

Shakespearean Texts and Eco-criticism

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Where does Shakespeare live?



This royal throne of kings, this sceptred isle,
This earth of majesty, this seat of Mars,
This other Eden, demi-paradise,
This fortress built by Nature for herself
Against infection and the hand of war,
This happy breed of men, this little world,
This precious stone set in the silver sea,
Which serves it in the office of a wall
Or as a moat defensive to a house,
Against the envy of less happier lands,--
This blessed plot, this earth, this realm, this
England.

-Richard II

Where do I live?



My Home's In Montana
I wear a bandana
My spurs are silver gray
When riding the ranges
My luck never changes
With foot in the stirrup I'll gallop away
Yip-ee-tie, yip-ee-tie-yeh!
Yip-ee-tie, yip-ee-tie-oh!
With foot in the stirrup I'll gallop away
When valleys are dusty
My pony is trusty
He lopes through the blizzard
The snow in his ears
The cattle may scatter
But what does it matter
My rope is a halter for pig-headed steers

An Elizabethan Globe in modern-day London



Does Shakespeare belong left, or right?





Shakespearean Criticism in the past 3 decades

New Historicism: focus on micro-history and power systems; resists aesthetic claims for the “greatness” of literature

- **Feminism, queer studies, race theory:** methods of criticism that read texts as participating in or reflecting the marginalization or subjugation of certain people
- **Postcolonial criticism:** focuses on the cultural legacy of colonialism and imperialism, specifically the human consequences of the control and exploitation of colonized people.
- **Presentism:** criticism that embraces what literature means to us here and now, without an attempt to limit meaning to historical period

What is Eco-criticism?

An interpretation of literature that examines ecological issues within the text and its time period, while also using these insights to illuminate present-day environmental issues.

“Ecocritical Shakespeare uses the playwright’s exceptional creativity and cultural reach to question practices and attitudes that have degraded organic life and environments, and to foster debate about sustainability, conservation, biodiversity, animal welfare, and other ecological goals in personal and public life.” –Randall Martin

Key Terms

Ecology: a branch of biology dealing with the inter-connectedness of all life forms

Ecosystem: a biological community of interacting organisms and their physical environment

Biodiversity: variability among living organisms from all sources, including terrestrial, marine, and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part

Biocentrism: affirming the value of all natural life, not privileging human demands over the interests of other species

