Chapter 9

Tongues in the Storm: Shakespeare, Ecological Crisis, and the Resources of Genre

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I start with two related assumptions. First, that ecological crisis is fracturing familiar narratives about the relationship between humanity and the natural world. Many of these narratives, from the Garden of Eden to the promise of the New World to Walden Pond, posit an at least potentially harmonious relationship between human beings and their environment. These stories are not dead by any means—they are not even past, to paraphrase Faulkner—but they do not seem to be up to the task of helping conceptualize a global ecology in crisis. Crisis is creating new patterns and more drastic narratives, populated with drowning polar bears, warming oceans, and killing storms. These stories do not fit post-Enlightenment patterns of progress and stability. Prominent representations of an inhospitable world exist—*King Lear* is one; the stories of Noah, Jonah, and Job are others—but they are not always seen as depictions of Nature as such. Catastrophic narratives may come to rival visions of harmony as the planet's ecology changes, and one challenge of literary ecocriticism is finding productive ways to interpret and employ these alternate structures.

Second, I suggest that Shakespeare can help respond to these changes because of his flexible and dynamic attitude toward narrative forms. In making this argument, I springboard off of recent literary work that sees ecological ideas emerging in early modern culture. This critical discourse asserts that early modern literature presents narratives that emphasize proto-ecological values like interdependence, unanticipated consequences, and the limits of human ambition.[1] The most direct suggestion that Shakespeare's literary culture parallels modern ecological thinking

[1] See, for example, Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia, 2005); Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London, 2006); Ken Hiltner, *Milton and Ecology* (Cambridge, 2004); Silvia Bowerbank, *Speaking for Nature: Women and Ecologies of Early Modern England* (Baltimore, 2004); Diane Kelsy McColley, *Poetry and Ecology in the Age of Milton* (Aldershot, 2007). For a survey, see Karen Raber, "Recent Ecostudies in Tudor and Stuart Literature," *English Literary Renaissance*, 37/1 (2007): 151–71. My own first publication in this area is "Shipwreck and Ecology: Toward a Structural Theory of Shakespeare and Romance," *Shakespearean International Yearbook*, 8 (2008): 165–82.

may be Gabriel Egan's analogy between the Elizabethan World Picture and the Gaia hypothesis, but he speaks from an emerging consensus.[2] These structural homologies themselves, however, are not the only reasons to shoehorn a four-hundred year old playwright into an urgent twenty-first century conversation. What Shakespearean drama offers, I suggest, is self-consciousness about literary invention that can help renovate narratives about human beings and the natural world. Shakespeare's plays model a mutable system for coming to terms with change and catastrophe, and they contain dramatic structures that can help shape future conversations about remediation and stability.

Numerous critics now suggest that modern society is reaching (or has reached) a tipping point regarding traditional understandings of nature. Western culture's relationship with the natural world has always been defined, and perhaps confined, by established narratives: the story of Genesis; the Biblical command to exercise "dominion" over beasts and the land; the promise of the New World; the still-powerful myth of the American farmer.[3] For the past several decades, a key task of ecocriticism has been critiquing these myths.[4] From Bill McKibben's *The End of Nature* (1989) and Gary Snyder's celebration of the "wild" to ecofeminist critiques of the gender politics of the New World exploration, environmental criticism has become dissatisfied with "nature" as external and static, a source of purity and alterity.[5] One clear indicator of the breakdown of traditional sustainability narratives has come from the ecological sciences, in the so-called "post-equilibrium shift." This shift, which is sometimes also called the "new ecology," argues that stable structures like equilibrium or homeostasis do not accurately represent natural systems.[6] As ecologist Daniel Botkin has observed about his own field

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[2] See *Green Shakespeare*, pp. 29–33.

[3] Exploring these meta-narratives has been a prime topic of ecocriticism; see, for example, Annette Kolodny, *The Lay of the Land: Metaphor as Experience and History in American Life and Letters* (Chapel Hill, 1975), and Carolyn Merchant, *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology, and the Scientific Revolution* (San Francisco, 1982). In the popular press, see also Michael Pollan's recent argument that backyard gardens draw on and reconfigure ancient narratives about the centrality of agriculture to civilization (*New York Times Sunday Magazine*, Oct. 12, 2008).

[4] Many ecocritics have documented the anti-nature bias of traditional Western cultural forms; for a "deep ecological" perspective, see Arne Naess, *The Ecology of Wisdom: Writings of Arne Naess* (London, 2008); for a feminist perspective see Val Plumwood, *Environmental Culture: The Ecological Crisis of Reason* (London, 2001).

[5] See, among others, Bill McKibben, *The End of Nature* (New York, 1989); Gary Snyder, *The Practice of the Wild: Essays* (San Francisco, 1996); Louise Hutchings Westling, *The Green Breast of the New World: Landscape, Gender, and American Fiction* (Athens, 1996).

[6] See I. Scoones, "New Ecology and the Social Sciences: What Prospect for a Fruitful Engagement?," *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 28 (1999): 479–507, and also Michael Dove, "Equilibrium Theory and Inter-Disciplinary Borrowing: A Comparison of Old and New Ecological Approaches," in A. Biersack and J.B. Greenberg (eds), *Reimagining Political Ecology* (Durham, 2006).

work, "Wherever we seek to find constancy we discover change."[7] This shift within scientific ecology has not yet spread far into mainstream or literary circles, but taking the measure of the "new ecology" seems an urgent task. To respond to this image of disruption in nature, I suggest, requires making use of critical understandings about change in narrative culture.

