

## Through an Un-Weeded Garden Teaching the Unsustainable *Hamlet*

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One of the most famous lines from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* is Marcellus' observation at the end of the fourth scene that "something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1. 4. 67).<sup>1</sup> Marcellus' conclusion has given generations of students an interpretive platform from which to enter the play. What does Marcellus mean? What is rotten? What causes this rottenness? How far does the rot go? Who or what is ultimately to blame for the decaying world in which Hamlet finds himself? These are useful questions, and there are good reasons why teachers of Shakespeare, myself included, have spent many class periods trying to answer them.

But as we talk about the rottenness in *Hamlet*, we rarely consider it in environmental terms, in terms of trophic levels and the larger ecosystem of Elsinore—the system within which rot properly belongs. Shakespeare himself places rot within just such a system by using terms he draws from the natural world around him. Shakespeare's use of nature and of wilderness provides us with the opportunity for a reading of this play that engages with our students' interest in the environment and in ecologically sustainable ways of thinking and living. I would not go so far as to argue that *Hamlet* itself is inherently an environmental play. But in it Shakespeare constructs for us a system that calls to mind our own understanding of ecology. The world of Elsinore has been damaged by human action; it is an unsustainable world, and we see the consequence of that unsustainability in the tragedy that ends the play and leaves the stage littered with the dead.

What I propose in the following discussion is a way to lead students through *Hamlet* by focusing on Shakespeare's systemic use of the natural world: the agriculture and wilderness that surrounded and was so important to Elizabethan society. We can use that focus to introduce issues of sustainability in *Hamlet*. Though sustainability is, admittedly, a late twentieth and early twenty-first century environmental concept, it can serve us here in two ways: 1) as a means to engage our students in the study of Shakespeare by drawing upon issues currently important to them and their world; 2) as a theory that can teach us something about Shakespeare's plays in its own right (much as other nineteenth and twentieth century intellectual

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<sup>1</sup> References to Shakespeare are from *The Norton Shakespeare* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et al.

developments—for example, Marxism, Psychoanalysis, Evolution, and Feminism—have proven to be useful tools for considering Shakespeare’s work).

For our students, understanding *Hamlet* in environmental terms must begin with a general sense of the relationship between the natural world and the audience for whom Shakespeare is writing.<sup>2</sup> Most Elizabethans carried with them a complex conception of the natural world. On one hand, even residents of London had connections to the rural landscape beyond the city. Like Shakespeare himself, many Londoners had come to the city from villages and towns where farming and animal husbandry were the primary ways of life. These Londoners came to London with their knowledge of the trees, the crops, the animals, and the folklore that informed the rural landscape of England. Even native Londoners had a much closer connection to rural ways of life than we might initially think. In the early seventeenth century the walled town of London, with its commerce and its churches, was separated by fields, farms, and forest from the town of Westminster, where the secular and church government had their seats. For us, Westminster and London are both a part of greater London, a sprawling urban landscape of concrete, double-decker buses, and black taxi cabs. But for Shakespeare, to get from London to Westminster was to travel by boat on the Thames or by roads through woods and fields. James Shapiro notes in *1599: A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare* that outside of the city of London where the Globe was built, “Southwark took on a much more bucolic appearance, and to the south and west were fields, farms, ponds and scattered marshland” (122). To make this point for students, it is often useful to pull up the famous 1574 map of London, first published in the second edition of G. Braun and F. Hogenberg’s *Civitatis Orbis Terrarum*.<sup>3</sup> It shows nicely the distance between London and Westminster, and the open spaces and generally agricultural tenor of the south bank wherein stood the theatres.

Even the landed gentry living in London had country houses on which agriculture, forestry, and hunting took place. For Shakespeare and his audience, far more than for us, the natural world was always close by, always a part of the conversation. When Hamlet invokes an un-weeded garden, or Ophelia distributes flowers just before her death, not only the metaphoric disorder implied in the one image, or the symbolic meanings of flowers in the other are invoked, but specific landscapes and specific flowers are called to mind as well.

It is helpful for students to recognize that a number of ideological forces impacted the way that Shakespeare’s audience would have understood the larger natural world. For Shakespeare’s society, the wilderness was often considered a fallen garden. In the

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<sup>2</sup> This is a large field that I summarize briefly here. It’s also a field that needs additional work. A good place to start, though, is Keith Thomas’ important *Man and the Natural World*.

<sup>3</sup> This map is available on-line at numerous web-sites, or can be seen reproduced in James Shapiro’s *1599*.

Christian tradition, the world had been given to humanity as a garden, and everything that Shakespeare’s audiences saw in the world beyond the cities was that garden in a greater or lesser state of decay and disorder. Human efforts on the land worked to bring order out of a chaotic wilderness. Agriculture, animal husbandry, and even hunting, were all attempts to impose a human order on the land and its denizens. Keith Thomas points out in *Man and the Natural World*, that for the early modern period,

By rebelling against God, man forfeited his easy dominance over other species. The earth degenerated. Thorns and thistles grew up where there had been only fruits and flowers (Genesis, iii. 18). The soil became stony and less fertile, making arduous labour necessary for its cultivation. There appeared fleas, gnats, and other odious pests. Many animals cast off the yoke, becoming fierce, warring with each other and attacking men. (17-18)

What is particularly interesting about the Christian story as it was understood in Shakespeare’s time is the nature of life before and after the fall. The original vision of natural harmony implied in Christianity is agricultural. This Christian story, which was the dominant story in Shakespeare’s time, assumed that the original and ideal state of nature is the garden that is tended by and provides for human beings. Even after the Fall, the natural order of the world is conceived of as a garden gone bad. Because of sin, the garden lost its gardeners, and disorder was unleashed; the earth became wild. This fallen world, however, is workable, and retained vestiges of its original purpose. God’s creation remains focused on humanity, even after the Fall. As the Bible notes in the first chapter of Genesis.

