

Let us pass in review a few of the trees mentioned by Shakespeare;—he was always at home in the woods, of these he never tires, in the woods he lays some of his most admired and poetic scenes. Spending his youth in the ancient and glorious forest shades of Warwickshire, and returning to them after his London life, no wonder that trees hold a place so distinguished in his imagery. It was under the boughs of immemorial forest monarchs that his imagination found earliest nurture, and no pleasure that we can conceive as concurrent with his declining years can have exceeded the calm delight with which he trod the shaded pathways wherein he had gathered his first impressions of the beauty of nature, and tasted the deep joy of meditation. Not only were the grand old trees a daily spectacle during his boyhood; he was much *alone* with them, as with most other elements of wild nature, and thus peculiarly open to their influence. His walks were in scented meadows, where he would hear no voices but those of the birds, and by the smooth and lilled river, from which he would change to the green recesses of the forests. No other scenes were at his command, save in the village, and even here the prevailing condition would be one of tranquility. But we must not think of Shakespeare's forests from the woodlands of to-day, wheat now grows upon many a broad acre, which, when Shakespeare wrote, was covered with timber, magnificent aboriginal forest, the like of which in England can never be seen again. Many of the trees now so common in England that they seem indigenous—the birch, for example, and the Lombardy poplar had not been introduced, and even the sycamore and the Norway spruce were known only in private pleasure grounds.

Shakespeare's forest consisted of trees such as had given shelter to Caractacus, and the great mass of them would be majestic. Trees such as these must be thought of, when we would understand in what kind of school Shakespeare learned his forest lessons.

Of the many beautiful scenes laid by Shakespeare in the quiet of great woods and forests, the most charming are those in the *Midsummer Night's Dream* and in *As You Like It*. The chief part of the action in each of these matchless pieces lies amid trees; and it is worth noting that it is in these two that Shakespeare most wins upon the heart that delights in peace. Nowhere are we nourished more exquisitely by his humane and dulcet wisdom than when listening to him among the trees which bore "love songs on their barks":—

"Are not these woods
More free from peril than the envious court?
Here feel we but the penalty of Adam,
The seasons' difference, as the icy fang,
And churlish chiding of the winter's wind,
Which when it bites and blows upon my body,

"Even till I shrink with cold, I smile, and say
"This is no flattery; these are counsellors
"That feelingly persuade me what I am,
"Sweet are the uses of adversity,
"Which, like the toad, ugly and venomous,
"Wears yet a precious jewel in his head,
"And this our life, exempt from public haunt,
"Finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks,
"Sermons in stones, and good in everything."

What a master of our language! let me ask you to note the charming alliteration in the two last lines:—

"Tongues—trees; Books—brooks; Sermons—stones."

Of trees, Shakespeare mentions the oak, willow, yew, aspen, linden, hawthorn, box, holly, birch, ash, elm, elder and the sycamore. Every country has its "forest monarch," in England this proud title is rightfully accorded to the oak, which in associations as well as figures and attributes owns no rival. Many circumstances contribute to this supremacy. The total number of references to the oak by Shakespeare appears to be thirty-one,—excluding the repetitions in the *Merry Wives of Windsor*, twenty-four. No other tree is mentioned so often, and thus, upon his own showing, it was his favourite; though we must not forget that the oak has in all ages held a front place in metaphor, the various names under which it appears denoting several species not British.

Shakespeare refers frequently to the prodigious strength and solidity of the oak; in *Julius Caesar* we have

"I have seen tempests when the scolding winds
Have rived the knotty oaks."

In "Measure for Measure":—

"Merciful heavens!
"Thou rather, with thy sharp and sulphurous bolt,
"Split'st the unwedgeable and gnarled oak,
"Than the soft myrtle."

Acorns, the fruit of the oak, are mentioned upon half-dozen occasions; "I found him," says Celia, "under a tree like a dropped acorn,"—Rosalind is ready for her, and replies:—

"It may well be called Jove's tree, when it drops forth such fruit."

Although so much historical and legendary lore have clustered round the oak, yet scarcely any mention is made of this by Shakespeare. The legend of *Herne the Hunter*, which seems to have been current at Windsor, is several times alluded to in the *"Merry Wives of Windsor"*.

Mrs. Page says:—

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