Research Project Presentation:

“The Non-Human as a character in Shakespeare’s plays. An Ecocritical Approach to the study of the 2nd tetralogy”.

(D lo no humano como personaje en la dramaturgia Shakespeareana. A proximación ecocítica a la segunda tetralogía). (VRID 1426)

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“This Blessed Plot of Land”

This research project aims at bringing to light the non-human dimension in Shakespeare’s second tetralogy, i.e. Richard II, Henry IV part 1 and part 2, and Henry V. These plays are set in the late 14th century and early 15th. Even though they integrate Shakespeare's historical plays it is worth pointing out that they were written around two centuries after the events. Out of the many possible readings the plays present, we have chosen the ecocritical approach, which in Cheryll Glotfelty’s terms is defined as an earth-centered approach to literary studies.\(^1\) In the tetralogy, nature appears as an omnipresent force in the language and speeches of its characters. Reading the plays or seeing them performed through this perspective broadens our understanding of Shakespeare’s world, which thus becomes our own.

Literature is only one of the manifestations of the human spirit and yet, because of the interrelation between the human and the non-human, nature -intentionally or not- will always be a part of it. Pope Francis in his encyclical *Laudato Si* makes reference to this inseparable relationship.

“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.”\(^{(139)}\)

“…we live and act on the basis of a reality which has previously been given to us, which precedes our existence and our abilities.” \(^{(140)}\)

*(Laudato Si, Francis)*

The first play in the second tetralogy is Richard II. It tells the story of a king who was deposed by Henry Bolingbroke -later Henry IV- in a world in which the concept of power as a divine right was being replaced by a more pragmatic one. Henry IV became king by conquest and feeble heredity.

In Act 1, scene 1 the King arbitrates a dispute between Bolingbroke and Mowbray, who has committed crimes against his king and country. Bolingbroke refers to the traitor through this metaphor: “Since the more fair and crystal is the sky, the uglier seem the clouds that in it fly.”\(^2\)

In the second scene the Duchess of Gloucester compares Edward III’s descendants to branches that spring from the same root in a speech that aims at prompting Gaunt to

\(^1\) Glotfelty, Cheryll. “What is Ecocriticism?”, 1994 Western Literature Association Meeting, Salt Lake City
avenge the death of his brother and the duchess's late husband, in which Richard himself was seemingly involved. Some of these branches have dried following the course of nature or destiny, but one has been vilely torn, its most precious sap has been spilt and its leaves have withered due to an act against nature.

“Edward's seven sons, whereof thyself art one,
Were as seven vials of his sacred blood,
Or seven fair branches springing from one root:
Some of those seven are dried by nature's course,
Some of those branches by the Destinies cut;
But Thomas, my dear lord, my life, my Gloucester,
One vial full of Edward's sacred blood,
One flourishing branch of his most royal root,
Is crack'd, and all the precious liquor spilt,
Is hack'd down, and his summer leaves all faded,
By envy's hand and murder's bloody axe.”

In the third scene, when Richard decides to put an end to the duel between Mowbray and Bolingbroke he 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 a 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. 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.”

When Gaunt says farewell to his son Bolingbroke he advises him to contemplate nature (birds, grass, flowers) and to see everything that he loves reflected in it so as to drive sorrow away. The connection between the human and non-human is such that we can find comfort in it.

“Suppose the singing birds musicians,
The grass whereon thou tread'st the presence strew'd,

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3 Ibid. Act 1, Scene 2.
4 Ibid. Act 1, Scene 3.
5 Ibid.
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.”

The scene ends with Bolingbroke’s farewell to mother earth. He calls it mother and nurse, acknowledging that life is impossible without it. Human beings depend on the earth for survival. The earth, in turn, is worthy of respect and the cares of mankind. It is thus a harmonious and everlasting relationship. Moreover, the scene expresses the feeling of belonging to a particular land, with its unique features.

“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.”

