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"This Blessed Plot": An Ecocritical Approach to Shakespeare's Second Tetralogy

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“This Blessed Plot”: An Ecocritical Approach to Shakespeare’s Second Tetralogy

By

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A culminating thesis, submitted to the faculty of Dominican University of California in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Humanities

Dominican University of California

San Rafael, CA

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Abstract

This research project aims at bringing to light the non-human dimension in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, i.e., *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. In the context of the military confrontations that preceded the Wars of the Roses, the disruption of human relationships bears an impact on the land and the non-human cosmos in general. Through his literary craft and thorough understanding of human and non-human nature, Shakespeare reveals an intricate network of relationships, which, even when broken, can be mended.

My project is guided by a presentist understanding of literature. Studying the relationship between the human and the non-human in Shakespeare's histories can also inform our own relationship with the land we inhabit and our mutual interdependence. Matter and spirit are integrated in this analysis and inspiration is drawn from Pope Francis' so-called green encyclical *Laudato Si*, which invites us to see the earth as our common home and, consequently, exhorts us to be responsible and caring.

From the point of view of methodology, I have selected scenes from the second tetralogy which enrich our understanding of nature and invite us to see ourselves as an integral part of it. In addition to exploring ecocritical theory for the construction of meaning in the tetralogy, I have incorporated a personal meditation to my analysis of each of the plays. Using close reading as a strategy, I have gathered lessons from the plays, which will take the form of exhortations to enhance our human/non-human interactions in the present and illuminate the path to repairing severed bonds.

Key words: *Shakespeare – ecocriticism – second tetralogy – non-human – Richard II – Henry IV – Henry V – Renaissance drama*

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Introduction

This research project aims at bringing to light the non-human dimension in Shakespeare's second tetralogy, i.e. *Richard II*, *1 Henry IV*, *2 Henry IV* and *Henry V*. These plays are set in the late 14th and early 15th centuries, a period of political turmoil and instability, which led to the destruction of many human and non-human lives and deeply affected the environment. In the context of military confrontations, the disruption of human relationships bears an impact on the land and the non-human ecosystems in general. Through his literary craft and thorough understanding of human and non-human nature, Shakespeare reveals an intricate network of relationships, which, even when broken, can be mended.

Literary theory understood from the positivist paradigm has been an attempt to rationalize and stagnate meaning, thus depriving the text and its readers from an authentic personal experience. However, the second half of the twentieth century witnessed the slow decline of such an approach and the rise of cultural theory, which incorporates other fields of knowledge into the study of literature. The construction of meaning in a literary work can be attempted from multiple and enriching perspectives, such as postmodern, poststructuralist, psychoanalytical, marxist, postcolonial, feminist, queer and ecocritical theory, among others. It is worth stressing that these critical lenses are by no means mutually exclusive nor immutable.

In these times of ecological crises and instability, ecocriticism, which is a fairly recent school of thought, holds promise: it provides the opportunity to explore the interconnectedness between the human and the non-human world and reevaluate our role in the network that we are part of. Donna Haraway made a significant contribution to this theoretical framework by elaborating the concept of *natureculture*, a "synthesis of nature and culture that recognizes their inseparability in ecological relationships that are both biophysically and socially formed"

(Malone, 1). This notion allows us to see beyond the traditional binary opposition nature/culture and understand human interaction with its environment as a complex web of interconnectedness, which makes the individual not an entity that is separate from what we call nature but an integral part of it.

Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* makes reference to the inseparable relationship between these worlds:

When we speak of the “environment”, what we really mean is a relationship existing between nature and the society which lives in it. Nature cannot be regarded as something separate from ourselves or as a mere setting in which we live. We are part of nature, included in it and thus in constant interaction with it. (139)

Father Placide Tempels, a Belgian missionary among the Bantu in Congo expresses a similar idea: “Nothing moves in this universe of forces without influencing other forces by its movement. The world of forces is conceived as a spider’s web of which no single thread can be caused to vibrate without shaking the whole network” (Kamanzi, 71). Philosophical and theological perspectives such as the abovementioned can broaden the scope of the conversation opened up by ecocriticism by adding transcendental value to our present concerns and actions.

Why Ecocriticism? Why Shakespeare?

Ecocriticism emerged in the late eighties and gathered full force in the nineties. It has held great appeal in the American West but it has also extended to other regions of the nation and

the world.¹ Ever since its inception, ecocritics have been struggling to define the term ecocriticism. Despite the multiplicity of perspectives, variations or blends, such as ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, queer ecocriticism, etc., there are some fundamentals that can be emphasized:

- 1) It is an “earth-centered approach to literature” (Glotsfelty).
- 2) “Ecocriticism is committed to making connections” (Estok, 3).
- 3) “Activist criticism has got to cause changes not only in the way we think but also in the way we interact with the natural world” (8).
- 4) “Our current environmental concerns may provide us with a lens through which to view literature” (Egan, 17).
- 5) Ecocriticism is a presentist school of thought because it is concerned with “applying the ideas drawn from literature to the present” (19).

Since Ecocriticism is about making connections, it is from this standpoint that I have chosen to study William’s Shakespeare’s histories. The opportunity these provide, as opposed to comedies, tragedies or romances, is based on their closer connection with reality, even though they are fictionalized representations of the past. During the past decades ecocriticism and Shakespearean Studies have blended into a single field, which is growing significantly. When studying Shakespeare’s works from this perspective, the multivocality of the Bard manifests once again, and we are invited to discover meanings that grant the plays their acclaimed universal

¹ The fact that there is a branch of ecocriticism known as Postcolonial Ecocriticism proves that its outreach has transcended borders and that it is fluid enough to be appropriated by a seemingly local and historically oriented school of thought.

character, which we, as individuals, can only perceive in fragmented ways. Therefore, ecocriticism broadens our understanding of Shakespeare's world and, in turn, our own.

In Shakespeare's second tetralogy, nature appears as an omnipresent force in the language and speeches of its characters. To set an example, Harry Hotspur's threat to divert a river so as to extend the portion of the land allotted to him in a geopolitical arrangement with his allies is an attempt to manipulate and control nature that can resonate with an environmentally aware contemporary audience.

My project is guided by a presentist understanding of literature. This vision does not intend to undermine the value of history to contextualize the plays; conversely, it draws lessons from history that are valid for our time as well. In this sense, studying the relationship between the human and the non-human in Shakespeare's histories can also inform our own relationship with the land we inhabit and our mutual interdependence. Matter and spirit are integrated in this analysis and inspiration is drawn from Pope Francis' so-called green encyclical *Laudato Si*, which invites us to see the Earth as our common home and, consequently, exhorts us to be responsible and caring, echoing the etymology of the word ecology ("oikos" + "logos"), the knowledge of our home. Moreover, it proposes the adoption of a vision of sacrality that relates with the quote from *Richard II* that I have chosen as a title for this thesis: "this blessed plot" (2.1.55). Seeing the Earth and everything in it as "blessed" could be the key to restoring what has been and keeps being damaged by lack of empathy and charity. Yet, a sacramental vision should not exclude science. On the contrary, scientific evidence should be an integral part of the knowledge we seek to become committed dwellers of this Earth. Kate Soper argues for more Green science rather than Green religion to counter "those forms of scientific wisdom and

technological ‘expertise’ that have proved so catastrophic in their impact on the environment” (276). I contend that they are complementary strategies that share a common purpose.

From the point of view of methodology, I have selected scenes from the second tetralogy which enrich our understanding of nature and invite us to see ourselves as an integral part of it. To consolidate my theoretical background, I have consulted foundational works in the field of ecocriticism in general and ecocriticism in connection with Shakespeare and Renaissance literature in particular, such as those produced by Lynne Bruckner, Gabriel Egan, Simon Estok and Jennifer Munroe, among others.

