

*BiOphelia* – a dramaturgical engagement, for Practice-based-Research

This “paper” will engage a form of experimental dramaturgical analysis, as part of a larger project I’m facilitating at Cornell in spring of ’25: an eco-Shakespeare symposium entitled *BiOphelia*.

Engaging contextual instances of “flowers” (botanical & rhetorical) in Ophelia’s journey through the play *Hamlet*, this cross-pollination of inquiries will engage scientific understandings of flora & rhetorical conceits of botany, bridging these gleanings into posited staging possibilities for acting students who will embody forth adapted excerpts of Ophelia’s journey to be embedded within scholarly talks & discussions within the symposium context.

Examples to include:

- “Violets in the youth of primy nature”
- “The expectancy and rose of the fair state”
- “OPHELIA

There's rosemary, that's for remembrance;  
pray, love, remember: and there is pansies, that's for thoughts.

LAERTES

A document in madness, thoughts and remembrance fitted.

OPHELIA

There's fennel for you, and columbines: there's rue  
for you; and here's some for me: we may call it  
herb-grace o' Sundays: O you must wear your rue with  
a difference. There's a daisy: I would give you  
some violets, (violet-actors wither & die) but they withered all when my father  
died”

May also include eco-contextual cross-engagement of Hamlet’s:

- “a man may fish with the worm...” life-cycles encapsulation &
- “For 'tis the sport to have the enginer / Hoist with his own petar.”

*Working Bibliography:*

- Ecoscenography by Tanja Beer
- Shakespeare & Ecology by Randall Martin
- Shakespeare’s Botanical Imagination, ed. Susan C. Staub

Rebecca Ann Bach  
Abstract SAA 2024  
Human and Non-Human Time in Shakespeare

Writing about “Time in History” in 1988, and thrilled by scientific advances, the mathematician and historian of science Gerald James Whitrow describes the twentieth century as the “golden age of modern science,” characterized by “an unprecedented increase in knowledge and in man’s command over nature” (180). It’s not as if Whitrow is unaware of problems with human achievements. He seems to be fearing nuclear annihilation when he invokes the possibility that “civilization on this planet” may come “to a catastrophic and complete end” (181). I would argue that in 2023, people, like Elon Musk, launching rockets into the sky in order to further their pursuit of human life (their life) on other planets share Whitrow’s ideas, especially his belief that “man’s command over nature” is a worthwhile goal. His phrase “civilization on this planet” is particularly ominously shared, since it appears to assume that humans could live somewhere aside from earth. Musk and his fellow pursuers of life-not-on-earth reject the truths of earth system science that reveal human dependance on all the life we are entangled with on earth. It is as if this science had never been. These men (a deliberate gender choice on my part) are part of what Isabelle Stengers calls “the technoscientific exploitation of the world” (18). Whitrow did not live long enough to see how badly the “allies” science was forced to choose in the twentieth century, “the State and Industry,” have “betrayed” their “alliance,” thus, rejecting the actual “increase in knowledge” in our world (Stengers 20). In my paper for our seminar and in the book I’m currently writing, I’m trying to show that looking at how Shakespeare’s works describe time can bring us close to a world which fundamentally and retroactively rejects these twentieth-century dreams, a world in which English people lived depending on the life and lives around them, living in their time as well as human time. Moreover, the humans Shakespeare depicts could easily recognize and reject the hubris fundamental to those dreams (what I have termed “human grandiosity”) as akin to the hubris of the couple in the Garden

of Eden and their descendants who built the Tower of Babel. Time in Shakespeare's work, as I hope to show, is measured along with, by the side of, and attending to, many other animals. I will show this through close readings of passages from Shakespeare plays. Close attention to how Shakespeare's texts invoke eschatological time, historical time, emotional time, and daily time can show us a world before what Bruno Latour calls "the pseudo-realism" that we live in that "purports to be drawing the portrait of humans parading against a background of things" (*Facing Gaia* 58). I think that Shakespeare here, once again, offers us a chance to fan "the spark of hope in the past" (Benjamin 255).

