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“The Multiplying Villainies of Nature” Northrop Frye’s Green World and The Red World of The Shakespearean Tragedy

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Northrop Frye’s Green World and
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In “‘Making the Green One Red’: Dynamic Ecologies in *Macbeth*, Edward Barlow’s Journal, and *Robinson Crusoe*”, Steve Mentz examines three texts containing disastrous environmental situations to argue that “[a]s ecological interpretations have become increasingly central to twenty-first-century literary studies [critics] need a more colourful eco-palette” (66) with which to examine literary texts. Mentz usually focuses on oceanic ecologies, but his argument here is that “the logic of dynamic ecological thinking cannot stop at the water’s edge” (67), and that the modern critic must reconfigure the meaning behind, and literary use of, the colour green in literature. If the literary green world of ecocriticism needs an update, so too does the idea of Shakespeare’s green world—the idyllic, pastoral, setting of escape and freedom from tyranny, established by literary scholar Northrop Frye in his 1948 essay “The Argument of Comedy” and elaborated on in his 1952 *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye’s green world, as published in 1952, was never fully conceptualized, and some scholars have attempted to update Frye’s green world idea, like Charles R. Forker, whose 1985 essay “The Green Underworld of Early Shakespearean Tragedy” provides a well-needed application of the green world theory to several Shakespearean tragedies.

Working directly within the incomplete framework Frye developed, and years before the discipline of ecocriticism would provide him the lens with which to properly critique the violent elements of Shakespeare’s natural world, Forker necessarily fails to capture the full essence of the green world within Shakespeare’s tragedies. However, I believe that in combining Forker’s research with the ideas of Steve Mentz—that in our world of climate change and in the light of humankind’s ecological damage, ecological criticism needs to focus on a newer, figuratively

darker, colour palette—it is possible to synthesize Frye’s comedic green world with Forker’s tragic, creating a re-shaded, red world lens through which to view Shakespeare’s darkest tragedies, like *Macbeth* or *King Lear*. In this reverse green world, the protagonists are subjected to the tyrannies of nature through unnatural weather patterns, barren landscapes, and terrible storms—all of which combine to ultimately destroy the protagonists.

Despite their status as opposites, the red world and the green world are surprisingly similar—enough so that the themes of green world comedies carry over to red world dramas, simply playing in reverse on the tragic stage. The best examples of this are Shakespeare’s seeming opposites: *King Lear* and *As You Like It*. The arbitrary difference between the plays is that *King Lear* is a tragedy, and therefore the natural spaces Cordelia, Lear, Kent, and Gloucester, find themselves in is not the idyllic, fertile, forest of Arden but a barren, open, wilderness. Interestingly, both green world plays like *As You Like It* and red world tragedies like *King Lear* or *Macbeth* all begin in what Fry would consider a ‘normal’ world. Lear’s palace and Macbeth’s Inverness are garrisoned to protect them, but when characters go outside this normal world, they cross a threshold into a dangerous wilderness that wreaks havoc on them, and they never return, or return changed, carrying the red world back inside with them—exemplified in the incurable “disease” Lady Macbeth suffers in 5.1.

To better establish the red world, I will examine its green opposite, and why specifically the critical interpretations of it necessitate my re-thinking of Frye's theory. “The drama of the green world” (Frye 182), comes out of the dichotomy between conservatism & liberation, bondage & freedom, and dutiful & romantic love. In *As You Like It*, this takes the form of Orlando fleeing Oliver’s hateful tyranny, and Rosalind & Duke Senior fleeing Duke Frederick’s before all of the characters are reunited and reconciled in the freedom of the green world. To

Frye, these dichotomies embody the ancient battle that is “the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land” (182). These oppositions are best understood within a framework of thesis, antithesis, and synthesis within the plays, where the green world provides the location for mental liberation that can bring about the synthesis. The thesis action begins in a normal play-world like *A Midsummer Night’s Dream’s* Athens, *Two Gentlemen of Verona’s* Verona, or the court of Duke Frederick in *As You Like It*. Heavy fathers and blocking characters like Duke Frederick incite the drama by attempting to stop the protagonists from achieving their goal, often by attempting to enforce a disagreeable arranged marriage. Sometimes darker motives will force this action, like Oliver’s attempt to “see an end of” (1.1.162) Orlando out of jealousy at being “misprized” by his little brother’s gentlemanly ways (1.1.168). In response to the blocking, the protagonists must flee the courtly/political boundaries of the normal world and join the happy synthesis of the green. Duke Senior, speaking to his “co-mates and brothers in exile” finds natural, Edenic Arden’s atmosphere “more sweet / Than that of painted pomp” (2.1.2 – 3) present in the normal world. These woods are “[m]ore free from peril than the envious court”, and seem to exist outside of original sin, without “The seasons’ difference” or “the icy fang / And churlish chiding of the winter’s wind” (2.1.7) being experienced as the penalty of Adam. Celia and Rosalind find themselves even enjoying their hurried flight to the green world, headed now to the antithesis, “liberty, and not to banishment” (1.3.145). Once the antithesis has been reached, metamorphosis can take place and a synthetic comic resolution can resolve the issues of the plot in the form of the “idealistic green world inhabitants’ triumphant return to the normal world” (Gale Literary Index). This is best exemplified in Duke Frederick’s sudden conversion upon entering the green world:

