

William Shakespeare as an Ecologist in His Comic Plays

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Abstract— William Shakespeare is widely known for his drama and poetry, but his work also shows an early understanding of the relationship between people and the natural world. Even though the word "ecology" was not used in the 16th and 17th centuries, Shakespeare's comic plays carry clear environmental ideas. In these plays, nature is not just a place for entertainment. It influences human choices, emotions, and the way society functions. In *As You Like It*, the forest of Arden provides an alternative to the corrupt court. It is a place where characters discover truth, simplicity, and compassion. Duke Senior's observation that he "finds tongues in trees, books in the running brooks" shows nature as a source of wisdom. The play also raises early concerns about habitat when Jaques criticizes hunting deer in "their native dwelling places." *A Midsummer Night's Dream* connects human disorder directly with environmental disorder. Titania explains that the quarrel between her and Oberon has caused floods, failed crops, and disturbed seasons. When human relationships are restored, balance returns to nature as well. *The Tempest*, though a romance, shares the comic concern for renewal. The island represents a fragile ecosystem where control over nature becomes a question of power and justice. Caliban's knowledge of "every fertile inch" of the island challenges Prospero's claims of ownership. These comic plays suggest that humans cannot be separated from nature. Shakespeare presents a vision where respect for the environment leads to personal growth and social harmony. At a time when environmental problems are increasing, these ideas from Shakespeare's comedies remain meaningful and important.

Keywords— Shakespeare, Ecocriticism, Ecology, Comic Plays, Nature, Environment, Human-Nature Relationship.

I. INTRODUCTION

William Shakespeare is widely regarded as the most influential writer in English literature. For more than four hundred years, readers and scholars have returned to his tragedies, histories, and comedies for their insight into human nature, and his characters, language, and stories continue to speak across different times and cultures. When modern readers hear the word "ecologist," however, they picture something quite different from a Renaissance playwright: a scientist with a clipboard, tracking population curves or measuring carbon in soil. Shakespeare, writing between roughly 1590 and 1613, had access to none of the conceptual apparatus of modern ecological science: no theory of ecosystems, no Darwinian framework, no climate models. Ecology as a formal discipline would not exist for another two hundred years. It would therefore seem, on its face, absurd to describe him as an "ecologist" at all.

And yet, over the last three decades, a substantial body of scholarship has argued that Shakespeare's plays repeatedly stage the kind of thinking that ecology would later formalise: an attentiveness to the reciprocal, often precarious relationship between human communities and the nonhuman environments that sustain, threaten, and transform them. Even without the vocabulary of science, Shakespeare shows a persistent awareness of how human beings are bound up with plants, animals, weather, forests, and land, and nowhere is that awareness more concentrated than in his comedies.

This paper argues that Shakespeare's comic plays are unusually rich sites for this kind of reading, precisely because comedy as a genre repeatedly relocates its characters from court or city into "green worlds": forests, islands, pastoral estates where social order dissolves and is eventually remade. Northrop Frye long ago observed that Shakespearean comedy characteristically

moves its characters out of a repressive society and into a natural space of transformation before returning them, changed, to the ordered world. What ecocritical scholarship adds to this older formalist observation is the recognition that the green world is never simply a backdrop or a convenient metaphor. It is populated by trees that carry political and ecological histories, weather systems that respond to human folly, animals that resist becoming mere symbols, and rural economies whose survival depends on forces beyond human control. In these plays, nature does not just decorate the story; it works as teacher, healer, and moral guide, shaping human behaviour and, ultimately, the shape of the societies characters return to.

