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Shakespeare and the Tree Catalogue in Early Modern Literature

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Abstract:

This paper is going to discuss what has been termed as the 'tree catalogue' and its significance for the Renaissance texts. I would attempt to look at Shakespeare's comedies alongside *The Old Arcadia* and *The Faerie Queene* in order to find out the various ways in which catalogue of flora in the early modern period could become a site for articulating complex set of cultural and symbolic values. Through a focused study of the densely figurative language of these texts may help us to rethink the human-centered worldview of Renaissance humanism. While generally forming the backdrop to conflict between human protagonists, nature is rendered as invisible and non-significant. However, as my paper would attempt to show through a discussion of Thomas Hariott's famous travel account how a detailed inventory of trees could often voice the nascent colonial drive of the Renaissance intellectual. At other times, through traditional associations derived from classical mythology, scripture, and popular folklore, trees and forests could underpin the protagonist's psychological and sexual yearnings. Reading certain instances of the tree catalogue in early modern literature reveals how the nature versus culture binary is becoming increasingly unsustainable.

Key Words: Shakespeare, Thomas Hariott, Tree Catalogue, Philip Sidney, Edmund Spenser, Faerie Queene, Old Arcadia, Colonialism

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The poetic device sometimes referred to as a tree catalogue goes back to classical literature. Herbals, often including lists of trees have been shown to exist even in the time of Theophrastus (d.287 BCE), and many examples in Latin circulated during the middle Ages. One of the most stirring examples occurs in Ovid's *Metamorphosis* when Orpheus, standing alone in a clearing strums his lyre and all the nearby trees, tip toeing on their roots, slowly gather within earshot and shade him while he sings (*Metamorphoses*: 78-9). Chaucer memorably features one in *The Parliament of Fowls*. Another tree catalogue adorns the pseudo-Virgilian *Culex*, which was translated by Edmund Spenser - who later inserted one in the opening canto of *The Faerie Queene*. The burgeoning confidence of Humanism in mankind's capacity to survey and comprehend its environment ignited tremendous interest in the genre in the second half of the sixteenth century. In *Doctor Faustus* Marlowe's eponymous hero asks Mephistopheles for a magic book listing "all the plants, herbs, and trees that grow upon the earth" (*Doctor Faustus*, 2.1.624) Interest in the landscape and natural history was a significant element of the Renaissance of knowledge in the Early Modern Age.

In this paper I hope to look more closely at precisely such a reorganization of knowledge about nature and landscape apparent through the various ways lists of trees are deployed by Renaissance writers. Since I cannot hope to present an overview of the field, very selectively, I will discuss a few instances from Early Modern literature that would show the widely divergent ways in which diverse flora of this time entered literary imagination. The first section of the paper will draw attention towards a significant document that was written during Elizabethan colonial expansion and settlement of Virginia in the late sixteenth century. It is Thomas Harriot's *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia*, first published in Latin in 1588. In this particular work we see how the knowledge of nature (especially trees) during the Renaissance was implicated and driven by the fundamental financial aims of colonial expansion. A detailed inventory of trees found in Virginia is produced which highlights the practical, profitable, and scientific ways of acquiring and assembling information whereby the natural history of a region serves an explicitly economic aim, that is, to articulate the attraction of investment and settlement in Virginia for the English traders. In the second part of my paper I would discuss two instances of tree catalogues from Sidney and Spenser in order to show how in poetry, lists of trees could create a new and literary otherworld. Themes associated with medieval romance draws together texts as divergent as Spenser's *Faerie Queene* and Sidney's *Old Arcadia* where ecology if considered in material terms instead of the usual metaphorical sense, can give rise to new ways of looking and reading. The last part of the paper will look at Shakespeare's comedies *The Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You like It* in the light of the above texts in order to show how unconventional is Shakespeare's rewriting of the forest. It is a well known fact that, unlike in Sidney and Spenser, in Shakespeare there are no long lists of trees. In spite of this, the number of plants and flowers that he introduces throughout the course of these two obviously pastoral plays is astonishingly large. Again, unlike his contemporary

Spenser, who would chiefly allude to classical flowers, Shakespeare's scenes - whatever their overt location - are mainly drawn from England of his day. Equally wide is the range of his observation - from "'turfy mountains' and 'the flat meads' from the 'bosky acres', 'peached bowers' to 'leafy orchards'" (*Plant-lore*: 5). In the process, we have in literature some of the most sensual descriptions of nature and landscape that stand diametrically opposite to the factual tone of Hariot's work. The tree catalogue or lists of flora in these diverse forms of writing create seem to arouse widely disparate readerly effects which add layers of meaning to one's understanding of Renaissance of knowledge in the early modern era.

