

English 764: Elemental Shakespeare

Fall Semester 2013

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Meeting Time: 7:00-9:50 PM T

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“Does not our life consist of the four elements?” (*Twelfth Night*)

Cleopatra claims that “I am fire and air; my other elements / I give to baser life” (5.2.280-1). Prospero calls Caliban “[t]hou earth” (1.2.317). Feste leaves us in “the rain [that] raineth every day” (5.1.379). Indeed, Shakespeare’s plays are known for their elemental occurrences. But as one windy character – Sir Toby Belch – puts it, the elements are more than just symbols for the playwright’s art: they are material interactions *through* and *with* which the human “consist[s]” and composes. Rather than simply tracking the elemental occurrences in Shakespeare’s poems and plays, this course explores the work the elements did in the early modern period and continue to do in ours. Reading Shakespeare as an elemental ecotheorist, we will ask several key questions. Of ontology: how do the elements challenge the human/inhuman divide, the separation between nature and culture, and any bounded notions of the “human” and of bodies in general? Of epistemology: how do the elements scramble our ways of knowing, disrupt systems of order, and even expand definitions of “life” to include inorganic beings? Of ethics: can Shakespeare’s elementalities help us listen to the silenced in/humans of the world, and, in response, usher in new worlds built upon desire as well as discord? In emphasizing mixtures over purification, networked assemblages over individual mastery or human autonomy, this seminar will engage emergent critical modes as well: such as dark ecology, actor-network theory, ecofeminism, vital materialism, and ecophobia.



J.M.W. Turner, “Shakespeare Cliff, Dover” (c. 1825)

Learning Objectives:

I have several goals for this course, none of them elementary:

1. to consider the ways that Shakespeare wrote about the elements (or *with* them); to ask how he made sense of (or did not make sense of) his increasingly-vortical world (drawing from pseudo-scientific theories like geohumoralism or literary traditions like Ovid); and to examine the turbulent non/human compositions that resulted from these elemental encounters.
2. to put Shakespeare's thought-experiments into conversation with current ecological thoughts – such as queer ecology, ecofeminism, postcolonial ecocriticism, and ecomaterialism (“the material turn”) – while simultaneously interrogating their terms and expanding their horizons.
3. to think about how the early modern elements speak to contemporary environmental issues, how they might offer alternative futures (“steps”) besides catastrophe.
4. to critique the anthropocentricity of our age in order to imagine a posthumanist ethics that accounts for love as well as strife with all elemental things.

Required Books: (available from the WVU Bookstore)

1. *The Norton Shakespeare* (2nd edition)
Although the plays are available in other formats, it is crucial that you have the Norton edition in order to follow along.
2. Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*

Requirements:

1. Expect plenty of reading: ranging from sixteenth-century pamphlets on extraordinary meteors, to difficult theoretical manifestos, to the plays themselves. If this workload is “too hot, too hot” for you (as it is for Leontes), then I suggest that you drop.
2. Eco-journals are weekly responses (at least one page, single-spaced) in which you will meditate on the entwining between the elements and the imagination—not only in Shakespeare's works, but also in your own day-to-day experiences. I would like you to pick a place in which to compose (local or not, built or otherwise) and stick to that site throughout the semester. Be creative; be personal. In general, your responses are meant to ask (intelligent) questions about that week's reading and, I hope, enlarge your own sense of elementality. Email responses to me by Monday at midnight.
3. A short paper (5 pages) on the weekly readings for *King Lear*, environmental degradation, and our trip to Kayford Mountain (more below).
4. A midterm paper (10 pages) that places Shakespeare's works in conversation with one or more ecotheoretical modes and a current environmental issue of your choice.
5. Final paper: an article-length paper (20-25 pages) worthy of publication that builds on your midterm research.

Grading Rubric:

Participation and attendance in class	20
Eco-journals	20
Short paper	10
Final paper (includes midterm)	50
Total	100

Kayford Mountain Field Trip:

Because one of the course objectives is thinking about how Shakespeare's ecocriticism can influence current environmental policy, we will join the WV Sierra Club caravan to Kayford Mountain – a controversial mountaintop removal (MTR) site – on Sunday 9/15. I am currently working out our travel plans. If you have any reservations about this trip, please come see me.

Attendance Policy:

Attendance is mandatory. **Late work will not be accepted** and you may not take an incomplete. If you foresee a scheduling conflict, please notify me as soon as possible.

Academic Dishonesty:

Academic dishonesty of any kind will be treated as a serious offense. In most cases, you will fail the course. You can find more on the Student Conduct Code (III.B.1) at http://studentlife.wvu.edu/office_of_student_conduct/student_conduct_code

Statement of Social Justice:

The West Virginia University community is committed to creating and fostering a positive learning and working environment based on open communication, mutual respect, and inclusion. **Any attempt to disrupt the nondiscriminatory environment of this class will not be tolerated.**

If you are a person with a disability and anticipate needing any type of accommodation in order to participate in this class, please advise me and make appropriate arrangements with the Office of Accessibility Services (293-6700). For more information on West Virginia University's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives, please see <http://diversity.wvu.edu>.

Contact:

I encourage you to take advantage of my office hours (information above), and feel free to email/call me at any time. Never hesitate to ask a question, express a doubt, or request clarification. Make sure that your MIX email address is operational; I will frequently notify you about what to read for a given day, and I will occasionally post documents online.