The specific contrast I shall use to explore Shakespeare's narrative flexibility juxtaposes *As You Like It*'s legible and hospitable Forest of Arden against the opaque and hostile natural world of *King Lear*. Both these plays are obsessed with the relationship between human beings and nature, and each begins, notably, with a dense set of references to the word: "nature" appears ten times in the first two scenes of *King Lear*, and five times in the same scenes of *As You Like It.* Bringing these generically unlike plays together and revealing continuities between their understandings of nature emphasizes that neither the tragic nor the comic master-plot operates in isolation. Shakespeare's plays draw upon these two genres' opposed fantasies about the humanity-nature relationship while also asserting their interrelation. Both plays in fact emphasize that their own primary stances about nature are partially blind. In each case an archetypical narrative attaches itself to a high-ranking older man—Duke Senior rhapsodizes the garden in *As You Like It*, the king commands the storm in *Lear*—who loses his authority. The King's rage and the Duke's harmony seem failed or incomplete paradigms. Each play, however, also presents a way forward through a next-generation figure associated with radical theatrical play and narrative invention. In *As You Like It* Rosalind's false magic and skeptical wordplay orchestrate the plot, and in *Lear* Edgar's desperate disguises and inventions enable his survival. Both these characters manipulate artificial conventions, including theatrical roles and narrative forms, to modify their plays' problematic natural and political landscapes. Shakespeare's literary example suggests that this generic and theatrical variety may also help reframe today's ecological narratives to respond to ongoing changes.

Narrative and Ecological Crisis

> Global warming is essentially a literary problem.
> Bill McKibben[8]

Before turning to Shakespeare's narrative flexibility, I shall touch briefly on one twenty-first century narrative that responds explicitly to ecological crisis: the writer and activist Bill McKibben's web-based global organization, 350.org. In a recent column in *Orion*, McKibben explains that "global warming is essentially a literary problem" and then suggests that the solution to this problem is a number,

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[7] Daniel Botkin, *Discordant Harmonies: A New Ecology for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 1990).

[8] Bill McKibben, "When Words Fail" (*Orion*, Jul.–Aug. 2008).

"the most important number on the planet," 350.[9] In response to this invocation of literary structure, I suggest that McKibben's article and organization display contradictory ideas about how narratives might respond to climate change.[10] On the one hand, he suggests (and I agree) that the current crisis requires narratives of ecological rupture, compelling ways to re-tell the story of the relationship between human beings and the non-human environment in the context of global climate change. That is what he means by a "literary problem," and that is what I shall use Shakespeare's plays to explore. But McKibben's second, and ultimately more pressing, desire is for a number, 350. The figure specifies exactly how much carbon the atmosphere can tolerate; 350 parts per million comes from NASA scientist James Hanson. Since, as McKibben's website shows, the figure (in January 2009) was 385 parts per million, the number 350 underlines the need for drastic remediation now.

McKibben undercuts himself by posing a narrative problem but providing a numerical answer. He ends up, perhaps unwittingly, extending the long-running assumption that science (the numbers game) is more substantial, powerful, and real than narrative (the word game). McKibben's slippage seems revealing. If what activists want is mass participation, the most powerful instigator of that kind of identification may be a shared narrative. I want what McKibben wants—a story to make global ecological crisis comprehensible and translatable—but I am much more optimistic about his first claim, that global warming presents a literary problem, than I am about the number 350. The literary solution may come as much from Shakespearean drama as from 350.org.

Shakespeare and Generic Invention

> The generic can be more intense than the concrete .... The generic (the repeated name, the type, the country, the wonderful destiny invested in it) takes primacy over individual features, *which are tolerated only because of their prior genres*.
>
> Jorge Luis Borges, "A History of Eternity"[11]

Having through McKibben identified a literary problem, I return to my second assumption, that Shakespeare can help solve it. The idea that literature can recover

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[9] Ibid.

[10] In a follow-up essay in the next issue of *Orion*, "Multiplication Saves the Day," McKibben revealingly suggests that his previous column had been "about numbers" and that the next step for climate change activists is "to do some math," *Orion* (Nov.–Dec. 2008): 18–19. His contribution to a recent issue of *Mother Jones*, "The Most Important Number on Earth," also emphasizes the precision of mathematics over the messiness of narrative. *Mother Jones* (Dec. 2008): 40–45, 97.

[11] Jorge Luis Borges, *Selected Non-Fictions*, ed. Eliot Weinberger, trans. Esther Allen, and Suzanne Jill Levine (New York, 2000), pp. 123–39.

or construct a healthy relationship with nature is not new; it is a basic feature of the Romantic impulse that emerged in European and American culture in the eighteenth century. The claim that Nature reveals eternal truths also has deep roots in Christianity and in classical pastoral. Versions of this idea permeate modern culture.[12] Without minimizing or rejecting this narrative impulse, I suggest that the pastoral vision should be supplemented with a wider range of stories about nature and what humans do with, to, and inside it.