So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them. And God blessed them, and God said unto them, Be fruitful, and multiply, and replenish the earth, and subdue it: and have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the fowl of the air, and over every living thing that moveth upon the earth. (Gen. 1: 27-28)<sup>4</sup>

The world was originally created for human beings, and this purpose persisted, even in the face of wildness. “Plants were created for the sake of animals and animals for the sake of men. Domestic animals were there to labour, wild ones to be hunted” (Thomas 1983:17). Created in the image of God, human beings were separate and superior to the rest of fallen creation.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This is admittedly from the King James version, which was not published until 1611. But these verses, in slightly different form, were central to the perceived distinction between humans and the natural world.

<sup>5</sup> This separation becomes more complicated, however, as society attempts to define what it means to be fully human. As Bruce Boehrer points out in *Shakespeare Among the Animals*, depending upon who was doing the defining, large numbers of persons were assumed to be less than human, including “the Irish, Spanish, Italians, French, Germans, Scots, and Welsh; Africans, Turks, Arabs, and Native

Hand in hand with Christian assumptions about the agricultural countryside is the English folk tradition that filled the woods with dangers and wonders. This tradition is various, but generally provides a clear dichotomy between human and non-human powers. As Diane Purkiss has noted in her wonderful book *At the Bottom of the Garden: A Dark History of Fairies, Hobgoblins, and Other Troublesome Things*:

Maps of the world in older times used to fill in the blanks of exploration with an array of fantastic creatures, dragons, sea monsters, fierce winged beasts. It appears that the human mind cannot bear very much blankness—where we do not know, we invent, and what we invent reflects our fear of what we do not know. (11)<sup>6</sup>

In this model, the world is tended by humans, but where human habitation ends, danger begins. Other forces, other creatures, lurk beyond our lands.

As our students will often note, there is an element of overlap in these two traditions. Both depend upon a direct human engagement with the world. Where human husbandry does not reach, there danger lurks. In Christianity the danger comes from the introduction of sin into the pastoral world of Eden. The fallen world becomes increasingly difficult to husband. In the older folk tradition, the agricultural world controlled by humans is bounded by unknown and dangerous realms, alien to people and our purposes.

These conceptions of the natural world infuse Shakespeare’s plays, and he makes use of different elements of belief depending upon his dramatic needs. Sometimes the woods are a fallen, demonic realm; sometimes a place designed by nature in which all things have purpose and ultimately serve humans; and sometimes they are simply an unknown territory where all manner of creatures, natural and supernatural, might lurk. In fact, in many (if not most) plays, combinations of these beliefs help to drive the narrative (and it can be useful, once students have a general understanding of the ways that the early modern period understood the natural world, to have them identify in different plays the various traditions upon which Shakespeare draws). In *Midsummer Night’s Dream*, for example, we have a blasted or a fertile nature, depending on the fairies’ relationships with one another, that, nonetheless, is ultimately benevolent toward the human world, combining folklore with an inherently Christian sensibility;<sup>7</sup> in *The Winter’s Tale* Antigonus is eaten by a bear,

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Americans; women; Jews, Muslims, Catholics, Puritans, and Protestants; apprentices, servants, farm laborers, the young, the poor, and the unemployed” (18). For Boehrer’s full discussion of the human/nature split, see his introduction, pages 6-37.

<sup>6</sup> Considerable work has been done on Shakespeare’s folk-lore. For a good place to start, see the Rev. T. F. Thiselton Dyer’s *Folk-Lore of Shakespeare*.

<sup>7</sup> *Midsummer* provides wonderful evidence for the wilderness as ultimately agricultural. The disruption the fairies cause by their bickering is figured in agricultural terms. As Titania says: “The ox hath therefore stretched his yoke in vaine, / The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn / Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard. / The fold stands empty in the drowned field, / And crows are fatted

his ship and mariners destroyed by a storm, but the lost princess Perdita grows up happily as a shepherd’s daughter, tending flocks in an Edenic pastoral world; in *Two Gentlemen of Verona* the woods are full of outlaws (who have honor and nobility upon which the resolution of the play turns); in *As You Like It* the woods are alternatively bare and forbidding—Orlando and Adam almost starve, and Oliver is almost eaten by a snake, first, and then a lion—and idyllic, where Duke Senior “finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, / Sermons in stones, and good in everything” (2. 1. 16-17); in *King Lear* the heath is blasted by storms and characterized by elemental forces that mirror both Lear’s increasing madness and his re-alignment with humanity; in *Macbeth* the heath is where the witches appear to Macbeth, where impossible prophecies can be made and believed, and Banquo can wonder “were such things here that we do speak about, / Or have we eaten on the insane root / That takes the reason prisoner?” (1. 3. 81-83); and in *Titus Andronicus* “the forest walks are wide and spacious, / Fitted by kind for rape and villainy” (2. 1. 115-16). Throughout his canon, Shakespeare makes use of a variety of possibilities offered in the early modern understanding of nature.<sup>8</sup>