In addition to exploring ecocritical theory for the construction of meaning in the tetralogy, I have incorporated a personal meditation to my analysis of each of the plays studied. Attending the 2021 Shakespeare Association of America conference has allowed me to observe the new directions that committed scholarly work is taking and has strengthened my desire to contribute to academia in a novel way. The UC Merced “Globe 4 Globe: Shakespeare and Climate Emergency” initiative inspired me particularly and I felt compelled to answer the question they posed: “As human-made climate change threatens to dissolve the ‘great globe itself,’ how can we use Shakespeare to address the most urgent environmental questions of our time?” My thesis is aligned with this effort since its major purpose is finding in literature a path to problematizing and searching for answers to our current predicament. Using close reading as a strategy, I have gathered lessons from the plays, which take the form of exhortations --our commitment is an urgent matter-- to enhance our human/non-human interactions in the present and illuminate the path to repairing severed bonds.

Historical Background: The Twilight Zone Between the Medieval and the Modern

The second tetralogy is Shakespeare's fictional reconstruction of an age of transition between the Medieval and the burgeoning Renaissance world that Shakespeare inhabited. The dramatist is the product of an era which saw rapid change in the cultural paradigm, an age where anthropocentrism would replace a theocentric view of the universe. The rise of the Tudor dynasty in the late fifteenth century closed a period of political instability, marked by factionalism, civil wars and wars abroad. The second tetralogy, written and performed during Queen Elizabeth I's late reign, was instrumental in the forging of the Tudor myth and had a pedagogical function by educating the masses that attended the theatre -most of whom were illiterate- about their own past. *Richard II*, the play that opens up this sequence, recreates the events that led to the decline of the Medieval monarchy, which converged toward the Wars of the Roses, a series of intermittent military confrontations between the Houses of York and Lancaster as well as their allies. The unquestionable doctrine of the Divine Right of Kings is utterly shaken since Richard II's deposition in 1399. A new political arrangement and approach to the nature of power would be necessary to fill the void left by Richard, and that is, in the Tudor myth, the ascension of Henry VII, the first Tudor monarch, who restored order and united the houses of Lancaster and York through marriage. In the tetralogy, Shakespeare not only vindicates this myth, but also reinforces it.

The political and social implications of the transition described in the tetralogy have been widely researched. However, observing the relationship between the human and the non-human in these plays has not been attempted as much. My own work is part of a collective endeavor which began in 2015 under the direction of Dr Malvina Aparicio at Universidad del Salvador in Buenos Aires. Our journey has been experimental and aimed at renovation, since our institutions

of Higher Education have for long followed in the footsteps of the Victorian tradition. We have engaged in the study of both the first and the second tetralogies to actualize the meaning of these histories in a time and space that might seem remote from Shakespeare, but which, nevertheless, can enrich itself with a novel understanding of the plays in question. It requires digging beyond the surface, avoiding the temptation to simply observe the human conflicts – which abounded and zooming out to see the broader picture and Shakespeare’s subtle but sound references to the environment and the non-human world.

Since the Norman Conquest and the inception of the Feudal system in England, land became synonymous with power. In 1066 William the conqueror, Duke of Normandy, claimed all the conquered lands as his own. To avoid decentralization and the factionalism and civil strife it could bring about – which he himself had witnessed in France – he designed a version of Feudal tenure in which all the land belonged to the monarch. He distributed it thus: the crown retained a quarter of the land, a quarter was given to the Church and the two remaining quarters were distributed among Norman nobles, but he scattered their estates to avoid local concentration of power and prevent rebellions. The Anglo-Saxon nobility was decimated during the Battle of Hastings and the years that followed. The Anglo-Saxon peasants had to accept their new Norman lords and inhabit and work land that they could not claim as their own. William the Conqueror was also notorious for his dealing with the Northern rebellion. The scorched-earth tactic that he applied when he failed to gain their allegiance would destroy not only human lives but also animals and crops and would devastate the landscape in such a way that it took centuries for the North to recover. The geographical distance and unique features of the North have always set it

apart from the centers of power – the Southeast fertile plains – in Britain. In the second tetralogy, the conflict with the North is manifested once again.

The so-called “Celtic Fringe” (Wales, Cornwall, Scotland and Ireland), which retained ancient traditions and whose inhabitants were usually left to themselves due to geographical and environmental constraints, also plays a major role in the plays. Alliances shift in these territories and kings make them part of their agendas as long as there are no other more pressing matters to solve locally or across the English Channel. The desire to control the fringe can be traced back to Henry II’s claim over Ireland and Edward I’s military campaigns to conquer Scotland, which he failed to accomplish, and Wales, where he succeeded. Wales is presented in the plays as a land where the irrational prevails over the rational, and its leaders as guided by the signs of nature. A notion of what is meant to be civilized in English terms is clearly at work in this portion of the land.

The feudal arrangement that William I wrought faded precisely because of the collapse of a centralized monarchy based on the notion of the Divine Right of Kings. From Richard II’s ascension until the rise of the Tudors, the crown was disputed because of the King’s failure to find a substitute for this decaying system in an age where pre-capitalist forms of trade were emerging in towns and cities. New social sectors were on the rise; power would not necessarily imply belonging to the nobility any longer but using natural resources wisely in the countryside, developing a trade or becoming a merchant in the growing urban centers. Also, the Black Death, which hit England for the first time in 1348, caused a striking decline of the workforce in the fields and, therefore, wage labor slowly replaced the former feudal arrangement. The fourteenth century fencing-off system also led masses away from rural villages and towards rising urban centers of power. Added to these changes, the Wars of the Roses would destroy entire families

belonging to the traditional Medieval aristocracy that would claim lands by inheritance. The void produced by their deaths would grant the Tudors the opportunity to make a new arrangement with their chosen people: the gentry. These would become the *nouveau riche*, faithful to the monarchs that gave them power over their estates. The gentry would transform the landscape by using the most refined local and foreign materials and majestic gardens would be attached to their properties. The dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII's reign would also grant to the Tudors one more card to play in land distribution and the consolidation of a new alliance with the gentry. Shakespeare, therefore, witnessed the transformation of urban landscapes and the early signs of pollution brought about by the rise of population in these areas. Bruckner and Brayton refer to these cultural and environmental transformations in their introduction to *Ecocritical Shakespeare*. The construction race in Tudor times also provoked significant deforestation (229). The fact that when the Globe was relocated the timbers from the old playhouse were transported across the Thames attests to it.

Richard II's "Sceptered Isle"

Richard II's reign marked the beginning of the transition from the Medieval world of chivalrous values to the modern age ushered in by the Tudors. Edward III, Richard's grandfather, together with his son, Edward the Black Prince, became the epitomes of chivalry through their exploits during the first phase of the so-called Hundred Years' War against France. Richard succeeded his grandfather at a very early age because of his father's untimely death. His lack of experience and inability to manage disputes among quarrelsome nobles was one of the reasons for his downfall. His drive for absolute power would eventually lead to his death.

The play paints a very clear picture of this political turmoil and brings to the foreground the question of land tenure that had rarely been disputed since William the Conqueror's claim over all the land. Henry Bolingbroke - later Henry IV - challenges Richard's authority precisely on account of land and Richard's failure to recognize Bolingbroke's claim to his father's estates. Henry takes on the role of the leader of the disaffected nobles that felt betrayed by Richard's policies and ultimately becomes king by conquest and feeble heredity through the Lancastrian line. A more pragmatic Machiavellian concept of power replaced the doctrine of the Divine Right: control over the land and its resources - and the capacity to sustain it - was at the center of what power entailed.

At the beginning of the play, the King arbitrates a dispute between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, who had committed crimes against his king and country which Richard presumably overlooked or even desired. Bolingbroke refers to the traitor through the following metaphor: "Since the more fair and crystal is the sky, the uglier seem the clouds that in it fly"(1.1.42-43).

Climatological images like this one abound in the play, but it is not only at a symbolic level that they become relevant. They echo features of permanence and transcendence in the face of rivalry and change. When authorities are caught in the game of politics, it is the land that suffers together with its weakest inhabitants, who have no voice in these grand schemes.

