

**2017 SAA Seminar: Shakespeare in the Anthropocene Abstracts
Leaders: Craig Dionne, Eastern Michigan University
and Lowell Duckert, West Virginia University 1**

Todd Borlik

“Shakespeare in the Iron Age”

In what was arguably Shakespeare’s favourite book, Ovid imagines the history of the universe passing through four phases: from the resplendent and pristine golden age of primeval humans to a violent and befouled iron age of incipient industrialization that swiftly triggers an environmental catastrophe. This paper considers how the Ovidian mythopoetic narrative of environmental declension shaped Shakespeare’s understanding of deep history and his vision of the planet’s possible futures. Specifically, it reveals the ways Ovid’s Iron Age functioned in early modern literature as a critique of England’s booming iron industry. The introduction of the first blast furnaces at Queenstock in 1490 and Ashdown forest in the Weald in 1496 represents a major milestone on the road to England’s industrialization. Through an eco-materialist study of iron in Shakespeare, this paper explores Renaissance perceptions of their contemporary Iron Age as both a precursor and alternative to the Anthropocene.

Sarah Crover

“Election and Trans-temporal Gardening: *Richard II* and Justin Trudeau”

Shakespeare’s *Richard II* raises the spectre of a kingdom and an environment gone awry because of the failure of good management. The royal gardener lays out the problem: “what a pity is it/ That [Richard] had not so trimmed and dressed his land/ As we this garden ... Had he done so to great and growing men,/ They might have lived to bear, and he to taste,/ Their fruits of duty (3.4.56-64). In this instance it is clear that the “garden” Richard has mismanaged is his subjects, but continued references to extravagance and land grabs to fund empty royal coffers throughout the play suggest that he has likewise mismanaged the “sea-walled garden” (3.4.42) of England, overtaxing what both the people and the land can give. Indeed, while there is little doubt in the play that Bolingbroke’s invasion and subsequent coup is fueled by ambitious self-interest, the play has him frame his invasion as what we might now consider proto eco-political activism on behalf of England. He arrives to set the garden back in order and return balance to the kingdom.

Prime Minister Justin Trudeau’s ambitious adoption of the Kinder Morgan Trans Mountain Pipeline in British Columbia, raises concerns, I argue, that echo *Richard II*’s preoccupation with eco-political balance and the pitfalls open to rulers who trade on cults of personality. Like Richard before him, Trudeau appears to imagine that his gift for the “common touch” with his citizens, as well as his optimistic, but relatively toothless, environmental gestures will lead his people to accept or overlook his endorsement of conflicting initiatives like the pipeline. Rumbblings in BC after the announcement of its adoption in December 2016 suggest that he, like Richard, may have critically underestimated the political climate when it comes to management of the nation. Environmentalists and political commentators predict that this particular pipeline may

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spark the largest resistance movement in Canada since the battle over the Carmanah Valley in BC in the 1990s, a battle that garnered such strong popular support (and political embarrassment for the resisting governments) that it ultimately led to a resounding win for indigenous and settler environmental activists championing its cause.

Comparing these two scenarios – Shakespeare’s characterization of the fall of Richard II, and local activists’ characterization of Trudeau’s endorsement of the pipeline as a dereliction of environmental duty – this paper will explore the ways we respond across time to moments of crisis with similar calls for stewardship and balance in our natural environments.

Shannon Garner-Balandrin

“From the Vasty Deep: *Henry IV* in the Anthropocene”

