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Shakespeare

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The Green World and Gender Expectations in Shakespeare's Tragedies

Shakespearean literature carries notable symbolism to convey gender expectations and traditional roles. Women are usually associated with nature, or the green world, to illustrate fertility, maternity, and beauty. Men, on the other hand, are typically connected to civilization to demonstrate power, tradition, and authority. While the green world is originally acknowledged in Shakespeare's comedies, other analyses show that Shakespearean tragedy utilizes the green world in similar—yet notably distinctive—ways. Shakespeare deliberately uses the green world not only to address traditional gender stereotypes, but also to subvert them to enhance his tragedies, as exhibited in the characters Juliet, Romeo, and Hamlet.

The green world is a term first used by Northrop Frye in his book, *Anatomy of Criticism*. Frye names the green world as a device in Shakespeare's comedies and directly connects the term to "the ritual theme of the triumph of life and love over the waste land" (Frye 182). Frye writes, "The green world has analogies, not only to the fertile world of ritual, but to the dream world that we create out of our own desires. This dream world collides with the stumbling and blinded follies of the world of experience" (Frye 183). The green world operates mainly in nature and nighttime in Shakespeare's plays, offering an alternative to civilization. However, as Frye clarifies, the green world is "the world of desire, not as an escape from 'reality,' but as the genuine form of the world that human life tries to imitate" (Frye 184).

The green world is more than just a setting in Shakespeare's work, particularly his comedies; rather, this is a place that characters visit to undergo a metamorphosis and resolve the

conflict within the play before returning to "the normal world" (Frye 182). Frye further acknowledges that all of Shakespeare's comedies have "the same rhythmic movement from normal world to green world and back again" (Frye 182). Given Frye's deliberate analysis on the green world, it must then be concluded that studying the use of nature in Shakespeare's plays reveals the hidden truths about the society within each play.

Frye is not the only scholar to discover the pupal nature of the green world. Jeane E. Feerick explores the life-altering characteristics of the green world in "Economies of Nature in Shakespeare." Feerick writes, "Shakespeare's earth . . . is both animator and animated, a kind of hybrid organic system that is coextensive with humankind. The plays frame earth as alpha and omega, as "mother" to all life, but also as a centripetal force that seeks to reclaim her own. (Feerick 37) "Earth and human," Feerick elaborates, "are co-substantial bodies, conjoined actors that dynamically modify each other's various potentialities" (Feerick 38). In his text, Frye also makes this maternal connection to the green world, writing that "the earth that produces the rebirth is generally a female figure" (Frye 183).

Northrop Frye's original analysis of the green world is associated with Shakespeare's comedies. Charles R. Forker writes an in-depth study of the green world's role in Shakespearean tragedy in his piece, "The Green Underworld of Early Shakespearean Tragedy." Forker illustrates the green world in Shakespearean tragedy as "the manifestation of nature that most readily symbolizes the cycle of growth and decay, of birth and death, that adumbrates but cannot fully reveal the mysterious interchange between immediate and final causes" (Forker 25).

Forker studies how the green world explores more themes of death and the acceptance thereof in tragedy than comedy, going so far to refer to the green world as the hub for "the birth-death or womb-tomb paradox" (Forker 31). He further analyzes a "bifocal or divided view of the

green world—of nature as fallen yet adumbrative of paradise" in a contrast of Shakespearean comedy and tragedy (Forker 32). Forker writes:

In comedies love triumphs over mortality in a way that subordinates our awareness of suffering and of human limits to the joyous confirmation of our hopes, to our belief in growth, personal fulfillment, and continuity. But in tragedy the stress necessarily falls elsewhere . . . a more negative reading of nature's book by pointing to . . . the alarming speed and violence with which the cycle of life and death may revolve. (Forker 32)

Frye and Forker's respective analyses, then, both reveal that the green world is used to explore different aspects of the human nature depending on the genre the green world is presented in. If comedy, according to Frye, then nature will be used as a place of metamorphosis and conflict resolution. In Forker's study, nature in tragedy is used to address the inevitable and balanced nature of death.

Shakespeare is also the topic of study for appearing to conform to gender stereotypes, yet ultimately challenging those ideas. Dr. Sezen Ismail addresses this in "Challenge or Perpetuation of Gender Stereotyping in *Hamlet*, *Othello* and *The Taming of the Shrew*." Ismail writes, "Female characters in Shakespeare's tragedies are portrayed as weak and feeble; however, a deeper reading of the text reveals that they are actually aware of their inferior position" (Ismail 84). Ismail continues to acknowledge Shakespeare's use of "women who are not as fitting as they seemed" (Ismail 84). Ismail makes an excellent analysis on the use of female characters in *Hamlet*, *Othello*, and *The Taming of the Shrew* to subvert gender stereotypes and challenge patriarchal structures. A like-minded study may also be applied to another Shakespearean tragedy, *Romeo and Juliet*.