In Act 2, before his death, Gaunt reflects about Richard’s reign using images-metaphors of nature such as rain and fire. His words are an omen: Richard's reign will be short-lived and its end, abrupt.

“His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last,
For violent fires soon burn out themselves;
Small showers last long, but sudden storms are short;”

Gaunt, who is beyond loyalties at this point, pronounces a hymn of praise to the land, England, and 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 non-human (the earth, the sea) prevails over the human in the following passage.

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,

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
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,⁹

Such a reflexion 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.

Act 2 closes in Wales. A Welsh Captain can read the king’s imminent fall in the signs of nature. The Welsh were 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 wither’d
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.”¹⁰

Act 3 opens with Bolingbroke’s return to claim Gaunt’s legacy, which Richard had confiscated upon Gaunt's death. In the film version of Richard II in the series "The Hollow Crown" Bolingbroke kisses the earth. He has two traitors to his cause executed: Bushy and Greene, whose names make reference to nature. Paradoxically, they are accused of having disparked Bolingbroke's parks and felled his forest woods during his exile.¹¹

Richard returns from his campaign in Ireland only to find Bolingbroke back in England. Richard disembarks on the coast of Wales and also salutes the earth with his hands in a reverential manner, while the rebels, from Richard's point of view, wound it with their horses’ hooves. He addresses the earth directly and urges it not to let the rebels benefit from its most precious gifts (food, flowers) 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 and death.

⁹ Ibid. Act 2, Scene 1.
¹⁰ Ibid. Act 2, Scene 4.
¹¹ Ibid. Act 3, Scene 1
Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,  
Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs:  
As a long-parted mother with her child  
Plays fondly with her tears and smiles in meeting,  
So, weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,  
And do thee favours with my royal hands.  
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  
Whose double tongue may with a mortal touch  
Throw death upon thy sovereign's enemies.12

In this passage there is a biblical allusion to the loss of the state of perfect harmony between the human and the non-human after the fall of mankind 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.”13

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 themselves. 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”14

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12 Ibid. Act 3, Scene 2.  
13 Genesis 3, 17-19 in http://bible.catholic.net/  
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 too are like that name written on sand.

Richard’s deposition presents a change of paradigm: the notion of the "divine right of kings", which Richard still upholds, is being replaced by a more pragmatic one. The king considers his position natural, granted by God, and, therefore, he is convinced that God will favour his cause by putting nature on his side as well.

“God omnipotent,
Is mustering in his clouds on our behalf
Armies of pestilence;”

The Elizabethan audience might have grasped an allusion to the English victory against the invasion of the Spanish Armada in 1588, in which nature (a storm, geographical features) “fought” on their side. Elizabeth herself is said to have made such a claim.

A remarkable scene in the play is set in the Duke of York's garden. There is a conversation between a servant and a gardener in which 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.

“…our sea-walled garden, the whole land,
Is full of weeds, her fairest flowers choked up,
Her fruit-trees all upturned, her hedges ruin'd,
Her knots disorder'd and her wholesome herbs
Swarming with caterpillars?”

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 trimm'd and dress'd his land
As we this garden!”

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15 Ibid. Act 3, scene 3.
16 Ibid. Act 3, scene 4.
17 Ibid.
The Queen overhears this conversation but her grief upon learning Richard’s fate makes her curse the gardener and wish that his plants will never grow.

“Gardener, for telling me these news of woe,
Pray God the plants thou graft’st may never grow.” 18

The gardener sympathises with her and as a sign of his compassion he promises "to set a bank of rue in remembrance of a weeping queen" 19. She waters the garden with her tears and, in doing so, the human and non-human worlds are fused.

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 prophesy, the bishop foresees that if Henry Bolingbroke is crowned “the blood of English shall manure the ground” 20. The earth will suffer due to human behaviour.

When Richard surrenders the crown he compares himself to snow in the face of Bolingbroke, whom 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". 21 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”. 22 His death ensues and he will return to the earth.