The essential literary concept that can address these changes is genre, understood not as a set of rigid proscriptions but a shared and changing system of narrative conventions.[13] Telling new stories about nature necessitates making new choices about generic forms. In Shakespeare's era, proto-ecological ideas were beginning to engage with Christian spiritualism and the early stirrings of empirical science.[14] Shakespeare's primary generic resources, however, were classical models, especially comedy and tragedy. Each of these forms invokes a different vision of the natural world, but the polygeneric nature of Shakespeare's plays—their connections across different formal modes—presents deeply flexible ideas about humanity's place in the biosphere. Literary critics know there is no narrative without a genre, and also that generic identity is always incomplete and mutable.[15] The benefits of a Shakespearean, or early modern, attitude toward genre include the recognition that all narrative structures, even (or especially) those which seem most reliable, always change.

Shakespeare's plays present several useful features for reframing the Romantic vision of nature in an age of ecological crisis. First, he is not a Romantic himself; he wrote nearly two hundred years before Wordsworth. Second, even though the modern world is saturated with Romanticist ideas, Shakespeare remains arguably the most influential writer in English today; there is a very practical sense in which these 400-year-old plays get reinvented and reinterpreted every year, around the world. Third, Shakespeare employs a wide variety of different narrative modes: several different kinds of histories (English, Roman, Scottish), domestic and exotic comedies, tragedies set in medieval Scotland, classical Athens, and a Denmark that resembles his own England, and a hybrid category known as "romances" or "tragicomedies" that combines elements of comedy and tragedy.[16] Many individual

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[12] In American ecocriticism, one influential exploration of the roots of this model of nature is Lawrence Buell, *The Environmental Imagination: Thoreau, Nature Writing, and the Formation of American Culture* (Cambridge, 1995).

[13] For a survey of the status of genre in literary discourse and early modern studies, see Steve Mentz, *Romance for Sale in Early Modern England* (Aldershot, 2006), pp. 26–41.

[14] On this three-way relationship, see Watson, *Back to Nature*.

[15] For a theoretical treatment of this point, see Jacques Derrida, "The Law of Genre," *Critical Inquiry*, 7/1 (1980). For a historicist approach, see Alistair Fowler, *Kinds of Literature: An Introduction to the Theory of Genres and Modes* (Cambridge, 1982).

[16] On Shakespeare's multigeneric practice, see, among many others, Lawrence Danson, *Shakespeare's Dramatic Genres* (Oxford, 2000).

plays highlight their own polygeneric nature; *King Lear*, for example, exists as both history and tragedy. This generic variety facilitates Shakespeare's exploration of several different and mutually competitive narratives about humanity and nature.[17]

Finally, and for my purposes most importantly, Shakespeare's plays mix multiple competing genres. If the abiding fantasy of comedy is that different things can be reconciled to each other—women and men, kings and commoners, even the woods and the city—Shakespeare's tragedies do not forget that fantasy when they take up darker stories. Rather, plays of opposite genres mirror each other. Shakespeare's ecological fables do not ask us to choose the happy forest of Arden over Lear's storm-tossed kingdom, but rather insist that these two plays' intertwined and mutually competitive stories about humanity in nature coexist. There are very real and tangible ways in which today's world looks less like Arden and more like Lear's storm, but these plays suggest that literary culture can help bridge this divide.

One reason Shakespeare wrote this way is because he exploited the Renaissance understanding of literary genre, rather than the Romantic one that dominates modern culture today.[18] The modern sense that playing generic games is beneath the serious artist was not current for Shakespeare; writers in his era employed genres as perfectly valid and in fact inescapable tools for writing and thinking.[19] In early modern genre theory, standard narratives stimulate combinations and variations. Typically, Shakespeare's clearest explication of his method in combining genres comes in a joke. Garrulous old Polonius describes the plays that might be performed in Elsinore: "either … tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastoral; scene

[17] Thus *Henry IV, Part 1* presents the young rebel Hotspur as a budding geo-engineer, eager to change the course of rivers so as to enlarge his share of the kingdom; in this play humans believe they control the land (III, i, 100–104). By contrast, in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, conflict between supernatural figures creates catastrophic weather, and the telling refrain is "Lord, what fools these mortals be" (III, ii, 115). These two plays provide opposed ideas about how much control humans exert on the natural world; both of these ideas—that humanity can re-engineer the planet, and that nature is controlled by unseen powers—remain potent today. See William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, G. Blakemore Evans, ed. (Boston, 1974).

[18] The Borges quotation I use as an epigraph emphasizes how powerful "genres" like names, countries, and political parties remain. Borges's point is not that the generic is more "true" or "realistic" but rather that it feels "more intense than the concrete." Through connecting individual things to a generic whole, through what Borges calls "the repeated name, the type, the country, the wonderful destiny invested in it," we come to value individual things, "*which are tolerated only because of their prior genres*." Generic identity creates emotional intensity. It is hardly surprising that a professional playwright should have made use of this structure.