The turn of the seasons and the general agricultural orientation of Elizabethan life provided an orderly seasonal sensibility for the members of Shakespeare’s audience. Tended nature had order that could be predicted. The easy movement from Spring to Summer to Fall, from planting to harvesting, from birth to slaughter, a world in which pasture is grown for sheep and sheep shorn and slaughtered for humans, where rain feeds crops, and lack of rain means famine, gave shape to a general cosmic order that Shakespeare presents as predictable. Corin wittily acknowledges to Touchstone in *As You Like It* “that the property of rain is to wet, and fire to burn; that good pasture makes fat sheep; and that a great cause of the night is lack of the sun” (3. 2. 23-25). Nature has order and balance, and that order and balance can be counted on.

Our current understanding of environmental science gives name and quantity to the order hinted at in Elizabethan natural history. We now see the relationship between rain, crops, and livestock as elements in an ecosystem. In the early twenty-first century we see the natural world as a series of functioning ecosystems made up of biotic (living) and abiotic (non-living) factors. The biotic factors are ranked into groups, or trophic levels, according to their main source of nutrition. Biologists describe these levels in hierarchical terms. Autotrophic organisms (like plants) obtain organic food molecules without eating other organisms (through, for example, photosynthesis). They are the primary producers of the ecosystem. All other trophic

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with the murrain flock” (2. 1. 93-97).

<sup>8</sup> For the Elizabethans, even defining “nature” can be challenging, and Robert N. Watson has pointed out in *Back to Nature: the Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance*, that the “definition of nature may seem to shift among several usages of the term: flora and fauna, the innate character of a being, and the totality of the physical universe” (7).

levels are consumers: primary consumers (those which eat the producers, like herbivores), secondary consumers (those which eat the primary consumers), tertiary consumers (which eat the secondary consumers) and on along those lines. In the final trophic level are the detritivores, the organisms that consume dead organic material. They are outside of the hierarchy of levels; they prey upon anything that has died, and ultimately consume all other organic material (Campbell 1993:1132-33). They are the final consumers, the eaters of the dead.

*Hamlet* helps us marry the Elizabethan understanding of nature with our own environmental science, and it begins with an indirect reference to the processes occurring after death. The play opens on the battlements of the castle of Elsinore, stronghold of the Danish king. The first lines reflect the fear and tension felt in the characters that open the play. “Who’s there? / Nay, answer me. Stand and unfold yourself” (1. 1. 1-2). There are many ways to explain this anxiety. On one hand the guards are simply responding to the “post-haste and romage in the land,” the possibility of military attack by the forces of young Fortinbras. But the threat of Fortinbras, who is, ultimately, one of them (as we see clearly at the end of the play) does not inspire the fear we hear echoed in these first voices. The more likely explanation is, as we soon learn, that for two nights running the guards have been visited by a ghost. This ghost comes out of the dark, from over the walls, from the blank spaces on their own cultural maps of the world. In an interesting emblem for the natural world itself, the ghost is both natural and unnatural. As Gertrude tells Hamlet later, death is natural, “all that lives must die, / Passing through nature to eternity” (1. 2. 72-73), but to come back from death—as the guards and later Hamlet himself make clear—is not.<sup>9</sup> The ghost’s return is discomfiting because it is unnatural and because it violates assumptions about the way the ecosystem should function. Old Hamlet has not passed through nature to eternity. Instead, he lingers. Hamlet and his audience must make sense of that.

Old Hamlet’s ghost occupies a multi-layered position in this play. Ghosts were among the supernatural phenomena about which educated English men and women argued. The Catholic church had a lively ghost tradition, a tradition embraced by many people in Shakespeare’s day, even those ostensibly not Catholic (a tradition embraced, as well, by a large percentage of current college students, if my own informal surveys are any indication). In the Catholic tradition, ghosts were possible as the souls of people trapped in purgatory. While in this interstitial place in the afterlife, souls could sometimes return to earth to appear to the living. In the strict Protestant tradition, however, there was no purgatory and consequently no ghosts. A spirit appearing to be a ghost was really a sending from the devil, conjured by demonic

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<sup>9</sup> As Macbeth so succinctly puts it: “the time has been / That, when the brains were out, the man would die, / And there an end” (3. 4. 77-79).

power and sent, as is always the case with the devil, to mislead and betray the living.<sup>10</sup> While deftly suggesting a depression that colors all of Hamlet’s perceptions in the play (the “weakness and melancholy” of which Hamlet speaks), Shakespeare does a nice job of summing up much of the argument about ghosts in young Hamlet’s insecurity about how to read the ghost and the ghost’s intention. Either the ghost really is his father come back from the grave, or

The spirit I have seen  
May be a devil, and the devil hath power  
T’ assume a pleasing shape, yea, and perhaps  
Out of my weakness and my melancholy,  
As he is very potent with such spirits,  
Abuses me to damn me. (2. 2. 575-80)