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 is rather the centre of the scene.

Silvina Barna

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18 Ibid.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid. Act 4, scene 1
21 Ibid. Act 5, scene 1
22 Ibid. Act 5, scene 2
The Non-Human as a character in Shakespeare’s Plays. An Ecocritical Approach to the Second Tetralogy

Local Stories and Local Soil in *Henry IV*

(...) ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (...). [It] takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (...) all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it (Glotfelty, 1994).

I intend to explore how Shakespeare builds local culture, or local soil (Berry, 1988), precisely through construction of the English founding myth, in terms of distance or proximity to the state of nature (as opposed to the state of society), explained by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*¹ (1923). I also follow here Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer’s ‘Concept of Enlightenment’² (2002) which construes the whole eighteenth-century Enlightenment as a fall from the natural world caused by hyper-rationality; a situation that necessarily led to nature’s enslavement and the exploitation of the masses. On the strength of these ideas, I plan to show how pre-Enlightenment Shakespeare, and his even prior stories, deviate temporarily from the course of natural law and order, only to return to the right track later on, making everything still more perfect and peaceful if possible.

In *Henry IV* Part One, this deviation from the natural law is apparent in two different conflicts: the one dealing with Prince Hal’s affective and moral distance from his father, his relationship with Falstaff, and Henry IV’s subsequent wish that Harry Hotspur were his real son; and the one related to the corruption, the stain, that lies on Henry IV’s crown, which has been gained by deposing the rightful king, Richard II.

Going from the smaller to the bigger picture, the former conflict contradicts the law of nature regarding local, or community, culture. Prince Hal’s distance from his father, from the crown that he is to inherit, in one word, from the royal family itself, represents a break in the generational succession, a negation of one’s own story, an attempt to cut original ties. If we consider that without a past there is no identity, Hal, the King’s son, behaves in

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¹ Written in 1754 as an answer to the subject for an essay competition proposed by the Academy of Dijon.
² In *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, originally written in German during World War II.
a manner that directly goes against Shakespeare’s avowed purpose in writing the play: Hal’s break threatens the continuity of the English myth; his rebellious attitude stands against the perpetuation, not only of his family, but of the royal lineage in general.

The latter conflict, notwithstanding, speaks to the audience, and the reader, about something of a more serious order. Bolingbroke (Henry IV)’s accession to the English Crown has also violated the order of nature according to the beliefs of the time. He was not the lawful heir to the Crown, and the stain cannot be erased.

Both conflicts speak about corruption, one as a lack of moral or honest conduct, the other as a direct cause and consequence of political inequality that is not as easy to solve. If we consider the meaning of corruption in a natural sense, the process of decay, putrefaction (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015), it is easy to detect the connection between both levels. Moral and political corruption will necessarily lead to natural corruption. If Hal does not return to his father’s side, the king is weakened, worried, sick; if the English crown is not lying on the rightful heir’s head, plots and treason will threaten the throne. England, the country, the nation, and the territory, will be suffering and in danger until the corruption is rooted out.
O(n)F Land and Honour (in The Hollow Crown)

By the sweat of your brow you will eat your food until you return to the ground, since from it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you will return.

Genesis 3:19

For the fate of the sons of men and the fate of beasts is the same. As one dies so dies the other; indeed, they all have the same breath and there is no advantage for man over beast, for all is vanity. All go to the same place. All came from the dust and all return to the dust.

Ecclesiastes 3:19 – 20

Mutilated limbs and corpses inhabit the setting in Act V of 1 Henry IV. Blood, either boiling, or shedding or drying, colours the stage in different shades of red. Honour is at stake in the Shrewsbury fields and worms ready to feast on the losers. These non-human elements provide material to a new reading of this part of the tetralogy from an ecocritical point of view. The ground(s) of our analysis (sh)wi(a)ll be the corpse of Percy Hotspur around which Hal Prince of Wales and Falstaff organize to form a system of mirrors and duplicities that show different conceptions of honour. These are conceptions on which either the nobility or the lower orders could find contemplation.