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## “Socio-Economic and Ecological Crises, Then and Now: Shakespeare, Political Eco-Criticism, and the Early Modern Origins of the Climate Emergency”

Daniel Vitkus (University of California, San Diego)

My paper will take up our seminar’s titular concept of “crisis,” as it was articulated in some of Shakespeare’s plays and as it might be understood for our planet and our species today. The paper begins by drawing on recent scholarship in earth system science and political economy, two seemingly disparate fields that have come together recently to show how the economies, technologies, and ideologies of capitalism have caused the ecological crisis. If the primary, underlying impetus for destruction of habitat, mass extinction, changes in the composition of the atmosphere, rising ocean levels, ocean acidification, extreme weather, warming, etc., has always been capitalism, an economic system supported by an ideology that promotes anthropocentrism, commercialization, extraction, unsustainable consumption, commodification, class-based exploitation, etc., then it follows that scholars working in the environmental or energy humanities ought to pay close attention to the socio-economic history of class-based injustice. And this is especially the case for early modernists and Shakespeareans because the origins of capitalism and its relentless drive for profit are to be found in the early modern period with the emergence of a globalizing capitalism—seen in the reorganization of the domestic agrarian economy after the Black Death, in the expansion of the Western empires and their trade diasporas, and in the advent of new commercial, class-based powers and their innovative methods of capital accumulation. That is why, the paper will claim, an imminent critique of the new materialism is so sorely needed today in early modern studies, where the monist theories of object-oriented ontologists and the ideas of Bruno Latour, Jane Bennett, and others have coalesced, forming the theoretical basis for a certain mode of literary-critical ecocriticism that has now rigidified as (liberal) orthodoxy. Following the anti-Marxist politics and undialectical thought of Latour, Bennett, Timothy Morton and Graham Harman, new materialists and posthumanists typically avoid any substantial discussion of capitalism or class and (like many of today’s postcolonial critics), prefer to use neutral concepts like “trade,” “commerce,” or “exchange”—even when referring to imperial power and colonial contexts. In mounting an immanent critique of the new materialists (whose flattened, anti-humanist, monistic sense of “crisis” is disconnected from its cognate in dialectical “critique”), the paper will build on recent eco-Marxist accounts, backed by the findings of earth system science, that indicate the central role of the human species, and especially the agency of its ruling classes, in bringing about the ecological crisis.<sup>1</sup> Their wealth and power have been gained through an

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<sup>1</sup> On the role of the capitalism system in causing ecocide and the climate emergency, see Ian Angus, *Facing the Anthropocene: Fossil Capitalism and the Crisis of the Earth System*, Monthly Review Books, 2016; Kate Aronoff, *Overheated: How Capitalism Broke the Planet and How We Fight Back*; John Bellamy Foster, Brett Clark, and Richard York, *The Ecological Rift: Capitalism’s War on the Earth*, Monthly Review Press, 2010; John Bellamy Foster, *Capitalism in the Anthropocene: Ecological Ruin or Ecological Revolution*, Monthly Review Press, 2022; John Bellamy Foster and Brett Clark, *The Robbery of Nature: Capitalism and the Ecological Rift*, Monthly Review Press, 2020; Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. The Climate*, Simon & Schuster, 2015; Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, *The Human Planet: How We Created the Anthropocene*, Yale University Press, 2018; Fred Magdoff and John Bellamy Foster, *What Every Environmentalist Needs to Know about Capitalism*, Monthly Review

