

An Introduction to Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: The Special Cluster ¹

Whenever the word “ecocriticism” pops up among Shakespeareans, it invariably raises initial interest which quickly (and rightly) fades when it becomes clear that ecocriticism, with Shakespeare at least, has largely failed to distinguish itself from the volumes of very clearly non-ecocritical work that has already been done with Shakespeare. The comment Lawrence Buell makes that “ecocriticism still lacks a paradigm-inaugurating statement like Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (for colonial discourse studies) or Stephen Greenblatt’s *Renaissance Self-Fashioning* (for new historicism)” (“Letter” 1091) applies with particular relevance for Shakespearean studies. The bar is already pretty high for ecocriticism: as Michael P. Cohen explains, “If you want to be an ecocritic, be prepared to explain what you do and be criticized, if not satirized.” The bar is even higher for ecocritical Shakespeares. Indeed, as Frederick Waage observes in his essay which follows, “‘ecocritics’ seem to be held to higher standards than ‘other kinds of theorists’ in defining both their approach and its applicability to literature of the [early modern] period.” The difficulties arise from both sides: Shakespeare studies and ecocriticism.

To many Shakespeareans, ecocriticism seems not to be new and instead to be like old thematicism and nature studies. Many Shakespeareans want to know what ecocriticism can offer, either methodologically or theoretically, that will shed new light and meaning on their field of study: while thematic discussions of nature in contemporary American environmental writers may very well be new (many of the writers themselves being new!), it’s old hat for Shakespeare. The demands of

Shakespeareans seem reasonable, if we assume that ecocriticism is not simply the study of Nature or natural things in literature, that it is any theory committed to effecting change by analyzing the function—thematic, artistic, social, historical, ideological, theoretical, or otherwise—of the natural environment (or aspects of it) represented in documents (literary or other) that contribute to material practices in material worlds. Doing ecocritical Shakespeares represents a tall order, and it probably explains why ecocriticism hasn't been applied to Shakespeare yet, with a few exceptions. When applied to Shakespeare, "ecocriticism," unlike image-cluster-counting, is hard work, and Shakespeareans want to know what "ecocritical" Shakespeares might look like, in contrast to what thematic readings of Nature in Shakespeare look like.

To many ecocritics, meanwhile, twentieth- and twenty-first century environmental writers are often explicitly political and direct in their comments about Nature and, therefore, seem to have required less of the kinds of explication that Shakespeare and other non-environmental writers require, writers who clearly are not writing in an age of or in response to environmental crises in the ways that Silko or Abbey (or even Thoreau) are. The explicitly activist position of many contemporary nature writers (and of ecocriticism as an approach to such writers) seems to have led ecocriticism decidedly away from self-theorizing at times and more toward what it sees as praxis, activism, and the translating of ideas into effect (though what "activism" or "praxis" exactly means is one of the problems—and always has been—for progressive academics). As ecocritics, most of us want to have an effect, share Buell's fear of "mesmerization by literary theory" (*The Environmental Imagination* 111), and feel that it should be possible to do ecocriticism (as John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington suggest) "without spinning off into obscurantism or idiosyncrasy" (xv). This has led some of us to wonder, though, as Michael Cohen does, "What if ecocritical thinking is fuzzy?" The combination of demands from Shakespeareans for an ecocritical paradigm and of ecocriticism's reluctance to go places that threaten to restrict its cherished principles of inclusivity and praxis have, in effect, worked very much counter to precisely both principles: Shakespeare has remained excluded, and, as we fumble to define ourselves, it is difficult to avoid the feelings of "ecodespair" Scott Slovic mentions in his "Foreword" to *The Greening of Literary Scholarship*.

Even on such basic matters as ecocriticism's core approach, we remain irritatingly unable to agree, let alone save any whales or trees or great apes. Sharon O'Dair summarizes her take on the situation nicely below arguing that "The most significant theoretical and practical question facing contemporary ecocriticism, as well as contemporary

environmentalism, is whether the movement should be, at base, eco-centric or anthropocentric: should protection of the environment be undertaken as a good in and of itself or should it be undertaken because of its use to humanity?" Certainly this is a question that has occupied a considerable amount of critical space and energy.

In the 2003 ASLE conference in Boston, Leo Marx and Lawrence Buell, on the second day of the conference, squared off against each other in a debate that in many ways characterizes the current state of ecocriticism in the West. Putting aside (for a moment) all the etiquette, gesturing, and masculine chivalry that made the whole thing seem (with all due respect) more a performance than an authentic debate about ideas, the ostensible base of the plenary was to get to the anthropocentric/ecocentric binary that seems to constitute the central debate about ecocriticism's undefined character. Marx contended that we can't help confronting it and aligned himself with the anthropocentric side by maintaining that people are "at the center of environmental thinking" and represent "the most responsible agent of environmental devastation"; Buell, meanwhile, essentially took the opposite position.