It won’t escape from our attention that Shakespeare was a theatre-minded person. As an actor he must have been well aware that the dramatic text offers spaces of indeterminacy that are filled with the performer’s imagination turned into action. Thus, the body and voice of the actor completes the text. This provides multiple possibilities of enactment and consequently different constructions of meaning through each actor’s body.

Being an actor myself, I’m conditioned to read actions there, where others might read poetry; therefore, approaching this paper with a performance perspective becomes inevitable. The reader might find some of the premises as mere subjective interpretations but the best will be done to justify them by considering the words and the given circumstances (in terms of Stanislavski) in each scene. Nevertheless, the interference of my own imagination and intuition will have to be excused.

When talking about a system of duplicities and mirrors, we are referring to a relation in which the most intimate aspects of one character become reflected in the other. Thus, it can be observed that Hal and Percy are two sides of the same coin. They
are virtue in the flaw (Hal) and the flaw in virtue (Percy). Hal’s disreputable lifestyle is broadly known throughout the kingdom and his affairs at the Eastcheap Tavern add more instability to the weakened power of his father the king. Nevertheless, there’s still a strong sense of nobility within him. Though he behaves like a rascal and he’s surrounded by thieves, his principles remain untouched. He shows them by responding honourably to his father’s call to the duty of battle. Percy’s reputation is unquestionable. His rigid sense of honour drives him on to a quest for a cause he considers just, but, blinded by his lofty ideals he drags the country to the greatest damage of civil war and bloodshed.

Considering that honour is earned with sacrifice, it becomes pertinent to refer now to what is each character willing to resign and for what purpose. Hal is willing to relinquish his selfish pleasures and careless life for the sake of his father and to occupy his place in the political system. His cause is higher than himself because it involves the stability & the prosperity of the whole kingdom. Meanwhile, Percy makes the country, his family and his allies offer their blood for his own selfish concept of honour. He listens to neither reasons nor (prudent) advice. The flesh he forfeits is for his own whim and glory. Percy’s *hybris* consists of believing himself to be the hero of a Chivalric Romance. He allows his *hot* temper to *spur* him and tempt his fortune against the wise counsel of his friends. He also underestimates the power of his enemies and he is overconfident about the perfection of his plans and his knightly virtue, whereas Hal owns up to his mistakes and respects Percy as a worthy rival.

With what’s been said, we do not attempt at detracting Percy in benefit of Hal. Percy may have worthwhile reasons to be angry and to want to dethrone the king who is, after all, an usurper to the Crown and possibly a regicide. In fact, Henry IV himself admits to the truth of Percy’s words and he is ashamed /embarrassed of his son’s deeds at Eastcheap. The intention here is to emphasise that each character is reflection of what is within the other.

The same mirror-like structure articulates Hal and Falstaff. Hal is a prince that poses for a scoundrel while Falstaff is the scoundrel that feigns a princely nature. Falstaff is a carnivalesque mirror of Hal and next to him Hal acquires a dignity he doesn’t have next to Percy. In act I sc. 2 and act II sc. 2 and 4, when they plan and carry out the theft, we find Hal among the group of vandals. Notwithstanding, he doesn’t behave like one of them. While Falstaff steals from the Crown, which is to say, the King
and the Nation, with the intention of keeping the booty for himself; Hal does everything out of boredom. To occupy his idle time, he steals from Falstaff, but as the saying goes “it’s no crime to rob a thief”, so Hal comes gracefully out of the situation and returns the money. In these scenes, Falstaff is portrayed as the ridicule of a thief and Hal, as just a mischievous/naughty young man.