The ghost works in very specific symbolic ways in the play. In the minds of the watchmen it is connected, for example, to the coming war with Fortinbras. As Bernardo says: “Well may it sort that this portentous figure / Comes armed through our watch so like the king / That was and is the question of these wars” (1. 1. 106.2-106.4). Horatio reads it as a portent of the fall of kings. As he says, in Rome “a little ere the mightiest Julius fell, / The graves stood tenantless, and the sheeted dead / Did squeak and gibber in the Roman streets” (1.1. 106.6-106.8). And more generally, both Horatio and Marcellus see the ghost as a figure of corruption in the state of Denmark. As Horatio indicates, “in the gross and scope of mine opinion, / This bodes some strange eruption to our state” (1. 1. 67-68). Marcellus, as we’ve seen, even more famously says: “something is rotten in the state of Denmark” (1. 4. 67). Like Horatio, Marcellus, and Barnardo, we are asked to inscribe meaning onto the ghost, and the ghost supports that inscribing precisely because it occupies a liminal space between life and death, between nature and the unnatural, between the physical and the metaphysical worlds. The ghost must be interpreted, and Hamlet himself recognizes this when he first sees it. He seeks to solve the problem of interpretation directly:

Be thou a spirit of health or a goblin damned,  
Bring with thee airs from heaven or blasts from hell,  
Be thy intents wicked or charitable,  
Thou com’st in such a questionable shape  
That I will speak to thee. I’ll call thee Hamlet,  
King, father, royal Dane. (1. 4. 21-26)

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of whether a ghost is actually the spirit of the deceased, or an independent (often malevolent) spirit who takes the form of the deceased, see Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (587-606).

Hamlet decides, regardless what the ghost *could* be, that he will interpret it in a particular way: “I’ll call thee Hamlet, King, father, royal Dane.” Shakespeare clearly intends for us to interpret this figure as well, and though we can accept all of the above as possible readings of the ghost, for us, the ghost’s connection to death, and to the world outside of the walls of Elsinore is also important. The ghost is a part of that world that is not the castle, that is not Elsinore, that is outside—Diane Purkiss’ “blanks of exploration.” The ghost is invested by the natural and the unnatural worlds that lie beyond the walls of Elsinore. In this reading, the ghost is associated with the world beyond Elsinore’s walls—whatever is out there. Though it comes in the figure of the king, it comes from beyond the wall, beyond the boundary drawn around Elsinore and the living.

“‘Tis bitter cold, / And I am sick at heart” (1. 1. 6-7), Francisco says as he leaves the platform to go home. The guards’ fear is connected to the bitter climate upon Elsinore’s walls, and to the encroachment of weather that comes from and defines the outside. Deftly, this line links climate to sickness, to fear, and to the figure of the King’s ghost, which comes out of that bitter chill, and is proximately related to it. The climate acts as a metonymy for the larger wilderness, the unweeded garden that begins to encroach upon Elsinore, and the cold and the ghost are further linked as the guards discuss the forces that oppose them. The forces that threaten Elsinore from the outside may be supernatural, may be foreign armies, may be untended nature itself. The ghost is associated with all of them.

But if the ghost is a surreptitious representative of nature in general, it is more closely related to one particular element of nature. Hamlet’s father is dead and his ghost is a sign of that death. But though he is a ghost, and by definition incorporeal, the ghost cannot help but refer us, our students, and Hamlet, to the physical consequences of death, as well. In the ghost we recognize the metaphysical impact of murder on the soul of the murdered, and that metaphysical corruption is marked out on the body as rot. Having to answer for corruption of both kinds is implicit in the ghost’s conversation with Hamlet.

I am thy father’s spirit,  
Doomed for a certain term to walk the night,  
And for the day confined to fast in fires,  
Till the foul crimes done in my days of nature  
Are burnt and purged away. (1. 5. 9-13)

Old Hamlet is paying for his metaphysical corruption, the foul crimes done in his days of nature, by spending his days “fast in fires.” But the ghost’s corruption is also symbolically connected to physical corruption as well, and he makes this clear in the description of his death. After his brother pours the poison into his ears,



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a most instant tetter barked about,  
Most lazar-like, with vile and loathsome crust,  
All my smooth body. (1. 5 . 71-73).

At the moment of death, Old Hamlet’s body is instantly rotted, as if infected with leprosy. For the ghost, corruption is both spiritual and physical, and though we are not asked to make the connection immediately, Hamlet’s dead father is, from the beginning of the play, like Polonius later, “not where he eats, but where ‘a is eaten” (4. 3. 20). The moral corruption for which he suffers in purgatory is the analogue of the physical corruption through which his body is passing. Decomposition is an essential part of the ecosystem. It should be a natural consequence of a natural death. But neither the method of death nor the decomposition are, according to the ghost, natural. It is “murder most foul, as in the best it is, / But this most foul, strange, and unnatural” (1. 4. 27-28). This begins to redefine for us and for Hamlet, the ecology of Elsinore.