The birth of the Anthropocene is measured from two vasty deeps: the ice core of the Antarctic and the subterranean sea floor. The earth-shifting events of the late medieval and early modern period provided the nativity for this new epoch. In some ways, Glendower has his revenge. The spirits of the past did come when called. Yet the basis of this scene from *Henry IV* is Hotspur’s mockery of Glendower’s self-importance. The earth and sky, he contends, exhibit their own agency and do not serve to mark the Welsh leader as extraordinary. Current critiques of the term “Anthropocene” echo Hotspur’s rebuke of anthropocentrism. However, experiencing this moment in the midst of palpable climate change, including induced seismicity and the ecological effects of light pollution, it is hard not to see the quaking ground and unnatural skies as delayed consequences rather than fearful portents. Within *Henry IV* there are several pathetic fallacies. Recounting Mortimer’s heroic single combat with Glendower, Hotspur borrows from romance hyperbole, declaring “swift Severn’s flood [...] / affrighted with their bloody looks, / Ran fearfully among the trembling reeds, / And hid his crisp head in the hollow bank” (1.3.103-6). Glendower and Hotspur both use romance-inflected language to calibrate human subjects as remarkable within a nonhuman world. When rivers change course, constellations morph, and the foundations of the earth move, human actions become sedimented in geologic time. While Glendower values sympathetic responses from the environment, he is distrustful of permanent human alterations. Shakespeare’s histories, dotted with romance, exhibit the tensions between the desire to enter into a heroic kinship with the land and the uneasy consequences of real human impact. This paper explores early modern resistance to anthropocentrism, the use of genre to frame ecological entanglement, and what it means to view *Henry IV* in the Anthropocene.

Justin Kolb

“Sterile Promontories: Shakespearean Tragedy and the Decay of Nature”

16th and 17th century decay of nature texts, like Francis Shalton’s *A blayzing starre* (1580) and Godfrey Godwin’s *The fall of man, or the corruption of nature* (1616),

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are an early recognition of the anthropocene epoch. In this theology of anthropocentric climate change, original sin not only dooms humanity, but also puts nature on a *telos* of slow decay. Mountains crumble into pebbles, the sea worries away the shore, the sun grows cold, the air grows foul, trees are stunted, human beings are a fraction of their former strength.

Most of these texts welcome God's fiery judgment as a sort of euthanasia, a conviction summarized by the last stanza of George Herbert's "Decay":

I see the world grows old, whenas the heat
Of thy great love once spread, as in an urn
Doth closet up itself and still retreat,
Cold sinne still forcing it, till it return,
And calling Justice, all things burn.

But I'm looking for texts that tease out other implications of this decline and fall account of nature. What happens when we face a crumbling world, but reject the temptations of apocalypse? How do early modern texts grapple with living in a second nature that is a smaller, sadder, more chaotic version of the first? When the fire doesn't come, what then? If the Earth becomes a "sterile promontory" and the sky "a foul and pestilent congregation of vapours" (*Hamlet* 2.2.265-269) how does one live? What can tragedy teach us about life after nature?

John Mitchell

"Quintessence of Dust: Atmospheric Particulates, Bond Events, and Biomass Burning – Dust as Hyperobject and Anthrogenic Agent of Warm and Cold Epochs"

If we accept that recent scientific theories about the AD 1610 Orbis Spike demonstrate that the collapse of New World populations and their attendant intensive land use led to the maximal CO₂ sequestrations via reforestation resulting in the Little Ice Age, then the Anthrogenic principle suggests that other periods of warming and cooling throughout the Holocene/Anthropocene were also enhanced or even "tipped" by human activities. My paper will survey a wider swath of alternating warm and cold epochs stretching from the Bronze Age to the Early Modern Period with this theory in mind. Archaeological, Paleo-Climatological, and Paleo-Botanical evidence suggests that New World agriculture, especially in the Neotropical zones (Mexico, Mesoamerica, Amazonia, and temperate South America), began as early as 6500 BC and intensive land use peaked in the Neotropic regions between 500 BC and AD 1500, which included heavy burning of biomass via slash-and-burn agriculture suited to the tropics and permanent land clearing through controlled burns. I postulate that these activities contributed on a global level to the reduction of biomass and thus of carbon sequestration and therefore aided the growth of warming epochs, specifically the Roman Warm Period (~250 BC – AD 400) and the even balmer Medieval Warm Period (~AD 900 – 1300). Conversely, I want to also include discussion of the 8 known Holocene Bond Events, driven perhaps by volcanic or

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cometary “winterizing” catastrophes which often resulted in rapid and devastating cooling and/or aridification. I conclude that “dust,” that potent Early Modern image of death and decay, exists as a global phenomenon that functions both as a Hyperobject more vast than human understanding and as an artifact of human activity.