The comedies chosen for close analysis here—*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *As You Like It*, and *The Tempest*—sit alongside two later plays, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*, that are generically classified as "romances" but share so much of comedy's underlying structure (exile, transformation in a natural or supernatural space, reconciliation, marriage) that ecocritical scholarship regularly treats them within the same conversation. Read together, these plays reveal Shakespeare returning obsessively to a small set of ecological concerns: deforestation and the politics of timber; the vulnerability of agrarian life to weather and season; the ethics of hunting and human dominion over animals; and the fantasy—and the danger—of imagining nature as infinitely available for human use. The Forest of Arden, the woods outside Athens, and the island of *The Tempest* are not neutral settings for these concerns; they function as teachers, judges, and healing spaces in their own right, actively shaping the moral and social outcomes of the plays.

This paper takes ecocriticism as its methodological foundation. Ecocriticism reads literature with sustained attention to environmental issues: it asks how texts represent nature, and how they shape human attitudes toward the nonhuman world. Applying that method to Shakespeare's comic drama, this paper argues that Shakespeare presents an early, unsystematic but recognisable ecological vision—one that criticizes the exploitation of nature, values the interdependence of human and nonhuman life, and suggests that harmony with the natural world is a precondition for social and personal renewal. The paper proceeds in four stages. First, it reviews the critical tradition of ecocritical Shakespeare studies. Second, it lays out a working definition of the ecological imagination this paper attributes to Shakespeare, and addresses directly the anachronism built into the paper's own title. Third, it offers close readings of the comic plays, organized around the specific ecological motifs outlined above. Finally, it draws these motifs together into a broader argument about what Shakespeare's comic drama can and cannot tell us about early modern environmental consciousness, and about our own.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The relationship between Shakespeare and nature has been discussed for decades, but the rise of ecocriticism in the 1990s gave this topic new direction and vocabulary. Ecocriticism reads literature with attention to environmental issues and asks how texts shape human attitudes toward the non-human world (Garrard 3). Within this field, Shakespeare has become an important figure because his plays show sustained engagement with forests, weather, animals, and land.

2.1 Jonathan Bate and the Foundations of Ecocritical Shakespeare

Jonathan Bate is the scholar most closely associated with Shakespeare and ecology. In *Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition* (1991), Bate first called Shakespeare "the first environmentalist writer." He argued that Shakespeare saw nature as a living presence rather than as property to be owned. Bate expanded this argument in *The Song of the Earth* (2000), where he gave detailed readings of *As You Like It* and *The Tempest*. For Bate, the forest of Arden represents a green world that heals people damaged by court politics. He also suggests that Shakespeare understood what it means to live "in" nature rather than "on" it (Bate 72). Bate's work established the foundation for all later ecocritical readings of Shakespeare.

2.2 Greg Garrard and Ecocritical Theory

Greg Garrard's *Ecocriticism* (2004, revised 2012) provides the main theoretical framework used in this study. Garrard defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. He identifies key concepts, such as anthropocentrism, biocentrism, and environmental ethics. Garrard argues that literary texts can either reinforce human dominance over nature or challenge it. He reads Shakespeare's plays as texts that often challenge anthropocentrism by showing humans as part of larger natural systems (Garrard 89).

2.3 Karen Raber and Human-Animal Boundaries

Karen Raber in *Animal Bodies, Renaissance Culture* (2013) focuses on how animals appear in early modern drama. Raber examines scenes of hunting, animal sympathy, and human-animal boundaries. Her reading of Jaques's encounter with the deer in *As You Like It* is important for this paper. Raber argues that Jaques's sadness shows an early awareness of animal suffering

and questions the ethics of treating animals as resources (Raber 145). This suggests something about animals' treatment in his own time.

2.4 Robert N. Watson and Environmental Change

Robert N. Watson's *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (2006) examines how Renaissance writers responded to environmental change. Watson connects literature to historical events such as deforestation and enclosure. He reads *The Tempest* as a play about colonization of both people and land. For Watson, Prospero's control over the island reflects early modern ideas about mastering nature through knowledge and technology (Watson 210).

2.5 Simon Estok and Ecophobia

Simon Estok developed the concept of "ecophobia" to explain fear and hatred of nature in literature. In *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare* (2011), Estok argues that some Shakespeare plays show anxiety about wild nature. The comedies often move beyond fear toward acceptance and harmony. Estok's work helps explain why Shakespeare's forests are both dangerous and healing spaces.