And to the skirts of this wild wood he came,

Where, meeting with an old religious man,
 After some question with him, was converted
 Both from his enterprise and from the world,
 His crown bequeathing to his banished brother,
 And all their lands restored to them again
 That were with him exiled (5.4.164–170)

Not only are all of Frederick's transgressions undone, the entire negative action of the play is effectively undone by his restoration of power to Duke Senior; Orlando's lack of education or rank is righted by his marriage to the—now again royal—Rosalind, and only the positive character changes that took place in the green world—the marriage and coupling of all eligible characters, remains to prove that the characters were ever even in the green world. The synthesis ends as *As You Like It* follows the traditional Shakespearean motif of the mass-wedding, in this case featuring Rosalind & Orlando, Celia & Oliver, Phoebe & Silvius, and Audrey & Touchstone. The coupling is a crucial point for Charles Forker, who argues that the green world, “in celebrating marriage, social cohesion, and the perpetuity of race, earns its affirmation in part by temporarily silencing, averting, or absorbing the menace of death” (26). To Frye, the green world is embodied in this ability to be temporarily unrestricted, to experience and enjoy the pagan freedoms that life in the tyrannical city and court worlds does not afford.

The main critique of Frye's green world rests on the divide between it and the normal world; because of this, G.K. Hunter argues that the green world concept has gained an independent status Frye never intended it to have. A world of escape and metamorphosis necessarily needs to be placed against a world of bondage and restriction to function properly, and to Hunter, Frye does not properly explain the divide between the two worlds. For Frye, “Shakespeare endows both worlds with equal imaginative power, brings them opposite one

another and makes each world seem unreal when seen by the light of the other” (182), but Hunter counters Frye, arguing that his “rhetoric defines the green world with glowing ambiguity but his normal world in terms of stereotyped negatives” and that Frye “does not seem able or willing to pursue his observation to a critical conclusion” (7), ending his argument by “shrugging his shoulders and telling us that poetry cannot be explained” (8). Hunter has a point—Frye’s analysis in “Anatomy of Criticism”, while noting a tactical technique Shakespeare uses to tell stories and explaining a fascinating alternative world within Shakespeare’s plays, lacks the critical punch it achieves when complemented with further reading within Frye’s critical discourse. Ultimately, Frye wants to explain the green world as a segment of English literature, saying in his collected notes that

[a]ll through English literature there has been a green England, a forest Beluah land of Faerie antipodal to historical England (which is red and white): a Bardo world of opposite solstices (as in MND [*A Midsummer Night’s Dream*]) This is Marvell’s world: its often Edenic ... antipodal [to the historical] morally as well as seasonally (Robin Hood and The Green Knight) ... some suppressed paganism lurks in it (41 – 42).

The problem with this description is that Frye never included it in *Anatomy of Criticism*’s green world analysis, and the work published during Frye’s lifetime consists more of a description of a single facet of Shakespeare’s comedies than an explanation of a large portion of English literature. Frye spends little time elaborating on it in comparison to other ideas, and does not apply the green world theory to Shakespeare’s histories or tragedies. Thankfully, Charles R. Forker does.

Forker’s analysis of “The Green Underworld of Early Shakespearean Tragedy” proves the following quote true—“[to] speak of greenery or vegetation as a significant component of

