The protagonist Richard Lovat Somers, an English "writer of poems and essays", concluding that in Europe "everything was done for, played out, finished", decides "he must go to a new country. The newest country: young Australia!" (8). On arrival, however, he finds himself frightened by what the novel, focalising his thoughts, calls "the vast, uninhabited land" (8), and his fear reaches a panicky climax one night when he wanders alone into the bush. Reaching "a clump of tall, nude, dead trees, shining almost phosphorescent with the moon", Lovat is overcome by "the terror of the bush" (9).

There was a presence. He looked at the weird, white, dead trees, and into the hollow distances of the bush. Nothing! Nothing at all. He turned to go home. And then immediately the hair on his scalp stirred and went icy cold with terror. What of? He knew quite well it was nothing.... But the horrid thing in the bush! He schemed as to what it would be. It must be the spirit of the place..., the roused spirit of the bush. He felt it was watching, and waiting. Following with certainty, just behind his back. It might have reached a long black arm and gripped him. But no, it wanted to wait. It was not tired of watching its victim. An alien people—a victim. It was biding its time

with a terrible ageless watchfulness, waiting for a far-off end, watching the myriad intruding white men. (9-10)

Stevenson, Conrad, and Lawrence all, in these examples, use the characteristic elements described earlier in this chapter, derived from the xylophobic tradition they bring with them from Europe, to evoke the loss of mastery over the visual field represented by the labyrinthine defeat of eyesight and the sense of subjection to an invisible, hostile gaze. But all three use these elements to embody an anxiety that has less to do with the actual environments they describe, and more to do with the violent colonial heritage of which all three writers were a part, and to which all were very sensitive. In these passages, then, each writer imports into his respective location (at the limits or antipodes of the imperial metropolitan centres) a form of xylophobia that has much less to do with fear of nature and much more to do with fear of the colonised other, whose resentful, hostile and perhaps vengeful gaze and voice are transposed into the humanoid forms of the trees and the easily anthropomorphised sounds of the bush: “men talking, children laughing, the strokes of an axe” and “a sort of quick, stealthy scurry near at hand”; an “implacable force” whose intention, although “inscrutable”, is unquestionably “vengeful”; “a long black arm” that might at any moment reach out from behind to grip the frightened foreign adventurer.

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Considering the durability and depth of the xylophobic tradition in European writing and thought, it is no surprise that it should re-emerge, after the Enlightenment, in precisely those cultural locations that represent the repressed underside of that century’s dominant narratives of triumphant rationalism and industrial modernity: on the one hand in colonial narratives, and on the other, in folk and fairy tales and in their cultural descendants, especially children’s literature and fantasy literature for adults.

Sara Maitland, in *Gossip from the Forest*, asserts that “one of the central aspects of the northern European fairy story is that it takes place in the forest” (16). There are two reasons why this tradition retains strong xylophobic elements through the period of industrialisation, when such elements are fading in other cultural domains. The first is that folk and fairy story settings are almost always atavistic, located in a fantastic faux-medieval “once upon a time” of kings, princesses, castles, and peasants – and extensive wildwoods. The second is the

powerful influence upon the Anglophone imagination of Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm's famous collections of *märchen*, which the brothers began publishing in German in 1812 and in English translations from 1820. In these tales xylophobic tropes are extremely pervasive, as one expression of the persistent association between Germany's cultural identity and its forests, which were preserved through the nineteenth century in a way that England's were not.¹⁶ According to Maitland, over half the stories in the Grimm brothers' last and fullest edition, that of 1857, explicitly mention a forest location, and at least 26 (out of 210) have "very clear forest themes or images" (16). Some of the longer and more enduring stories that take place partly or wholly in fearsome wild woodlands include "The Twelve Brothers", "Little Brother and Little Sister", "Rapunzel", "Hansel and Gretel", "The Brave Little Tailor", "The Devil with the Three Golden Hairs", "Thumbling", "The Six Swans", "Little Snow-White", "The Two Brothers", "The Golden Goose", "Iron John", "Snow-White and Rose-Red", and "The Drummer". Maitland suggests that such stories draw on the capacity of forests to evoke "[t]he terror of the wild", a feeling of "a deep unease, a chthonic fear", a version of the Freudian *unheimlich* (200), a response to the sense that "[t]he woods are chaotic and wild; life goes on unseen within them ..." (206).

The terrifying wildwoods of the European Classical and Medieval traditions, preserved in nineteenth-century fairy stories and folk tales, were then transplanted into Victorian and modern children's literature. As a prime example, Maitland cites Kenneth Grahame's "account of forest fear" in *The Wind in the Willows* (Maitland 205). Nothing in the first chapters of this gentle tale prepares the reader for Mole's experience when he ventures into the "Wild Wood" to visit Badger. As he enters, the "trees crouc[h] nearer and nearer, and holes ma[k]e ugly mouths at him on either side". Before long he begins to see evil faces peering at him from the trees, "[t]hen the whistling began", "[t]hen the pattering began" – until he panics and runs helter-skelter to hide in a hollow full of leaves: "he knew it at last, in all its fullness, that dread thing which other little dwellers in field and hedgerow had encountered here, and known as their darkest moment ... – the Terror of the Wild Wood!" (Grahame 29-31).

One route by which these xylophobic tropes also made their way, via children's stories, into literature in English for adults is exemplified by Angela Carter, whose highly influential works drew a lot of their force from her re-mobilisation of fairy-tale traditions. Her story

“The Erl-King” (1979) makes exceptionally effective use of the trope of the forest as a disorienting and suffocating labyrinth.

The woods enclose. You step between the first trees and then you are no longer in the open air; the wood swallows you up. There is no way through the wood any more, this wood has reverted to its original privacy.... The trees stir with a noise like taffeta skirts of women who have lost themselves in the woods and hunt round hopelessly for the way out.... The woods enclose and then enclose again, like a system of Chinese boxes opening one into another; the intimate perspectives of the wood chang[e] endlessly around the interloper, the imaginary traveller walking towards an invented distance that perpetually recede[s].... It is easy to lose yourself in these woods. (84-5)

However it is surely J.R.R. Tolkien’s Middle-earth that provides the best example – the most fully developed, the most influential – in twentieth-century Anglophone writing of the survival and elaboration of forest-fear from medieval romance, as preserved in and transmitted through the genres of fairy story, folk tale, children’s literature, and fantasy. It’s hard to think of a writer whose work engages with fear of the forest more centrally, intensely, or deliberately. And because Tolkien’s novels have enjoyed such widespread and enduring popularity, they in turn have played a significant role in preserving and re-energising dendrophobic and xylophobic tropes and structures of feeling from the 1950s onwards.