When Richard decides to put an end to the duel between Mowbray and Bolingbroke, the King argues that his kingdom's earth should not be soiled with the blood which it has fostered. The earth, whose fruits nurture life, is given an intrinsically sacred dimension for which it must be protected and respected. The earth is synonymous with life; bloodshed is repugnant to it. Richard decides on banishment for them both. Exile means uprooting the individual from their land or, in Romeo's words, being banished is death misnamed (3.3). Bolingbroke, despite his grief, accepts leaving his land aware that it is the same sun that shines over all mankind, no matter where we are. The universal character of nature is foregrounded: "That sun that warms you here shall shine on me, / And those his golden beams to you here lent/ Shall point on me and gild my banishment" (1.3.147-149). There is no life without the sun. Every living being, directly or indirectly, obtains the energy it needs to survive from it. In that sense, we are all connected in a network of energetic exchange that stems from the sun. This inextricable tie between the sun and life is at the root of the divine quality attributed to it in many cultures. The sun can also symbolize the father figure as the giver of life. Bolingbroke's father, John of Gaunt, would have to see his son go and accept the fact that they might not see each other again. In his farewell speech, Gaunt urges his son to contemplate nature – birds, grass, flowers – and to see everything that he loves reflected in it so as to drive sorrow away. Nature is presented as a source of solace that goes beyond political frontiers. Human conflict becomes ephemeral if one can read the language of nature and be in tune with its rhythms:

Suppose the singing birds musicians,
 The grass whereon thou tread'st the presence
 strew'd,
 The flowers fair ladies, and thy steps no more
 Than a delightful measure or a dance;
 For gnarling sorrow hath less power to bite
 The man that mocks at it and sets it light. (1.3.294-300)

The scene ends with Bolingbroke's farewell to mother earth. The association between the feminine and the earth as a womb, a space where life originates, is a trope explored by ecofeminists.² In this passage the earth is symbolically represented as a mother and a nurse, acknowledging that life is impossible without it, as is the case with the sun. Living beings depend on the earth for survival. Like a nurse, it provides sustenance and channels the energy that enables life. The earth, in turn, is worthy of respect and the cares of mankind. Thus, a harmonious and everlasting relationship is imperative. Moreover, the scene expresses the feeling of belonging to a particular land with its unique features. It provides identity to the human and fulfills their desire to grow those roots that we, unlike other living forms, don't naturally have. Bolingbroke departs with these words:

Then, England's ground, farewell; sweet soil, adieu;
 My mother and my nurse that bears me yet!
 Where'er I wander, boast of this I can,
 Though banish'd, yet a trueborn Englishman. (1.3.314-316)

In Act 2, before his death, Gaunt reflects about Richard's reign by referring to the elements of nature such as rain and fire. His words are an omen: Richard's reign will be short-lived and its end, abrupt. "For violent fires soon burn out themselves;/ Small showers last long,

² Within the ecofeminist corpus, Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva's work is foundational. They refer to the masculinization of the state, especially in connection with India, as disruption of the concept of motherland.

but sudden storms are/ short;" (2.1.38-40). Gaunt, who is beyond loyalties at this point, pronounces a hymn of praise to the land, England, which is yet a lament because it is being leased out by those who rule it. He accuses Richard of having become the landlord of England rather than its king. The reason behind Richard's decision to prostitute the land in this way is the funding of his military campaign in Ireland. He exploits the resources of the English soil to continue Henry II's quest to extend the crown's domains, and, by forsaking his own land, he loses it. In Gaunt's famous speech, the non-human prevails over the human, which challenges the anthropocentric view of the universe of the Renaissance. The land is once again worshipped as the source of life, it is given divine attributes and glorified for its perfection. This makes the disruptive behavior of the humans in charge even more notorious. Richard not only leased out land, but he also granted blank charters to his loyal subjects in exchange for large sums of gold (1.4.49-51). Gaunt, who is on the verge of death, has the clarity that those who are blinded by power for power's sake lack. He shares his prophetic vision but to no avail:

This royal throne of kings, this scepter'd 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,
 This nurse, this teeming womb of royal kings. (2.1.45-57)

Such a reflection is the result of contemplation. Contemplation comes with maturity; it is a quality of the wise. Upon Gaunt's death, Richard refers to him as a ripe fruit, which is the first to fall from the tree, that same tree to which Bolingbroke and he himself belong to. Having the same "sap" flowing through their veins will not be sufficient to impede a war. There is a conscious appeal to brotherhood as a physical and energetic connection made very clear through the metaphors of branches and sap. In the same way that all branches and leaves are nourished by the same sap, so are all the members of the royal family linked by their common ancestry and, furthermore, by their belonging to the human species. Therefore, turning against one another implies self-destruction and goes beyond the bounds of reason. Nevertheless, war occurs because human beings fail to perceive that shared materiality which binds us to one another and, in turn, to the universe at large. This disconnection opens up a chapter that will only be closed by the union of the Lancastrian and Yorkist houses at the conclusion of the Wars of the Roses.

Act 2 closes in Wales. A Welsh Captain can read the King's imminent fall in the signs of nature. The Welsh are going to fight for Richard against Bolingbroke, but they disperse due to the bad omens in the earth and sky:

The bay-trees in our country are all withered,
 And meteors fright the fixed stars of heaven;
 The pale-faced moon looks bloody on the Earth, (...)
 These signs forerun the death or fall of kings. (2.4.8-15)

These are not mere metaphors. When a war is fought, the land suffers: fields are burnt, animals are dispersed, horses' bodies are manipulated for destructive purposes, crops are laid to waste, the vegetable and the mineral world are exploited to produce weaponry and ammunition. For centuries, Wales had been a backwater for England due to its natural features and climate.

Edward I had managed to secure the allegiance of the Welsh by crushing its rebellious princes and imposing the rule of his firstborn son as Prince of Wales, a tradition that still stands.

Nevertheless, the Welsh economy and lifestyle remained fairly primitive as compared to the progress that fourteenth-century England was experiencing in its urban communities. The Welsh are, therefore, depicted as backward, uncultured, and more “natural” in the Shakespearean usage of the term. Their traditional connection with the land, its signs and its cycles is what grants its leaders a different perspective and allows them to see beyond the present circumstances.

Shakespeare does not seem to favor a condescending view of the Welsh; he merely illustrates the patronizing attitude that urban England had towards their neighboring country.

Act 3 opens with Bolingbroke’s return to claim Gaunt’s land, which Richard had confiscated after Gaunt's death. He comes back to claim his “inheritance of free descent” (2.3.140). Nicolo Machiavelli in the chapter of *The Prince* that describes principalities acquired by one’s own arms and ability states:

...there is nothing more difficult to take in hand, more perilous to conduct, or more uncertain in its success, than to take the lead in the introduction of a new order of things, because the innovator has for enemies all those who have done well under the old conditions... (13)

Throughout his reign, Henry IV will be haunted by his enemies – old and new – as well as some of his former allies as a consequence of inaugurating a new order in which power derives not from the principle of primogeniture but from one’s ability to command and bargain.

Bolingbroke returns from exile with the intention of restoring order and justice.³ He executes two traitors to his cause, Bushy and Greene, whose names make clear reference to nature. Paradoxically, they are accused of having dispark'd Bolingbroke's parks and having felled his forest woods during his exile (3.1.23). Richard arrives back from his campaign in Ireland only to find Bolingbroke in England. Richard disembarks on the coast of Wales and salutes the earth, mirroring Bolingbroke's gesture. Richard establishes a dialogue with the land and despises those who wound it with their horses' hoofs (3.2.7). He urges the earth not to let the rebels benefit from its most precious gifts – crops, flowers, fruits – but rather to interpose nettles, toads, spiders, and snakes in their way. This prayer foregrounds the double quality of the earth as a giver of life but also as the place to which all living forms will return. It problematizes the notion of the “Great Chain of Being”⁴, where human beings claim superiority over other animate and inanimate forms, and lays bare how vulnerable we are:

Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth,
Nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense,
But let thy spiders, that suck up thy venom,
And heavy-gaited toads lie in their way,
Doing annoyance to the treacherous feet
Which with usurping steps do trample thee.
Yield stinging nettles to mine enemies,
And when they from thy bosom pluck a flower,
Guard it, I pray thee, with a lurking adder,

³ In the film version of the tetralogy *The Hollow Crown*, Bolingbroke kisses the earth upon his return. This symbolic gesture of reunion and worship is a prelude to his aim to uproot all those who have been unfaithful to the land.

⁴ The Early Modern Period appropriates and re-elaborates the Aristotelian hierarchical organization of the universe.