[19] As Rosalie Colie influentially summarizes this point, "Literary invention—both 'finding' and 'making'—in the Renaissance was largely generic, accomplished by generic instruments and helps." *The Resources of Kind: Genre-Theory in the Renaissance* (Berkeley, 1973).

individable, or poem unlimited" (II, ii, 334–6).[20] Even Polonius knows that you make plays by combining unlike genres; *Hamlet* itself combines a history play's interest in government and succession with a tragic focus on heroic individualism and a comedy's obsessive wordplay. As numerous critics of early modern literature have observed, generic combination and imitation—the technical terms in Italian were *imitatio* and *contaminatio*—ruled the day.[21]

By presenting a narrative model that emphasizes the ability to shift between tragic agony and comic resilience while maintaining a distanced perspective on both, Shakespeare's plays can help re-frame familiar stories in an unfamiliar world. This model would not reject old meta-narratives about Nature, but instead use them as Shakespeare used received genres, as tools that are practical, but also fungible. The plays stage a shift from characters who espouse traditional narratives, like Duke Senior or King Lear himself, to younger figures who manipulate them, like Rosalind and Edgar. Stories about nature, these figures suggest, are artificial and therefore changeable, albeit at some cost. With this in mind I turn to generic play and instability in ecocritical readings of Shakespeare.

Tongues in Trees: *As You Like It*

The key speech in *As You Like It* that uses literary form to imagine nature is Duke Senior's address to the Forest of Arden. This speech exemplifies one of Western culture's most cherished fantasies about the natural world: that it is built for humans. (This fantasy also underlies the etymology of the nineteenth-century word ecology, which contains the Greek root *oikos*, meaning "house.")[22] Inverting Adam's naming of the animals in Eden, Duke Senior imagines that the Forest speaks to him, directly. Sounding like an evangelist for Romanticism two centuries ahead of his time, he advocates listening to trees:

> Now, my co-mates and brothers in exile,
> Hath not old custom made this life more sweet
> Than that of painted pomp? Are not these woods
> More free from peril than the envious court?
> Here feel we not 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 counselors

[20] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, eds Ann Thompson and Neil Taylor (London, 2006).

[21] See Bernard Weinberg, *A History of Literary Criticism in the Italian Renaissance*, 2 vols (Chicago, 1961).

[22] See *Oxford English Dictionery* (*OED*).

> 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. (II, i, 1–17)[23]

Duke Senior's rhetorically-framed nature is legible on many levels. Not only can he hear trees and read brooks, he finds a hidden unity on a temporal level (emphasized through the speech's first command, "now"), on a social level (he calls his followers and subjects his "co-mates and brothers"), and through a new physical space ("here," or the forest). The speech inverts the city-court distinction the play has already constructed, asserting that the "churlish chiding of the winter's wind" provides better education than the city from which the Duke (and many of the play's other characters) have been exiled. Even the discomfort of life in the woods—"the seasons' difference"—serves as a pedagogical tool, teaching the Duke how much better off he is outside the court. In the woods, life is "more sweet" and "more free." Nature's difference defeats the city's "flattery." The Duke and his court have gone, in Robert Watson's phrase, "back to nature."

The irony that the Duke's polished rhetoric about unpolished nature could only have been learned at court undermines his hopes for political renewal in the forest. (Education is a persistent sub-theme in the play, from Orlando's anguished plea for "good education" [I, i, 67–8] in the first scene to Rosalind's claim that she has been taught good speech by an imaginary uncle in the woods.) As Watson emphasizes, the Duke's speech engages the early modern referential crisis in language that would reemerge as an obsession of late twentieth-century critical theorists like Foucault and Derrida.[24] In refusing the "flattery" of the court, the Duke reaches for a natural language that would emerge directly from physical experience: "These are counselors / That feelingly persuade me what I am." The key term, "feelingly," pinpoints the heart of the matter: winter in the woods makes the Duke feel his body. Weakness, cold, isolation, and intense bodily sensation create deeper knowledge of "what I am." The shifting movement of this anti-rhetoric, in which the adverb "feelingly" bears the full weight of self-identification, shows language attempting to capture and utilize physical experiences that lie outside of language. Nature, in this model, represents the real thing, that to which language can only gesture.

Depending on how much the Duke's pastoral fantasy engages the audience (and how these lines are delivered in performance), the argument may collapse under its own ambition. The weak rhetorical and logical link is the toad, partly because these so-called "unnatural natural history" metaphors were already

[23] William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*, ed. Juliet Dusinberre (London, 2006). Further citations in the text.

[24] See *Back to Nature*, pp. 77–107.

clichés in Shakespeare's time (he mocks them in *Henry IV, Part 1*), and because the relationship between the toad's "precious jewel" and Arden's power seems tenuous. The cascade of images in the final two lines—from tongues to books to sermons—builds a scaffold of increasing cultural power and authority, from the merely heard to the read to the preached. But the final turn to pure abstraction—it all adds up, the Duke claims, to "good in everything"—loses purchase on the natural world. Some part of Shakespeare's audience may have assumed the connection between sermons and good will, but the gaps in the Duke's logic present him as a slightly ridiculous figure, recently ousted from power by his more aggressive brother. The wishful-thinking Duke imagines a hospitable winter, but less fortunate humans, like old Adam, remain cold and hungry.