As a professional scholar of Middle and Old English literature, whose first published fiction was written for children, Tolkien engaged with the tradition of forest-fear in ways that were both knowledgeable and knowing. The complacent, stodgy, middle-class eponymous protagonist of *The Hobbit* (1937) thus inevitably encounters, amongst the other terrors that might be expected in a fantastic adventure shaped by traditional European legend and fairy tale – trolls, storms, mountains, giants, goblins, a berserker, a dragon, and the vampiric-ghoulish Gollum – a *silva daemonium*. The name of the terrifying forest into which Bilbo Baggins and his companions venture was imported without alteration from pre-existing sources. “*Mirkwood* is not an invention of mine”, he explained in a letter, “but a very ancient name, weighted with legendary associations”: such associations included “the great mountainous forest regions that anciently formed a barrier to the south of the lands of Germanic expansion” – that is, the same wildwoods that terrified the Romans (*Letters* 369). In Old English, Tolkien explains, the adjective *mirce* survives only in poetry, and only with

the sense of an evil murkiness: “[i]t was never, I think, a mere ‘colour’ word”, but was “from the beginning weighted with the sense of ‘gloom’ (369-70).

The descriptions of Mirkwood in *The Hobbit* unfold from these long-established associations. The adventurers enter through “a sort of arch leading into a gloomy tunnel made by two great trees that leant together”, and once inside, “their feet seemed to thump along while all the trees leaned over them and listened” (*Hobbit* 123). Before long Bilbo begins to feel that he is “being slowly suffocated” (124). Nevertheless, in this novel the trees themselves do not show any active hostile agency, beyond these threatening intimations. Instead, the travellers fall foul of gigantic spiders whose webs and poison embody the sense of entanglement and contamination endemic to the tradition of the *silva daemonium*.

However it is in *The Lord of the Rings*, originally envisaged as the sequel to *The Hobbit*, that Tolkien most fully develops the power, threat, and active vitality of Middle-earth’s trees and forests. The development occurs progressively through the course of the novel. One of the first dangers faced by the hobbits on their quest to destroy the Ring of Power is the Old Forest, which Meriadoc (Merry) Brandybuck, whose family lives nearby, describes as being “much more alive, more aware of what is going on” than any woodland in the Shire, and as hostile to strangers (*Rings* 125). The trees, he says, “watch you”, and “the most unfriendly ones may drop a branch, or stick a root out, or grasp at you with a long trailer” (125). The Old Forest is most dangerous at night: “I have only once or twice been in here after dark, and then only near the hedge. I thought all the trees were whispering to each other, passing news and plots along in an unintelligible language; and the branches swayed and groped without any wind. They do say the trees do actually move, and can surround strangers and hem them in” (125). On entering, the hobbits’ experience initially echoes that of Bilbo in Mirkwood: an increasing density of roots, branches and foliage, accompanied by a suffocating silence and the sense of “being watched with disapproval, deepening to dislike and even enmity.... [T]hey found themselves looking up quickly, or glancing back over their shoulders, as if they expected a sudden blow” (126). No such blow occurs, and the characters perceive no extraordinary arboreal mobility: up to this point, the narrative remains closer to the more naturalistic of the xylophobic and dendrophobic accounts surveyed in this chapter. As the travellers go deeper, however, Tolkien gradually intensifies the sense of the forest’s active agency. Although they can’t be seen to move, it becomes clear the trees are blocking the intended path: the hobbits are “being headed off, and [are soon] simply following a course chosen for them ... into the

heart of the Forest and not out of it” (130). It turns out they are being herded in the direction of a huge, ancient, sentient, and malignant tree whose baleful influence dominates the whole forest. This is Old Man Willow: “his heart was rotten, but his strength was green, and his song and thought ran through the woods [and] drew power out of the earth and spread like fine root-threads in the ground, and invisible twig-fingers in the air, till it had under its dominion nearly all the trees of the Forest” (145). Arriving at the feet of the Forest’s patriarch, the travellers fall easily under a miasmatic spell of drowsiness that extends throughout Old Man Willow’s reach. Merry and Pippin unwisely choose to sleep with their backs resting within apparently hospitable hollows in the tree’s trunk, as its leaves continue to sing them to sleep. Frodo tries to wake up by sitting on a root with his feet in the stream, until he nods off – at which point the root twists around, holding him under the water until his steadfast servant Sam rescues him from drowning. But now the others have been seized by Old Man Willow’s trunk. Pippin has been entirely swallowed up by the crack he lay down in, and Merry is trapped in another: “his legs lay outside, but the rest of him was inside a dark opening, the edges of which gripped like a pair of pincers” (133). It seems that the quest to destroy the Ring will end here, through the agency of tree and forest, until Tom Bombadil appears and orders Old Man Willow to release his prisoners.

Bombadil is peculiar creation – not exactly a Green Man, perhaps, but rather a figure familiar from English country lore, a more or less immortal nature spirit in the form of a hale, eccentric old man.¹⁷ Through him Tolkien gives voice, for the first time in his work, to the idea that the Forest’s malice arises from reactive hostility to the destructiveness of those who threaten to damage it. In the stories he tells the hobbits, Tom describes

the hearts of trees and their thoughts, which were often dark and strange, and filled with a hatred of things that go free upon the earth, gnawing, biting, breaking, hacking, burning: destroyers and usurpers. It was not called the Old Forest without reason, for it was indeed ancient, a survivor of vast forgotten woods; and in it there lived yet, ageing no quicker than the hills, the fathers of the fathers of trees, remembering times when they were lords. (145)

Tolkien’s own well-documented anger at the decimation of British and European woodlands infuses this passage. In an autobiographical note he remarked that “I find human maltreatment of [trees] as hard to bear as some find ill-treatment of animals” (*Letters* 220),

and one of his walking companions recalled that “[t]he first time I heard him say ‘ORCS’ was when we heard not far off the savage sound of a petrol-driven saw. ‘That machine,’ he said, ‘is one of the greatest horrors of our age’. He said that he had sometimes imagined an uprising of the trees against their human tormenters” (Scull and Hammond 633). As Anne C. Petty comments, Tolkien’s hatred of the destruction of nature by mechanised progress – most fully embodied for him by deforestation – “seems to have been triggered when his mother moved the family from rural Sarehole to industrial Birmingham” in 1900, when Tolkien was aged eight, and was powerfully intensified by his experience of industrial-scale warfare during the Battle of the Somme (219).