Professor Marx used some provocative phrases—"capacity to change," "effective environmental action," "successful environmental movement," asked "is it enough," and commented in the townhall section that "my question is whether changing minds is enough." I, for one, don't think it is, and I also think that the kinds of phrases and questions Marx presented get at what should be the most basic, most central, most fundamental question: not so much a question of an eco-centric/anthropocentric binary as of effectiveness. Everyone laughed nervously when Professor Buell, at the height of academic boys club manners, said "I'm sure there's no one here" for professional advancement. I'm not so sure (nor quite so polite or diplomatic). The reality is that many people, despite Buell's comments, are, in fact, "here" for professional advancement. No one would reject having a successful *book, or making associate, full, or distinguished professor, and there's probably no shame in that (and if there is, then it's not for me to judge, and, anyway, we're perhaps all guilty of it)*. It seems to me that rather than lying about it, rather than pretending to some sort of a professional ecological sainthood, we ought rather to acknowledge and not deny the realities of our profession because to fail to do so will mean a failure to recognize that some of us are not ecocritics at all, that some of us may, in fact, be "here" purely because it secures some form of professional advancement. And that can't be good for ecocriticism.

There seem to be at least two other questions that the Marx/Buell performance brought out: firstly, how far can we go from anthropocentric models and retain both the analytical and transformative poten-

tials of ecocriticism? After all, surely humanity is central to effective environmental action and transformative analyses. The other question is equally compelling: if we don't put Nature front and center, doesn't ecocriticism reiterate the very arrogance it critiques—namely, of humanity having dominion over everything? And, of course, the next question should probably be about how to get rid of the binary itself.

Wherever we end up going with ecocritical theory, if we are to see it applied to Shakespeare, we will need to present a case compelling enough to persuade Shakespearians of the usefulness of ecocriticism and to convince ecocritics that the growth and development of ecocriticism itself stands to gain substantially from readings of Shakespeare.

However we deal it, ecocriticism needs some sort of the paradigm-inaugurating stuff Buell sees it as lacking ... or, at least, a vocabulary. There is, for instance, no word comparable to "misogyny" or "homophobia" or "Anti-Semitism" or "racism" in ecocritical theory, though there certainly is irrational and groundless hatred of the natural world and aspects of it. If we use a term such as "ecophobia," we are able to expand on and historicize the concept and practices it labels.

In clinical psychology, the term "ecophobia" is used to designate an irrational fear of home. In ecocriticism, the term is independent of and in no way derived from the manner in which it is used in clinical psychology and psychiatry. Briefly, "ecophobia" is an irrational (often hysterical) and groundless hatred of the natural world, or aspects of it. Such fear of the agency of Nature plays out in many spheres. The personal hygiene industry relies on it, since capital-driven notions about personal cleanliness assign us preference for perfumes (for some more than others) over natural bodily odors; the cosmetic industry (in its passion for covering up Nature's "flaws" and "blemishes") uses it; beauticians and barbers (in their military passion for cutting back natural growths) are sustained by it; city sanitation boards display it in their demands that residents keep grass short to prevent the introduction of "vermin" and "pests" into urban areas; landscaped gardens, trimmed poodles in women's handbags on the Seoul subway system—anything that amputates or seeks to amputate the agency of Nature and to assert a human order on a system that follows different orders is, in essence, ecophobic. Ecophobia is a subtle thing that takes many forms.

Ecophobia is all about fear of a loss of agency and control to Nature. It is ecophobia that sets the Old Testament God (within the first twenty-six verses of *Genesis*) declaring that "man" (anatomically and generically, at this point) is to have dominion over everything. It is ecophobia that allows "man" unquestioned use of land and animals. And it is ecophobia that posits Nature as the scapegoat for social problems (such as

over-crowding and the diseases that such over-crowding encourages). Control of the natural environment, understood as a god-given right in Western culture, seems to imply ecophobia, just as the use of African slaves implies racism. Similarly, misogyny is to rape as ecophobia is to environmental looting and plundering.² Like racism and misogyny, with which it is often allied, ecophobia is about power.

Ecophobia doesn't begin with the Old Testament, however, even though we see there one of its most famous articulations. It probably has roots that reach back to the evolution of the opposable thumb, which enabled hominids to make tools and to conscript "wheat, barley, peas, lentils, donkeys, sheep, pigs, and goats about 9,000 years ago" (Crosby 21). By the time of Shakespeare, obviously, there had been huge changes in humanity's relationship with the natural world, and, without a doubt, the crossing of the seas in the fifteenth century and the subsequent empire-building that developed produced the most dramatic of those historical changes up to that point.