Shakespeare's tragic ethos may seem at first bizarre, then, on sober reflection, merely strained or farfetched" (25), yet his essay does manage to naturalize some examples of greenery and vegetation as recurring components within Shakespearean tragedy and to point out the heavy literary meaning within the leafy symbolism. For example, Forker points out the dark natural symbolism of *Romeo and Juliet*, analyzing how bud and flower metaphors are used to enhance various character details, like how Montague compares Romeo's melancholic attitude to "a bud bit with an envious worm" before it "can spread his sweet leaves to the air / or dedicate his beauty to the sun" (1.1.151 – 53). Forker notes that the budding flower imagery demonstrates Romeo's youth while foreshadowing his impending demise, noting that "[d]eath has already entered this Arcadia" (27). His analysis is useful in that it examines the darker natural symbolism and the "dialectic between good and evil" (45) within the tragedies, where "the benign evidence of nature's environment" appears less prominently than the comedies. Despite his findings, I do not believe Forker's analysis goes far enough—He applies Frye's green world archetype, exactly as Frye worded it, to several of Shakespeare's early tragedies—working within the framework of Frye's original theory, an idea that was never meant to be applied to the tragedies in the first place. This results in a strange fusion between Frye's hopeful green world and the tragic green world. The extent to which Forker analyzes Frye's green world by not adapting it, but applying the concept directly to Shakespeare's tragedies, means that in the end, Forker's examination of green world elements within the tragic genre is lacking. Frye positions the green world as "the victory of summer over winter" (*Anatomy of Criticism* 182). If the dramatic intent of comedies like *As You Like It* is to describe this victory, what Forker has achieved in examining *Romeo and Juliet* is merely noting that the action of this tragedy takes place during the ending of the figurative winter and only hints at the summer—the peace painfully bought by the deaths of

Verona's youth. By keeping the exact notion of Frye's green world, Forker limits the implications he can achieve by not examining "the green world within the tragic genre" but the tragic genre within the green world. A large portion of Forker's problem is that at the time of his writing, the tragic world he was trying to examine did not exist in the manner it does now. Forker was writing in the late twentieth century about Frye who had been writing in the mid twentieth century, and it would be decades before substantial writing about climate change, or the dark ecologies ecocriticism has described, would be published.

The lack of critical discourse that was Forker's problem has been righted in our present generation, a world where it "is entirely possible that humans' production of atmospheric carbon dioxide gas ... will soon substantially warm the earth and change its climate" (Egan 1), and the entire discourse of ecocriticism has been built on the idea that "our current environmental concerns may provide us with a lens through which to view literature" (Egan 17). In *Shakespeare and Ecocritical Theory*, Gabriel Egan states the above as ecocriticism's core thesis before using it to analyze several Shakespeare plays. In Shakespearean ecocriticism, the natural world can still be the positive green world of Frye, but in Shakespeare's darkest tragedies, the natural world is one of chaos, terror, and death—darker than the mere "green underworld" of Forker. Instead, this world is the roaring, oceanic, salty green that Steve Mentz describes as "a mixed and mixing color that stains everything it touches. This "green's expansive, uncontrollable dynamism" (67) spreads out of Macbeth's language in the same way that he imagines the red blood of his regicide corrupting all the world. "[t]his my hand will rather," the doomed hero exclaims, "[t]he multitudinous seas incarnadine / [m]aking the green one red" (2.2.58 – 60)" (Mentz 67). Following from Mentz and Forker's work, the red world theory takes the green world of Frye but reapplies it: Not in the manner of Forker, who examined the green world's elements within the

tragic genre, but in the manner wherein the aspects of the tragic genre are studied in plays taking place within the green world.

Frye never pinpoints the exact moment any character crosses the threshold into the green world, but for the red world it is far easier: in *Macbeth* and *King Lear* the green world is heralded by “unnatural hags”, that represent the inverse of the green world’s fertility figures. Lear, having left the safe walls of Gloucester’s castle, finds Kent imprisoned in the stocks by Regan and Cornwall. Lear argues with Kent, in disbelief that his daughters could be responsible. At 2.4.17, Lear denies Kent five times in a back-and-forth that could be mistakenly read as comedic, were one not aware that the scene is Lear’s pitifully ironic discovery of what the audience already knows, that not only Regan, but also Goneril, have betrayed him. Upon Lear’s realization of this at 2.4.319, he calls his daughters “unnatural hags” and exits the stage as the storm begins, representing his descent into the red world. *Macbeth*’s first scene also begins with the Witches he calls “midnight hags” (4.1.148) and whom he later describes as “[s]o withered, and so wild in their attire, / That look not like th’ inhabitants o’ th’ Earth / And yet are on’t” (1.3.140 – 43). The witches are centered in nature, being “wild” but still look like they do not belong in the natural—they are unnatural. Frye argues that “in the rituals and myths the earth that produces the rebirth is generally a female figure” (183). In the red world, the females that herald descent into darkness are the decidedly un-female Regan and Goneril, defined by their betrayal, and the witches, so anti-feminine that Banquo believes they “should be women” but their “beards forbid” him to interpret them so. These betraying, non-feminine female figures are the red world opposite of Frye’s fertile green world females.