Still, both Hal and Falstaff see in each other what they themselves have within. Falstaff induces Hal to robbery and describes Hal with adjectives that would well suit himself, he projects his own flaws on Hal and even blames him for sending him to perdition:

“Thou hast done much harm upon me, Hal – God forgive thee for it! Before I knew thee, Hal, I knew nothing; and now I am, if a man should speak truly, little better than one of the wicked.” (Shakespeare, p. 14)

Falstaff is a witty old man and he has learned that laughter washes blame away and keeps oneself in people’s favour. Not everything he says must be taken too literally, but though he might be bluffing, his truth is that no prince should have any affairs around the Boar’s Head Inn like Hal does, and therefore his accusations partake of some truth.

This knowledge of the human soul is something that Hal has not yet learned nor will he begin to until Act V. Hal fails to see Falstaff’s true colours and assumes Falstaff would undergo the same conversion process he has. Although Hal never utters a word of recognition of his friend’s chivalry, his actions indicate that he expects Falstaff to show his inner knighthood when hard times demand it. In the most desperate moment of the battle, Hal urges Falstaff “I prithee lend me thy sword.” (Shakespeare, p. 116)

Hal is begging Falstaff to rise to the occasion just as he has done. The curious detail here is that Hal has this hope even after having witnessed Falstaff’s lack of courage and subsequent lies in act II scenes 2 and 4. The fact is that in both circumstances, the robbery and the battle, Falstaff faces the real possibility of death and runs away; whereas for Hal his plot with Poins was just a joke and he failed to see these as analogous situations. Otherwise, he would have known that from Falstaff he could only expect a bottle of sack, but never a man-at-arms. Yet, even at the end of the play, after having believed him dead, Hal still keeps Falstaff by his side and seems to forgive his performance in the battlefield:
“Come, bring your luggage nobly on your back.
For my part, if a lie may do thee grace,
I’ll gild it with the happiest terms I have.” (Shakespeare, p. 123)

This machinery of mirrors and duplicities becomes more interesting when applied to Percy’s death (act V, sc. 4). When Hal kills Percy, he kills his double and endows himself with Percy’s virtues.

Hotspur: My name is Harry Percy.
Prince: Why, then I see
A very valiant rebel of the name.
I am the Prince of Wales, and think not, Percy,
To share with me in glory any more.
Two stars keep not their motion on one sphere,
Nor can one England brook in double reign
Of Harry Percy and the Prince of Wales.
Hotspur: Not shall it, Harry, for the hour is come
To end the one of us; and would to God
Thy name in arms were now as great as mine!
Prince: I’ll make it greater ere I part from thee,
And all the budding honours on thy crest
I’ll crop to make a garland for my head.

Further on, before dying, Percy reinforces this idea of being deprived of his titles:

Hotspur: O, Harry, thou hast robb’d me of my youth!
I better brook the loss of my brittle life
Than those proud titles thou hast won of me:
They wound my thoughts worse than thy sword my flesh...(Shakespeare, pp. 119-120)

Hal dignifies himself after acquiring Percy’s grandeur, and he pays his respects to the corpse he leaves behind with its defects and degeneration. Percy’s honourable blood baptizes Hal/invests him with the renewed dignity of a crown prince. Their duplicity is nullified through a process of integration of both Harrys. Now, after having killed Percy, he must get rid of Falstaff as a second stage of his maturation process. He can no longer ‘absorb’ Falstaff because he is incompatible with Percy. There Hal’s duty as the heir to the throne is to ‘kill’ whatever of Falstaff still remains within him. This process begins with Percy’s death but continues throughout 2 Henry IV.

Falstaff, in his warrior-like mockery, desecrates the remains of he who has once been great, i.e. Percy. He kills what is already dead, what is “food for worms” (Shakespeare, p. 120) and when he carries it on his back, he makes it his own. When he
claims this corpse on false grounds, he impregnates himself with the putrescence of the flesh and vice, which has been left behind by Hal in the battlefield. In this way, Falstaff invests himself with the corpse’s corruption. He becomes a ‘rotten limb’ that has to be disentangled from off the Nation’s body...