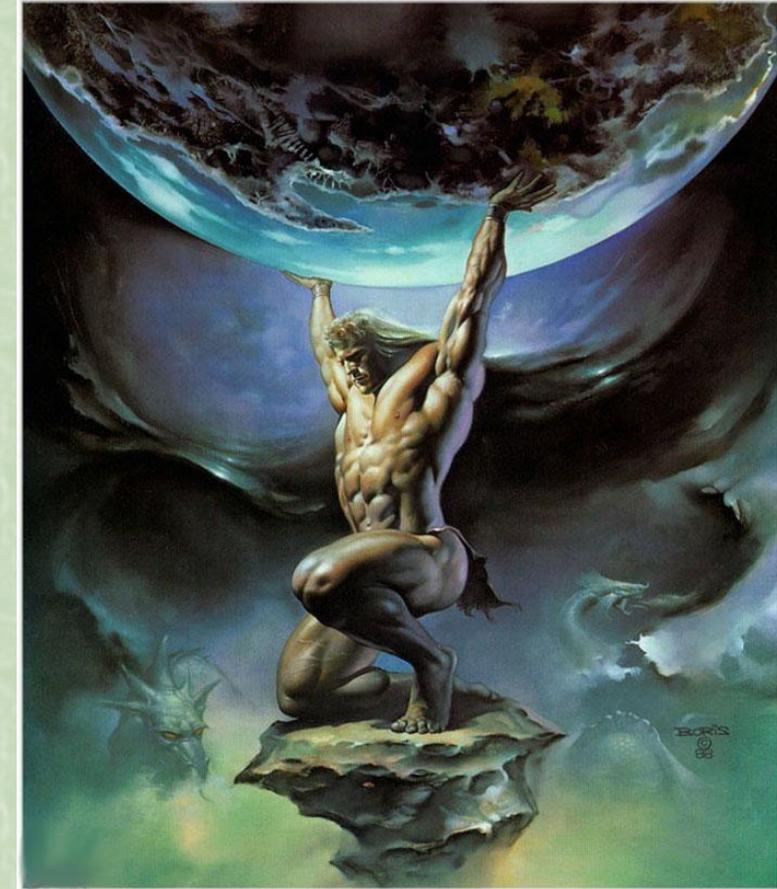
As You Like It: The Ethics of Hunting

- **Duke.** Come, shall we go and kill us venison?
And yet it irks me the poor dappled fools,
Being native burghers of this desert city,
Should, in their own confines, with forked heads
Have their round haunches gor'd.
- **First Lord.** Indeed, my lord,
The melancholy Jaques grieves at that;
And, in that kind, swears you do more usurp
Than doth your brother that hath banish'd you.
To-day my Lord of Amiens and myself
Did steal behind him as he lay along
Under an oak whose antique root peeps out
Upon the brook that brawls along this wood!
To the which place a poor sequest' red stag,
That from the hunter's aim had ta'en a hurt,
Did come to languish; and, indeed, my lord,
The wretched animal heav'd forth such groans
That their discharge did stretch his leathern coat
Almost to bursting; and the big round tears
Cours'd one another down his innocent nose
In piteous chase; and thus the hairy fool,
Much marked of the melancholy Jaques,
Stood on th' extremest verge of the swift brook,
Augmenting it with tears.



History of environmentalism

- Darwin and 19th-century evolutionary biology
- Aldo Leopold (1949): argues for “the land ethic”, giving rights to mountains, rivers, animals
- Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*, 1962): criticized agricultural and industrial pollution
- The Anthropocene: The period when human activities began fundamentally to reshape the earth’s ecosystem



Why Literature?



- The power of science vs. the shared experience of culture
- Nature, wilderness, even the idea of “the human” are constructions, built of words and of fictions
- Thinking through and with fiction gives us the tools necessary to address problems with creative and flexible minds, informed by history, aesthetics, and the imaginative force of stories.

Environmental concerns in Shakespeare's England

- Degradation of forests for buildings, glass, iron foundries, agricultural land
- No safe drinking water
- Food shortages
- Air pollution and acid rain from coal fires



The Tempest

- From postcolonial to ecological readings
- Subjugation of people > subjugation of land



“This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou takest from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strokedst me and madest much of me, wouldst
give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I loved thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile:
Cursed be I that did so! All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king: and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' the island.” -Caliban

Aimé Césaire, *Une Tempête* (1969)

I respect the earth, because I know that Sycorax is alive.

Sycorax. Mother.

Serpent, rain, lightning.

And I see thee everywhere!

In the eye of the stagnant pool which stares back at me,
through the rushes,

in the gesture made by twisted root and its awaiting thrust.

In the night, the all-seeing blinded night,
the nostril-less all-smelling night!



King Lear

- “Nature” in 1606: the way people act, natural law, astrology, kindness, the outdoor elements
- Human-animal relationships

“Why, thou wert better in thy grave than to answer with thy uncover'd body this extremity of the skies. Is man no more than this? Consider him well. Thou ow'st the worm no silk, the beast no hide, the sheep no wool, the cat no perfume. Ha! Here's three on's are sophisticated! Thou art the thing itself; unaccommodated man is no more but such a poor, bare, forked animal as thou art. Off, off, you lendings! Come, unbutton here.” -King Lear