unsustainable drive for profit maximization, enabled by class-based exploitation and imperialist appropriation and extraction—and yet, this is not only an economic process. It has left deep marks and traces on human cultures throughout the world—and on the literary archive that so eloquently bears witness to both the beauty and the violation of “nature.” The paper will then refer to a second problematic trend: recent historical and theoretical arguments that question “crisis epistemology” or ask us to interrogate the claim that our own juncture in planetary or human time is a genuine, urgent crisis.<sup>2</sup> The paper concludes by looking briefly at a few exemplary passages from Shakespeare’s plays that dramatize an early modern sense of crisis, depicting human beings’ inhumanity to other humans as a monstrous and unnatural form of behavior. These texts include examples of how Shakespeare and his contemporaries often connected human-made crises, by way of human/non-human analogies (including both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism), to the non-human. Shakespeare’s tragedies, in particular, attest to the connection between 1) the way that human beings harm other human beings and 2) the way that human beings harm the non-human, acting in unnatural ways that destroy home and habitat. These examples from Shakespearean tragedy show how Shakespeare’s anthropocentric humanism exhibits a tension between 1) displaying and condemning the dark and destructive power of humanity and 2) celebrating humanity’s (alleged) virtue in terms of superiority over the non-human.

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Press, 2011; Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital: The Rise of Steam Power and the Roots of Global Warming*, Verso, 2016, and *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World*, Verso, 2020; Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life: Ecology and the Accumulation of Capital*, Verso, 2015; and the essays in Jason W. Moore, ed. *Anthropocene or Capitalocene? Nature, History, and the Crisis of Capitalism*, PM Press, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> For various reactions and resistances to the idea of an anthropocene process of change reaching an unprecedented, urgent crisis in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, see: Kyle Whyte, “Against Crisis Epistemology,” *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, ed. Brendan Hokowhitu, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, Linda Tuhiwai-Smith, Chris Andersen and Steve Larkin (Routledge, 2021), pp. 52-64; Joseph Masco, “The Crisis in Crisis,” *Infrastructure, Environment, and Life in the Anthropocene*, Kregg Hetherington, ed. (Duke University Press, 2019); David J. Baker and Patricia Palmer, “Early Modern Criticism in a Time of Crisis,” <https://emctc.tome.press/>; Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Duke UP, 2013); Imre Szeman, “A Crisis Discipline? The Task of the Environmental Humanities to Come (Results of a Personal Study),” *Resilience: A Journal of the Environmental Humanities* 10.1-2 (Winter 2022/Spring 2023), pp. 108-118; and Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (U of Chicago Press, 2021).

### **Henry IV: “Of One Substance Bred”**

My project is guided by a presentist understanding of literature. This vision does not intend to undermine the value of history to contextualize Shakespeare’s 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.

This paper explores *1 Henry IV* and *2 Henry IV* as a unit, 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. Henry IV struggled to maintain or extend his control over territories that were 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.<sup>[1]</sup>

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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 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.

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.

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[1] 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.



2024 SAA seminar, "Shakespeare and Ecological Crisis"  
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### Ecological Crisis, AI, and Shakespeare

This paper will serve as a kind of thought experiment in which I put together rather disparate texts and sources from diverse time periods and fields of study. I say this with the caveat that I realize that most papers are in some way thought experiments; however, I am categorizing this paper as such because the juxtapositions of ideas and texts may have greater chasms readers must leap than in most academic writing. I begin by considering the two of the largest global issues occurring in the current moment: ecological crisis and the rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI), specifically Large Language Models (LLMs). These two problematic subjects may seem distinct, but they are in fact linked because of the resources LLMs consume. Because they require the super computers, LLMs use an incredible amount of water: "ChatGPT needs to 'drink' a 500 ml bottle of water for a simple conversation of roughly 20-50 questions and answers, depending on when and where ChatGPT is deployed."