The Old Forest anticipates a much more explicit and literary confrontation between trees and industry that features centrally in the second volume of *The Lord of the Rings*. This requires the introduction of the most original figures in Tolkien’s mythos: the anthropomorphic walking and talking trees he calls Ents. The description of Treebeard, the first of these beings to enter the story, strongly recalls both the Green Man and the Green Knight:

a large Man-like, almost Troll-like, figure, at least fourteen foot high, very sturdy, with a tall head, and hardly any neck. Whether it was clad in stuff like green and grey bark, or whether that was its hide, was difficult to say.... The lower part of the long face was covered with a sweeping grey beard, bushy, almost twiggy at the roots, thin and mossy at the ends. (484)

Tolkien leaves his reader in no doubt that in Treebeard (or Fangorn as he is more properly called), he means to embody the mind, will, and agency of vegetal nature itself: describing Treebeard’s eyes, the hobbit Pippin suggests that “it felt as if something that grew in the ground – asleep, you might say, or just feeling itself as something between roof-tip and leaf-tip, between deep earth and sky had suddenly waked up, and was considering you with the same slow care that it had given to its own inside affairs for endless years” (484-5). More than any other inhabitants of Tolkien’s Middle-earth, the Ents seem to be the author’s original innovation. Yet he insisted he “did not consciously invent them at all” (Tolkien, *Letters* 211, n.). Instead, he claimed to have written the chapter introducing Treebeard “more or less as it stands”, almost as though he was just “reading some one else’s work”, adding: “I like Ents now because they do not seem to have anything to do with me. I daresay something had been going on in the ‘unconscious’ for some time ...” (211-12, n.). It is not very difficult

to identify some of that must have been at work during this spell of somewhat automatic composition: in a 1955 letter to W. H. Auden, Tolkien wrote that he derived the name of his walking trees from *enta*, meaning *giants*, in the Anglo-Saxon poem *The Wanderer* (Tolkien, *Letters* 212, n.). In Middle English this word became *etayn*, which appears twice in *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* – a text with which Tolkien was extremely familiar, having collaborated with E. V. Gordon to produce a scholarly edition in 1925. In that poem, when the Green Knight appears at Arthur’s court, the narrator speculates that he may be “*half etayn*”, that is, half-giant (l. 140). Later, the list of wild forest-dwelling foes encountered by Sir Gawain includes *etaynez*, giants (ll. 723). These connections were surely at work in Tolkien’s mind when he imagined and named his Ents.

As for their role in *The Two Towers*, Tolkien connected this to his “bitter disappointment and disgust from schooldays with the shabby use made in Shakespeare of the coming of ‘Great Birnam wood to high Dunsinane hill’: I longed to devise a setting in which the trees might really march to war” (*Letters* 212, n.). The implied mobility and agency of the trees of Mirkwood and the Old Forest now becomes literalised as the Ents and their army of half-Ent, half-tree “Huorns” march from their forest to the supposedly impregnable stronghold of Isengard and tear it apart. Of course, forests can move across landscapes, and trees can crush rock and bring down human structures, although they take decades or centuries to do so. Tolkien gives these real capacities of vegetal nature a warlike and vengeful power simply by speeding them up. “An angry Ent is terrifying”, testifies Merry, describing to his friends the destruction of the wall of sheer rock that surrounds the turncoat wizard Saruman’s tower of Orthanc (*Rings* 590). “Their fingers, and their toes, just freeze on to rock; and they tear it up like bread-crust. It was like watching the work of great tree-roots in a hundred years, all packed into a few moments” (590).

Like Bombadil in the earlier volume, Treebeard provides a mouthpiece for Tolkien’s attitudes when he explicitly identifies Saruman and his operations at Isengard with industrialisation (or as near as it as a medieval-style fantasy can represent). “He has a mind of metal and wheels”, the Ent declares angrily, “and he does not care for growing things, except as far as they serve him for the moment” (*Rings* 494).

He and his foul folk are making havoc now. Down on the borders they are felling trees – good trees. Some of the trees they just cut down and leave to rot – orc-mischief

that; but most are hewn up and carried off to feed the fires There is always a smoke rising from Isengard these days. Curse him, root and branch! Many of those trees ... had voices of their own that are lost for ever now. And there are wastes of stump and bramble where once there were singing groves. (495)

Tolkien's angry, vengeful forests and trees therefore represent perhaps the most fully-articulated form of the re-emergence into mainstream literary production in English, during the second half of the twentieth century, of those ancient and medieval dendrophobic and xylophobic narratives that had become marginalised over the previous centuries. Yet they are not the only example, nor even the first. In John Wyndham's *The Day of the Triffids* (1951), which appeared three years before the first volume of *The Lord of the Rings*, the triffids are deadly ambulant plants the size of a small tree (or the size of an adult human) which all but destroy human society. The horror associated with the triffids arises not just from their ability to walk; nor from their weaponry, the slashing poison-impregnated whips; nor even from their ability to communicate and organise – but from the combination of the anthropomorphic qualities with their persistently vegetal nature. The narrator's disgust and dismay is strongest when he perceives triffids behaving most like trees: patiently waiting beside their kills for them to decompose, in order to feed on them.

The trope of the mobile and intelligent arboreal agent, as portrayed so vividly by Tolkien and Wyndham, has endured and enjoyed a renewed popularity, as shown by recent examples such as Patrick Ness's *A Monster Calls* (2011), Ali Smith's *The Trees* (2016), and Max Porter's *Lanny* (2019). One obvious reason for this proliferation is the growing awareness of environmental crisis and especially of deforestation and habitat loss. Another might be that evocation of talking and moving trees embodies, with gusto, the way in which xylophobic and dendrophobic topoi encode the very longstanding human intuition that trees do indeed play active and agentive roles in the complex network of agencies that constitutes the forest. Jane Bennett puts this intuition in new materialist terms when she offers an actor-network-theory description, following Latour, of “vegetal agency” in a real-world rainforest: “the scene of not-fully-predictable encounters between multiple kinds of actants”, including “vegetation, forest trees, soil, soil microorganisms, and humans native and exotic” (97).

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Outside of children's fiction, fairy-tale, science fiction, and fantasy, however, it has been only in the last few years that prominent novelists in the realist tradition have begun to find ways of making trees and forests into active and credible protagonists and antagonists. Two of the best recent examples are Richard Powers' *The Overstory* (2018) and Annie Proulx's *Barkskins* (2016), discussion of which will conclude this chapter.

In "Roots", the first section of *The Overstory*, eight chapters give us individualised biographies of each of the main human characters in turn, whose stories will be interwoven in the subsequent sections: "Trunk", "Crown", and "Seeds". Each of these biographies, though, might also be called a dendrography or xylography: the life story of a tree or group of trees that has intimately affected the life of the human character in question. For example the genealogy (the family tree?) of Nick Hoel's Norwegian immigrant ancestors is intertwined with the story of chestnut blight, a parasitic fungus introduced to the USA accidentally by arborists in the early part of the twentieth century, which within a few decades killed nearly every North American chestnut, "[t]he tree of the tanning industry, of railroad ties, train cars, telegraph poles, fuel, fences, houses, barns, fine desks, tables, pianos, crates, paper pulp, and endless free shade and food – the most harvested tree in the country ..." (Powers 12). In Chapter Two, our second protagonist, Mimi Ma, has an experience that echoes Dante's horrific visit to the forest of the suicides when she accidentally breaks a branch of the mulberry tree planted by her immigrant parents in memory of their ancestral Persian and Chinese homelands: "[t]hick, milky tree blood oozes from the wound", and Mimi's youngest sister Amelia cries out, "Stop! You're hurting it. I can hear it scream!" (32). Years later this tree will be splattered with their father's actual blood when he sits beneath it and shoots himself. And so the first section of the novel proceeds: in the third chapter, Adam Appich's parents plant a different tree for each child born to them; in the fourth, Ray Brinkman and Dorothy Cazaly resolve to plant a tree on each anniversary of their marriage.