Trees in Thomas Harriot's Mapping of the New World

Thomas Harriot (1560?-1621), explorer, scientist, and author, was the first English compiler and publisher of information relating to the New World. By 1580, Harriot had already been tutoring Sir Walter Raleigh and his sea captains in mathematics and navigation for a few years and was involved in the initial planning of the Roanoke venture, in which Raleigh attempted to establish a colony on an island off the coast of present day North Carolina in 1583. His first-hand experience in England's early attempts at exploring and colonizing the New World came from his participation in the second Roanoke expedition of 1585 which he recorded in his text *A Briefe and True Report of the New Found Land of Virginia* (1588). The primary focus of the text is to drum up investment in the nascent colonial venture of Raleigh on the Roanoke. The first half of the book is in fact nothing more than an inventory of the abundant "Merchantable commodities" of the New World (*Report*: 9). In Harriot's words, the first part of his work would attempt to "enumerate commodities already found here". To emphasize further on the economic relevance of his work, Harriot adds, "A surplus of these can be provided by experienced men for trade and exchange with our own nation of England. It will enrich you, the providers, and those who will deal with you and will greatly profit our own countrymen by supplying them with many things which they have to procure in the past either from the strangers or our enemies." (*Report*: 11) The work compels our attention because Virginia had hitherto existed entirely off consensus and was a conceptual blank which required filling in. Harriot's text was, in short, trying to bring Virginia into mental existence of his audience.

Chapter 3 titled "Of Commodities for building and other necessary uses" turns out to be a list of various trees species native to the Eastern seaboard accompanied by a detailed description of their numerous commercial applications. It should be noted that this section on 'merchantable commodities' begins not with precious metals but with 'grasse silk', a specimen of which, on his return to England, Harriot used to make 'a peace of silke Grogran' that 'was excellent good'. This is followed by silk worms which by planting mulberry trees, Harriot hoped would lead to "as great profite in time to the Virginians as there doth now to the Persians, Turks, Italians, and Spaniards" (*Report*: 33). The theme of commodities derived from plants continues with flax, hemp, pitch, tar, resin, turpentine places particular emphasis on a relatively new commodity to European markets, Sassafras which he says, has most rare virtues in "physick" for the cure of many diseases which is found by experience to be far better and of more value than the wood

which is called Lignum Vitae. The treatment of trees in Harriot's writing clearly shows how writing about nature and trees could be rooted in the entrepreneurial desires of the Elizabethan traders and investors. The impulse to divide, categorize, enumerate the details of landscape in new found lands largely served a utilitarian function whereby the continent was opened to the inquiring (and acquisitive) gaze of the European. Renaissance of knowledge during the early modern time would depend much on production of precisely this kind of knowledge economy. It thus comes as no surprise that Harriot pointedly omits description of flora and fauna which had no commodity value. In the section of trees, Harriot says, for instance that they found many other strange trees in the region "whose names I know not but in the Virginian language" but he declines to "trouble" his readers with "a particular relation of them as they have no necessary uses." (*Report*: 16) The text is overtly ideological in so far as it aspires to serve as colonial propaganda. Yet this does not mean aesthetic is completely absent here. The aesthetic and the ideological are throughout in constant negotiation in Harriot's representation to the point where they even enter into direct conflict when brute reality of colonial ideology intrudes on the projected delights of the newly planted locus amoenus.

Tree Catalogues in the Works of Philip Sidney and Edmund Spenser

In the same decade in which Harriot's book appeared, manuscripts of Sir Philip Sidney's *Old Arcadia* were circulating among the English literati. In the first eclogue, a heartsick courtier seeks refuge in the woods where he directly addresses the trees and suggests how each variety figures forth his inner state:

> And when I meet these trees, in the earth's fair livery clothed,
> Ease I do feel (such ease as falls to one wholly diseased)
> For that I find in them part of my estate represented. --
> Laurel shows what I seek, by the myrrh is showed how I seek it,
> Olive paints me the peace that I must aspire to by conquest:
> Myrtle makes my request, my request is crowned with a willow.
> Cypress promiseth help, but a help where comes no recomfort.
> Sweet juniper saith this, though I burn, yet I burn in sweet fire.
> Yew doth make me bethink what kind of bow the boy holdeth
> Which shoots strongly without any noise and deadly without smart. (*Old Arcadia*: 77)