Whose double tongue may with a mortal touch
 Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies. (3.2.12-22)

This passage alludes to the postlapsarian loss of the state of perfect harmony between the human and the non-human described in the book of Genesis:

Cursed be the ground because of you! In toil shall you eat its yield all the days of your life.
 Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to you, as you eat of the plants of the field. By the sweat of
 your face shall you get bread to eat, until you return to the ground, from which you were taken
 For you are dirt, and to dirt you shall return. (Gen 3, 17-19)

The idea of returning to the ground from which we were taken is also alluded to when Richard learns that Bushy and Greene have been executed and that the Welshmen have dispersed themselves⁵. The king reflects about the temporality of royal power and human finitude:

what can we bequeath
 Save our deposed bodies to the ground
 [...] For within the hollow crown
 That rounds the mortal temples of a king
 Keeps Death his court. (3.2.154-167)

In *The Hollow Crown*, after this speech, the King inscribes his name on the sand and the waves wash it away. It is a symbolic representation of the temporal quality of human existence and political power on earth in the face of nature, which precedes and succeeds us. We are, as far as our matter is concerned, like that name written on sand.

⁵ This connection is even more vivid in the etymology of the word human, which derives from the Latin word “humus”, meaning earth.

Richard's deposition challenges the prevailing political paradigm in which the monarch was part of a cosmological order. He considered his position natural, granted by God, and, due to his privileged place in the hierarchy of being, he deems it natural for God to be on his side. "God omnipotent, / Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf/ Armies of pestilence..." (3.3.87-89). The Elizabethan audience might have grasped an allusion to the Plagues of Egypt -since the Bible was the great code of communication behind the Shakespearean text- when the forces of nature favored the "righteous." Moreover, they could also have associated this episode to the English victory against the invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588, in which nature (a storm, the wind, geographical features, etc.) "fought" on their side. Elizabeth herself is said to have made such a claim.

A remarkable scene in the play that has been widely studied in terms of symbolism takes place in the Duke of York's garden. Gardens constitute a liminal or transition zone between the public and the private space. They exemplify Donna Haraway's concept of *natureculture*, through which there are no artificial boundaries between pure nature and pure culture. Contrariwise, nature and culture are two ends of a continuum. The gardeners have an active role in keeping the garden alive; in turn, the household benefits from its fruits and herbs and also, as is the case of the Queen and her lady-in-waiting, from the protection and privacy that such a space offers. The garden constitutes a eulogized space and is an instance of *topophilia* since it is open to human habitation, it is a protected expanse which can become a shrine for nature without the impending dangers of wilderness (Bachelard, 35). In their collaborative essay "On a Bank of Rue," Jennifer Munroe and Rebecca Laroche offer a material and ecofeminist reading of the garden scene. They resist the temptation of a mere allegorical interpretation of the garden as a microcosmos that represents England and chose to focus on the materiality of the garden

informed by early modern gardening and kitchen practices. They contrast herb-gardens to orchards, the former being the province of women and the latter typically the domain of men. In this scene, the Queen and her lady take shelter in the garden and overhear a conversation between the gardener and his serving men about the imbalances of the kingdom. They compare the weeds in the garden to those who have thrived during Richard's reign, such as Bushy and Greene. The latter are weeds that have already been pulled out. The failure of Richard's reign according to them was having let those weeds grow and choke up the garden, England. Munroe and Laroche add an ecopolitical dimension to the metaphor by suggesting that if Richard had engaged in active dialogue with those that know and work the land, his leadership would have been transformed (43). In this intimate space, Shakespeare gives voice to the voiceless. The disenfranchised – servants, women – become the voice of nature. Richard, like so many other leaders of all times, disregards the humans that are more deeply connected to the non-human world, and who, therefore, have the practical wisdom to perceive the failures of his reign. The gardener regrets that Richard has not taken care of the nation as they take care of the garden in the Duke's estate: "O, what pity is it/ That he had not so trimmed and dressed his land/ As we this garden!" (3.4.61-63). The workers of the land are invisibilized in the face of seemingly more pressing affairs of state. However, after the famine experienced as a result of the plague, agricultural workers will attempt to put pressure on the authorities by demanding higher wages. During the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, a recently crowned and underaged Richard appeared as the champion of the people and dispersed the mob. Nevertheless, he failed to uphold his promise and became a victim of his own hubris, neglecting the masses that he had defended earlier in life. By forsaking the backbone of England's population, he ultimately failed to care for the land itself. Healing the kingdom goes beyond the metaphor of tending to it as if it were a garden. It involves

satisfying the needs of the invisible and administering the resources of the land in a harmonious manner.

The Queen overhears the conversation between the gardener and his servants. Her grief upon learning Richard's fate makes her curse the gardener and wish that his plants will never grow. The gardener sympathizes with her and as a sign of his compassion he promises to "set a bank of rue, sour herb of grace, / [...] in the remembrance of a weeping queen" (3.4.111-114). She waters the garden with her tears and, in doing so, the human and non-human worlds are fused. This image is a vivid representation of a perpetual connection.

In Act 4, when Bolingbroke ascends the throne, the bishop of Carlisle, who was still loyal to Richard, refers to the events that would take place the following century as a consequence of this usurpation: the Wars of the Roses, a dynastic struggle that would decimate an entire social sector. In his prophecy, the bishop foresees that if Henry Bolingbroke is crowned "the blood of English shall manure the ground" (4.1.143). The earth will suffer due to human behavior. When Richard surrenders the crown, he compares himself to snow in the face of Bolingbroke, who as king evokes the image of the sun. Richard understands he is helpless; there has been "a change of season" for the history of England.

In the closing act, the former king Richard and his Queen say farewell to each other. She would rather return to the earth than see "her fair rose wither" (5.1.8). This metaphor reminds us of the delicate and fragile nature that is attributed to Richard. Richard is sent to Pomfret Castle and the Queen is sent to France. In the second scene, York retells the people's attitude when Richard passes by: "dust was thrown upon his sacred head" (5.2.33). His death ensues and he returns to the earth. The body of the king, which in the Medieval mentality had sacred qualities

and, to some, even the ability to heal by touch, will now dissolve into one with other atoms of the material world. In death, all humanly constructed hierarchies fade.

The ecocritical vision makes us aware of the fact that in the language of the tetralogy the non-human is not the background of the events; it impregnates it all but, perceiving this, requires a change of perspective.

Meditation

The play invites us to adopt a contemplative vision, which many of its characters model for us. A thorough understanding of the essence of power and political institutions cannot exclude the non-human living and non-living forms of the world we inhabit. It is the disenfranchised in the play who remind us of this forgotten dimension. Who owns the land and what is done with it? In Richard's time, arable land fed the nation but those who worked it were not the ones who owned it. The unequal distribution of the land for political purposes and to secure alliances might not be as evident now as it was back then, but it is still an issue that has to be addressed worldwide. Vast tracts of land are owned by few, and its workers rarely get to enjoy the fruits of their labor. How to make land distribution and access more equitable is one of the questions that the play might inspire a contemporary audience to reflect upon.

The poetic rendering of the beauty of nature in the play also inspires us to see the beauty in all human and non-human forms in our own spaces. Is our relationship with the land driven by a desire of exploitation to increase the wealth of just a few or is it based on a sustainable approach where all species can thrive? The fact that it is the same energy that flows through all the matter in our universe reminds us of our interconnectedness. What can we do to care for the earth around us and, in turn, ourselves? What types of energy are we choosing to produce? What is our attitude toward consumerism? In a pre-capitalist world like Richard's, land was appropriated to distribute among prospective allies, who would serve the King in military campaigns. A violent attitude towards land distribution also entailed a violent attitude towards the land itself by sheer destruction through endless battles fought on English soil. Readers of different geographies can ponder about their own past. The history of land appropriation by a powerful elite -or simply by the strongest- and the destruction of native human and non-human

lives is recurrent in the American continent. Have we moved forward and are we ready to write a new chapter in our relationship with the land which does not stem from violence and the desire to exploit its resources “to benefit” a select group of humans? Reflecting on our attitudes to the land, the nature of power, institutions and what our role as human beings should be in the web that constitutes the earth can lead us to the understanding that environmental and social justice are inextricable, as Blado and Ladino propose in *Affective Ecocriticism* (3). “What can we bequeath to the earth?”, Richard asked himself. Not just our dead bodies as he stated. We can bequeath our commitment to restore a different logic to guide our relationship with the land: the adoption of a vision of sacredness and respect that will allow us to see the earth as our shared home, and ourselves in others.