Cumulatively, these chapters build an emotionally potent sense of grief and anxiety – not fear *of* the forest, though, but rather, that fear *for* the forest (as radically vulnerable, and catastrophically damaged) which, as I have already discussed, became such a strong feature of the post-industrial Romantic and Victorian attitude to nature. And the novel accompanies this sensibility, just as many late-eighteenth- and nineteenth-century European evocations of the vanishing forest did, with a sometimes-florid sense of arboreal sacredness. So, for example, when several of the characters fetch up at a redwood forest in Oregon, where they

come to join the protest against clear-cutting for cheap timber by a Wall Street corporate raider, the paragraph evoking their first impression compares the trees to “angels” and to Doric columns, and describes them as embodying a “russet, leathery apotheosis” as they reach “up nearer eternity” (211).

Even though it repeats these Romantic clichés, *The Overstory* is versatile and effective in making readers aware of the agency of trees and forests. It achieves this in two main ways, which connect. The first, beginning in the opening chapters and continuing throughout, is the depiction of a character’s experience or intuition of arboreal agency in terms resembling either a supernatural numinosity or a Tolkienish (Entish or Huornish) anthropomorphism. Dorothy Cazaly’s car crash is the result of an “ambush” by a “parkway linden wide enough to destroy her front grille” (72). Douglas Pavilicek, parachuting from a bomber over Cambodia, “tumbles into the branches of the banyan, that one-tree forest that has grown up over the course of three hundred years just in time to break his fall” (82). Eleven-year-old Neelay Mehta, taking refuge from home and school “high up in a crazy cantilevered oak”, slips and breaks his spine: left paraplegic, he has “years to wonder whether the branches jerked. Whether the tree had it in for him” (102). At other times, *The Overstory* might seem to deploy a certain kind of dendro-mysticism, which becomes most evident in the repeated suggestion that the novel’s protagonists are brought together by, and enlisted in, a more-than-human plan that emanates from and is coordinated by, not God or Providence or Fate, but the trees themselves. Olivia, for example, is guided to her meeting with the artist Nick Hoel, and on their subsequent quest to save the redwoods, by the same “large, powerful, desperate shapes” that visited her “in a clearing” during a near-death experience at college (157-8, 163-5). Nick, who goes camping in the wilderness following the disastrous outcome of the protest, during which Olivia is killed, finds himself surrounded by “messages” “pour[ed] out [by trees] in media of their own invention. They speak through their needles, trunks and roots. The man in the tent lies bathed in signals hundreds of millions of years older than his crude senses. And still he can read them” (355, italics in original). Mimi achieves enlightenment in a San Francisco park as “[m]essages hum out from the bark she leans against. Chemical semaphores home in over the air. Currents rise from the soil-gripping roots ...” (499). And Neelay’s path towards invention of an AI system that will enhance a more sustainable understanding of local ecosystems begins with instructions “whispered to him” by a grove of exotic trees in a city arboretum: they “insert a thought directly into his limbic system.... [a] plan that now uses him, although he thinks it’s his” (195, 111).

The second direction taken by Powers' depiction of the possibilities of arboreal communication and collaboration occurs by means of a character based closely on a real-life individual. Influenced by her beloved dendrophile father, Patricia Westerford grows up loving the human-tree metamorphosis stories from Ovid: Daphne, Cyparissus, Myrrha, Baucis and Philemon. This shapes her appreciation of the subtle interconnectedness of living forms to such an extent that when, as a young woman, she attends Forestry School at Purdue University, she realises "[s]omething is wrong with the whole field" (122) – namely its insistence on monoculture, and her professors' doctrinaire adherence to the practices of completely removing undergrowth and decaying matter from commercial plantations. During her postdoctoral research, Patty discovers that her experimental trees are communicating with each other, across considerable distances, to warn against attack by insects and disease: "[h]er maples are *signaling*. They're linked together in an airborne network ..." (126). In the face of constant and often misogynistic professional and academic hostility she persists in her research, and eventually discovers that in addition to airborne signalling through biochemicals, forest trees also communicate and collaborate below the soil surface. "Networked together underground by countless thousands of miles of living fungal threads, her trees feed and heal each other, keep their young and sick alive, pool their resources and metabolites into community chests ..." (142, ellipsis in original). This character, nicknamed "Plant Patty", along with her biography and her research findings about both airborne and subterranean woodland networks, are closely based on real-life forest ecologist Susan Simard, whose paradigm-altering discovery of the extent and richness of trees' interconnection through their roots' fusion with the vast skein of subterranean mycorrhizal filaments is recounted in her memoir *Finding the Mother Tree* (2021) – a discovery that *Nature* magazine in 1997 dubbed the "wood-wide web" (Simard, *Research*).

Throughout the *Overstory*, the other characters and groups of characters discover Patty's book *The Secret Forest* and find their sense of their place in the natural world transformed. The more mystical, anthropomorphic, or metaphorical modes of depicting arboreal agency described above are thereby brought into connection with the scientifically derived ones. Olivia and Nick study Patty's book in the protestors' treehouse, two hundred feet above ground in the massive redwood Mimas (Powers 268). Dorothy reads it to her paralysed husband Ron, prompting their decision to allow their section to revert to wild woodland (443). Mimi and Neelay attend Patty's final lecture, at the end of which she either – the novel

offers two different narrative outcomes at this point – publicly commits suicide, or explicitly rejects doing so, as a culminating act of advocacy (463-6). Neelay is inspired both by Patty’s book and by her lecture to switch from producing fantasy-world video games to creating eco-enhancing artificial intelligence platforms (412, 434).

The Overstory thus portrays with considerable force the real agentive and communicative systems at work amongst trees, and also evokes suggestively the ways in which, with increased attentiveness, human beings might learn from those systems metaphorically and spiritually as well as materially. Although fear of the forest is not a significant part of this novel’s sensibility, it should be clear from the above that Powers by no means relegates trees to passive victimhood. On the contrary, he deploys several of the tropes of arboreal agency from the xylophobic and dendrophobic topoi that I have surveyed earlier in this chapter – sometimes explicitly: extended allusions are made to the story of Daphne from Ovid, Dante’s visit to the forest of the suicides, and Birnam Wood’s march against Macbeth (32, 41-2, 66, 102) – and brings these into suggestive communication with the recent discoveries of ecological science regarding tree communicative and collaborative agency.

By contrast, Annie Proulx’s *Barkskins* retains a pervasive insistence on dendrophobia and xylophobia. Justified fear of the real dangers posed by trees and forests, and of the damage they can do to human bodies even as human enterprises seek to subjugate them, are crucial to the impact of Proulx’s depiction of environmental violence.

