Chapter Four

As You Like It
And the “Warwickshire” of Shakespeare’s Mind

Until now, the chapters of this volume have treated certain late Elizabethan topics of interest in As You Like It that possess meanings accessible to a literate playgoer. I have called such generally accessible meanings public, for want of a better term. In this and the following chapter, I describe some private meanings of the play—meanings, that is to say, referring to a hypothesized private life of the late Elizabethan dramatist William Shakespeare and sometimes not accessible to the majority of literate playgoers. Much of this chapter is admittedly speculative, and I hereby give my reader notice of that fact. As You Like It is a pastoral comedy, and pastoral for Shakespeare and his contemporaries had become a literary mode known for the usually veiled depiction of autobiographical events in the author’s life, notably his or her artistic life. Paul Alpers in his definitive What is Pastoral? provides the best account of how this happened, by explaining in depth first the third-century BC Sicilian poet Theocritus’s self-representation in his Idylls, and then Virgil’s in his Eclogues.1 Typically, for Elizabethan readers, a character such as Colin Clout in Spenser’s collection of pastoral eclogues titled The Shepheardes Calender (1579) or Philisides in Sir Philip Sidney’s highly popular pastoral romance, The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia (1593), would act out aspects of the author’s career, sometimes including its birth and usually in interaction with other characters adumbrating individuals important in the author’s life. Regarding the autobiographical dimension of early modern English literary pastoral, James Bednarz notes that [the standard technique of self-portraiture in the Renaissance was to follow [Iacobo] Sannazaro’s example in Arcadia [1501] by depicting oneself as a mournful lover, often the victim of cross-wooing. Indeed, the attraction of pastoral self-reference was so strong that even Anthony Munday became ‘shepherd Tonie’ in England’s Helicon (1600). What is more, the great English examples—Philisides in the Arcadia and Colin Clout in The

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Shepherd’s Calendar and Book Six of The Fairy Queen—involved cameo appearances hidden in tangled plots. These characters were planted in self-reflexive episodes for readers in the know who were meant to be surprised by the sudden emergence of truth in feigning.2

In The Countess of Pembroke’s Arcadia, Philisides, the anagram of Philip Sidney’s name, focuses and names a philos—a philosophical wisdom—emerging from this character.

That the forest of Ardennes in Lodge’s Rosalynde, a territory straddling the boundaries of modern France, Belgium, and Luxembourg, becomes the forest of Arden in Shakespeare’s As You Like It (this being, in fact, the name of his mother’s family) is enough to suggest that this pastoral location provides an English Midlands setting for the playwright’s introduction of an alter ego and for the exploration of certain issues of importance in Shakespeare’s past and present life. Shakespeare’s dramatic method in this case potentially involves nostalgia, of what I call a “Warwickshire of the mind” informing the pastoral art of the forest of Arden in As You Like It. Understanding nostalgia involves a grasp of the distance nostalgia bridges—the distance, in this case, between London and the felt presence of Shakespeare’s “native country” in his late Elizabethan pastoral comedy. That distance, the length that Rosalind could be said to travel from the treacherous court of Duke Frederick to the forest of Arden, was considerable.

“He was wont to go to his native country once a year,” the seventeenth-century biographer John Aubrey pronounced concerning the playwright Shakespeare’s relationship with his native place, the Midlands town Stratford-upon-Avon.3 No one can gauge the accuracy of the gossipy Aubrey’s anecdotes; but considered in light of a sixteenth-century English traveler’s difficulty in negotiating the nearly one-hundred miles between Shakespeare’s rural home and the largest city of early modern Europe, Aubrey’s claim may very well be true. Russell Fraser has memorably taken us hand-in-hand with Shakespeare on an imaginative Elizabethan journey from Stratford over the muddy, sometimes flooded, highwayman-threatened roads that Shakespeare probably took to Newgate.4 This trip one-way took at least three or four days, sometimes more—especially if the traveler, unable to hire horses between inns, had to walk. Yet, as Fraser remarks, “at three pence a mile [riding a horse probably] wasn’t an option available to the young [as opposed to the prosperous] Shakespeare.”5 In any case, walking was the standard method of travel for London players on provincial tour. The journey most likely took Shakespeare initially east through Compton Wynyates to Banbury, past “stone farmhouses, grayish brown . . . dark against the fields”6—poor pelting villages—through Buckinghamshire and through the hamlet of Grendon Underwood. John Aubrey, getting his Shakespeare plays wrong, proclaimed that “the humour of the constable in A Midsummer Night’s Dream [Much