Henry IV: “Of One Substance Bred”

The following section explores *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* as a unit. These are the second and third plays in the tetralogy, which focus on Henry Bolingbroke’s late reign and his quest to retain legitimacy after having deposed Richard II. He lives in the shadow of his usurpation and its consequences, embodied in his former allies’ rebellion. Fringe territories - Wales, Scotland, the North of England- close in on the King and his followers. The conflict between center and periphery has been and still is a well-trodden trope in British history. Since Ancient times, the British Isles suffered wave after wave of invasions from the South, even when there was still a land bridge connecting the island of Great Britain to the continent. This pattern was successively repeated by different groups until the last successful invasion by William of Normandy in 1066, with the exception of the Viking raids from the North. The early invaders settled in the Southeast due to the fertility of the lands and the abundance of rivers that became important arteries of trade and movement. However, the more inhospitable qualities of the so-called Celtic Fringe lands made the Northwest less attractive and harder to subdue. Henry IV struggled to maintain or extend his control over territories that are very remote from the center and, because of their idiosyncrasy, very distinct from England. The arbitrariness of establishing a political unity in the Isles has been the source of controversy for centuries and its inhabitants are still divided on this issue.⁶ The relationship with the land and its resources has always been at the root of this dispute.

In the plays, king Henry IV realizes the past and potential destruction that his lands suffered and wants to divert his bellic impetus to distant lands. In his opening speech, he vouches for peace at home and war abroad, and he does so on the grounds of a monistic interpretation of

⁶ The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence, not to mention the more recent disagreements over Brexit prove that territorial and political unity in the UK is still an area of contention.

human and non-human nature. The passage holds a promise of harmony by acknowledging the material interconnectedness of all creation. It can be read as a confession and call for forgiveness for all the harm caused in preceding conflicts. Bloodshed has damaged the soil, its plants, its animals, and humans alike. It has disrupted and tainted a quasi-Edenic network of relationships in what John of Gaunt had dubbed a demi-paradise:

No more the thirsty entrance of this soil
 Shall daub her lips with her own children's blood.
 No more shall trenching war channel her fields,
 Nor bruise her flow'rets with the armed hoofs
 Of hostile paces. Those opposed eyes,
 Which, like the meteors of a troubled heaven,
 All of one nature, of one substance bred,
 Did lately meet in the intestine shock
 And furious close of civil butchery (...) (1.1.5-13)

Had Henry IV pronounced those words and understood their implications, what followed would have been completely different. Shakespeare creates a “what-if” scenario and invites the audience to reimagine British history without the civil wars that this period would lead to. The Henry of Act 1 understands the all-encompassing consequences of destruction by acknowledging that everything, animate and inanimate, is “of one substance bred.” Consequently, the expected attitude towards all forms should be of reverence and respect since harming any element of creation would imply harming oneself. However, the promise that this passage holds is short-lived, since Henry fails to recognize that the same logic applies to all the world and is not restricted to the land over which he rules. A few lines after referring to this oneness-in-nature, he eagerly proposes to embark on a crusade to the Holy Land to atone for his usurpation of the crown and its effects on the human and non-human worlds. Paradoxically, he does not perceive

the contradiction between his initial attitude of reverence to all forms “of one substance bred” and his approach to those that are perceived as others due to their religious and/or cultural identity. Difference seems to justify violence once again. Yet, this prospective crusade is not concretized because the marginal lands within the isle rebel against the monarch’s authority before he has the chance to depart.

Another “what-if” scenario that the audience is presented with relates to differences in social hierarchies. Prince Harry, the future Henry V, consorts with the commoners and engages in unprincely behavior in the eyes of his father. The king is very disappointed at his son’s disconnection from the affairs of the state and wonders whether his son will be fit to succeed him. In the Shakespearean text, what could be a mere instance of youthful rebellion leads us to another moment of reflection. What if the future ruler could adopt a more egalitarian view of society by regarding all human lives as intrinsically valuable? The bond he establishes with Falstaff, who becomes a father figure to him, makes us hopeful that the new generation will be more sensitive towards the people. When addressing Falstaff, the Prince shows a shift in perspective by saying “...wisdom cries out in the streets and no man regards it” (95). Even if Henry does not satisfy that expectation in the end, the Elizabethan audience might have sensed that the Tudors did move forward in that direction by forging new alliances. A contemporary readership with environmental and social sensitivity can also ponder on the implications such a remark may have had. Simon Estok refers to the potential of these plays for ecocritical reflection and the inseparability of ecological and social justice: “it seems untenable to discuss class meaningfully outside of an ecocritical framework, since so very much of our thinking about class and social hierarchy is structured by ecophobia, by the way we lay value on, commodify, and hierarchize nature” (64). Estok understands that there is an interconnectedness in literary theory

which he refers to as “confluent theorizing” (1). It is an invitation to integrate academic endeavors to construct meaning and a call to avoid a binary view of the world by rejecting the logic of either/or. Whenever we fail to discern the oneness and connection that Henry IV referred to in his opening speech, we otherize what is outside ourselves and adopt an illusion of separation.

Prince Hal’s soliloquy (1.2.202-224) reveals the real motivations behind his consorting with the lower ranks, and our illusion for equality is shattered. His purpose is to act like the prodigal son, whose return and reformation “show more goodly and attract more eyes”. The foil to the prince is Harry Hotspur, the Earl of Northumberland’s heir, and the ideal son in the eyes of Henry IV. Not only does he fulfill the role that is expected of him, but he also hints at the ecological destruction that war brings about, an issue that Hal does not address. When speaking of saltpeter, one of the ingredients of gunpowder, he claims: “...it was a great pity (...)/ This villainous saltpeter should be digged / Out of the bowels of the harmless earth, / Which many a good tall fellow had destroyed / So cowardly...” (1.3.62-65). Even though he attributes human qualities to inorganic matter by dubbing it “villainous”, it is clear that it is the human misuse of the elements of nature that drives destruction from the otherwise “harmless earth.” Later in the play, Hotspur reinforces the creative capacity of the earth by comparing it to a womb:

Diseased nature oftentimes breaks forth
 In strange eruptions; oft the teeming earth
 Is with a kind of colic pinched and vexed
 By the imprisoning of unruly wind
 Within her womb, which, for enlargement striving,
 Shakes the old beldam earth and topples down
 Steeples and moss-grown towers. At your birth

Our grandam earth, having this distemp'rature,
In passion shook. (3.1.28-36)

This passage is part of a thought-provoking description of how the forces of nature were at work during the Welsh rebel Owen Glendower's birth. There is an intrinsic ontological connection between the human and the non-human in this interpretation and it is no coincidence that those described as more "natural" are those who are further away from the established centers of culture. Glendower sees himself as extraordinary on account of these signs of nature. The description refers to an earthquake, yet the rebel endows it with mystical attributes which he, in turn, transfers onto his own figure: "I am not in the roll of common men" (3.1.45). But it is not just the unusual circumstances of his birth that set him aside; it is the features and the position of the land that he inhabits. The landscape shapes who we are.

In this same scene, we also witness an exchange between the three rebels: Hotspur, who comes from the northernmost part of England, Mortimer, earl of March -the frontier territory between Wales and England-, and Glendower of Wales. From the geographical point of view, the periphery rebels against the center. King Henry IV's sphere of influence is reduced, and he finds himself suddenly surrounded by enemies. What underlies the rebels' grievances is a desire to recover their lost autonomy and to manage their own resources. Rivers, which are usually sources of life and human habitation, act as a natural boundary in defense of the Welsh: "Three times hath Henry Bolingbroke made head/ Against my power; thrice from the banks of the Wye / And sandy-bottomed Severn have I sent him/ Bootless home and weather-beaten back" (3.1.68-71). The weather is also an ally of the Welsh. In the conversation that follows, Glendower displays a map and proposes a geopolitical arrangement that would be fulfilled if the rebels were to defeat the King. They would divide the conquered territory into three "equal" parts, but nature

gets in the way of what the participants consider fair. Owen Glendower secures “all the fertile land within that bound” (3.1.80). However, upon looking at the map, Hotspur feels cheated and points out that the arrangement is far from equal. A river would cut him off from the best land. Consequently, his solution will be to build a dam. His relationship with the non-human is driven by a desire to dominate and exploit to consolidate his power over the region.