Even more epic in scope than *Overstory*, *Barkskins* covers three centuries in the fortunes of two families engaged in the timber industry in Canada and the USA. It opens in 1693 with the arrival of two young peasants, René Sel and Charles Duquet, in French colonial territory north of the St Lawrence River. They are taken into the forest by Monsieur Trépagny, their new master, in order to cut trees for the timber trade. The first chapter, told mainly from René Sel’s point of view, conveys his wonder and trepidation in response to the forests of New France. “Here grew hugeous trees of a size not seen in the old country for hundreds of years, evergreens taller than cathedrals, cloud-piercing spruce and hemlock.... [O]verhead their leaf-choked branches merged into a false sky, dark and savage” (Proulx 4). One of the many impressive qualities of this novel is that it represents so accurately the changing emotional responses to trees and forests over the three hundred years of its narrative span. In this passage, for example, Proulx is entirely accurate in asserting that her young *émigrés* would

never have seen trees or forests like these. Genuine “wildwood” was almost entirely gone from much of Western Europe well before the seventeenth century (Rackham 20). By the Middle Ages, most of the areas referred to as “forest” – including the Morvan Forest in Burgundy, where René Sel comes from – were a blend of regrowth woodlands and clearances containing villages, pastures, and crops (Crumley 245). In such “forests” the wooded parts were intensively cultivated, mainly through coppicing and pollarding (Rackham 56). These are the kinds of trees a peasant woodcutter like René Sel would have worked. And to such a person, the truly wild wildwood of New France would be astounding indeed. Similarly precise is the novel’s representation of René’s overwhelming sense of fear. From his perspective the trees of the New World are “monstrous”: their interlacing “leaf-choked” branches form “a false sky” above him, “dark and savage”. René comes to the New World imbued with the cultural xylophobia described earlier in this chapter: a forest terror that goes at least as far back as ancient Rome, and persisted in Western Europe throughout the middle ages and into the early modern period, even as areas of genuinely wild forest grew fewer and fewer and became less and less accessible.

When Charles Duquet, tired of Trépagny’s bullying, goes off on his own into the forest, his angry ex-master describes “with vindictive relish” the diabolical horrors that will befall him: wandering lost in the labyrinth of trees, drowning in the river, being killed by wolves or crushed by moose; or being “snapped in half by creatures with steaming teeth”, by “the furious Mi’kmaw spirits of the forest – *chepichcaam*, hairy *kookwes*, frost giant *chenoo*” (Proulx 14). Listening to this litany of horrors René feels his hair bristle, testimony to the physical affect provoked by mere naming of the forest’s multiple hostile agencies. When a day later the two men hear “a quavering voice in the distant trees”, Trépagny, who is cutting limbs from a felled trunk, starts upright and declares this is “not one of the Mi’kmaw spirits, but one that had followed the settlers from France, the *loup-garou*, known to haunt forests” (14). Along with the terror of arborealised indigenous agency represented by the Mi’kmaw forest spirits – a terror endemic to the colonial terrain, comparable to those evoked, as I discussed earlier, in the fiction of Stevenson, Conrad, and Lawrence – Proulx’s settlers have clearly brought with them their own forest demons, that is to say, the forms of cultural xylophobia derived from their country of origin.

At the same time they have brought with them the idea that civilisation must be created by destroying the forest. Asked by René whether it wouldn’t be easier for the settlers to build

their houses in the natural clearings, Trépagny is “scandalized”: “Yes, easier”, he replies, “but we are here to clear the forest, to subdue this evil wilderness” (Proulx 17). As my previous discussion made clear, European cultures well into the early modern period perceived the destruction of “wild” forests as a necessity for the advance of civilisation. In *Barkskins* many of the protagonists voice this view, including the missionary Père Crème, who also recognises the inevitable link between destruction of the forests and destruction of the indigenous Mi’kmaq, whom he perceives to be as “tightly knitted into the natural world” as if they have “grown from this place as trees grow from the soil ...” (149). To his sister Marguerite, back home in France, Père Crème writes that, to the Mi’kmaq, “*Trees are Persons. In vain I tell them that Trees are for the uses of Men ...*” (152, italics in original). He goes on to dismiss the Mi’kmaq accusation that the White Man is stealing their land: how can this complaint have any merit, asks Père Crème, when the Mi’kmaq themselves have done nothing to “*improve*” that land, only allowing it “*to ever thicken with more and more Trees*”? – whereas the European settlers, by contrast, through the strenuous labour of cutting “*the oppressive encroaching Forest*” in order to build housing for their family and domestic animals, have thereby asserted their “*God-given Right to claim the cleared Land as [their] own*” (180, italics in original).

Against this ideology, through the stories of various descendants of René Sel, who marries into the Mi’kmaq, Proulx portrays the indigenous perspective on the European colonists’ simultaneous destruction of forest, people, and culture – a devastation all the more bitter because, as the forest recedes, the only mode of living left to the diminishing Mi’kmaq is employment in the timber trade.

The dominant form taken by what Père Crème calls the settlers’ “*improve[ment]*” of the “*encroaching*” forest is also anticipated early on. A few months after his arrival René Sel is exploring the forest, hoping to find an area of land he can claim when his contract with Trépagny runs out, when he stumbles upon a trail that shows the ruts of cartwheels. Soon this turns into a more elaborately engineered path: “[t]rees had been carefully cleared to create the effect of an *allée*, the ground thinly spread with thousands of broken white shells” resembling the kind of manicured road that René remembers seeing at home in France, leading to the mansions of aristocrats (20). Here, too, at the end of the *allée*, in a brightly-lit clearing, “[a] massive pale thing loomed up, a whitewashed stone house, almost a château, that might have been carried on the sea winds from France and dropped in place” (20-21). It is not so much

the house itself, though it is “almost a château”, but rather the long formal *allée* that proves Trépagny’s intention to import into New France not just the European class structure, with himself at its apex, but also the ways that structure has learned to express itself environmentally by replacing chaotic wildwood with disciplined, geometrical patterns composed of dead-straight, tree-lined avenues.

This ambition reflects the emergence by the early seventeenth century of a fashion amongst aristocratic owners of large houses to have “a dense plantation of trees ... laid out in an orderly and geometrical fashion” (Thomas 206). As Thomas further explains, by “the later seventeenth century it was common to cover the adjacent hills with plantations, intersected with axial vistas”, which “demonstrated [the owner’s] power to manipulate the lives and environment of lesser mortals and emphasized that all local avenues of power converged upon him” (206-207). A less elaborate alternative, easier to achieve and therefore more common, “was to plant a long avenue leading up to the great house”, which by the start of the seventeenth century “had become a recognized aristocratic symbol” (207). In his long poem “Upon Appleton House”, written in 1651 to flatter his employer, Lord Fairfax, the poet Andrew Marvell describes the avenue leading to the house through the estate’s forest, where “like a Guard on either side, / The Trees before their Lord divide” (128).