After leaving the unnatural heralds of the red world, Lear enters a barren wild where “[f]or many miles about / [t]here’s scarce a bush” (2.4.344 – 45). The red world wilderness is no

longer the fertile green world of Arden with its “tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, Sermons in stones and good in every thing” (2.1.16 – 17). This lack of fertility in wild spaces is typical of red world tragedies—In *Darkness Visible: Macbeth and the Poetics of the Unnatural*, Charlotte Scott describes how Macbeth’s world too is de-sexualized in Lady Macbeth’s call to be literally unsexed, and to lose her fertility to gain “triumph of humans over nature” (131). Scott says that in *Macbeth*’s “protagonists, we witness an overarching belief in the suppression of biological determinants” (131). Where the green world is about the celebration of life over death, and the suppression of death in all its forms, the red world is one of death and the stifling of life—indicative of why the tragedies end in almost all characters dying and almost all the marriages or couplings failing. *King Lear*’s ending sees Edgar killing his brother Edmund, Goneril dying by suicide and poisoning Regan, and Gloucester dying from an apparent heart attack, Cordelia hanged, while Lear dies of grief. Kent hints at a possible suicide, saying “My master calls me. I must not say no” (5.3.391) Kent’s master is, of course, the now deceased Lear. This leaves Albany and Edgar as the only surviving males capable of reproduction, and the two destined to “rule in this realm, and the gored state sustain” (5.3.389). This line points to the Kingdom’s issue—with two rulers, further issues with primogeniture and the line of succession will inevitably develop, leaving the kingdom impotent until further strife can decide a line of succession and ensure its continuation This is helped by the fact that only Albany is royal, but still hindered by the new deficit of royal females.

The green world may provide freedom from tyranny to all who escape into it, but the red world places those who enter it into bondage. Lear, in giving up his power and leaving the normal world to “shake all cares and business from our age; / Conferring them on younger strengths” to become “Unburthen’d” (1.1.141 – 43), instead finds the inverse, becoming

beholden to the awesome and inescapable power of the storm. In the green world, lovers like Rosalind and Orlando can escape tyrannical demands to marry, but going into the red world sees Macbeth and Lear enter nature's tyranny—"Macbeth's Boundless intemperance" Malcolm says, in "nature is a tyranny. It hath been / Th' untimely ... fall of many kings" (4.3.80 – 83), and would of course lead to Macbeth's own irrevocable course towards doom. In *King Lear*, the storm tyrannically powers over all in it, such that Kent's human nature is barely able to tolerate it:

Since I was man,
Such sheets of fire, such bursts of horrid thunder,
Such groans of roaring wind and rain I never
Remember to have heard. Man's nature cannot carry
Th' affliction nor the fear. (3.2.47 – 51).

The power of natural tyranny in the red world is defined by the absence of the normal world's tyranny—King Duncan is an excellent ruler over Scotland, described by Macbeth as having "faculties so meek" and having been so "great [in] office, that his virtues / Will plead like angels" (1.7.18 – 20). Duncan, through his instrument Macbeth, has even just successfully put down an unjust revolt against his throne by Macdonwald and Cawdor. In *King Lear*, Lear is beloved by his people, if there is any truth in Goneril and Regan's speeches. Lear only exercises tyrannical power when he mistakes Cordelia's insistence at speaking "nothing" more opulent than her sisters (1.1.95) for treason and disowns her. This mistake, like Macbeth's decision to listen to the witches in 1.3., forces Lear out of doors, out of normalcy, and into the bonds of the storming red world.

The red world weather's importance is twofold: it informs the main representation of

Nature's destructive power, and it serves as pathetic fallacy for the emotional turmoil within the protagonists of the tragedies. Charlotte Scott argues that in the tragedies "the natural spaces are suggestive; largely oblique and often redundant, they function as emotional weather rather than naturalistic space. Opening, [as does *Macbeth*,] with some 'unnatural hags' on a heath reveals the play-world to be devoid of a sustainable nature in which [natural] growth governs images of value" (123). To Scott, the characters within the play stand to gain nothing from their contact with the natural world, and the stormy weather's narrative purpose is to suggest character mood. Gwyllim Jones supports Scott by arguing that *King Lear* is "consistently misunderstood by the tendency to imagine the storm happening in a particular place" (59). To Jones, locating the storm as specific to a certain portion of the natural environment undermines the storm's importance in defining characters, and stops it from being "aesthetically and structurally, what sustains the play" (59). The storm is not specific to Lear's place—his entering it signals the darker direction of the play as it enters the red world, and of course the mental turmoil Lear is experiencing.

The fact that so few scholars have applied Frye's green world to Shakespeare's tragedies is disappointing, but understandable. It is tempting to understand the extremely adverse natural environments of Shakespeare's tragedies as completely other to our own small, green, world—This can not be the case however, if we want human-kind to live on into the future. To preserve our environmental health, it is now imperative that we examine storming, ecological nightmare-narratives like *Macbeth* and *King Lear* to better conceptualize the red world we could have and the green world we can preserve.

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