<sup>1</sup>

To think about these related contemporary issues, I turn to early modern phenomena and texts that function both as analogs and historical/literary precedents to our current problems. More specifically, I am interested in 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> century inventions and explorations, both their cost to the environment and how they manifest scarcity. On the one hand, the ships for long distant travel required huge masts for which large trees, really forests of them were cut, maybe leading us to think in another way about the moving forest in *Macbeth*. On the other hand, traveling across the oceans often meant dealing with scarcity, of fresh water and food, especially as the journey lengthened, and the destination remained relatively unknown. And of course, the possibility of shipwreck was real, and for those who were shipwrecked finding fresh water and food to tantamount to survival. *The Tempest*, with its two shipwrecks, shows us a present version of the problem with the Naples party and the outcome of the problem with Prospero and Miranda, given that they relied on and exploited the native population. The *Tempest* also gives us analogs for different modes of intelligence; for although Ariel is not what we might call artificial intelligence, his intelligence is also not human, and Caliban also possesses an intelligence marked differently than that of colonizing Europeans. To think about Caliban's perspective of the island and its resources and possible ramifications/possibilities for our current problems, I will turn to Tyson Yunkaporta, *Sand Talk: How Indigenous Thinking Can Save the World* for an indigenous perspective. Although this paper may offer only some loose ideas about solutions to the multiplicity of environmental problems and artificial intelligence humankind has brought upon itself, I do hope that it will enable us to think of ways to help our students, the generation that will be most affected to date, crack open these issues and discover possible answers.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://techhq.com/2023/04/ai-water-footprint-suggests-that-large-language-models-are-thirsty/>

2024 SAA seminar, "Shakespeare and Ecological Crisis"  
Melissa Walter  
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Reading and Writing Shakespeare in and on the Fraser Valley, Stó:lō Téméxw

The document (or possibly paper) I would like to offer to the seminar is (about) the University of the Fraser Valley's Shakespeare Reconciliation Garden ([www.shakespearereconciliationgarden.ca](http://www.shakespearereconciliationgarden.ca)). In this project, which comes out of particular community circumstances, we are trying to create a land-based, community-oriented work that builds community and provokes conversation about conciliation, colonialism, and colonial and decolonial space by juxtaposing Shakespeare stories and language with Indigenous perspectives on plants and the land, in particular with those of the Stó:lō, the People of the River, who have lived in the Fraser Valley since time immemorial. Like Stó:lō Téméxw, the unceded land, place, and earth of the Stó:lō, the garden can be read. But unlike those lands, its legibility was designed by the students, staff and faculty who designed and planted the garden, rather than by the transformer siblings who made the world right or by the human history that has defined fishing, hunting, berry patch, and other rights over the centuries. The garden features specifically planted plants, in contrast to the maintained patches of berries and other food- and fibre-plants that are traditionally cared for in place but not typically planted in places they have not chosen to grow. Our Shakespeare garden is hybridized, not least because many of the plants in the garden, while cued by Shakespeare's works in some way, are indigenous to the area. The plants in the garden invoke and stand for stories. But what stories, and how will the stories be interpreted?

We have sought to use the opportunity to create a Shakespeare garden on campus to draw attention to the fact that the land is Stó:lō, to the Halq'emeylem language (the upriver language of the Stó:lō), and to a worldview in which plants are beings with the same life spirit that humans have, and in which plants, like other sources of food and medicine in the area, are gifts from the creator.

I am also working to read Shakespeare through the garden in useful ways, although this feels very preliminary especially with respect to the work of members of this seminar.

The designers of the garden offer the garden as an evolving text open to diverse readings and we hope it opens conversations about land and culture.

We also offer it as a kind of quasi-commons. Although the groundkeepers provide major maintenance, we hold approximately monthly volunteer workparties and invite visitors to the garden to be part of a community who are authorized to care for the space as well as eat berries or drink tea from the garden's resources. Our hope is that as members of the UFV community take care of the garden, they develop relationships with the garden and with each other.