2.6 Edited Collections and Indian Scholarship

Lynne Bruckner and Danielle Glassmeyer in *Shakespeare and the Natural World* (2014) edited a collection that looks at plants, weather, and ecology in Shakespeare. Several essays in this volume focus on comedy. They argue that comic endings often depend on natural cycles of renewal and fertility.

In the Indian context, scholars have begun applying ecocriticism to Shakespeare in postcolonial classrooms. Nivedita Sen in "Green Shakespeare in India" (2016) argues that Shakespeare's nature imagery can be used to discuss environmental justice in South Asia. Rimi B. Chatterjee in *Empires of the Mind* (2013) shows how Shakespeare was taught in colonial India with a focus on nature and Empire. Indian journals like *The Shakespeare Association of India Journal* have published articles connecting Shakespeare to local environmental issues such as water scarcity and deforestation.

Despite this growing scholarship, most studies focus on tragedies like *King Lear* or on *The Tempest* alone. There is still a need for a focused study of Shakespeare's comic plays as a group. Comedies offer a unique space where nature enables reconciliation, marriage, and social renewal. This paper aims to fill that gap by reading *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest* together through an ecocritical lens.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: WHAT WOULD IT MEAN TO CALL SHAKESPEARE AN "ECOLOGIST"?

Before proceeding to close analysis, it is necessary to be precise about the claim this paper is making. Ecology as a scientific discipline dates to the late nineteenth century; the term itself was coined by the German biologist Ernst Haeckel in 1866, more than two hundred and fifty years after Shakespeare's death. Shakespeare had no access to concepts such as trophic levels, carrying capacity, or anthropogenic climate change. To call him an "ecologist" in the disciplinary sense would be a straightforward anachronism.

What this paper instead argues is that Shakespeare's comedies display what might be called an ecological imagination: a recurring dramatic interest in the ways human wellbeing, social order, and individual identity are entangled with, dependent upon, and vulnerable to nonhuman systems—forests, weather, animals, seasons, and land. This is not the same claim as saying Shakespeare held modern environmentalist values. Following Estok's caution about ecophobia, this paper remains alert to moments where the comedies imagine nature as a resource for human use, a wilderness to be tamed, or a threat to be neutralised, alongside moments that stage more reciprocal or humble relationships between people and their environments.

The comedies, in other words, are not simple green parables; they are ambivalent texts that repeatedly return to environmental questions without settling on a single, consistent environmental ethic. It is precisely this ambivalence, this paper suggests, that makes the comedies valuable ecocritical objects: they dramatize the tensions of early modern environmental thought rather than resolving them.

Greg Garrard's concept of anthropocentrism versus biocentrism provides a useful framework for reading this ambivalence. Anthropocentrism places human beings at the center of the universe, treating nature as a resource for human use. Biocentrism, by contrast, recognizes the intrinsic value of all living beings and ecosystems. Shakespeare's comedies oscillate between these positions, sometimes celebrating nature's bounty and at other times questioning the ethics of human dominion. This oscillation, rather than indicating inconsistency, reflects the genuine tensions in early modern environmental thought.

IV. NATURE, POWER, AND RENEWAL IN SHAKESPEARE'S COMEDIES

4.1 *As You Like It*: The Forest as Teacher

As You Like It opens on a court already corrupted by usurpation: Duke Frederick has seized power from his brother, and exile, not choice, drives Duke Senior and his followers into the Forest of Arden. The contrast Shakespeare draws is not simply between two locations but between two systems of value. The court prizes appearance, hierarchy, and political calculation; Arden prizes simplicity, endurance, and direct experience.