Imperialism indirectly offered the first big push to control of the natural environment since the Neolithic Revolution. The world was becoming smaller, mappable, predictable, and less diversified. With the colonists came disease, extinctions, homogenization, and profound changes in humanity's control of the world. The romanticization of Nature as a space of simplicity, innocence, and peace that Raymond Williams notes as characteristic of "the country" no more slowed the progress of ecophobia than did the notion of "the Noble Savage" slow the genocide of colonized peoples.

Not far behind the crossing of the seas and the colonialism that developed forthwith was, of course, the Industrial Revolution. Here, the control of Nature was consolidated. Among the many paradigmatic shifts and lurches occasioned by the Industrial Revolution was the redefinition of Nature from participative subject and organism in an organic community to the status of pure object, a machine that ideally could be intimately and infinitely controlled and forced to spit out products in the service of an increasingly utilitarian capitalist economy.

Though we can always find diggers and levellers and pockets of resistance that challenge the ecophobic hegemony of early modern England, history hasn't been kind to green thinkers and revisionists. The antinomies between the social and the ecological have almost invariably resulted in formidable triumphs of humanity over the rest of the natural world.

Printed on stone high above the books and heads of people in the Social Science Reading Room at the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., one can read that "the earth belongs always to the living generation. They may manage it then and what proceeds from it as

they please during their usufruct." Such is, the writing in stone continues, one of the cornerstones of human freedom. Yet, we all know the environmental horrors to which such a principle has lead. We have all heard the apocalyptic prophets arguing for our doom and the scientists arguing for our salvation. We have all heard the debates about our changing weather, our increasingly tainted food, air, and water, and our diminishing resources. We know the arguments, but nothing seems to be changing in the way we relate with the natural world. Things only seem to be getting worse. Why this is so has to do with how we understand our most cherished ideals.

Critiquing Western environmental ethics in some ways means critiquing the imagined bases of hard-won freedom and democracy. It means critiquing the parameters of freedom and the parameters of democracy—in effect, critiquing the imagined essences of each and at times perhaps even engaging in a balancing act between civil liberties on the one hand and environmental respect on the other. In some ways, it means abandoning certain concepts of personal rights, and in others, it means extending them to the nonhuman world. It means envisioning the “democracy extended to things” (12; 142) Bruno Latour speaks of. It means taking things personally and making personal changes. And it means making connections.

Studying how someone such as Shakespeare connects with the present environmental crises that we daily breathe and smell and eat and taste, the difficulties and tragedies we live through and cause, does several things. It forces us to imagine the literature and the theory through new perspectives, to examine complementary systems of thought, and to develop a vocabulary for concepts that have no names. It also allows us to define more fully the goals, methodologies, and terms of ecocriticism.

The rough parameters this “Special Cluster” followed were posed as a series of questions to the contributing authors in the following way:

What makes your argument ECOCRITICAL?

What does ecocriticism have to offer Shakespeare that differentiates it from purely thematic readings of nature?

Can ecocriticism really shed new light on Shakespeare? How?

Is there anything methodologically special about ecocritical readings of Shakespeare?

Each of the essays below tackles the questions in its own way with surprisingly different results, the papers being substantially and methodologically different from each other.

Breyan Strickler seeks connections in *Othello* among race, gender, and environment and argues that representations of Desdemona as innocent and victimized are frustrating when we read her as a powerful woman, rushing away from the safety of her father's house to the hostility and chaos of the battlefield while also longing for adventures like those that fill Othello's past. Reading Desdemona in this way, Strickler maintains, we are compelled to re-read her femininity through a perspective that is both post-colonial and ecocritical. Strickler uses these perspectives to navigate among the assumptions behind the gendering of both the city of Venice and the wilderness and looks at how the gendering process is linked to the rhetoric of war and contamination. In these analyses, we also find that typical readings of Othello's demise and redemption are not at issue; rather, the process of his character's development can be identified as a product of place and the cultural tendency of early moderns to demonize the wilderness. As an ecocritical perspective suggests, the colonizing forces of the *process* of the Venetian rhetoric corrupts other cultural signifiers like gender.