Schedule of Readings (mutable like the elements):

8/20 The Elements Never Act Alone

8/27 Composing with the Elements

- Sonnets 18, 44, and 45; *The Rape of Lucrece*
- Bruno Latour, "An Attempt at a 'Compositionist Manifesto'"
- David Macauley, *Elemental Philosophy: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water as Environmental Ideas*: "Philosophy's Forgotten Four" and "Revaluing Earth, Air, Fire, and Water: Elemental Beauty, Ecological Duty, and Environmental Policy"
- Gail Kern Paster, in *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*: "Becoming the Landscape: The Ecology of the Passions in the Legend of Temperance"
- Robert Markley, in *Early Modern Ecocriticism*: "Summer's Lease: Shakespeare in the Little Ice Age"

9/3 *The Tempest* Tamed: Be Collected!

- Simon Estok, *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia*: “Doing Ecocriticism with Shakespeare” and “Staging Exotica and Ecophobia”
- Christopher Manes, “Nature and Silence”
- Selections from E.M.W. Tillyard, *The Elizabethan World Picture*
- Selections from Francis Bacon’s essays

9/10 *Richard II*: Political Ecology: Dethroning the Human?

- Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature*: “Introduction” and “Why Political Ecology Has to Let Go of Nature”
- Lynne Bruckner, “‘Consuming means, soon preys upon itself’: Political Expedience and Environmental Degradation in *Richard II*”
- Selections from Thomas Hill, *The Gardener’s Labyrinth*

9/17 *King Lear*: Is this the promised end? Ecocatastrophe and the Promises of Post/sustainability

- Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare’s Ocean*: “Preface” and “Fathoming: *The Tempest* and *King Lear*”; “A poetics of nothing: Air in the early modern imagination”
- Post/sustainability cluster from *PMLA* 127/3/2012

9/24 *As You Like It*: (Queer) Tongues in Trees

- Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology”
- Robert Watson, *Back to Nature*: “As You Liken It: Simile in the Forest”
- Selections from Michael Drayton, *Poly-Olbion*
- **Short paper due**

10/1 *Pericles*: Humming Water and In/organic Life

- Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*: “Preface” and “The Force of Things”
- Mentz, *Bottom*: “Fishing: *Pericles*”
- Dan Brayton, *Shakespeare’s Global Ocean*: “Introduction” and “Backs to the Sea? The Terrestrial Bias”
- Patrica Yaeger, “Editor’s Column: Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons”

10/8 *Twelfth Night*: Thinking the Ecological Thought

- Morton, *The Ecological Thought*: “Dark Thoughts”
- Tim Ingold, *Being Alive*: “The shape of the earth” and “Earth, sky, wind and weather”
- Selections from John Stow, *A Survey of London*

10/15 No class: Fall Break

- Work on midterm paper. I recommended reading Sharon O’Dair, in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*: “Is it Shakespearean Ecocriticism if it isn’t Presentist?”

10/22 *The Merry Wives of Windsor*: Poor Parks and Recreation

- Selections from Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*
- Vin Nardizzi, *Wooden Os*: “‘Come, will this wood take fire?’ *The Merry Wives of Windsor* in Shakespeare’s Theatres”
- Selections from John Manwood, *A Treatise And Discovrse Of the Lawes of the Forrest*
- **Midterm paper due**

10/29 *Othello*: Elemental Contact Zones

- Mary Floyd-Wilson, *English Ethnicity and Race in Early Modern Drama*: “The ghost of Hippocrates: geohumoral history in the West” and “Othello’s Jealousy”
- Mentz, *Bottom*: “Keeping Watch: *Othello*”
- Estok, “Monstrosity in *Othello* and *Pericles*: Race, Gender, and Ecophobia”

11/5 *Antony and Cleopatra*: Mucking the Nile, or, Elemental Desire

- Michel Serres, *Biogea*: “Sea and River” and “Encounters, Loves”
- O’Dair, “Water Love”
- Edward J. Geisweidt, in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*: “‘The Nobleness of Life’: Spontaneous Generation and Excremental Life in *Antony and Cleopatra*”

11/12 *Julius Caesar*: Mis/reading the Skies

- Selections from Serres with Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time*; Serres, *The Natural Contract*: “War, Peace”
- Selections from S.K. Heninger, *A Handbook of Renaissance Meteorology* and Craig Martin, *Renaissance Meteorology*
- John Evelyn, *Fumifugium*

11/19 *The Winter’s Tale*: Freezing Women

- Stacy Alaimo, in *Material Feminisms*: “Trans-corporeal Feminisms and the Ethical Space of Nature”
- Jennifer Munroe, in *Ecocritical Shakespeare*: “It’s all about the gillyvors: Engendering Art and Nature in *The Winter’s Tale*”
- Estok, “Disgust, Metaphor, Women: Ecophobic Confluences”

12/3 *Timon of Athens*: Who’s (Not) Coming to Dinner?

- Selections from Serres, *The Parasite*
- Émilie Hache and Latour, “Morality or Moralism? An Exercise in Sensitization”
- Bruce Bohrer, *Environmental Degradation in Jacobean Drama*: “Shakespeare’s Dirt”
- Mentz, *Bottom*: “Drowning: *Timon of Athens*” and “Toward a Blue Cultural Studies”

12/10 Enter, *The Tempest*, Wet: Be collective!

- View clips from Synetic Theater’s 2013 production of *The Tempest* and (informally) discuss alternate elemental interpretations of the play
- Dinner plans TBA
- **Final paper due**