This redefinition is necessary because Gertrude and Claudius have already made the argument for a natural interpretation of the old king’s death. We know that people die and that death is natural. Life and death are both equally important parts of the ecology of a place, and this should be true in Elsinore as well as elsewhere. Because we understand this—and Shakespeare’s original audience did as well—we are likely to sympathize with Claudius and Gertrude when they explain the old king’s death in terms of the natural cycle of succession. Gertrude tells Hamlet:

Do not for ever with thy veiled lids  
Seek for thy noble father in the dust.  
Thou know’st ‘tis common—all that lives must die,  
Passing through nature to eternity. (1. 2. 70-73)

And Claudius, critiquing Hamlet’s extended mourning, continues the theme:

Fie, ‘tis a fault to heaven,  
A fault against the dead, a fault to nature,  
To reason most absurd, whose common theme  
Is death of fathers. (1. 2. 101-04)

If the death of fathers is a common theme of nature, then the death of the old king is natural, and Hamlet should get over it and take his rightful place within the ecosystem of Elsinore.

But the ghost challenges Claudius and Gertrude’s description of the way the world works. His death was not natural. By appearing to the watchmen and then to Hamlet—an appearance that we have already noted, attracts many different interpretations—the ghost encourages all of us to consider that the system governing

Elsinore is an unnatural one, and that the natural ecosystem that should control the relationship between life and death, and fathers and sons, has broken down. The garden in which old Hamlet was murdered, a garden now left untended by his death, prepares us to consider death within a larger system of meaning, and particularly prepares us to think about Hamlet’s first soliloquy, which allies Hamlet with his dead father in considering the consequences of dissolution.

Hamlet’s first soliloquy reaffirms the centrality of decomposition for the play and for himself.

O, that this too too solid flesh would melt,  
Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew,  
Or that the Everlasting had not fixed  
His canon ‘gainst self-slaughter. O God, God,  
How weary, stale, flat, and unprofitable  
Seem to me all the uses of this world!  
Fie on’t, ah, fie, ‘tis an unweeded garden  
That grows to seed. Things rank and gross in nature  
Possess it merely. (1. 2. 129-37)

Hamlet begins the play with a desire for death, decomposition, and dissolution. On one hand, of course, Hamlet simply wants to disappear, to not be. The world has become stale and unprofitable and he is tired of it. But Hamlet’s consideration of dissolution occurs within the context of a natural world made orderly by the human hand. His context is agriculture, gardening, the primary way that Elizabethans understood the natural world. Elsinore is a garden which, well tended, will yield well. Without a proper gardener the world is stale, flat, rank, gross, and unprofitable. Of course, within the context of gardening, decomposing is potentially productive. In a different context Hamlet could be compost. But as the garden stands at this point in the play, composting is pointless. The garden is untended, unweeded. Hamlet laments that the Everlasting stands in the way of his dissolution, but the garden itself is also a problem. His death would be throwing compost on the weeds, strengthening their rankness and grossness.<sup>11</sup>

Though Hamlet would like to disappear into the water and chemical cycles, to be resolved into a productive dew, he can not do it while the natural world, figured as a tended garden, is disordered. When Hamlet laments the untended garden, of course, he is lamenting the loss of his father and the usurpation of his father’s throne and position by his uncle Claudius, puffed up now into rankness and grossness, possessing his father’s throne, kingdom, and wife. But he also laments the loss of the order that made Elsinore a garden in the first place. Without tending, the natural

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<sup>11</sup> I find that in most cases, “rank” and “gross” need to be defined for my students. For Shakespeare’s time, rank is likely to mean “vigorous growth.” Gross is unnaturally large.

world grows out of control (“rank”) and out of its proper shape and border (“gross”). Interestingly, in the ecosystem of the play, rankness causes rot. The ghost makes this clear as he talks with Hamlet. As Hamlet promises to revenge his father’s murder, the ghost replies: “I find thee apt, / And duller shouldst thou be than the fat weed / That rots itself in ease on Lethe wharf / Wouldst thou not stir in this” (1. 4. 31-34). The fat weed is a gross weed, a weed grown without limit, without tending. And fat weeds rot. This has relevance both as we read Elsinore as an untended garden, subject to rankness and grossness (and ultimately rot), and as we consider Claudius as that thing in the garden which “rank and gross in nature possess[es] it merely.” Both are rotten.

Claudius’ rankness is described from beginning to end in terms of nature, and in terms of natural hierarchy. Hamlet introduces this general idea when, in his first scene, he compares his father to his uncle as “Hyperion to a satyr” (1.2. 140), a sun god to a minor mythological creature. In addition to the obvious difference between these two characters in terms of power and importance in Greek mythology, we also see Shakespeare considering the two in natural, and systemic, terms. The sun is essential in any model of the natural world—Shakespeare’s or our own. Hierarchically it is at the top, empowering all growing things, driving the system. In the ecosystem model discussed earlier, the sun is outside of the biosphere, providing energy to the producers to maintain the productivity of the system. Hyperion occupies a similar position for Hamlet. The satyr, meanwhile, is a very different sort of figure. A minor nature god, it is a part of nature, within the system overseen by the sun, and though tangentially related to fertility, it is more particularly a figure of lust, debauchery, drunkenness, and (yes) rankness.