The more sophisticated and practical stance toward poems, trees, and nature appears in Rosalind, whose two-faced theatrical power amounts to a thorough re-arrangement of Duke Senior's legible Nature. Her cross-dressing and skeptical critiques of Orlando's poems reject easy fantasies about the reliability of tongues and trees. As she boasts late in the play, "I can do strange things" (V, ii, 58). Her strange magic includes recognizing her own artifice, though that self-awareness does not stop the magic from working. Rosalind performs a comic compromise, in which she manipulates narratives in which she does not quite believe. "Love is merely a madness," she tells Orlando, "and I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do" (III, ii, 384–5). By displacing erotic conventions, especially the Petrarchan idiom in which men are conquering knights and women unapproachable damsels, Rosalind asks Orlando to re-see his "heavenly Rosalind" (I, ii, 278) and imagine her as "saucy lackey" (III, ii) as well as princess. Implicitly, she asks her father to look differently at the forest as well.

Rosalind's dynamic vision of nonhuman and human nature emerges from her insistence that to be "natural" is to be multiple and constantly changing. She articulates the textual center of her natural variety even before she enters Arden or changes her clothes. In Act I, scene ii, in a punning exchange that precedes the spectacle of the wrestling, she and Celia debate the words "nature," "natural," and "nature's"; these three terms appear eight times in the space of two dozen lines (I, ii, 41–55). Starting from a humanist commonplace about the divided gifts of Fortune and Nature—"Fortune reigns in gifts of the world not in the lineaments of Nature" (I, ii, 41–2)—Rosalind proceeds to blur the distinction between mutable Fortune and God-given Nature. The arrival of Touchstone, a "natural" Fool, caps the argument against separating the artificial and the natural: "Indeed there is Fortune too hard for Nature, when Fortune makes Nature's natural the cutter off of Nature's wit" (I, ii, 47–9). Between natural foolishness ("Nature's natural") and natural wit Rosalind sees little distinction. This comic wordplay underlines the artificiality of the ideal Nature that Duke Senior's speech would subsequently invoke. Duke Senior sees Nature as an object of reverent worship, but his daughter treats it as an opportunity for theatrical play.

This skepticism about Nature and Fortune does not prevent Rosalind from employing traditional frames when they suit her purposes. Her final act of magic,

supported by Hymen, the god of marriage, uses conventional rhetorical genres to assert control over herself. Facing both her father and her future husband (and in them the basic conflict between generations that fuels comedy from ancient Greece forward), she speaks in paradoxes: "To you I give myself, for I am yours. / To you I give myself, for I am yours" (V, iv, 114–5).[25] The two identical lines can be distinguished in performance—the first to her father, the second to Orlando, or perhaps the other way around—but Rosalind's simple, clear, performative diction rejects the flowery language of Orlando's love poems and Duke Senior's speech. She does not need tongues in trees; she instead uses the resources of theater to control her body.

Rosalind's magic-aided performance of self-control contrasts sharply with Duke Senior's desire to listen to Nature. Her theatrical power is political and public: she creates marriages and alliances. She also indulges in multiple identities—court lady, exile, traveler, page-boy, mistress, magician—without insisting on a clear hierarchical relationship among them; she even stages the exchange of father for husband in her own words, something that tragic heroines like Desdemona or Juliet cannot do. Her focus on non-human nature is not as direct as her father's; she mostly ignores trees when they do not have poems carved in them. Instead, she imposes new and variable scripts on both the natural and the human world. Her rejection of melodramatic love stories—"Men have died from time to time and worms have eaten them," she says, "but not for love" (IV, i, 97–9)—refuses traditional ideas like those of her father and Orlando. For Rosalind, however, rewriting old narratives does not mean foregoing everything they promised. Her theatrical practice suggests that living with illusions remains possible, and even practical, if one accepts their illusory nature. Rosalind's example suggests that the pleasures of Love or Nature will not vanish even if the forms of their traditional narratives change.

In the Storm: *King Lear*

The green world of Arden provides ample room for Rosalind's narrative flexibility, but the storm scenes in King Lear generate a counter-image of Nature that successfully resists human attempts to construct survivable narratives. In this space, generic variation takes many forms, each trying to salvage space for human bodies. Lear's rage imagines the natural world as a self-generating apocalypse: "Strike flat the thick rotundity o'the world, / Crack nature's moulds, all germans spill at once / That make ingrateful man!" (III, ii, 7–9).[26] These lines reveal the

[25] On these lines as in the context of J.L. Austin's performative speech-acts, see Susanne Wofford, "'To You I Give Myself, For I Am Yours': Erotic Performance and Theatrical Performatives in *As You Like It*" in Russ McDonald (ed.), *Shakespeare Reread* (Ithaca, 1994), pp. 147–69.

[26] William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, ed. R.A. Foakes (London, 1997). Further citations in the text.

crisis in nature that the storm scenes dramatize: this world is no one's home.[27] The king flounders through the wasteland of his kingdom, trying to reclaim his relationship with his world. His assortment of theatrical poses and rhetorical genres parallels Rosalind's variety, though he lacks her comic flexibility. He starts as an angry monarch, commanding the winds to "Blow … and crack your cheeks" (III, ii, 1); becomes a comforting parent when he ushers the Fool, "in, boy, go first," into the hovel (III, iv, 26); resembles a bemused philosopher when he asks, "What is the cause of thunder?" (III, iv, 151); and finally resolves into a maddened father, unable to believe what his daughters have done: "Is there any cause in nature that makes these hard hearts?" (III, vi, 74–5). His language invokes a host of explanations for the storm, from divine wrath to failed kingship to both proto-scientific and theological symbols: "You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout / Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!" (III, ii, 2–3). (Weathercocks here recall early weather science, and church steeples religion.) These scenes also contain a mini-compendium of oratorical modes, from impassioned exhortation ("Blow, winds … " (III, ii, 1–9) to political persuasion ("Take physic, pomp," III, iv, 28–36) to a parody of forensic examination (the mock trial, III, vi, 20–61). Even the supporting cast extends the generic variety. The Fool and Poor Tom distort the roles of wise counselors, while Gloucester and Kent play these roles more conventionally. There is a basic sense in which little happens in Act III of *King Lear* (with the exception of the blinding of Gloucester in III, vii, which falls outside the "storm" section), but these scenes register the repeated failures of multiple dramatic and rhetorical forms.