Kelly Stage  
University of Nebraska Lincoln

### Full Fathom Five: The Inescapable Human

Despite what our imaginations might allow us to picture, the great Pacific garbage patch is not a huge, floating island of plastic trash suitable to shipwreck upon. Instead, it's actually a huge area of high concentrations of plastic in the water, which is not just on the surface but distributed and roiled throughout the entire water column. The debris is thus not necessarily even visible from above the water, and so in some parts of the "patch" it may not even seem out of the ordinary on the surface. Yet, underneath the waves tiny pieces of plastic swim with the currents.<sup>i</sup> As well, there is more than one 'patch' of dense concentration—a western and eastern "patch." Whether we see it on the surface or not, there are swirling masses of large and small pieces of plastic serving as an index of human existence, with far greater reach or depth than most of us, I venture to say, can even imagine. The garbage patch indicates a toxicity of human impact that is impossible to escape. Larger pieces of plastic (mostly) also ride the waves, and trace other unintended paths of human impact—cargo ships dumping their treasures have led to years of tracking lost items that wash up on beaches. When the Tokyo Express cargo ship met with a monster wave in 1996, sixty-two containers fell from the ship, leading to millions of pieces of Lego and other items dumped off the coast of Cornwall.<sup>ii</sup> But even more unfathomable (so to speak) than finding little plastic doors, flowers, and dragons on the beach is the amount of Lego (and other items) that seem simply to be lost in the ocean. To that end, oceanographer Curtis Ebbesmeyer, a specialist in currents and ocean gyres, speculated that the pieces of Lego that had not washed up in Cornwall or anywhere else, could be traveling on currents indefinitely. BBC writer Mario Cacciottolo put it this way: "The incident is a perfect example of how even when inside a steel container, sunken items don't stay sunken."<sup>iii</sup>

With these ideas in mind, I reconsider the shipwreck and island habitation in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Fletcher and Massinger's *The Sea Voyage*. These texts offer mysterious islands, to which the lucky victims of shipwrecks (or of abandonment) are drawn. These places offer disparate conditions—in some ways, paradise, and in others, desolation. The events that bring the shipwreck victims to their island utopias and dystopias are dictated by economics and politics, especially in *The Sea Voyage* in which we see the unlucky merchant voyagers dumping all of their cargo treasures before their ship succumbs to the waves. Yet, shipwrecked people in isolation seem to always end up finding more people; always already "some kind of human" meets them on their island destination to shape their experiences. In the early modern period, there is no plastic circulating the globe. But, like our imagined version of the garbage patch, early modern dramas imagine remote and impossible islands that track the alienation of the human from their world, but which at the same time cannot imagine that alienation without the continued anthropocenic domination of the natural world, a domination that is marked by increasingly global trading patterns and emergent capitalist practices. With this in mind, we can reconsider the social and environmental constructions that both these plays provide as examples of the indelible human pollution that is inescapable already by the 17<sup>th</sup> century.



Image: a Lego doorframe from the Tokyo Express, with a tiny piece of coral growing on one of its bumps.

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<sup>i</sup> See NOAA, “What is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch?” *Ocean Facts*. National Ocean Service: NOAA, Department of Commerce. Updated: Twenty-seven November 2023. Accessed 14 December 2023, <https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/garbagepatch.html> .

<sup>ii</sup> Lego pieces and figures have been washing up—often near Cornwall—for the past 26 years. See Mario Cacciottolo, “The Cornish Beaches where Lego Keep Washing Up,” *BBC News*. 14 July 2014. Also, Tracey Williams has documented the incident and its aftermath in *Adrift: The Curious Tale of the Lego Lost at Sea* (Unicorn Publishing Group: 2022). Also see:

<sup>iii</sup> Cacciottolo, “The Cornish Beaches.”

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Peter Brook's Eco-Apocalyptic *King Lear* Worlds  
David W. Hartwig, Ph. D.  
Weber State University

In 1962, director Peter Brook experienced a conceptual crisis during the pre-production for *King Lear* that led to him tearing apart everything that had been planned and starting anew, with what he would later call an “empty space.” The stage production that resulted has become one of the most-revered productions of *King Lear*, and the same conceptual underpinnings later informed his film of the play. Both of these works presented audiences with a vision of *King Lear* situated within aestheticized, imaginative spaces that eschewed realism, and yet both affectively/effectively mirrored the real world. This paper focuses on the storyworlds of Brook's two iterations of *King Lear* as aesthetic representations that both provided an environment in which the story of *Lear* could be told, and that, I argue, invited audiences to imaginatively respond to the storyworld as a reflection of both *Lear*'s themes/ideas and the real world.