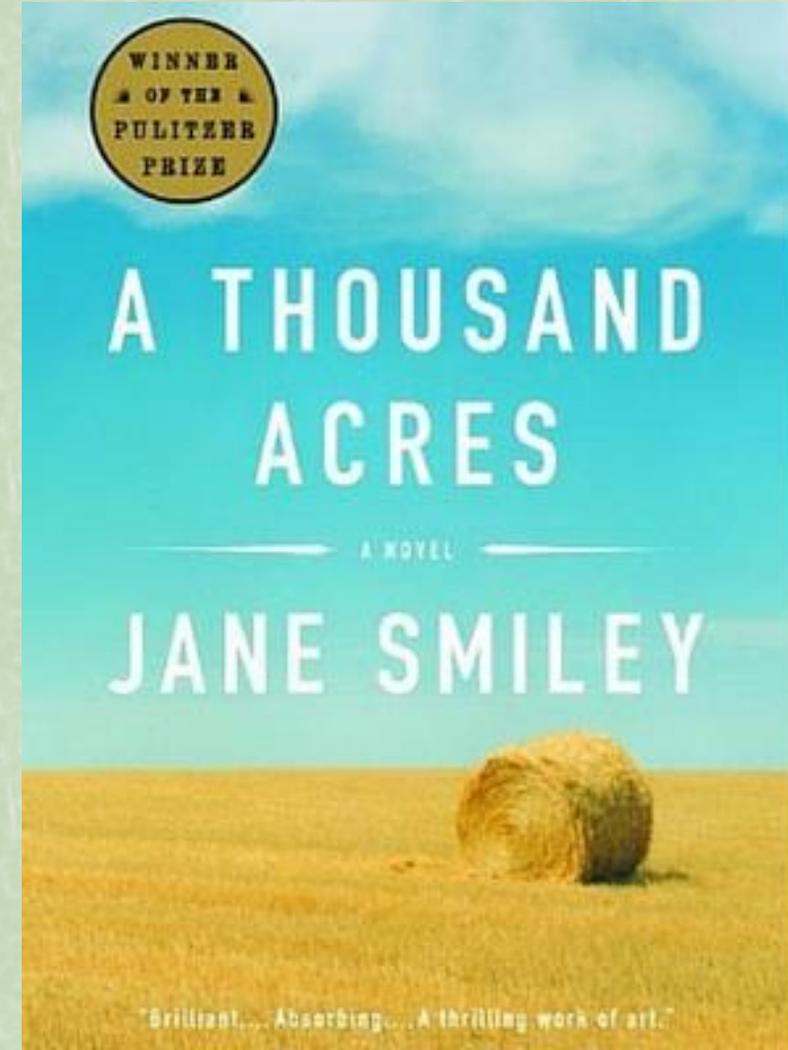
- The storm



Adapting *King Lear*: *A Thousand Acres*

- Transferring Shakespeare to the 1970s
- Exploitation of agricultural land and of the female body

“[My father] had lessons...along with the land and the lust to run things exactly the way he wanted to no matter what, poisoning the water and destroying the topsoil and buying bigger and bigger machinery, and the feeling certain that all of it was ‘right’.”



Macbeth

- Tyranny and isolation
- Nature turned upside down
- Crimes against future generations



Ross. Ah, good father,
Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's
act,
Threaten his bloody stage: by the clock, 'tis day,
And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp:
Is't night's predominance, or the day's shame,
That darkness does the face of earth entomb,
When living light should kiss it?

Old Man. 'Tis unnatural,
Even like the deed that's done. On Tuesday last,
A falcon, towering in her pride of place,
Was by a mousing owl hawk'd at and kill'd.

Ross. And Duncan's horses—a thing most
strange and certain—
Beauteous and swift, the minions of their race,
Turn'd wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung
out,
Contending 'gainst obedience, as they would
make
War with mankind.

Montana Shakespeare in the Parks' global warming *Macbeth*



Eco-criticism as activism

“The greatest challenge for critics engaged with climate change may be how to acknowledge that climate change is inevitable, already under way, without paralyzing our ability still to imagine a future worth struggling for.” –Timothy Clark

Practicing Theatre