The storm scenes also countermand, almost point by point, Duke Senior's humanized Nature. While the Duke asks for his life in Arden to represent an asynchronous "Now," the storm scenes emphasize the unsupportable qualities of one uniquely inhospitable night. "Here's a night pities neither wise men nor fools" (III, ii, 12–13), says the Fool, and Kent concurs, "Things that love night / Love not such nights as these" (III, ii, 42–3). Duke Senior's imagined social unity becomes Lear's lament for the "poor, naked wretches," but in the later play political unity has already failed: "I have ta'en / Too little care of this," the King says (III, iv, 32–3). Above all, the storm scenes present a natural world that is not legible; the king feels the violent weather on his body, but he cannot understand what the storm says. No books in these brooks. This representation of nature underlines the play's larger crisis of authority.

While it contains arguably Shakespeare's deepest exploration of "nature," *King Lear* lacks a single core speech that matches Duke Senior's in *As You Like It*.[28] Instead, multiple meanings swirl around the word: the play invokes human nature, sexual nature, the nature of fathers, daughters, and storms, all of which underscore the dilemmas of living in an unstable environment. Among these

[27] For an older but still influential Christian reading, see John Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature: A Study of King Lear* (London, 1949).

[28] The word "nature" appears thirty-two times in *King Lear*, the most of any play.

portraits of nature, Edmund's speech in 1.2 most clearly rebuts Duke Senior's fantasy. For Edmund, Nature is a goddess, and also an invitation to social and sexual violence:

> Thou, Nature, art my goddess; to thy law
> My services are bound. Wherefore should I
> Stand in the plague of custom, and permit
> The curiosity of nations to deprive me? ...
> When my dimensions are as well compact,
> My mind as generous and my shape as true
> As honest madam's issue? Why brand they us
> With base? With baseness, bastardy? Base, base?
> Who in the lusty stealth of nature take
> More composition and fierce quality
> Than doth within a dull stale tired bed
> Go to the creating of a whole tribe of fops
> Got 'tween a sleep and wake. (I, ii, 1–4, 7–15)

Not a hospitable world but a "fierce quality," creating not "good in everything" but sexual desire and lust for his brother's patrimony, Edmund's "nature" exemplifies a rough form of dramatic power. His repeated attention to his own body—his "dimensions," his "mind," his "shape"—emphasizes that he pits his individual nature against a hostile social world. (Edmund speaks less directly about non-human nature; he, significantly, is not the brother who gets exposed to the storm.) Edmund's Nature produces the sexual energy ("lusty stealth") that undoes Lear's two older daughters, and the goddess also drives the base-born son's assault on custom. Against this violent, rapacious, and unstable power, two viable responses appear: Cordelia's redemptive pastoral, and Edgar's desperate theatricality.[29]

The spokesperson in *King Lear* for the pastoral vision that dominates *As You Like It* is Cordelia, but her version of pastoral is both tragic and artificial. When a Gentleman describes her reaction to the news of her father's exposure to the storm,

[29] In the context of the division between Edgar's skepticism and Cordelia's pastoral, it seems important to remember the varied texts of *King Lear* and their multiple generic identities. The Quarto text, published in 1608, frames itself on its title page as the *True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King Lear and his three daughters*, while the 1623 Folio places "The Tragedie of King Lear" between *Hamlet* and *Othello* (see Foakes's introduction, pp. 112–19). (The title of the Quarto presumably alludes to the anonymous play, *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* [1605].) This generic and textual split can be further complicated by considering Nahum Tate's 1681 rewritten version, which marries Edgar to Cordelia and which ruled the stage for over a hundred years (Foakes, pp. 85–9). (This marriage arguably picks up on hints within the play that romance should be considered among the potential generic modes.) The print and theatrical history of this play underlies its commitment to generic variety.

she embodies an aestheticized and humanized nature: "You should have seen / Sunshine and rain at once, her smiles and tears / Were like a better way. Those happy smilets / That played on her ripe lip seemed not to know / What guests were in her eyes, which parted thence / As pearls from diamonds dropped" (IV, iii, 17–22). Cordelia's pearl-tears and diamond-eyes create a symbolic unity that combines "sunshine and rain," and she also represents a living poem, her unity of opposites recalling the symbolic features of the Petrarchan lady. Like Duke Senior's forest, Cordelia connects opposites, and her later invocations of traditional pastoral tropes—"our sustaining corn" (IV, iv, 6), "All you unpublished virtues of the earth" (IV, iv, 16)—make her embody the natural-and-theological unity that is the logical extension of the Duke's humanist fantasy. In *King Lear*, where the stakes are starker than in Arden, ideas of order shift from the natural to the theological, so that Cordelia's tears become "holy water from her heavenly eyes" (IV, iii, 31) not long after being introduced as "rain and sunshine." Her role as earth-redeemer fails in plot terms, but Lear's final lament that she is "dead as earth" (V, iii, 259) recalls her symbolic role as the daughter that "redeems nature from the general curse" (IV, vi, 202). In the generic mélange of *King Lear*, this theological-redemptive nature—the divine Nature to which so much sentimental eco-writing appeals today—represents one, but not the only, constructed image of the human-nature relationship. It is Edgar's skeptical invention, not Cordelia's purity, that survives.