In the longer project from which this paper will be excerpted, I more fully examine the econarratological ramifications of Brook's *King Lear* storyworld; elements examined include the eco-cultural contexts for each production, archival records that give researchers a glimpse into the production processes, Brook's own writings, and the recorded responses of reviewers, which provide an individualized glimpse into the contextualized reception for each. I also think about my positionality as a (re)viewer in my own context, informed as I am by contemporary understandings of the Anthropocene and anthropogenic ecological crises. In this excerpt, I will argue that Brook's storyworlds invite “us” – theatrical practitioners, filmmakers, scholars, students, and more – to reconceptualize Shakespeare's works and to situate them in worlds that speak to contemporary ecological concerns.

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## **SAA Abstract: Shakespeare and Ecological Crisis**

### **Rewilding Ariel: Queer Ecology and *The Tempest***

This paper uses queer ecology to explore Ariel's journey to 'liberty' in *The Tempest*.<sup>1</sup> Ariel's longing for freedom is inherently bound up with a desire to freely live as their truest self; free from man-made constraints. Queer theory collapses man-made binaries, relocating what is naturally there. As an elemental part of the island's ecosystem, Ariel collapses the binary between human and nature. Ariel does not just transcend the gender binary, but also taxonomic distinctions between human and spirit, body and earth. Humanity has caused nature to become unnaturalized, queer ecology works to expose how anthropocentric constructions of "natural" vs "unnatural" are bigoted, imposing synthetic taxonomies onto nature. Queer ecology is thus an act of rewilding, of nature's joyous return to its natural state. In *The Tempest*, Ariel, a free-roaming spirit native to the island, can only find queer joy by reclaiming bodily autonomy. Prospero- the heteropatriarchal coloniser embodying the anthropocene- colonises Ariel too, who must manipulate nature in order to follow their master's orders. Ultimately, Ariel's release back into nature allows them to be 'free / As mountain winds'.<sup>2</sup> Their rewilding is metonymic for the island's biodiversity returning to its natural harmony- a harmony free from heteronormative man-made constructions. This act of rewilding sets the island free from ecological crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. By Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: The Arden Shakespeare, 2011), Ariel, 1.2.245.

<sup>2</sup> *The Tempest*, 1.2. 499-500.

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SAA Abstract  
*Shakespeare and Ecological Crisis*  
Rebecca Lemon

### Climate Emergency

Seemingly endless declarations of emergency and natural disaster make exceptional states all too familiar. Perhaps this should come as no surprise: etymologically, at least, “dis-astro” means ill starred. This origin might seem to cast disaster as an inescapable, extra-terrestrial threat, beyond our human power to contain it. But are disasters really “natural”? Are emergencies inevitable? These questions, which feel acute in the twenty-first century, have had a long reach. From the moment of the word’s appearance in English, “disaster” provoked a skeptical undercurrent, a sense that disasters are not, in fact, beyond human control. John Florio introduced the word “disaster” in his 1598 English dictionary, and Shakespeare took up the word to dramatic effect in *King Lear* (c.1606). The villainous son Edmund mocks his father, the earl of Gloucester, for worrying about recent events, claiming that the “disaster” he decries is his own fault: “This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and stars.” Edmund answers the above questions clearly: disasters are self-made, the product of human folly. Recent political theorists tend to agree: “we have come,” Australian politician and theorist Adam Bandt writes, “to be suspicious of emergencies.”