Sharon O’Dair

“Shakespearean Growth; 21st-Century Degrowth”

In 2012, *PMLA* published a cluster of short essays on “Sustainability,” written by people familiar to us and by one, Steve Mentz, who is among us for this seminar. Steve is most grumpy about the concept, asserting from the get-go that “the era of sustainability is over.” Others are less certain: Stacy Alaimo thinks the concept might be reworked, as do Stephanie LeMenager and Stephanie Foote. Mentz doesn’t think this possible, because, in his view, sustainability, like pastoral, means stasis and what we need are “models for thinking about nonstable systems.” But I would suggest that sustainability doesn’t mean stasis, because in most cases, we don’t say “sustainability,” we say “sustainable development” or “sustainable growth.” Development or growth, not stasis; adjective, not noun. What I want to emphasize here is not the sustainable but the development or, more precisely the growth. Toward this end I want to think about Shakespearean growth, which is focused almost entirely on the growth of living things, e.g.,

Orlando: “but I, his brother, gain nothing under him but growth...”

Othello: “When I have pluck'd the rose, / I cannot give it vital growth again.”

(The *OED* confirms this usage in its first definition—“The action, process or manner of growing; both in material and immaterial senses; vegetative development; increase”—and noting further that specialized use in economics does not begin until the middle of the 20th century. Along these lines, one think of the recent appropriation or redefinition of “incubator” by business.)

Shakespearean growth is physical and inherent or—gasp!—natural; it is also emotional and moral, as in these lines from Agamenon in *Troilus and Cressida*:

Princes,
What grief hath set the jaundice on your cheeks?
The ample proposition that hope makes
In all designs begun on earth below
Fails in the promised largeness: cheques and disasters
Grow in the veins of actions highest rear'd,
As knots, by the conflux of meeting sap,
Infect the sound pine and divert his grain
Tortive and errant from his course of growth.

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Or arguably these from Time in *The Winter's Tale*, since the wide gap contains much more than physical growth:

Time: "Impute it not a crime / To me or my swift passage, that I slide / O'er sixteen years and leave the growth untried / Of that wide gap.."

In our first offerings to each other, Todd Borlik, an eco-historicist, poses this question: "how do we trace the origins of the Anthropocene without sending a tacit message that our current predicament is simply another episode in a millennia-long saga and therefore nothing too worrisome?" I'm sure Todd has an answer, as many of us do. One answer might be that it's unnecessary to trace the origins of the Anthropocene, since what we need to do is address "our current predicament," as Todd puts it, and since we know very well how to address it.

Instead of trying to discover the origins of the Anthropocene, I suggest instead that in the early modern, in Shakespeare, we discover—or rediscover—different ways of living, of understanding, of defining words and concepts. I have chosen "growth" because it coheres perfectly with the aims of the mostly European 21st-century environmental and economic movement of degrowth, which is the English translation of the French *decroissance* (and of the Italian *decrescita* and the Spanish *decrecimiento*). Degrowth argues that sustainability will only arrive when we abandon the economic, social, and personal drive for economic growth and personal consumption. Undermining "the automatic association of growth with better," degrowth asks societies to imagine and construct "a different society—a society that manages to convince itself that it has enough and that it no longer has to accumulate." With that, we will consume and produce "less, *much less*" than we do now, but we will do so in order to flourish, to live well. Growth will be Shakespearean only—physical and moral.

Of course, the challenge is in the consuming and the producing of "less, *much less*." So far, at least, all of us, even ecocritics, environmental humanists, and humanists have failed the challenge. SAA grows bigger and so does ASLE. Bigger and bigger and not better. Individually, we gather more and more objects around us, accumulate more and more, but are we better off? As a thought experiment, I'd like to challenge each of us to reduce our carbon footprints (personal and familial, if applicable) by 25%. How would you do it?