Sidney's rendition is unprecedented both in its length and the complexity of association that the trees evoke. At first glance, Sidney's tree catalogue appears to participate in the trend set by Harriot in that is substitutes the bewildering, haphazard spectacle of the forest for a tidy, legible

landscape. But if Harriot describes the forest in documentary prose, Sidney decks his in effusive and highly figurative poetry. In pointed contrast to the *Report*'s fixation on the commercial properties of the trees, *The Old Arcadia* painstakingly inventories the various cultural meanings assigned to each species. Many of the associations are traditional derived from scripture, popular folklore, natural histories such as Pliny, or classical theology: the Olive symbolizes peace, the willow the emblem of grief; the yew conjures images of Cupid's bow; and the laurel, sacred to Apollo betokens poetic glory. As it does in the first canto of Spenser's epic, Sidney's tree catalogue epitomizes the timeless realm of chivalric romance. However, in contrast to Spenser, Sidney's version underscores the cultural and psychological value of the forest. Of the seventeen different verities named in this particular excerpt, only three - the pine, oak, and ash - have commercial application. Even these are reinscribed in a discourse that value them primarily for their ability to act as poetic signifiers. Whereas Harriot sees the living pine as a mast, Musidorus, Sidney's protagonist sees the mast itself as a metaphor for the hope that sustains his quest for Pamela's affections.

Likewise, Sidney's shepherd repeatedly deciphers the peculiar natural properties of the various species as evidence of the ubiquity of sexual desire in nature. From the way vine entwines the elm and the palm responds to its pollination by the opposite sex, Musidorus infers the forest also experiences his erotic yearning. By referring to the trees as "the books of a fancy", Sidney wishes to highlight the ways in which woods could indeed reflect and thereby naturalize Petrarchan desire. The catalogue thus serves to dissolve the barrier between human and non-human nature. By appropriating Petrarchan rhetoric to make Cedar the object of the same intense adoration that Sidney later bestows on Stella, the poet's gaze clearly genders the forest as female. Though, as Todd A. Borlik points out, this forest, though gendered female, is by no means passive. "The trees writhe, blush, paint, promise, embrace, rejoice, nod, and salute the reader in a manner that attributes both sensual beauty and a mysterious agency to the natural world" (*Ecocriticism*: 79-80).

Spenser's *Faerie Queene* replicates most closely the terrain of medieval romance, telling a tale of quest and adventure whose protagonist is Arthur himself and whose forest appears to be a highly individual allegorical forest. from the beginning itself, Spenser's poem purports to be an allegory, or in the poet's words "a Continued Allegory, or Darke Conceit" explaining that his intent is to portray through the narrative the twelve "private morall vertues" embodied in Arthur, the ideal prince. Redcrosse and Una begin their adventures by seeking 'couert' from a storm in a 'shadie grove'. This place is defined by its darkness, so overcast it is with leafy canopy. As soon as Redcrosse and Una start concentrating on the following tree catalogue they find themselves lost.

> the Trees so straight, and high,
> The sailing Pine, the Cedar proud, and tall,
> The Vine-prop Elm, the Poplar never dry
> The builder Oak, sole King of Forests all;

The Aspine, good for staves; the Cypress funeral: (*The Faerie Queene*, 1.1.78-9.)

What is interesting here is that instead of showing trees, Spenser shows us also the properties of trees. The properties of individual species of tree seem entirely irrelevant to the overall function of trees in this episode. It may be that Redcrosse and Una find themselves beguiled by a specialization in trees that distracts them from the darkness and obscurity of the trees ' shady covering. It would indeed be "mimetic fallacy" if the reader considers such a list to denote real things. A tree expert would inform us that most of these trees are not native to Ireland - which has been conventionally seen as the imaginative location of the poem. (*Rhetoric and Wonder*: 15) Even a lay person would be hard put to imagine an Olive taking root in such humid climes. Yet a recent critic Bruce McLeod has fallen foul of precisely such a mimetic fallacy, taking this passage to exemplify the 'strategy' of 'classifying resources' in a colony with the aim of "making space enclosed, intelligible and attractive to the coloniser and merchant in the face of numerous risks" (*Geography*: 44) In McLeod's opinion, much like Hariott, by identifying and naming natural resources like trees in this way, Spenser is commodifying them, ascribing to them, and by extension to Ireland, a value in terms of the English economy. In short, through his tree catalogue Spenser seems to offer here a representation of things whose significance is ideologized in terms of English economic and political interests.