Even more telling, later in the play, Hamlet confronts his mother and, after showing her pictures of Hamlet’s father and his uncle, asks her: “Could you on this fair mountain leave to feed, / And batten on this moor” (3.4. 65-66)? The comparison involves height and majesty, as the comparison between Hyperion and the satyr did, and this one, too, is presented in terms of nature, of land and land use. The mountain oversees the productive land; it receives and distributes water and nutrients to the lands below; the moor is unproductive wilderness. Finally, exhorting her to stay away from Claudius’ bed, Hamlet tells her: “and do not spread the compost o’er the weeds / To make them ranker” (3.4. 142-43). Here he figures Gertrude’s sexuality, her fertility, as a compost that will strengthen Claudius. Claudius is a weed. In his final justification for killing Claudius, Hamlet calls him a “canker of our nature” (5. 2. 70), a worm that kills the garden, or a cancerous growth infecting it. Throughout these scenes, Hamlet consistently figures his uncle as an unproductive part of the system, a weed invading a tended garden, or an undesirable (and unproductive) piece of land, unfit for human habitation, and finally as a cancer or a worm. For Hamlet, the crisis in Elsinore is a gardening problem. For Hamlet (and for Shakespeare’s imagery) the death of the old king represents another fall, a garden losing its overseer, going over

to weeds, going to wilderness, to rankness, and to rot.

Instead of profitable growth, Hamlet’s Elsinore is increasingly linked to the unproductive elements of the natural world: weeds, wilderness, and worms. Weeds and wilderness were not “natural” to Elizabethans. Productive land was. Though as we’ve already seen, decomposition is necessary, even for gardens, it is not productive when it is preeminent. Images that begin with Marcellus and rottenness, continue with Hamlet’s first soliloquy and his desire for dissolution, and move in to more serious contemplations of the rot afflicting Elsinore.

*King.* Now, Hamlet, where’s Polonius?

*Hamlet.* Not where he eats, but where ‘a is eaten. A certain convocation of politic worms are e’en at him. Your worm is your only emperor for diet. We fat all creatures else to fat us, and we fat ourselves for maggots. Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That’s the end. (4. 3. 17, 20-25)

In nicely systemic terms, Hamlet moves us from Hyperion, the sun, to the worms in the shadows. In Elsinore, the worms occupy the preeminent position. The “worm is your only emperor for diet.” More powerful than the king, the worm, ensconced in its trophic niche, is the creature to which all pay allegiance. The true king (“A was a man, take him for all in all, / I shall not look upon his like again” [1.2. 186-87]) is already at the table of the worms; Polonius, his primary counselor, has just joined him. The rest will follow. It is natural. All that lives must die.

In the untended garden, however, this is not a comfort. Hamlet emphasizes the bleakness of the ecosystem of Elsinore with the final words of this speech: “Your fat king and your lean beggar is but variable service—two dishes, but to one table. That’s the end.” The last line—“That’s the end”—emphasizes the problem with this model for Hamlet. The table of the worms should be a beginning, a way for the world, for society, to fertilize the ground for the next generation. But in Elsinore, the table of the worms is the end. Shakespeare is presenting us with an ecosystem in which decomposition leads nowhere.

In the second half of the play, the decomposition of bodies comes to dominate Hamlet’s thinking about the natural world. We see his most profound acknowledgement of this process in his visit to the gravedigger. As the gravedigger tosses skulls out of the grave he is digging, Hamlet comments on their possible identities as politicians, courtiers, lawyers, and buyers of land, always with the subtext that all humans come to this.<sup>12</sup>

Why might not that be the skull of a lawyer? Where be his quiddits now, his quillets, his cases, his tenures, and his tricks? Why does he suffer this rude knave now to knock him about the

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<sup>12</sup> It is of course worth noting that the lawyers, courtiers, land-buyers and politicians represent the powerful elite in Shakespeare’s culture.

*Richard Grinnell – “Through an Un-Weeded Garden...”*

sconce with a dirty shovel, and will not tell him of his action of battery? H'm! This fellow might be in 's time a great buyer of land, with his statues, his recognizances, his fines, his double vouchers, his recoveries. Is this the fine of his fines and the recovery of his recoveries, to have his fine pate full of fine dirt? (5. 1. 90-98)

Not surprisingly, Hamlet initially sees this death as a cycle, as “this fine revolution, an we had the trick to see't” (5. 1. 82-83), invoking the revolution of fortune's wheel, but also the turning of the seasons from life to death. For Hamlet, this fine revolution is poignant and ironic and natural. It is also general. His examples are lawyers, courtiers, ladies, and buyers of land, and of course the court still contains lawyers and courtiers and ladies and buyers of land. This is the natural ecosystem operating as it should: death functioning as a part of a dynamic system in which parts die and are replaced to maintain the vigor of the community and—to continue his earlier metaphor—the health of the garden.

But as Hamlet sharpens his focus, Shakespeare enables us again to see that Elsinore is not functioning normally or naturally. Hamlet asks the grave-maker:

How long will a man lie i'th' earth ere he rot?

FIRST CLOWN: I'faith, if a be not rotten before a die—as we have many pocky corpses nowadays, that will scarce hold the laying in—a will last you some eight year or nine year. A tanner will last you nine year. (5. 1. 151-55)

An individual corpse will last eight or nine years if it is not already rotten before it dies. Though an ecosystem is complex with many layers and many functions, Shakespeare directs our attention to this one particular aspect of it. In his earlier consideration of lawyers and land-buyers and courtiers Hamlet considered the decomposition of human beings in general terms, but when he meets up with the skull of Yorick, his focus shifts to the personal, and we see the play shifting in the way it understands the ecosystem of Elsinore.