McKenna Rose

"Anthropogenic Signatures: Writing Nature in *Doctor Faustus*"

As Steve Mentz notes, Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin date the start of the Anthropocene, the age in which humans exert the greatest geological force on the environment, to 1610. In their article, "Defining the Anthropocene," Lewis and Maslin, "assess anthropogenic signatures in the geological record against the formal requirements for the recognition of a new epoch" (171). While Lewis and Maslin support their claim

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that the geological age shifted from the Holocene to the Anthropocene in 1610 by interpreting evidence found in “stratigraphic material, such as rock, glacier ice, or marine sediments,” they also appreciate that the growing recognition of humans as a *the* climatological force is “an act with consequences beyond geology” (171). For Mentz, early modern plays such as *The Tempest*, and especially Prospero’s world demolishing curses, suggest some of the terminal consequences of the age of man to come. In my paper I argue that Marlowe’s Faustus desires the same sort of “ecological disorder” that Mentz identifies in Prospero (par. 4). Even before we meet him, for instance, Faustus is “swoll’n” (Prologue 20) and then later “glutted” (1.1.80) by a fantasy of accumulation that includes, but is not limited to, pearl, gold, silk, fruits, all the secrets of foreign kings, war machines, and Germany. So that Mephistopheles will “bring him” (2.1.101) grapes from the southern hemisphere and move trees at his command, Faustus signs his name in blood to a deed of gift. Just as Faustus is about to sign, however, the blood he draws from his arm to use as ink unexpectedly congeals. Faustus thinks it thickens of its own accord and asks, “What might the staying of my blood portend?/Is it unwilling I should write this bill?” (2.1.64-65). Ultimately he is able to sign the deed “By me, John Faustus” (2.1.114) in his blood, but the trace of this weird moment of the blood’s resistance remains. Faustus’s famous signature is itself a sedimentary layer in the literary historical archive that is freighted with both the citation of the *Faustbook* that precedes Marlowe’s play, as well as the historical conditions—expansion, extraction, and extinction—in which Marlowe wrote. At the same time, the recalcitrant blood not only emphasizes the fact that the origin points of human dominion can repeat indefinitely in the absence of the signatory, but it also shows how the very material of Faustus’s own body writes itself into this exemplary instance of anthropogenic signature.

Molly E. Seremet

**“This is & is not Cressida: Resisting Anthropocentrism
in the Shakespeare of Things”**

This paper entwines posthumanism and cyborg theory with object-oriented ontology to argue that incorporating reciprocal performing objects into a small-scale Troilus and Cressida magnifies the scale of Shakespeare’s epic drama, exceeding the representative power of human performance through the creation of a Shakespeare of Things. This conception grows out of my work devising and directing Compass Shakespeare Ensemble’s 2016-2017 small-scale production of Troilus and Cressida, in which five human actors navigate the vast terrain of Shakespeare’s anti-heroic epic in tandem with a cast of performing objects. In this paradoxical environment of the epic played out in small-scale, we conscripted performing objects such as augmented valet stands (affectionately called Chaff and Bran in a nod to Shakespeare’s nomenclature of the sullied soldier) into the Trojan and Greek armies to be uncanny “soldiers,” human surrogates rather than anthropomorphic emblems, with a drive that surpasses the human. In this paradigm, humans are actors, objects become actant and anthropocentrism gives way to the posthuman undercurrents of Shakespeare’s baldly anti-heroic narrative. In this

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ontology, Ajax is a puppet that controls the full body and voice of the actor underneath, Chaff and Bran are augmentations for fragmented or insufficient bodies, while the physicality of the amorphous fabric tent functions as something else entirely, becoming an alternate body for Cressida while simultaneously marking the vector of the relationships between the drama's pairs and triads of lovers. This paper argues that within the space of the anthropocene, objects that resist anthropomorphism can instead enact humanness through a deliberate emphasis on retaining their objectness in performance. In other words, a Shakespeare of Things takes root in the posthuman era as objects seek to unlock the humanity encoded in Shakespeare's texts.