Frederick Waage takes quite a different approach to making an ecocritical reading of Shakespeare. Waage begins "Shakespeare Unearth'd" below by noting that ecocritical studies of Early Modern writers, particularly Shakespeare, are fairly few in number and that in many cases, ecocriticism exists only as an appendage to studies with related, but different, critical agendas. Waage suggests that one possible way of approaching pre-modern writers ecocritically, while avoiding inhibitive perils such as anachronism, is by centering on a "topic"—a particular natural phenomenon. As a primal entity in this regard, Waage maintains, earth itself can be discussed ecocritically as it manifests itself in Shakespeare's plays. Moreover, what we know of the playwright's life on the earth gives evidence of his own lifelong connections with land, earth, and soil. Earth as a physical substance, Waage shows, is staged or verbally evoked throughout Shakespeare's works, and more expansively as the site of husbandry. Earth is also evoked as figurative of the human body and the body's fate on, or in, it. Most richly, in *Timon of Athens*, earth centers an ideological questioning of the human connection with nature. Timon's "questionings about the human place in nature," Waage concludes, "are surely basic to Shakespeare's thinking." They are twinned with his consciousness of the earth's sheer physical presence."

Taking another play and another approach, Sharon O'Dair seeks to address the unbalance of the last quarter century of *The Tempest*

criticism, which has been almost uniformly about colonialism in the Americas. In “*The Tempest as Tempest: Does Paul Mazursky ‘Green’ William Shakespeare?*”, O’Dair discusses Mazursky’s 1982 release of *Tempest*, a film that Americanizes Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in a different way—namely, by setting the mid-life crisis of an upper-middle class New York professional on a Greek Island. At the time, critics panned Mazursky’s effort, but in recent years several critics have tried to recuperate the film for serious attention. O’Dair continues this recuperation by asking ecocritical questions: does Mazursky “green” Shakespeare? And if so, how does a green Shakespeare rework Shakespearean pastoral? And further, how does a green Shakespeare contribute to current debates about environmentalism?

These essays are compelling and original, both as ecocriticism and as Shakespearean scholarship. It is indeed an exciting time for the meeting of Shakespeare and ecocriticism. In addition to this “Special Cluster” that *ISLE* is running, Routledge is publishing a book this year by Gabriel Egan entitled *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism*, *AUMLA (The Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature)* has just published an article by Simon Estok entitled “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of ‘Home’ and ‘Power’ in *King Lear*,” there is a seminar at the 2005 meeting of the British Shakespeare Association entitled “Shakespeare and ecology” (led by Gabriel Egan), and there is a panel session entitled “Ecocriticism and the World of Shakespeare” (led by Simon Estok) at the International Shakespeare Association’s 8th International World Shakespeare Congress, to be held in Brisbane in July 2006.

Seeing links in ecocritically unfamiliar but profoundly influential literature (such as Shakespeare’s) is an important beginning for an activist, ecocritical scholarship. However, it is only a beginning: the real work lies ahead.

NOTES

1. Portions of this essay appear in an earlier form in “Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of ‘Home’ and ‘Power’ in *King Lear*.”

2. Rape, as an example of misogyny, has more to do with violence than sexuality. Sexualization of landscapes of the sort we see at the time of Shakespeare in the visual art of Jan van der Straet and Theodor de Bry, for instance, similarly suggests that it is more the visualizing of power and indifference than the allegorizing sexuality or desire that compelled the eroticism of the art. Describing much later experiences of the early American landscape, Annette Kolodny argues that such experiences are variously expressed through an entire range of images, each of which details one of the many elements of

that experience, including eroticism, penetration, raping, embrace, enclosure, and nurture, to cite only a few (150).

In theory, there are links between women and the land; in practice, men rape and butcher women and tear up the land. A culture that sanctions commodification of women as environmental and spatial commodities certainly does not balk at victimizing women in the manner that it does the natural world.

REFERENCES

- Buell, Lawrence. A Letter. *PMLA* 114.5 (October 1999): 1090-92.
- . *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture*. Cambridge, MA and London, England: Harvard UP, 1995.
- Cohen, Michael P. "Blues in the Green: Ecocriticism Under Critique." *Environmental History* Vol. 9, no.1 (January 2004). 03 September 2004. <<http://www.historycooperative.org/journals/eh/9.1/cohen.html>>.
- Crosby, Alfred W. *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900-1900*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1986.
- Estok, Simon C. "Shakespeare and Ecocriticism: An Analysis of 'Home' and 'Power' in *King Lear*." *AUMLA: The Journal of the Australasian Universities Language and Literature* 103 (May 2005).
- Kolodny, Annette. *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters*. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1975.
- Latour, Bruno. *We Have Never Been Modern*. Trans. Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1993.
- Slovic, Scott. "Foreword." *The Greening of Literary Scholarship: Literature, Theory, and the Environment*. Ed. Steven Rosendale. Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2002. vii-xi.
- Tallmadge, John and Henry Harrington. "Introduction." *Reading Under the Sign of Nature: New Essays in Ecocriticism*. Ed. John Tallmadge and Henry Harrington. Salt Lake City: U of Utah P, 2000. ix-xv.
- Williams, Raymond. *The Country and the City*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975.