Alas, poor Yorick. I knew him, Horatio—a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy. He hath borne me on his back a thousand times; and now, how abhorred my imagination is! My gorge rises at it. Here hung those lips that I have kissed I know not how oft. Where be your gibes now, your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment that were wont to set the table on a roar? Not one now to mock your own grinning? Quite chap-fall'n? Now get you to my lady's chamber, and tell her, let her paint an inch thick, to this favor she must come. (5. 1. 174-79)

Yorick's death and decomposition strikes Hamlet as particularly abhorred. Partly this is Hamlet's own personality coming to the fore. Throughout the play he struggles to come to terms with the loss of individuals. But at this moment in the play, Shakespeare shifts our focus from the general death and recycling of types (lawyers, courtiers, etc.), to the specific. Yorick is gone, is decayed, and will not return. He

moves from Yorick to Alexander the Great and Julius Caesar.

Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust; the dust is earth; of earth we make loam; and why of that loam whereto he was converted might they not stop a beer-barrel?  
Imperial Caesar, dead and turned to clay,  
Might stop a hole to keep the wind away. (5. 1. 193-97)

This personalizing of death and of decomposition works effectively to turn our attention to the sterility of Elsinore that does not replace that which has been lost. Hamlet emphasizes that there will be no new Yoricks, and no new Alexanders. As we recognize the permanence of the loss described here, it becomes easier for Hamlet to turn our attention to a critique of the system of life and death so blithely invoked by Gertrude and Claudius. To be human is to be food for worms, is to be transformed into dust. We are then pulled back into the ecosystem to serve some other role. But in Hamlet’s Elsinore the human is not reborn into children, into humans, to perpetuate culture and civilization. It is reborn in the form of worms, and loam with which others may stop beer barrels or chink gaps in wood.

Hamlet has asked us to focus on decomposition, and to see that as an end. Unlike the world that Gertrude and Claudius describe, in which the recycling of fathers serves to make room for and promote sons (what we might think of as a more or less balanced ecosystem), Hamlet’s world is one without fertility, in which recycling results only in dew and dust. Hamlet searches for his father in the dust because recycling and renovation have broken down, and dust is the only product of human endeavor. In an infertile world, the commonality of death is no comfort.

As if to underscore the system’s inability to reproduce, Hamlet is interrupted in his contemplation of decay by the entrance of Ophelia’s funeral train.

But soft, but soft; aside. Here comes the King,  
The Queen, the courtiers. (5. 1. 200-01)

Shakespeare’s juxtaposition of these two scenes—Hamlet’s conclusion that humans are recycled into loam and barrel stoppers, and the entry of Claudius, Gertrude, and the rest of the Danish court—encourages us to thematically relate these two scenes and extend Hamlet’s conclusions to the suddenly present Danish court. The king, the queen, and the courtiers, like the worms that Hamlet is contemplating, live off of the dead, producing naught but dust. They are detritivores, not producers.

That *Hamlet* represents a truncated ecosystem is made evident throughout the play. It is figured in the opening scene’s defense against the encroachment of nature, and in the masculine control and destruction of the female characters in the play. As we noted earlier, a functional ecosystem is driven by its producers. In Elsinore there are no producers, no fertility. Every contemplation of the cyclical nature of succession, of

society, of human beings, is met with images of rot and decay. Though some characters hold out hope that fertility and natural succession are possible, we see that the consummation that Hamlet wishes for in his famous meditation on being or not being, the consummation of death, is the only consummation possible.<sup>13</sup> Shakespeare makes this clear in Ophelia’s burial scene.

QUEEN GERTRUDE. Sweets to the sweet. Farewell!  
I hoped thou shouldst have been my Hamlet’s wife.  
I thought thy bride-bed to have decked, sweet maid,  
And not have strewed thy grave. (5. 1. 227-29)

The aging Queen who bore her single son thirty years ago makes clear that the play’s hope for fertility lay in Ophelia. But instead of a bridal-bed, this scene relegates Ophelia’s fertility to the grave. Both Hamlet and Laertes seem to recognize the conflation of grave and wedding bed in this scene. Increasingly agitated as the funeral service progresses, Laertes is the first to leap in upon his sister, as he cries:

Hold off the earth a while,  
Till I have caught her once more in mine arms.  
*[Laertes] leaps into the grave*  
Now pile your dust upon the quick and dead. (5. 1. 233-35)

Not to be outdone, Hamlet, coming forward, also enters the grave and proclaims:

I loved Ophelia. Forty thousand brothers  
Could not, with all their quantity of love,  
Make up my sum. (5. 1. 254-56)

Ophelia was the last hope for a sustainable court. With her death, Denmark has become, in Hamlet’s earlier phrase “a sterile promontory” (2.2. 290). Necrophilia takes the place of fertility. It is all that is left.<sup>14</sup>

That Ophelia’s fertility would ultimately come only to maggots and worms is indicated well in advance of this scene, however, in a cryptic conversation between Hamlet and Polonius.

HAMLET. For if the sun breed maggots in a dead dog, being a good kissing carrion—Have you a daughter?  
POLONIUS. I have, my lord.  
HAMLET. Let her not walk i’ th’ sun. Conception is a blessing, but as

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<sup>13</sup> “To die, to sleep— / No more, and by a sleep to say we end / The heartache and the thousand natural shocks / That flesh is heir to—‘tis a consummation / Devoutly to be wished” (3. 1. 62-66).