Ameer Sohrawardy

**“De-Familiarizing Christian Time in Ottoman Space:
George Sandys's *A Relation of a Journey* Re-Considered”**

Written while travelling through territories of the Ottoman Empire, George Sandys' 1615 *A Relation of a Journey... Containing a Description of the Turkish Empire* considers the challenges of travel by referencing particular topographical features. Noting for his reader the Biblical and ancient significance of various landscapes and waterways, Sandys's account reads like a journey through wondrous surroundings, yet with reference to familiar epochal time (religious and ecological.) My paper proposes that Sandys' account meaningfully informs current dialogue about the cultural Anthropocene by jarring current presumptions that link movement through space with that through time.

Sandys's journey suggests terrain, waterways, and landscape speaking back to the modern traveler, urging him to consider locales divested of presumed ideological, religious, and even political signification. Territory itself bespeaks a new, decidedly anti-Orientalist, engagement with the Ottoman custodians of these sites. If critics like Ian Baucom have proposed a “fourth-degree history” to meet the challenges of defending the Anthropocene against charges of Eurocentrism and technocratic elitism, then a text like Sandys can complicate even such propositions. Written before Christian hegemony was established in what is now Hungary and Poland, Sandys's text suggests ways in which postcolonial engagements with pre-modern times productively suggest new cultural chronologies within which to evaluate ‘the anthropocene’ and how we have conceptualized it. At the same time, postcolonial theory may rejuvenate itself through ongoing dialogue about the Anthropocene, particularly in its singularly, early modern manifestations.

Charles Whitney

“Foreclosing the Future in *Hamlet*, *Macbeth*, and ‘Agnotocene’ Climate Policy”

King Hamlet's ghost, the Macbeths, and the scenarios of today's international climate policymakers all pursue self-serving goals that create or will create tremendous

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havoc while frustrating their goals entirely or substantially. All these cases exhibit a kind of willful blindness causing havoc that descends or will descend on innocents who have come after: children, youth, or future generations.

The term “agnotocene,” is one of Bonneuil and Fressoz’s several coinages highlighting different aspects of the Anthropocene period (*The Shock of the Anthropocene*, 2013; 2016). It labels the negative side of ideology: not what populations are influenced to believe but “a modernizing unconscious,” the continuous “production of zones of ignorance” that authorize environmental mayhem by obscuring or trivializing it. For instance, when economists calculate Gross Domestic Product, their measure of economic growth, they ignore the loss of environmental resources that growth entails. And at the U. N. climate summits, capitalism’s growth imperative perversely precludes consideration of climate-change-mitigation pathways that do not contribute to growth so defined (Anderson 2015, 2016; Geden 2015). At the Paris summit, the recourse to quasi-mythical BECCS carbon-capture technology provides a shock-doctrine example of the corner into which blinkered agnotology has painted policymakers and therefore everyone, especially the young. Climate scientists have recently criticized BECCS, with James Hanson emphasizing the outrageous burden this puzzle places on the young (“Young People’s Burden,” 2016). But thanks to media agnotologists, public response has been minimal.

The Ghost and Macbeth operate in an analogous way that may exemplify (tragic?) Anthropocenic aspirations. The burden the former places on his son is matched by the burden of sinful revenge he inadvertently places on himself. Hamlet is finally able to see beyond his father’s obsessive blindness (Kerrigan, *Revenge Tragedy*). Where Macbeth doubles down to destroy the futures of many, preclude his own, and estrange futurity itself along with the hope it bears (“Tomorrow and tomorrow...), Hamlet shifts his goal from private revenge to rightful rebellion that addresses what is rotten in the state: “is’t not to be damn’d, To let this canker of our nature come In further evil?” (5.2.69-70). Perhaps the generations living today will have better success in that enterprise than he.