Edgar uses the theatrical imagination as Rosalind does, to create something new, and to survive in hostile conditions.[30] The narratives he creates are not as liberating as Rosalind's skeptical acceptance of human inconstancy. Rather, Edgar's inventions, from Poor Tom's demons (III, iv, 112–16) to the artificial seascape beneath his imagined Dover cliffs (IV, vi, 11–24), envision a hostile but also fungible natural world. In what amounts to both an extension and rebuttal of his brother's enabling goddess Nature, Edgar displays the creative force of a desperate theatrical imagination.[31] The fantasy that Edgar employs, however, is not Duke Senior's harmony with the forest or even Kent's ideal service. He instead creates himself as a not-self: "Edgar I nothing am" (II, i, 192). When leading his blind father to the false Dover cliffs, he cures suicidal madness by imagining that dry land is a sea-cliff (IV, vi, 1–41). He here imagines a natural environment that is less comprehensible, less human-sized, and less hospitable than Arden—but like Arden it proves amenable to human invention. Edgar makes his nature artificial in a way that resonates with Rosalind's theatrical practice. This artificial nature may prove more useful in reshaping today's cultural narratives than Rosalind's skeptical return to her father's court. For while Rosalind may always inhabit the court with a knowing smile, Edgar's final desire to "Speak what we feel, not what

[30] A slightly different exploration of Edgar's theatricality and the storm scenes appears in my book on Shakespeare's maritime world, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London, 2009).

[31] On Edgar as actor, see Simon Palfrey, *Doing Shakespeare* (London, 2005), pp. 200–208.

we ought to say" (V, iii, 323) suggests a harsher commitment to reshaping his culture's core narratives. Rosalind's model maintains a skeptical distance from narratives of ecological redemption even if—especially if—it suggests ways live by them. Edgar's tactics ask for something harder: a knowing refusal of ecological despair as the waters rise.

Conclusion: Ecocriticism and Generic Play

> Human beings are the Earth's only literary creatures.
>
> Joseph Meeker, The Comedy of Survival[32]

Literary ecocritics have explored genre since Joseph Meeker's *The Comedy of Survival* (1974) proposed that comedy, with its successful reunions and disasters averted, is the fundamental ecological genre.[33] What Meeker calls a "play ethic," however, need not be limited to comedy; Shakespeare's polygeneric drama as a whole more closely resembles ecological exchange and diversity than comedy alone. While there is a basic sense in which comedy and tragedy generate opposed understandings of nature—the Forest of Arden renews human society, while Lear's storm hastens its destruction—these generic frames together comprise a continuum between a perfectly intelligible and harmonious nature (the "green world") and an indifferent and hostile environment (the "wasteland"). Stories built from these competing generic frames can produce narratives for a world in which urbanization crowds out pastoralism and storm surges emerge from rolling seas.

Recent critical responses to ecological crisis fall, perhaps unconsciously but importantly, along this generic continuum. To suggest the abiding value of Shakespeare's polygeneric models, I close by framing two recent ecocritical works, Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature* and Timothy Morton's *Ecology without Nature*, through their contrasting (and possibly unintended) employments of the resources of genre.[34] These postmodern critics share many things, including distaste for progressive narratives and deep skepticism about "nature" as such. But their core disagreement seems generic: Latour, with comic wit and energy, advocates a radically pluralistic politics that would bring not just the sciences but also nonhuman actors "into democracy," while Morton, with tragic clarity, wants

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[32] Joseph Meeker, *The Comedy of Survival: Literary Ecology and a Play Ethic* (3rd edn,Tucson, 1997).

[33] The other side of Meeker's claim argues that tragedy, which features the hyper-assertion of human individualism and struggle, is ecologically catastrophic—and, as Meeker emphasizes, it seems no accident that since Aristotle tragedy has been deemed the "higher" genre.

[34] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, Catherine Porter, trans. (Cambridge, 2004); Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, 2007). Further citations in the text.

to put aesthetics at the center of political and ecological debates.[35] The problem both writers address is the "relationship between nature and culture," which literary ecocritic Jonathan Bate has called the "key question of the twenty-first century."[36] In place of Bate's post-Romantic, semi-Heideggerian, deep ecological answer, Latour and Morton devise complementary generic frames for a post-nature world. Their models replicate the distinction I have drawn between Shakespeare's dramatic genres.

