

## Trees, Woods and Literature, 17

*Thus happy in their change of life,  
 Were several years the man and wife,  
 When on a day, which proved their last,  
 Discoursing o'er old stories past,  
 They went by chance, amidst their talk,  
 To the churchyard, to fetch a walk;  
 When Baucis hastily cried out;  
 "My dear, I see your forehead sprout":  
 "Sprout", quoth the man, "what's this you tell us?  
 I hope you don't believe me jealous:  
 But yet, methinks, I feel it true;  
 And really, yours is budding too –  
 Nay, – now I cannot stir my foot:  
 It feels as if 'twere taking root."*

*Description would but tire my muse:  
 In short they both were turned to yews.  
 Old good-man Dobson of the Green  
 Remembers he the trees has seen;  
 And goes with folks to shew the sight:  
 On Sundays after evening prayer,  
 He gathers all the parish there;  
 Points out the place where either yew;  
 Here Baucis, there Philemon grew.  
 Till once a parson of our town,  
 To mend his barn, cut Baucis down;  
 At which, 'tis hard to be believed,  
 How much the other tree was grieved,  
 Grew scrubby, died a-top, was stunted:  
 So, the next parson stubbed and burnt it.*

From *Baucis and Philemon* (1709), by Jonathan Swift.

The full title refers us to Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. The following is the entry under Baucis in Lempriere's *Classical Dictionary* (11th Edition, 1820): *An old woman of Phrygia, who with her husband Philemon, lived in a small cottage, in a penurious manner, when Jupiter and Mercury travelled in disguise over Asia. The gods came to the cottage, where they received the*

*best things it afforded; and Jupiter was so pleased with their hospitality, that he metamorphosed their dwelling into a magnificent temple, of which Baucis and her husband were made priests. After they had lived happy to an extreme old age, they died both at the same hour, according to their request to Jupiter, that one might not have the sorrow of following the other to the grave. Their bodies were changed into trees before the doors of the temple.*

Phrygia is part of present-day Turkey. Swift transposes the tale to Kent, in England; the gods become "two brother-hermits, saints by trade"; the temple a church with the old chimney growing into a steeple, and, as is proper to a churchyard, the trees become yews.

Jonathan Swift is best known as the author of *Gulliver's Travels*, an amusing but serious and impressive work, best read in a full and scholarly edition. He himself said that the book "will wonderfully mend the world".

Swift was born in Dublin in 1667. The identity of his father has been much discussed. Alternatives are a Dublin court clerk of English midlands origin (with one branch claiming descent from "Erick the Forester") i.e. Swift, or else one or other generation of a line of influential English statesmen and diplomats, i.e. Temple.

After education in Kilkenny and Trinity College, Dublin, he took orders in the Church of Ireland and served in Antrim and Meath before becoming embroiled in English politics as a pamphleteer in London. Finally, although expecting a mitre, he settled for appointment as Dean of St. Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin.

Swift's personal life has aroused much interest and speculation. He was closely involved with two women: Esther Johnston "Stella" whom he may have secretly married and who may have been his close relative, and Hester Vanhomrigh "Vanessa" who may have been his mistress.

He died in 1745 and is buried in St. Patrick's Cathedral, under his own famous epitaph, equally famously translated by W. B. Yeats:

*Swift has sailed into his rest;  
Savage indignation there  
Cannot lacerate his breast.  
Imitate him if you dare,  
World-besotted traveller; he  
Served human liberty.*

(Literature consulted: list available on request.)

(Selection and note by Wood-Kerne)