I'll have the current in this place dammed up,
And here the smug and silver Trent shall run
In a new channel, fair and evenly.
It shall not wind with such a deep indent
To rob me of so rich a bottom here. (3.1.105-109)

The use of the first person reveals that Hotspur's conception of power and authority stems from a hierarchical view of the world in which human beings are at the top. There are no limits to what those who wield political power over a territory can do in it or to it. The stage is now set for war. In Prince Hal's own words: “The land is burning” (3.3. 215). This symbolically points at the fire raging in men's hearts, but it is also literal, since war brings about destruction and devastation to lands and creatures which would otherwise be fertile and productive. Hotspur also refers to the ravaging of the land that is about to happen by saying “Doomsday is near” (4.1.142). The word doomsday is impregnated not only with the biblical allusion to the Day of Judgement but also with historical connotations for Britain, since it brings to memory the burning of the land by William the Conqueror and his later survey of the conquered territories, their inhabitants, and their wealth.

Henry IV, whose usurpation of the throne was intended to bring stability, paradoxically finds himself amid an undesired civil war, which he must fight to secure the throne for his son. Hal's participation in the war vindicates him as a character and makes him worthy of the crown,

as he had anticipated. His transformation is summed up in his combat against Hotspur. In a verbal exchange before the fight, Hotspur speaks of death and how after killing Hal his body will be food for worms. As was observed in *Richard II*, the notion of going back to the earth where we came from is part of Shakespeare's use of the Bible as a common code. The prince, after killing Percy, reinforces this idea by reflecting about the body and the spirit. Upon death, the body is reunited with the earth and the spirit is not bound by it anymore. Thus, he refers to interconnectedness between the body and the spirit while we are alive, and between the body and the earth once we have passed away. This speech serves as an acknowledgement of Percy's valor in battle and as a substitute for funeral rites:

When that this body did contain a spirit,
 A kingdom for it was too small a bound,
 But now two paces of the vilest earth
 Is room enough. This earth that bears thee dead
 Bears not alive so stout a gentleman. (5.4.91-95)

The victory at Shrewsbury does not mark the end of the internecine confrontation inaugurated during Richard II's reign. Conversely, in *2 Henry IV* we witness the continuation of the wars against the rebels. This play exposes the king's failure to preserve the new order that he had wished to institute. Once again, ecocriticism allows us to see beyond his failure as a politician and statesman and observe the impact that decades of war has on the land. In the induction to the play, rumor explicitly refers to Shrewsbury as a "bloody field" and the "rebels' blood" (Ind. 24-27). The open question is whether that knowledge will make the future any different and if the wish to restore what was lost will make the future Henry V more compassionate towards the land and its inhabitants.

At the beginning of the play, the Earl of Northumberland, who had not been present at the Battle of Shrewsbury, is told how his son perished. His grief and frustration are not only directed against his enemies but also against nature itself. The unnaturalness of his loss – in the natural order of things fathers are not expected to witness their children’s deaths – might in his view legitimize his desire that nature unleash its destructive potential and that order should give way to chaos:

Let heaven kiss the earth! Now let not Nature’s hand
 Keep the wild flood confined. Let order die,
 And let this world no longer be a stage
 To feed contention in a lingering act; (1.1.169-172)

Northumberland is subsequently rebuked by his peers and urged not to let his passions gain mastery over him. He acknowledges their good intentions and accepts his words were motivated by grief, yet that does not change the course of events and he prepares for battle.

Before being transported again to the battlefield, Shakespeare allows the audience to penetrate King Henry IV’s inner world by means of a soliloquy. The intimacy of the scene is not only expressed through the monarch’s psychomachia, but it is also complemented by external details such as the King’s garment -his nightgown- and the fact that it is the middle of the night. The King, burdened by the guilt of having deposed Richard II and all that followed, is suffering from insomnia. The body of the king is, in this sense, as vulnerable as that of any of his subjects. Rank does not make any difference since no body can be deprived of sleep. The King envies any of his poorest subjects who are favored by slumber, “nature’s soft nurse” (3.1.6). He invokes sleep in a passage where he summarizes the burden of power by saying “uneasy lies the head that

wears a crown” (1.3.30). Following this soliloquy, a group of earls enters the scene. In an exchange with Warwick, Henry compares his kingdom to a body where rank diseases grow and goes on to express how difficult it is for human beings to foresee the results of their actions and how much uneasiness that produces. However, human enterprises are insignificant compared to the great alterations that the cosmos undergoes:

O God, that one might read the book of fate
 And see the revolution of the times
 Make mountains level, and the continent,
 Weary of solid firmness, melt itself
 Into the sea! And, other times, to see
 the beachy girdle of the ocean
 Too wide for Neptune’s hips... (3.1.45-51)

The previous passage evinces that the King has gained wisdom with age and has been able to identify that there is a universe with its own rules and rhythms that humans have no dominion over. He also refers to the evanescent quality of human life and to how if one could foresee the perils to come later in life, one might as well sit down and embrace death. This reflection is loaded with regret, even repentance, and with the burden of knowing that the past cannot be undone. The dying king must accept that it is his son who will be in charge of repairing the damage. His own time is up.

When the rebellions are finally put down, the King speaks to his son, the future Henry V and admits the tenuous claim of the Lancastrians but hopes his son will turn his energies to other lands rather than keep spoiling their own:

God knows, my son,
 by what by-paths and indirect crook’d ways
 I met this crown; and I myself know well

how troublesome it sat upon my head.
 To thee it shall descend with better quiet,
 better opinion, better confirmation,
 for all the soil of the achievement goes
 with me into the earth. (4.3.341-348)

The thirst for atonement that King Henry IV conveyed in the opening speech to *1 Henry IV* has not been quenched. Therefore, towards the end of *2 Henry IV* there is a certain circularity, a return to the beginning. Once again, the king refers to the recovery of the Holy Land as a vehicle to attain forgiveness, and sanctified wars as the only legitimate ones. This insistence also seems to point at what would become the state of affairs during Tudor times: war at home should be avoided but it can be tolerated or even encouraged if it is waged against a foreign enemy. The religious dimension provides an additional layer of justification in Henry IV's eyes. It is likely that the Tudor audience, which had been suffering religious confrontations within their territory since Henry VIII's break with Rome, could grasp the value of religious uniformity for the sake of political stability. A contemporary audience, by contrast, is invited to reflect about the contradictions entailed in such propositions. No matter who the enemy is, or on what grounds wars are waged, any conflict that implies the annihilation of other human lives and their environments constitutes an offense against humanity and the earth itself.

When King Henry IV utters "How quickly nature falls into revolt /when gold becomes her object!" (4.3.217-218), he alludes to his son's premature seizing of the crown when he believes his father to be dead. In addition, we are warned against the dangers of greed and an exploitation of the natural world that could lead to the exclusion of others. Nature could and currently is answering back to human greed through the disruption of its cycles and patterns. But healing our relationship with the Earth also implies understanding that there is no human that can

be undermined or excluded. Fixing our broken bonds with each other can and must be the first step towards working for our common home. Pope Francis reflects about the need to leave behind any policies that are based on the hatred of other peoples in his encyclical letter *Fratelli Tutti*. “When a specific policy sows hatred and fear towards other nations in the name of its own country’s welfare, there is need to be concerned, to react in time and immediately to correct the course” (5.192). He offers a reflection about political love, which might seem an oxymoron due to its radicalism. In Henry IV’s time, such an idea was inconceivable. If peace was to be attained at home to prevent the destruction of the kingdom, then the bellicist impulse must be directed elsewhere. With the end of civil strife, there is a sense of a return to order and harmony with nature among the commoners. Shallow expresses it thus: “...you shall see my orchard, where, in an/ arbor, we will eat a last year’s pippin of mine own/ grafting, with a dish of caraways...” (5.3.1-3). Regrettably, Henry V is disengaged from the affairs of the people and is already plotting his next move to secure a strong reign. He betrays his old-time friend and father-figure John Falstaff and condemns him to exile as a final symbolic step in his reformation. The play ends with the announcement that England will wage war against France. Henry V’s reign will be marked by his exploits on foreign soil and will revive the conflict known as the Hundred-Years’ War initiated by Edward III. Even if this time English soil will not be soiled directly through bloodshed, its resources, its animals, its crops, and its people will be drained to prepare for this effort and the land will suffer as well.