But what about Spenser's olive? In his eagerness to locate the colonial impulse of Spenser's text, McLeod overlooks the fact that Spenser is not writing up in verse some real life observations made in the field and jotting them down in his notebook, rather, and as so often, he is working within the discursive paradigm of rhetorical invention - quite a rigid and fixed paradigm to be sure, but one that nevertheless admitted of infinite inflection. Critics have repeatedly marked the evolution of the mixed forest topos toward innovation from Homer, Theocritus, Virgil via Ovid to the lines of Chaucer and Spenser. Spenser’s catalogue of trees here thus does not the denotative function of representing the real world rather it refers the reader to the literary heterocosm stored in the memory. While in this episode, the dark canopy of the trees is supposed to mark the hazard of the natural setting, the Spenserian wood is based predominantly on classical literary tropes and traditions. The ideological function of the forest however, seems to vary from episode to episode.

The Forest in the Imaginative Geography of Shakespeare's Comedies

While the multilayered, allegorical function of the forest in *The Faerie Queene* forms part of the larger allegorical tradition in the Renaissance, we need only turn to Shakespeare to realize that such a usage was by no means obligatory. In both *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *As You Like It*, the forest is the predominant landscape, becoming an essential part of the dramatic structure. Neither play however, approaches allegory; indeed Shakespeare's concern is for

emotions and intrigues of the everyday present world. At the same time, the subject of both the plays is the creation of an alternative and literary world of the imagination. In order to create this world, Shakespeare draws heavily on the presentation of the forest as the landscape of transformation, reworking the themes of romances. The forest is once again the world in which love and madness, exile and idyll, hunt and adventure, meet.

The sense of the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as a locus amoenus is retained as Helena describes "...the wood where often you and I / Upon faint primrose beds were wont to lie" (I.I 214-15) and this is echoed later in Oberon's hauntingly beautiful description of Titania's resting place:

> I know a bank where the wild thyme blows,
> Where oxplips and the noddinf violet grows,
> Quite over-canopied with luscious woodbrine,
> With sweet musk-roses and with eglantine" (II. i 249-52)

Even though this is not a conventional list of trees or plants as we have seen in Sidney and Spenser, Shakespeare deploys a surprisingly wide variety of flora to make alive for the reader the sheer beauty of the forest. No doubt, that a detailed description like this is aimed at invoking the tradition of the idyll - the very landscape that the lovers set out to seek. What is equally interesting is the sheer sensuous impact of Shakespeare's description in contrast to Sidney and Spenser's set pieces. By referring to the variegated topography Shakespeare seems to challenge the dominant mode of viewing nature even in the pastoral tradition - i.e. primarily as a 'picture'. He is clearly guided by the desire to indulge as much the sense of touch, smell and hearing as to gratify the eye. When Titania directs Puck to take care of Bottom, she says:

> Be kind and courteous to this gentleman;
> Hop in his walks, and gambol in his eyes;
> Feed him with Apricocks and dewberries
> With purple Grapes, green figs, and Muberries.

The list of fruits not only posits the overflowing cornucopia of the magical forest, it solicits very unusual sense of taste challenging the primacy of the visual in the pastoral tradition. Till now, as we saw in Sidney and Spenser, in the set piece of tree catalogue, only a limited number of places, attitudes, and feelings were involved. But Shakespeare seems to broaden the ability of the natural landscape to provide intense dramatic energy. The subtle hedonism of plant life in Shakespeare's comedies far surpasses even the most skillfully constructed topos of early modern romance.

Arden, like the forest of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* promises beauty of the locus amoenus, offering an idyllic escape, a golden alternative to society. The Duke presides over a kind of rival court: "They say he is already in the Forest of Arden, and many a merry men with him; and they live like the old Robin Hood of England. They say many young gentlemen flock to him everyday, and fleet the time carelessly, as they did in the golden world." (1.i 114-19). The lines, with the reference to Robin Hood summon up a topos of the greenwood, the "fair forest" of the Robin Hood ballads, in which it is always spring, and where merriment and plenitude dominate. Shakepspeare's use of the topography of forest is unique in terms of the multifarious meanings invested in the imaginary geography. The Forest of Arden is described in a way that makes a precise accounting of its different spaces difficult to produce. While the early modern definition of the forest allows certain degree of ambiguity since the forests were supposed to contain not only trees and undergrowth but pasture as well. Forests were also often woodland spaces set aside for royal hunting, its beasts preserved in order to be destroyed later by the monarch and his retinue. What is striking about the forest in Shakespeare's comedies is that they have their own multifarious geography. Instead of looking at specific types of trees, collection of trees as a whole is the predominant concern here. For some the Forest of Arden resembles the prelapsarian golden world, for others it appears to be a wilderness. However, the characters in the comedies seem to imaginatively and willfully shape the forest in term suited to them. The geography of the Forest of Arden is then a malleable and a symbolic one.

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