Questions about disasters and emergency power were particularly pressing ones in the years surrounding *King Lear*’s composition and performance. This SAA paper will take up one so-called disaster in a provisional way, given that this is new research that I’m only beginning to explore. Having written on food anxiety in Shakespeare as a result of crop failures and distribution crises, I now turn to consider the role of natural disasters, particularly in the form of damaging storms, in early modern life. I do so initially by tracking storms in Shakespeare, before trying to locate them more broadly in early modern records. *Julius Caesar*, in its meditation on spectacle and leadership, stages an ironic



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juxtaposition of emergencies: the plotters, even as they concoct a state emergency, dismiss the natural storm that should serve as a portentous warning to them. If storms might challenge or expose rulers, not only in *Caesar* but in *King Lear* and *The Tempest* as well, such storms also offer opportunities. Specifically, minor characters make possible the restoration of community even in the midst of emergency. Through dedicated action toward a potentially undeserving sovereign, characters such as Kent, Edgar, Ariel and Ferdinand help construct the resolution – whether heartbreaking or hopeful – that these plays offer.

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SAA 2024 / Portland, OR

“Cosmic Drives and the Shakespearean Stage”

Dr. Jean Feerick

My paper will consider some of the ways that Shakespeare’s plays activate estranging angles on human identity, contesting notions of mastery and sovereignty, by positioning humans as effects of cosmic processes that dwarfed them in scale. I’d like to tease out the ways his plays tap theories of agentic materialism that can be traced back to the eco-theories of the presocratics. I am particularly interested in how these philosophers, whose work was being reactivated in Shakespeare’s moment by contemporary philosophers, describe the cosmos as propelled by affects, such as love and hate. Shakespeare’s plays draw on these ideas of cosmological affect at moments of extreme ontological crisis for his characters, moments when they experience self-splitting and world-cancelling sensations. As one example, Titus comforts the traumatized Lavinia by grounding her dissolution in cosmic processes: “When heaven doth weep, doth not the earth o’erflow? If the winds rage, doth not the sea wax mad . . . Then must my sea be moved with her sighs; / Then must my earth with her continual tears / Become a deluge . . .” (Titus, 3.1.220-228). In such moments of dissolution – whether of self, family, or political structure – Shakespeare compellingly figures the human not as sovereign or exceptional but as a constellation of extra-human affective patterns. What is it about moments of crisis that lead to these cosmic reveries and how do they speak to our own moment of ecological crisis? As a provisional answer, I see them not only as a reminder that humans are instruments of cosmic forces that easily overpower them but as examples of how theater itself can tap and amplify its affective modes to raise audience awareness of such links.

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“Shakespeare” AND “Ecological Crisis”

Shakespeare Association of America 2024 (Portland, OR)

Jen Munroe, UNC Charlotte

This paper thinks about “Shakespeare and Ecological Crisis” by parceling out those terms and with a pedagogical focus that considers how the work we do with our students might draw on Shakespeare and the early modern period more broadly to redress some of the very real consequences (as well as underlying causes) of the global climate crisis.

I propose to share my approach to teaching these terms in the spirit of collaborative thinking (here in our seminar as well as in my classroom), framed by Donna Haraway’s notion of thinking new thoughts, telling new stories (*Staying With the Trouble*). To teach “Shakespeare” and “Ecological Crisis,” for me, amounts to coming to Shakespeare’s oeuvre with fresh eyes informed by (and informing) our ecological moment as well as an early modern one to offer new stories about it; and it equally benefits from having students orient themselves anew (in intellectual as well as visceral ways) to their own relationship with the nonhuman world in which they are intermeshed. In practice, this means reading the past (literary and historical) in its own right and for the traces of who we have become as well as redressing our present, all with an emphasis on “lived experience.”

Thus, my material for this paper will be my “Shakespeare and the Natural World” class, the incubator for this collaborative thought experiment about human/nonhuman relationships, especially as relates to notions of “becoming with” (historically and today). I want to share my course with you not as a “show and tell,” but rather as part of the generative thought experiment Carolyn has encouraged for this seminar; my hope is that thinking about the classroom space as key to unpacking the terms of this seminar might add to our “troubling,” to borrow from Haraway, of our notions of past and present, of the import of lived experience, and how Shakespeare fits into it all for us as scholars and for our students.