In *Barkskins* it is neither Trépagny himself, nor René Sel, who achieves the privilege and mastery represented by those *allées* of obedient trees. Instead it is Charles Duquet. Having escaped Trépagny, he eventually makes his fortune, establishing a timber firm. Tellingly, he then renames himself Duke, and the firm Duquet et Fils becomes Duke and Sons. It is the Duke scions who gain in the New World the kind of wealth and power held by the aristocracy in the Old – the privileges that Trépagny’s château with its straight avenues of trees foreshadowed. And it is the Dukes who inherit the relationship to the natural world represented by those straight avenues.

This relationship is characterised by application of the geometrical fantasy described in an earlier section of this chapter by Rackham – the desire to remake, both in perceptual and material terms, the forest as space of regular and measurable resources, entirely obedient to capitalist calculation. As Proulx’s narrative shows, it is this post-Cartesian geometrical disposition allows the prodigious multidimensionality of the forest to be surveyed, classified, quantified, subdivided, and audited. Of the various children of Charles Duquet / Charles

Duke, his adoptive son Bernard understands this disposition best, and it is he who takes over control of the family company. But he worries constantly about finding a successor, someone capable of taking over as landlooker, the vital company official whose job is to assess the worth of the timber contained in the huge forests now possessed by Duke & Sons: none of his nephews shows any interest in acquiring the necessary skills in “judging trees, estimating cubic volumes and board feet” which Bernard’s adoptive father taught him (Proulx 228). As it turns out, the Duke descendent who possesses this disposition most effectively comes along two centuries after Bernard’s death, in the mid-nineteenth century, when ownership and direction of Duke & Sons is taken over by Lavinia Duke, the great-great-grand-daughter of the firm’s founder. Believing that only geometrisation will grant her control of the forests as well as authority in the intensely masculinist world of timber capitalism, Lavinia decides to study scaling, recognising that “it was useless to say that you had five hundred logs with an average diameter of thirty-seven inches. How many feet of inch-thick boards would come out of that log? How did you allow for the bark, for the saw kerf, for the taper of the log?” (508-7). Again, Proulx’s characterisations make sense within the real-world historical shifts in attitudes to and relationships with trees that occurred during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Lavinia, she embodies up the increasingly economically-driven instrumentalism that would impose its saw-toothed algebra to old-growth forests in the Americas, from the Canadian north to the Amazon, as well as in Europe, Russia, China, the Indian Subcontinent, Australia, New Zealand, and elsewhere (Williams).

None of Proulx’s trees become anthropomorphic avengers – there are no Ents or Triffids in *Barkskins*, despite the suggestive title. The novel is committed to historical accuracy, which rules out science-fiction and fantasy scenarios, but the real history Proulx draws upon supplies plenty of opportunities for a persistent and instructive dendrophobia. Rather than mobilising like Birnam Wood or Fangorn Forest, Proulx’s trees take their revenge simply by being materially what they are, by their height, girth, growth habit, hardness, suppleness, flammability, texture, and grain. But of course it is not really revenge: it is simply the frighteningly inevitable result of treating a forest as a passive, pliable, manipulable, geometric resource.

So, for example, a horrifying story is related to Armenius Breitsprecher, a Duke & Sons landlooker, during his survey of the company’s far-flung estates. Arriving at the remote farm of one employee, a German immigrant named Anton Heinrich, Armenius asks to speak to

him but is told by the man's daughter there has been an accident. Chopping wood with his "dummkopf" sons Moony and Kelmar, Anton was too slow to escape from a falling tree, which pinned him to the ground (Proulx 484). His two sons came to release him. "They were strong", says the daughter; "[t]hey seized the butt end of the tree and began to pull. They dragged the entire tree across Vater's body as he shrieked" (484). When Armenius asks where her father is now, she replies, "[h]e did not live. That tree's branches tore his belly and his inside came outside when they pulled" (484). In this case the gnarly rigidity of the tree's cut and splintered branches, combined with its sheer weight, have eviscerated a soft human body.

At other times it is the frangibility and elasticity of wood, rather than its hardness, that prove fatal. Blony Jacko, a teenage friend of Sel descendants, develops a taste for spar-tree climbing. This entails scaling a two-hundred foot Douglas Fir using a climbing loop, cutting off the branches along the way, and finally chopping off the top section. The aim is to prepare one or two spar trees that will carry a high cable, linked to a motorised winch, the steam donkey, enabling logs to be picked up and loaded for transport. The system depends on a complex of geometrical interactions amongst elements such as weight, height, vectors of force, and arcs of swing. Obviously the most dangerous moment of spar-tree cutting is when the decapitated section falls, and the remaining top of the trunk whips back and forth while the climber clings on. Blony and his rival, a Frenchman named Napoleon Tessier, are in competition to perform the riskiest acrobatics to celebrate completion of a cut. Tessier's latest triumph is to balance on the top of the trimmed spar as it vibrates, so Blony plans on his next cut to stand on his head, whistling. However, as he severs the top, which is especially heavy with branches, the spar he is standing on bends, splits, and catches him "in the cleft as a clothespin grips a tea towel. His scream was short, the air squeezed out of his collapsed lungs. It was Tessier's dreadful job to climb up and cut the spar a second time, this time below the dead boy, whose urine-drenched boots dangled in his face. Blony fell, still in the clasp of the Douglas fir, and they buried him that way" (Proulx 618). Such is the strength with which the tree entraps the young man's body that he has to be buried still in its clasp, which recalls a series of similar moments distributed through the long tradition of cultural dendrophobia: Tolkien's Old Man Willow traps Meriadoc Brandybuck as though in a "pair of pincers" (*Rings* 133); Shakespeare's Prospero threatens to "peg" Ariel in an oak tree (*Tempest* 1.2.295); in the seventh circle of Dante's inferno, the souls of suicides are eternally "tied in knots" in the wood of tormented trees (13.87); Ovid's Daphne finds herself paralysed

by encompassing bark. In Proulx's novel, though, there is nothing supernatural about these moments. Instead, these dying trees exert their appalling agency – one rips out a man's guts, and another takes a man in its jaws – simply by means of the material properties endemic to their wood: its ability to stay unbroken or to splinter or split, to remain rigid or to bend, in unpredictable ways. In the course of this novel, as in real-world history, millions of trees are cut over hundreds of years, but neither wood nor woods will ever comply perfectly with geometrisation, so that over-estimation of the human ability to measure, calculate, and predict their behaviour all too often produces lethal results.

The life and death of Jinot Sel demonstrate the danger even more clearly. As René Sel's great-great-grandson, he is the part-Mi'kmaq counterpart of Lavinia Duke, Charles Duquet's great-great-granddaughter, although the two never meet. As a young man in the early nineteenth century, Jinot works with his friend Franceway managing the armadas of timber sent down river from forest to factory. Just as Proulx describes, these vast cross-hatchings of floating logs had to be carefully governed according to two geometrical principles: the trunks had to be as smooth and straight as possible to avoid catching on each other; and the entire raft had to be kept on a two-dimensional plane, only a single log deep, right across the surface of the water. When the logs fought with each other or teamed up, snarl-ups would quickly build into a chaos of pulverising wooden forces, vectors, and angles – a pandemonium reminiscent of Pliny's appalled imagination of the tangled German forests. Such log-jams could be miles long and dozens of feet high, and were frequently deadly. Jinot Sel witnesses the death of his friend Franceway in such a jam. Along with a third man, James Ketchum, the two friends are herding one of these vast rafts of cut timber through a narrow channel. But they notice a large, slightly misshapen log in the middle of the batch: just as the men fear, "Old Crooked", catches on the ledge at the side of the water so that remaining logs start to pile up behind it.