In a postmodern echo of Rosalind's commitment to social renewal, Latour imagines a revitalized politics. If ecological crises are, as he puts it, "generalized revolts of means" in which "no entity—whale, river, climate, earthworm, tree, calf, cow, pig, brood—agrees any longer to be treated 'simply as a means' but insists on being treated 'always also as an end'" (216), then the sphere of social debate and exchange—Rosalind's comic playground—must radically expand.[37] Latour's project is vast, but he voices comic optimism: "The world is young, the sciences are recent, history has barely begun, and as for ecology, it is barely in its infancy: Why should we have finished exploring the institutions of public life?" (228). By advocating a dramatic expansion of all public institutions, Latour transforms the "end of nature" into a new leftist hope. Like Rosalind, he plays himself into a more connected world.

Morton, who parallels Edgar's stoicism and clarity, advocates instead a tragic refusal of sentimentality. He fingers modern capitalism for creating tempting but unavailable fantasies of "nature." "Our notions of place," he writes, "are retroactive fantasy constructs determined precisely by the corrosive effects of modernity" (11). Against the false grail of "place" (which he associates with Heidegger), Morton advances tragic art instead of comic politics.[38] Faced with what he calls a "dark ecology" of "irreducible otherness" (142–3, 151), Morton refuses to assimilate

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[35] Latour and Morton both begin by reframing the core term of the environmental movement, "nature." Latour claims that the basic insight of ecology has made nature passé. "Nature is not in question in ecology," he writes. "On the contrary, ecology dissolves nature's contours and redistributes its agents" (p. 21). It is no longer possible to distinguish between nature and anything else, so the word has lost its meaning. Further, Latour suggests that the death of "the great god Pan" should be celebrated, because only after the "end of nature" can true political reform begin (pp. 25–32). Morton, similarly, opens his book by claiming that "the idea of nature is getting in the way of properly ecological forms of culture, philosophy, politics, and art" (p. 1).

[36] See "Foreword," *The Green Studies Reader*, ed. Laurence Cope (London, 2000), p. xvii.

[37] What Latour calls a "new bicameralism" and a "new collective" (pp. 162–3) bring together various kinds of expertise to renegotiate the relationships among different parts of society. He asks for "an experimental metaphysics" to replace "the old metaphysics of nature" (p. 130) which he claims derives from Aristotle.

[38] For Morton's attack on Heidegger, see *Ecology without Nature*, pp. 56–7.

the nonhuman world into the palatable forms called "nature."[39] For ecological critics (and artists) to "politicize the aesthetic" (205), in Morton's words, they must "choose this poisoned ground ... [and] be equal to this senseless actuality."[40] Like Edgar, Morton fashions an aesthetic for surviving in a fractured, contested environment.

The flexible narrative culture of Shakespeare's plays helps relate Latour's reconfigurable political sphere to Morton's artistic vision. For Shakespeare, Latour, and Morton, Nature seems paradoxically artificial, something represented and manipulated through human narrative artifice. Shakespeare's professional sense of narrative as a tool, capable of generating the sympathy-effect of *As You Like It* and the alienation of *King Lear*, suggests that human relationships with the nonhuman world are malleable. Unlike in Latour and Morton, however, the poetics of change in Shakespeare's presentations of the human-nature dyad need not be radical or revolutionary. Suggesting that all generic masks are equally arbitrary, Shakespeare's plays replace emancipatory politics and aesthetics with the oddly conservative magic of Rosalind, who eventually wraps herself in the secure folds of aristocracy, and the desperate theatricalism of Edgar, who ends up crushed under the "weight of this sad time" (V, iii, 323). Shakespeare's diverse portraits of nature provide options, if not solutions.

In using ecocriticism to connect early modern literary narratives about nature and natural (dis)order to today's ecological crisis, I have emphasized that literary representations are useful precisely because they are not "real," and further that they are self-aware about their own artificiality. If the greatest shock of global warming has been recognizing nature as something man-made (or man-remade) rather than just "out there," literature's long-engrained understanding of how created things sometimes exceed the control of their creators may be newly valuable. A facility with literary narrative—with the combination and recombination of competing narrative forms—can help reshape intellectual engagements with a changing natural world.

My larger hope is that the humanities and the ecological sciences might together address unstable natural and cultural environments. I do not think, even at my most optimistic, that stories about human culture and nonhuman nature can, in and of themselves, change the world. But familiar narrative habits contain stumbling blocks for environmental thinking, and literary critics can help reconfigure them by using their expertise in how generic forms function and change. Shakespeare's

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[39] Morton's models are radical thinkers like Theodor Adorno and especially Walter Benjamin, whose ironic utopianism and engagement with modern technology makes him serve Morton as a kind of anti-Heidegger. But it is literary models, especially Romantic poets like Percy Shelley and John Clare, that most engage Morton's sympathies. Clare's depiction of his tortured connection with the earth recommends itself to Morton as a story about how the nonhuman world really works on us: "Clare helps us stay right here, in the poisoned mud. Which is just where we need to be, right now" (p. 201).

[40] Ibid., p. 205.

robust version of theatrical variety can help reframe narrative practices to respond to the ground that is shifting underfoot. Certain scripts, like Cordelia's lament and Duke Senior's harmony, seem static; I would rather invent like Edgar or connive like Rosalind. But both Duke Senior's fantasy and Lear's pain—the tongue and the storm—remain powerful responses to the immensity and alterity of an increasingly unstable natural world. Perhaps Edgar's destabilizing play and Rosalind's "natural" magic can help write new responses to the old stories about the humanity-nature relationship, even if Shakespeare's plays present four-hundred-year-old reminders that old stories die slowly.