Meditation

Power and leadership can feel like a burden as expressed by Shakespeare’s Henry IV in his memorable quote “uneasy lies the head that wears a crown” (3.1.31). Contemporary readers/viewers of this play can reflect about their own call to leadership roles in their lives

whatever those may be: familial, political, educational, medical, religious, environmental, etc.

The question we might ask ourselves is why we should lead and how to lead. What do we want our contribution to be? If we acknowledge the interconnectedness of all beings – that we are “of one substance bred” – , what follows is to assume our collective responsibility for the well-being of others and, in turn, our own selves. An ecocritical outlook might have been instrumental for a monarch such as Henry IV to conduct the affairs of state with wisdom and balance. It might have allowed him to see his role as one of service rather than one of power. He grappled with the emotional cost of preserving the crown at the expense of many human and non-human lives. Leaders must remember that their undertakings should be driven by love and respect for life. Nowadays, creating environmental awareness in our communities and taking an active role in the preservation of the land and all its inhabitants – human, animal, plant, mineral, etc. – should be the focus not only of those that occupy formal positions of leadership but also of anyone that has felt the calling to drive change. We are all invited to be leaders when it comes to caring for our “common home”, but we can leave behind the uneasiness that afflicted Henry IV and assume “the burden” with love and patience, knowing that change requires collective strength, commitment, and endurance. To work for the common good, we should let go of our individualism and see ourselves as part of a greater whole. As Pope Francis proposes in his encyclical *Fratelli Tutti*,

People can develop certain habits that might appear as moral values: fortitude, sobriety, hard work and similar virtues. Yet if the acts of the various moral virtues are to be rightly directed, one needs to take into account the extent to which they foster openness and union with others. (3.91)

If we are to strive for a world where charity prevails, we should assume the risk of leading with charity and hope.

Henry V: “The World’s Best Garden”

During Henry V’s reign England once again experienced the political stability brought about by strong leadership. After his father’s uneasy reign, Henry managed to bring England back to the standards of his chivalrous ancestor Edward III. In popular imagination, this king had become the paragon of courtly values which were associated with the legend of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. With such a model in mind, Henry V revived the conflict known as the Hundred-Years’ War, which had started during Edward III’s reign and had been interrupted during Richard II and Henry IV’s reigns due to domestic quarrels.

The reasons why the war against France was fought are manifold. On the surface, the question of inheritance through a female ancestor was the spark that lit the fire. Edward III’s mother had been Isabella, princess of France; the king considered his claim to the French crown through his mother legitimate. However, the French disputed this idea on the grounds of Salic Law, an ancient tradition that forbade inheritance through the female line. Reality was much more complex. The preceding reign had been chaotic: barons had challenged the authority of the king, Edward II, leading to his murder. To maintain the loyalty of his barons and reinstate order at home, Edward III redirected his subjects' urge for conflict to a foreign land, thus bringing unity and peace to his homeland. The French monarchy, in turn, was also consolidating its power and saw English control over certain French territories as an obstacle. Moreover, France had entered an alliance against Scotland, which was intermittently at war with England. But above all, the Hundred-Years’ War was a dispute about economic interests over the region of Flanders and the sale of English wool in that territory. The sheep of English pastures were providing the raw material to Flemish spinners and weavers. Edward III’s claim was, therefore, motivated by control over land, trade, and resources (Schultz, 59). This first phase of the Hundred-Years’ War

had some positive results for England, but the death of the monarch and his son halted the conflict.

In the closing act of 2 *Henry IV*, we are told that efforts will be directed towards France again. Henry V mirrors Edward III's attempt to claim the French crown with the desire to bring peace and stability to England and expand English control over territories that were fertile and productive to establish a trade network. Factionalism between Burgundians and Orleanists and the French King's insanity brought instability to France. These conditions fostered an alliance between the English and the Burgundians that paved the way for the English invasion and the revival of the war (Schultz, 68).

At the beginning of the play, Henry V is determined to do whatever it takes to seize the French crown: "France being ours, we'll bend it to our awe/ Or break it all to pieces..." (1.2. 232-233). The cost of this ambition will not only be numerous human lives but there will also be repercussions on the land itself. To reclaim France, before taking over Harfleur, Shakespeare's Henry advises his troops to imitate the tiger. Human feelings such as pity or empathy must be left aside, and an animalistic instinct must take its place if victory over other human beings is desired:

But when the blast of war blows in our ears,
Then imitate the action of the tiger:
Stiffen the sinews, [summon] up the blood,
Disguise fair nature with hard-favored rage,
Then lend the eye a terrible aspect... (3.1. 6-10)

The King models the desired attitude by threatening to destroy the town and its people unless they yield. There is no room for mercy until the Governor admits defeat. Yet, Henry and his men are aware that they still need to contend with the forces of nature before they can complete

their conquest. The King announces: “The winter coming on and sickness growing/ Upon our soldiers, we will retire to Calais” (3.3. 56-57). No matter how glorious or elevated the goal of invading might seem, the army is still made up of men who have physical needs to satisfy. According to Peter Ackroyd’s account, on their march to Calais, the men were exhausted and hungry, and many had “suffered dysentery from the eating of unripe fruit” (279). Once the English army crosses the river Somme, the French king and his constable discuss their fears of the enemy getting too close. It is striking to note that the constable expresses concern for the vineyards and the wine to be obtained from them, a product that is typically associated with French idiosyncrasy and pride: “...if he be not fought withal, my lord, / Let us not live in France. Let us quit all, / And give our vineyards to a barbarous people...” (3.5. 3-4). He implies that the English do not meet the standards of refinement required to make the most out of the produce of the land. The Dauphin joins in the scoffing of the English by calling them a “wild and savage stock” (7) and the Duke of Brittany equates the English land to “a dirty farm” (13) on account of their Norman ancestors.

One of the main landmarks that Shakespeare helped mythologize is the Battle of Agincourt. On the eve of the battle, in which the English were outnumbered and yet victorious, king Henry addresses his men in disguise. They are discussing whether the monarch is like any other man, and Henry explains it in the simplest terms: “I think the King is but a / man as I am. The violet smells to him as it doth to me. All / his senses have but human conditions...” (4.1. 106-108). His sensory experience and interconnectedness with the non-human erases the hierarchical difference that humans attribute to rank or status, revealing that these concepts are mere constructs and that in material terms we are all equal. Shakespeare’s Henry IV had expressed this common materiality that bonds all humans “of one substance bred” in the opening speech to *I Henry IV*. This idea is brought forward again by King Henry V in another memorable passage of the play. In his “band

of brothers” speech (4.3.61), Henry refers to the blood bond between him and his men, which makes them all brothers. On the battlefield, ranks are erased and what prevails is the survival instinct, the desire to remain alive. Nevertheless, Henry appeals to their nobler sentiments and their wish to be praised as heroes one day to give them courage and inspiration. Even if such a speech were mere poetic fiction, the victory at Agincourt provided the impetus to keep fighting until an alliance was sealed with the French. Through this alliance, Henry V would marry Katherine of Valois, the French King’s daughter, and their first-born son would become both King of England and France. Through an ecofeminist lens, Katherine can be seen as another fertile land to be sown for the good of the realm. Aristocratic women, with few exceptions, had little to say in the appropriation of their bodies as channels for inheritance in the greater political scheme. However, Shakespeare does not delve into that matter but romanticizes the courtship between Henry and Katherine for dramatic purposes. His queen, Elizabeth I, well-aware of such manipulations had chosen never to marry.