Higher and higher the logs rose on each other's backs.... Franceway and Ketchum chopped their way down to the bad log and began to cut into its crooked bend. Crackling sounds came from it and Ketchum shouted "Run!" suiting his action to the words. But Franceway lifted his arms and smote the bent devil a final blow. It broke, the jam quivered and immediately began to haul. Logs gushed over the edge. Jinot ... saw a thirty-foot log rear up at the top of the releasing pile and plunge down like a falling arrow, striking Franceway square in the center of his back. Men onshore heard

the crack. Franceway folded backward like a sheet of paper, his heels came past his ears and now a butcher's package of meat, he went under the grind. (303-5)

The rogue log that causes the jam and destroys the controlled geometrical flow is “Old Crooked”, a “bent devil”, a vengeful revenant from the *silva daemonium*. Its irregularity first twists and then smashes into splinters the Platonic world of smooth, obedient trees imagined by the calculations of firms like Duke & Sons. As Rackham points out, however much the nineteenth-century proponents of forestry might have yearned for trees that were geometrically obedient to the actuarial laws of extractive industry, trees have their own agenda and their own ways of interacting with humans (16). In *Barkskins*, this other-than-human agenda – this refusal by the forest trees of the measures imposed by humans – is of course experienced most punishingly, not by the wealthy and powerful Dukes, but by the always-struggling, ever-labouring, constantly precarious Mi'kmaq descendants of René Sel. Jinot Sel's own death, for example, results from the accumulated agencies of both the trees he cuts and the industry he works for.

After the log jam incident Jinot leaves the river and finds work as a woodcutter in the Miramichi woods, in present-day New Brunswick. A dry winter, followed by a hot summer, and the men's habit of knocking their pipes out on the ground produce the inevitable result: a savage forest fire fuelled by exploding pine trees. Jinot survives by taking refuge in a pool, but a severe burn on the back of his right leg creates scar tissue that gives him a disabling limp. No longer fit for the forest, he joins forces with a man who makes axes and the two of them build up a business. In time they hatch a scheme to go to New Zealand to cut what Jinot's partner calls “the most perfect trees on the earth”, whose vast trunks have “all the branches clustered conveniently at the top” (Proulx 415). The fantasy of a tree purpose-made for the timber trade has now shifted its focus to a new land and a new species: the kauri, *Agathis australis*.

Jinot's arrival in New Zealand echoes that of his great-great grandfather René Sel in the wild forest of New France 150 years earlier. Dazzled by the lushness and intricacy of a forest “pulsing with life and color”, he feels “he should not be here” (426-7). Coming upon a stand of kauri he touches one massive trunk, “[feels] the tree flinch and [draws] back his hand” (427). The vegetation seems especially alive and hostile: Jinot receives a “burning jolt of pain” from a stinging nettle tree,¹⁸ his feet tangle “in creepers and rough vines”, and his pants

are sliced to ribbons by cutty grass. Despite his lifetime in the woods of Québec “[a] wave of anxiety suddenly washe[s] over him and he [feels] he [has] to get out” (427). This is the first time a Sel character has experienced xylophobia in the novel for 150 years (and about 400 pages) – and it proves prescient.

Proulx describes the method used to bring down the massive kauri by chopping out, within the trunk of the still-standing tree, a space large enough for the axeman to enter it and cut inwards from there. But Jinot’s first attempt to bring down a kauri proves to be his last: having spent three days chopping out a “room” large enough to climb into, he enters the gap in the tree and swings his axe “in a twisted half crouch” (439-440). After an hour his scarred leg is so painful that he needs to rest. But as he creeps awkwardly to the edge of his chopping hole and jumps down, his leg gives way and the bad knee hits the point of his mattock (439-440). The resulting wound leg suppurates and some days later Jinot dies of the infection. His colleagues bury him but a great deluge washes his grave out and takes his body to the sea. This death, more than any other in the novel, shows the compounded inimical agencies of forest and forestry alike: injury from fire combines with injury from blade, and both result from the recalcitrant materiality of trees – from the ways in which their height, girth, weight, and density, their flammability or their growth habits, their sudden splinterings and the direction of their falls, or nothing else but their sheer massy immobility, refuse to comply with the geometrical regime of industrial modernity. Jinot recognises this just as he is defeated by it. In him, the Sels have come as far as they can. There, in the frightening depths of a wild forest on the opposite side of the world from where he was born, Jinot Sel has cut his way into the heartwood of its largest tree, only to receive his death blow from his own axe. Realising this, he leans against the “maimed kauri”, puts “his head against the old tree’s grey bark and whisper[s], ‘You got me this time’” (440). Like Franceway and Blony before him, Jinot ultimately finds himself lethally subject to arboreal patterns not of his own making.

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Comparing *Barkskins* with *The Overstory* shows the shortcomings of Powers’s over-investment in the Romantic fear-on-behalf-of-the-forest topos, and shows what Proulx gains, by contrast, through her attentive and pervasive re-mobilisation of the older, spikier, more jaggedly agonistic fear-of-the-forest topos. The comparison also demonstrates a closely related difference in the two novels’ depiction of human indigeneity and colonialism. In sharp

contrast to *Barkskins*, indigenous humans have no role in *The Overstory* until the very end, when four nameless men appear out of the woods to assist Nick with his wilderness eco-artwork. They are not given names, nor identified with any specific people, yet these men are clearly Noble Savage types: one is described as “a giant man with a raven profile”; another is accompanied by “a dog that must be three-quarters wolf”; they refer to Nick as a “crazy white man” and speak “a language so old it sounds like stones tossed in a brook, like needles in a breeze, humming” (Powers 486, 492, 301). When Nick remarks on his amazement at “how much [the trees] say, when you let them”, one of his new friends chuckles and replies “[w]e’ve been trying to tell you that since 1492” (493). The narrative function of this group of clichéd holy indigenes is to authorise and sacralise Nick’s art project, which takes the form of a structure of fallen trees spelling out the word “STILL”. “It’s good”, says their leader, and he and his confreres chant a blessing in their “very old language” (501-2).¹⁹ This scene, which concludes the novel, foregrounds the mystification that pervades and limits Powers’ depiction of networked agency – his novel’s pervasive dependence on a semi-spiritualised arboreal intelligence that can only be transmitted to certain especially receptive “modern” citizens, while (of course) welling up innately within indigenous people.