Duke Senior articulates the play's ecological premise most directly when he claims to find "tongues in trees, books in the running brooks" (2.1.17–18). The line proposes an alternative epistemology: understanding need not come solely from texts and institutions but can be read off the natural world itself. Arden also disciplines those who enter it. Because life in the forest is governed by weather and season rather than by decree, it teaches patience as a practical necessity rather than an abstract virtue.

The forest's suspension of social hierarchy extends to gender as well. Rosalind, disguised as Ganymede, gains a freedom of movement and speech unavailable to her at court, using her disguise to test Orlando's affections and to speak with a candour the court would not permit. Arden functions here as more than scenery; it is a space that loosens rigid social roles and makes experimentation and honesty possible.

The play's ecological attentiveness extends beyond human characters to animal life. When Jaques encounters a deer wounded by hunters, he does not simply note the image and move on; he lingers on the animal's suffering, reading its isolation from the herd as a kind of grief (2.1.34–35). Karen Raber identifies this moment as an early instance of sympathy extended toward nonhuman creatures, one that resists reducing the deer to pure allegory (Raber 145). The animal remains, in this scene, a being with its own stake in its habitat, not merely a figure for human meaning.

By the play's close, marriage and reconciliation restore social order, but that restoration is prepared, not undone, by the time spent in the forest. Arden does not offer an escape from society so much as a correction of it. The play's underlying suggestion is that immersion in the natural world—its rhythms, its vulnerabilities, its demands—can repair what political ambition has broken.

4.2 *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: Linking Human and Natural Disorder

A Midsummer Night's Dream moves between two contrasting spaces: Athens, governed by law and paternal authority, and the wood outside it, governed by magic, desire, and metamorphosis. The play's most explicit statement of ecological interconnection comes from Titania, who tells Oberon that their marital conflict has thrown the natural world itself into disorder: seasons have become confused, rivers have overflowed their banks, and disease has followed in the wake of this environmental disturbance (2.1.111–113). The speech does more than lend cosmic weight to a domestic quarrel; it proposes that human and natural systems are causally linked, so that discord among the fairies registers directly as damage to weather, crops, and health. This is, in miniature, an early articulation of systemic thinking about the environment.

Within the wood, the four Athenian lovers lose their bearings almost as soon as they enter it. Lysander and Demetrius quarrel over affections scrambled by the love potion, and certainty dissolves along with social decorum. Simon Estok's concept of ecophobia is useful here: the forest is figured as simultaneously alluring and threatening, a space that draws people in and then strips them of the confidence and order they arrived with.

Yet the wood that disorders also restores. By the play's end the lovers are correctly matched, and Oberon and Titania reconcile, a peace that is immediately followed by the return of natural order to the world outside their quarrel. The mechanicals' play in the final act, performed in celebration of the newly settled marriages, stages art itself as a response to and a celebration of this restored harmony. Taken together, these episodes argue that human relationships and the nonhuman environment are not separate domains but interdependent ones: disorder in one produces disorder in the other, and healing in one enables healing in the other.

4.3 *The Tempest*: Island, Control, and Limits

The Tempest unfolds entirely on an island with its own weather, creatures, and spirits—a closed system in which every disturbance is traceable to human intervention. Prospero rules this system through books and magic, commanding Ariel and

the storms alike, and he extends the same logic of command to Caliban, who was born on the island and whose subjection reflects an early modern conviction that knowledge entitles its possessor to mastery over both land and its inhabitants.

Caliban offers a counter-model of knowledge grounded not in command but in familiarity. He knows where to find "fresh springs" and can distinguish "barren place and fertile" (1.2.337–338), a practical, embodied understanding built from living within the island's limits rather than presiding over them. Robert Watson reads the play's colonial logic as operating on two registers simultaneously, seizing both land and the people native to it (Watson 210), and Caliban's dispossession makes that double seizure explicit.