The last act of *Henry V* contains a speech delivered by the Duke of Burgundy, who is acting as an arbiter in the negotiations between the King of France and the King of England after the English victory at Agincourt. The core of his speech is the devastation that war causes on nature and, consequently, on every aspect of human and non-human life. He calls France the “best garden of the world” (5.2.37), but a garden requires care and, if the energies of a nation are centered upon a destructive end and not a productive one, vines die unpruned (42-43). The beauty and bountifulness of the land has been prevented from emerging due to the actions of human beings. Nevertheless, nature can be reborn in the same way that the nations that have been at war.

Should not in this best garden of the world,
Our fertile France, put up her lovely visage?

Alas, she hath from France too long been chased,
 And all her husbandry doth lie on heaps,
 Corrupting its own fertility.
 Her vine, the merry cheerer of her heart,
 Unpruned dies. (5.2.37-43)

Once more, we encounter a reference to the production of wine, an emblematic French craft. War had affected trade, so the passage has material as well as economic implications, but it is also a symbolic representation of the web of interconnectedness between what nature offers and the human skills that transform it. The duke continues:

And all our vineyards, fallows, meads, and hedges,
 Defective in their natures, grow to wildness.
 Even so our houses and ourselves and children
 Have lost, or do not learn for want of time,
 The sciences that should become our country (5.2.55-59)

According to the duke, when war takes over a nation's agenda, everything becomes unnatural (63), and the creative potential of humans and non-humans is lost. In this passage, the use of the word unnatural implies the loss of interconnectedness. The example of vineyards and wine illustrates a point made by Dana Phillips in her essay "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology": "nature is thoroughly implicated in culture, and culture is thoroughly implicated in nature" (577-578). We can't have one without the other and if that interconnectedness is not well-balanced, the universe will be affected.

At the end of the play, after negotiations have been concluded, the hope of fertility being restored is twofold: on the one hand, peace will allow for fertility in the land that will now be taken care of, and the marriage between Henry V and Katherine, the French King's daughter, will open the door to a fertile union between both nations. However, these hopes will be short lived due to

Henry V's early death and the mismanagement of his legacy by the infant king's regents. In *The Lost Garden*, John Wilders refers to the concluding passage of the play in which the chorus echoes the words of the Duke of Burgundy. He states that the peace agreement is not free from ironies:

The play ends with the reminders that Henry's reign was brief, that his successor allowed a further civil war to break out in England, and that he lost the empire in France which his father had struggled to acquire. Time destroyed the nearly ideal monarch and his achievements, and Henry VI failed to fulfil his father's hopes. The life and death of Henry V, as Shakespeare interprets it, is not a tragedy but it is perceived with a characteristically tragic sense of life. (142)

With the circularity that characterizes Shakespeare, the tetralogy ends as it starts: civil war will once again plague England under Henry VI, whose reign will closely resemble that of Richard II. The “sceptered isle” will once again be ruled by a monarch that will see his land bleed.

Meditation

At the beginning of the play, the Bishop of Ely uses gardening metaphors to refer to Henry V's past and his later transformation. Henry is compared to strawberries growing under the nettle and his “ripening” seems to be a consequence of having consorted with “fruit of baser quality” (1.1. 63-65). The body of the King is elevated to a higher plane and those “fruits of baser quality” are left behind. The affairs of the state and the desire of glory for his nation make Henry seek for virtue in the battlefield. The King's temporary victory against France satisfies his material and immaterial wishes, but the whole scheme leads to his premature death, an early decay for a ripened fruit.

Henry's victory anticipates a possible return to fertility and harmony through the union of the English and the French crowns. However, upon the monarch's death and during his heir's

infancy, the fighting resumes, more fields are crushed and burnt, human and non-human lives are lost and the rivalry between both nations is deepened forever. The English only retained Calais, which was eventually lost under Mary Tudor. The loss of most English territories in France and the subsequent crisis of leadership under Henry VI led once again to a domestic struggle for power known as the Wars of the Roses.

Throughout the play, Shakespeare provides evidence for the destruction and instability that military conflicts bring to any land where they occur. When power is sought for as an end in itself, it does not bear fruit. The return to peace could have made France's vines fertile again and the land would have recovered. Nevertheless, the conflict dragged on and the opportunity for reconciliation among humans and non-humans was lost.

If there is an environmental lesson to be learnt in this play, it is contained in the Duke of Burgundy's reflection about the barrenness of the land as a consequence of war. Not only does he refer to unplanted fields that could be sources of food to satisfy material needs but he also refers to the loss of an aesthetic and spiritual experience that could derive from human labor.

The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth
 The flecked cowslip, burnet, and green clover,
 Wanting scythe, withal uncorrected, rank,
 Conceives by idleness, and nothing teems
 But hateful docks, rough thistles, kecksies, burrs,
 Losing both beauty and utility. (5.2.49-54)

The passage exhorts us to orient our endeavors to the service of the land to unlock its potential and create harmony in our world. If political authorities were oriented towards this goal, all humans would become allies in a common quest to make the Earth flourish.

Closing Thoughts

In *Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, Di Pietro and Grady redefine Shakespeare's timelessness and ubiquity. They refer to the oeuvre's potential to open dialogues with contemporary audiences and address their current concerns. They contend that Shakespeare "continues to have a presence that can be aesthetically powerful" as well as "culturally formative" (1). Readers and audiences are empowered and encouraged to find new meanings in works that might, at first sight, seem unrelatable to them.

The omnipresence of Shakespeare in our multicultural present bespeaks instead something more remarkable: our ability to reshape and rethink Shakespeare across time and space, to turn the reading and watching of the plays into a creative encounter between 400-year-old texts and active, creative readers and audiences in the present, passionately involved in appropriating and reunderstanding these "timeless" works. (1)

Not only does the second tetralogy provide intellectual and aesthetic pleasure, but it is also a fertile ground to explore our current ecological concerns.

Richard II offers an abundance of nature-related images and metaphors to ponder on, but if we read beyond the surface of language, we are invited to explore the concept of power itself and reflect about the transition between a medieval and a modern approach to it. Richard II endorsed a hierarchical worldview in which the King derived his authority directly from God but, paradoxically, failed to preserve the order he defended by ushering in almost a century of civil strife. The play opens questions regarding land ownership, the exploitation or preservation of natural resources and urges us to adopt a contemplative vision towards the earth by questioning our role in it and our relationship with other humans and non-humans.

In *1 and 2 Henry IV*, the shifting alliances and political schemes we encounter exemplify the notions of center and periphery and point at the unequal relationships which emerged among the different countries that make up the British Isles based on their geographies, resources and natural features. These plays, which elaborate on the human quest for the preservation of power and control over the land, present us with an opportunity to reassess the notion of leadership as one where the multiplicity of beings that coexist in this Earth should be protected and cared for. Embracing leadership in that vein can transform what might otherwise be conceived as a burden into a service, guided by the principle of interconnectedness.

Finally, *Henry V* depicts a reign in which temporal stability was regained by diverting war efforts abroad to preserve peace at home. At present, we can ask ourselves what the cost of intervention in foreign lands might be and how, instead of defiling other countries to retain one's own wealth and prestige, nations might work together across political boundaries to preserve the fertility and diversity of every region on Earth. If human efforts are directed to the service of the land, all species can flourish. This might seem like a long-term goal, but, in the Anthropocene – the current geological age in which human beings have assumed a dominant role over the environment – we have reached such extremes of destruction and carelessness, that humanity is slowly becoming aware of what has been lost and what we might still lose if we continue along the same path.

An ecocritical reading of the second tetralogy with a presentist perspective, which does not exclude the lessons of history for our time, can make the Shakespearean text come to life once again and speak to an audience that thirsts for a new relationship with the human and non-human cosmos. Our legacy can go beyond Shakespeare's Richard II's fatalistic claim of

bequeathing just our dead bodies to the Earth (3.2.154-155). Even though on material terms the statement holds true, as dwellers of our “common home,” one that is shared by all human and non-human species, we are exhorted to assume an active and committed role in the cherishing and preservation of our world. The environmental humanities have the responsibility to take this to the symbolic level as well, so that no matter what our vocation is, we are aligned by a common purpose. Studying Shakespeare’s works in this light truly proves the Shakespearean text interminable.⁷

⁷ Intertextual reference to a chapter in Stanley Cavell’s book entitled “The interminable Shakespearean text”.

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