In *Barkskins*, by contrast, Proulx’s greater attentiveness to strictly material forms of agentic interaction, and her unrelenting focus on the ongoing forces of colonialism, class hierarchy, and capitalism, allow for a far shaper and clearer picture.²⁰ It is nothing other than Proulx’s mobilisation of the types of nonhuman agency specific to the fear-of-the-forest topos – the particular threats to human minds and flesh posed by the crushing, suffocating, tearing, consuming properties of trees – that gives such horrifying precision and realistic impact to her painstaking history of the violence, injury, and exploitation suffered by the novel’s Mi’kmaq characters, generation after generation, as both they and the forests are exploited by colonial, industrial, and corporate capitalism. In this respect, *Barkskins* provides a striking instance of the kind of “cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces” that Jane Bennett associates with new materialism, and shows how such attentiveness can generate freshly vivid and urgent insight into the historical and political elements still at work in the intersecting exploitation and degradation of humans and environments (Bennett xiv).

Proulx’s novel thereby also, in my view, demonstrates that potential political efficacy of new materialist analysis. Countering the criticism sometimes made of such an approach, that it renders power differences unrecognisable by opening up to consideration as actants all the

different kinds of elements in any given network of agency (trees, chemicals, weather, humans, and so on), Bennett points out that

to acknowledge nonhuman materialities as participants in a political ecology is not to claim that ... participants are all alike. Persons, worms, leaves, bacteria, metals, and hurricanes have different types and degrees of power, just as different persons have different types and degrees of power ... depending on the time, place, composition, and density of the formation. (108-9)

In the same way, *Barkskins* makes abundantly clear that the Dukes have power over both the forests and their workers, including the Sels, through their cumulatively inherited possession of woodlands converted into capital; the trees have more power over successive generations of Sels than over Dukes because of the vulnerable labour practices to which a ruthless capitalism exposes forestry workers. *Barkskins*, read in this fashion, offers a novelistic answer to Bennett's call for "a theory of action ... that more clearly discerns instances of harm to the (affective) bodies of animals, vegetables, minerals, and their ecocultures" (103).

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Notes

- ¹ . Among the most famous examples are the face appearing on a corbel supporting a statue at Bamberg Cathedral, and the one carved into a spandrel in the choir stalls at Poitiers Cathedral. Both of these date from the thirteenth century.
- ² . A very striking instance can be seen under an arch in St. James' Church, Sutton Benger, Wiltshire.
- ³ . As in the case of the fourteenth-century Green Man in the Lady Chapel of St. Mary's Church, Ottery St. Mary, Devon, and the one on a column of St Swithin's Church in Woodbury, Devon.
- ⁴ . Frequent as they are, Green Men motifs comprise only a fraction of the exhilarating and bewildering bestiary of figures carved into the nooks and crannies of medieval churches, which also include animals (sheep, cattle, rats, mice, foxes, apes, birds), monstrous creatures (griffins, wyverns, unicorns, sirens), and human figures depicted in a range of everyday activities (working, dancing, playing games, having sex) (Hardwick).
- ⁵ . Excellent examples of the former include Green Men in the Lady Chapel of Ely Cathedral, and those in St Bartholomew's Church in Much Marcle and in the Church of Saint Mary and Saint David in Kilpeck, both in Herefordshire; examples of the latter can be seen in Fountains Abbey in Yorkshire, in St Mary's Church in Langley Marish, Berkshire, in the Lady Chapel and St Mary's Church in Ottery St Mary, Devon, and perhaps most vividly of all in Rosslyn Chapel in Roslin, Scotland.
- ⁶ . The first component of the word *xylophobia*, or as it is sometimes rendered, *hylophobia*, derives from the Greek *hyle*, meaning "forest". Technically, *xylophobia* and *dendrophobia* are terms for clinically diagnosable irrational fears of forests and trees respectively. In this chapter I use both terms in a far more generalised way, to indicate culturally pervasive rather than psychologically individualised categories of anxiety.
- ⁷ . According to Carmen Concilio, *The Metamorphoses* includes "about fifteen episodes of transformation of women and men into plants" (22). Her essay goes on to discuss examples of such transformations in more recent literature.
- ⁸ . Fiona Stafford suggests that Dante might have been thinking here of the yew (*Taxus baccata*), "which is capable of oozing a deep, red, remarkably bloodlike, sap" (25).
- ⁹ . I am following here a tradition of scholarly interpretation begun by Speirs.
- ¹⁰ . See also Barton's discussion of this incident (60-61).
- ¹¹ . Rackham makes a distinction in the English context between *forest* in the general sense of woodland, and *Forest* with a capital *F*, a term that carried the specific legal sense, following the Norman conquest, of an area (which might or might not be wooded) in which the king or a member of the high nobility "had the right to keep deer, to kill and eat them, and to set up a special legal system ostensibly to protect the deer" (26).

¹² . Although Scot's book was mainly concerned with undertaking a sceptical debunking of beliefs about witches, in so doing he documented many such current beliefs in considerable detail.

¹³ . Historical ecology offers another attractive answer. In *Gossip from the Forest* Sara Maitland notes that Scots pines tend not to grow well from seed under their own canopy, but rather "to the sides of existing stands", which means that "pine woods have a strange habit of wandering" (199). As she remarks, "[o]ver longer periods of time this adds to their atmosphere of mystery" as well as putting "a rather spooky twist on the haunting prophecy" about Birnam Wood in *Macbeth* (199).

¹⁴ . Barton suggests it may be evidence of the impact of the idea of the advancing, hostile forest on the play's original audiences that Simon Forman, who provides the only contemporary account of seeing the play performed at The Globe, in his summary "felt oddly impelled ... to replace Shakespeare's blasted heath at the beginning with a wood, through which he thought he saw Macbeth and Banquo ride ..." (136).

¹⁵ . Scholars have largely focussed on this disposition in their survey of trees in English literature: for example spiritual awe and contemplative replenishment are the dominant tones of Kim Taplin's *Tongues in Trees* (1989), a survey of representations of the Greenwood from the Romantic era to the twentieth century.

¹⁶ . For an account of German "forest-mindedness" (*Waldgesinnung*, *Waldbewußtsein*), which can be traced at least as far back as the Battle of the Teutoberg Forest, and of state-sponsored preservation of Germany's woodlands see Imort.

¹⁷ . Edward Thomas's "Lob" (1915), composed of equal parts English folklore and idealized rural archetype, is one of the best-known representations of this figure. For a discussion of links between the two figures see Milbank (5-7).

¹⁸ . The "stinging nettle tree" with "silvery hairs" that stings Jinot is ongaonga (*Urtica ferox*), which New Zealand botanical historian Robert Vennell describes as "one of the largest stinging nettles in the world, packed with enough poison to kill a fully grown human, and regarded by some as the world's most dangerous stinging plant" (179).

¹⁹ . For a compelling critique of this and other ways in which *The Overstory* repeats aspects of settler colonialism see Nichols.

²⁰ . But see also Fosbury and Tanaka's judicious assessment of both the gains and the limits of the novel's representation of colonialism and indigenous resistance.