The play poses its ethical question plainly: should nature be owned, or respected? Prospero's mastery isolates him even as it empowers him, and the play's resolution turns on his renunciation of that power. When he vows to "drown my book" (5.1.57), the gesture can be read as an acceptance of limits, a recognition that dominion carried too far comes at a cost to the one who holds it. The island, meanwhile, has tested every character who lands on it, exposing Antonio's ambition and Ferdinand's capacity for love in equal measure. When the human characters finally depart, the island itself remains, untouched by their departure. The implication is that human power over the natural world is not without boundaries, and that recognizing those boundaries is not a defeat but a necessary condition for reconciliation.

4.3.1 Ecological Motifs Across the Comedies

Read together, these three plays reveal a consistent pattern of ecological concern. In each play, a natural space—forest, wood, or island—functions as a site of transformation where characters are forced to confront their relationship with the nonhuman world. In each case, the natural space is not passive but active, shaping human behaviour and social outcomes. And in each case, harmony with nature is presented as a precondition for personal and social renewal.

This pattern is not limited to the three plays examined here. In *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the Windsor forest serves as a space of comic punishment and reconciliation. In *Twelfth Night*, the sea and the coast of Illyria shape the play's themes of loss and reunion. In *The Winter's Tale*, the pastoral world of Bohemia provides a space of healing and renewal after the tragedy of the first half. These plays, taken together, suggest that Shakespeare's ecological imagination was not confined to a single work but was a recurring concern throughout his comic writing.

V. DISCUSSION: SHAKESPEARE'S ECOLOGICAL VISION AND ITS LIMITS

The analysis above suggests that Shakespeare's comic plays display a consistent ecological imagination: an awareness of the interdependence of human and nonhuman life, a critique of the exploitation of nature, and a vision of social renewal through harmony with the natural world. However, it is important to acknowledge the limits of this vision.

First, Shakespeare was not a systematic environmental thinker. His plays do not present a coherent ecological philosophy but rather a series of dramatic explorations of environmental questions. The comedies are ambivalent texts that sometimes celebrate nature's bounty and at other times treat nature as a resource for human use.

Second, Shakespeare's ecological imagination is shaped by the assumptions of his time. The early modern period was a time of increasing exploitation of natural resources, and Shakespeare's plays reflect both the anxieties and the opportunities of this era. His comedies sometimes imagine nature as a space of freedom and healing, but they also reflect early modern assumptions about human dominion over the natural world.

Third, the comedies' resolution through marriage and social integration can be read as a conservative gesture that restores the very social order the natural space had temporarily suspended. The return to society, in other words, may undercut the radical potential of the green world.

Despite these limits, the comedies remain valuable ecocritical objects. They dramatize the tensions of early modern environmental thought rather than resolving them, and in doing so they offer insights into how people in Shakespeare's time understood their relationship with the natural world.

VI. CONCLUSION

William Shakespeare's comic plays present an early ecological vision. Through *As You Like It*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and *The Tempest*, Shakespeare shows that natural spaces are not a passive background but active participants in human life. The forest of Arden teaches moral lessons and heals social wounds. The woods in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* link human

conflict to environmental disorder and show that harmony in one requires harmony in the other. The island in *The Tempest* raises questions about power, colonization, and the limits of human control over nature.

Shakespeare challenges anthropocentrism and values interdependence between humans and the non-human world. His comedies suggest that reconciliation, marriage, and social renewal are possible when humans align themselves with natural cycles rather than trying to dominate them. Shakespeare wrote before the development of modern environmental science, but his plays anticipate many concerns that are central today.

As we face climate change and ecological crisis, returning to Shakespeare's imagination can help us rethink our relationship with the environment. His work reminds us that literature has long been a space for thinking about how humans should live with nature. The comedies, in particular, offer a vision of renewal through harmony with the natural world—a vision that remains meaningful and important in the twenty-first century.

Future research could extend this reading to Shakespeare's tragedies and histories, or compare his ecological vision with that of other early modern writers. Comparative studies with non-Western literary traditions could also illuminate how different cultures have imagined the relationship between humans and nature.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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