<sup>14</sup> For a discussion of this phenomenon, see Grinnell “And Love Thee After: Necrophilia on the Jacobean Stage.”

your daughter may conceive—friend, look to't. (2. 2. 182-86)

Hamlet links the breeding of maggots by the sun with Ophelia's breeding, foreshadowing for us Ophelia's blasted fertility. If she conceives, Hamlet says, Ophelia will breed maggots. Though these maggots are connected thematically to the fools that Polonius threatens her with at the beginning of the play (“Tender yourself more dearly, / Or...you'll tender me a fool” [1. 3. 107-09]), and to the sinners that Hamlet foresees as her offspring a bit later (“Why wouldst thou be a breeder of sinners?” [3. 1. 122-23]), they are clearly also connected to maggots themselves, and to the decomposers to which the Elsinore ecosystem has been reduced.

Throughout the play Ophelia is associated with fertile nature, which is why both Polonius and Laertes are so concerned about her relationship to Hamlet. That Ophelia is an important representative of nature is indicated by the imagery that surrounds her throughout, but particularly at her madness and her death. Continually monitored and controlled throughout the play (by her brother, by her father, by Claudius, by Hamlet), when she finally shakes off that control and with it masculine order and reason, she embraces rhyme and flowers, distributing to the men (and to Gertrude, who has allied herself with Claudius) rosemary, pansies, fennel, columbine, rue, and daisies—flowers associated with the rural gardens of Shakespeare's day, and symbols in their own right of that omnipresent rural fertility.<sup>15</sup> Not surprisingly, these are flowers and herbs that one might cultivate. However, in this scene Ophelia is giving those symbols away. In her madness she distances herself from the fertility implicit in the flowers of the rural garden.

The connection between Ophelia and nature is also reinforced by Gertrude's description of her death.

There is a willow grows askant the brook  
That shows his hoar leaves in the glassy stream.  
Therewith fantastic garlands did she make  
Of crowflowers, nettles, daisies, and long purples  
That liberal shepherds give a grosser name,  
But our cold maids do dead men's fingers call them.  
There on the pendent boughs her crownet weeds  
Clamb'ring to hand, an envious sliver broke,  
When down her weedy trophies and herself  
Fell in the weeping brook. Her clothes spread wide,  
And mermaid-like awhile they bore her up....

But long it could not be  
Till that her garments, heavy with their drink,  
Pulled the poor wretch from her melodious lay

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<sup>15</sup> Each of these flowers is associated with folklore of its own (which is clear in Ophelia's comments as she distributes them).



To muddy death. (4. 7. 137-47, 151-54)

Associated with flowers, water, and nature, Ophelia comes to be defined by them in her death. Now, however, the flowers are wild-flowers, un-tended flowers: crowsfeet, nettles, long purples. Ophelia's shift from association with tended, cultivated flowers, to un-tended wild-flowers, is a consequence of the untended nature of the Elsinore garden and her own loss of order within it. She is the lone character associated with growing things, with fertility and greenery. Her death removes the last producer from the ecosystem and in environmental terms seals the fate of Elsinore's ecosystem. Tellingly, it is not the flowers, the willow, or even the water that causes her death. Her clothing, the sumptuary sign of her status at court, “drunk deep,” pulls her down. Related to the natural world by Shakespeare's imagery, Ophelia is killed by the court: its political and personal machinations, as well as the clothing that marks her as a courtier. Ophelia's death is the death of the balanced ecosystem, the ecosystem that can reproduce itself and provide for its various trophic levels. That what remains is but a fragment of an ecosystem is highlighted by the primacy of the detritivores in the play. Now, Hamlet's obsession with decomposition and worms seems entirely merited. Elsinore is an environment so damaged that only worms inherit.

In *Hamlet*, as in many of his plays, Shakespeare demonstrates a surprising sensitivity to the need for a balance between humans and nature, and the dangers of over-consumption. Though Shakespeare is not making an explicit environmental point in this play, he uses unbalanced nature as a metaphor for the disruptions of the social and political world. It certainly helps that our current model of the environment and Shakespeare's model of the natural world, are both generally hierarchical, with producers and consumers working together in balance to keep the environment sustainable and “natural.” For Shakespeare, human interactions and human order are organized in similar fashion. Consumers rely upon producers in both models. Though he is writing before current environmental science, his affinity for the natural world and the relationship between the hierarchical principles of nature and those of Tudor social organization, elevates nature and the environment to an important interpretive platform in *Hamlet*. It is a useful platform for engaging our students with Hamlet and his world.

By reading *Hamlet* environmentally our students come to recognize that Shakespeare understood the need for a world in balance. That he understood that balance in political terms, in psychological and human terms, and in terms of rural nature, is clear in the use to which he puts the natural world in *Hamlet*. Shakespeare saw what environmental science has confirmed: that a world out of balance cannot be sustained. Where the producers have been blasted by human agency, death, destruction, and tragedy follow. This is a lesson that students understand, and that in the best tradition of literature bridges the gulf between *Hamlet* and the world in which

they live. An ecosystem cannot survive with only consumers and detritivores. In Shakespeare’s world, as in our own, tragedy follows.

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