Both protagonists in *Romeo and Juliet* fall into Shakespeare's use of the green world to subvert gender expectations and traditional gender roles. For instance, Frye appoints Romeo as "both a lover and a killer . . . a boy who not only is identified with flowers in his role as an amorist but can also use the mortal liquor distilled from the 'simples' . . . self-destructively" (Forker 31). Shakespeare's alternative assignment of traditional gender roles is especially notable in the balcony scene.

First, consider the positions of the characters themselves in the balcony scene. Juliet stands on the balcony in her father's house, indicating an alliance with tradition and masculine authority. Romeo, on the other hand, hides in the garden, expressing his creative—and potentially feminine—romantic nature.

Romeo and Juliet's comparisons of one another during the balcony scene are a heavy indicator of these roles. Upon Juliet's appearance, Romeo exclaims:

But soft, what light through yonder window breaks?

It is the east, and Juliet is the sun.

Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon . . .

Be not her maid, since she is envious. (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.1.44-6, 49)

Much is implied in Romeo's poetic speech here. He directly associates Juliet with the sun, an image typically connected to male figures to indicate power, authority, and leadership. Juliet's literal and metaphorical location at the time of this speech—that is, her place standing *above* Romeo on a balcony as he pleads to her—confirms this subversion of stereotypes.

It is a typical literary and poetic move to compare one's lover to natural elements (flowers, sun, moon, etc.), thereby implementing the green world once more. Romeo takes this

comparison a step further. Not only does he exalt his lover beyond the beauty of the moon, but he encourages Juliet to take authority and conquer the moon for her envy of Juliet's beauty.

Romeo has an equally notable role in the balcony scene. Moments after his analogy between Juliet and the sun, Romeo attempts to confess his love for her by vowing to the moon. A startled Juliet responds, "O swear not by the moon, th' inconstant moon, / That monthly changes in her circled orb, / Lest that thy love prove likewise variable" (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.1.151-3). Romeo then asks Juliet what he should swear by, and heeds her advice; once again, the male lover falls into submission for the female he physically and figuratively stands beneath.

The balcony scene goes beyond romantic authority and submission to carry a darker weight. This episode may be considered either a visitation or an entryway into the green world in *Romeo and Juliet*, following the theme of visiting the green world from the "normal" world that Frye examines (Frye 182-4). Not only is this one of the few times that Romeo and Juliet meet, but it is a moment where the green world (as represented by Romeo, the Capulet garden, and the nighttime setting) interacts with manmade civilization (as shown by Juliet and the Capulet house).

Furthermore, notice how Romeo asks Juliet to "kill the envious moon" moments before his love is compared to the moon and its phases (*Romeo and Juliet* 2.1.46, 151-3). Later on in the play, Romeo and Juliet both commit suicide for thinking the other is dead. If Frye established that the green world is visited in comedy to establish a metamorphosis—and if Forker argues that the green world in tragedy is used to explore, implement, and accept death—then the sun and moon analogies in the balcony scene may be considered the catalyst for the tragedy to come later in the play. Romeo and Juliet allow the green world and civilization to interact, but they do not realize the power their words and wishes have in such a meeting. One interpretation may be that

when civilization comes face-to-face with nature, nature will win; and in Shakespearean tragedies, this victory may take the form of death, which can be viewed as the green world reclaiming humanity to its true or natural state in an inevitable cycle.

This conflict between the green world and manmade civilization is also explored in the beginning of *Hamlet*, another one of Shakespeare's tragedies. Once again, *Hamlet* follows Forker's study of death in the tragic green world. In Hamlet's case specifically, the clash between the green world and civilization is so great that it contributes to Hamlet's confusion, internal conflict, and potentially authentic madness.

When Hamlet visits his father's ghost in Act 1 of *Hamlet*, he does so during the night watch. Hamlet panics upon seeing the ghost and cries out:

. . . thou, dead corpse, *again in complete steel*

Revisits thus the glimpses of the moon,

Making night hideous, and *we fools of nature*

So horridly to shake the disposition

With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? (*Hamlet* 2.4.53-7, emphasis mine)

Once again, this passage carries many implications in so few lines, most of which indicate another dangerous interaction between the green world and civilization.

Hamlet refers to his father's ghost as "dead corpse" before wondering how he can be wearing "complete steel" once again (*Hamlet* 2.4.53). This may signify a marvel of a green world representative (Hamlet's father) wearing elements of human civilization (his steel armor). Hamlet's proclamation that the ghost is "making night hideous" exhibits how unnatural and unnerving it is to see such a nontraditional combination of the two worlds.

Hamlet also acknowledges his own mental mortal shortcomings as he claims to be a fool of nature who, upon seeing the ghost, wrestles "with thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls" (*Hamlet* 2.4.55-7). This expressed fear reveals that Hamlet is well aware of an interaction with something beyond his known world, a ghost that surpasses Hamlet's scientific understanding and logical reason.

If Hamlet is facing an unusual being, then he will likely experience an unusual reaction. Hamlet receives a charge from his biological father's ghost to avenge the late king and murder Claudius, Hamlet's current stepfather. Although Hamlet has already spent a considerable portion of the first act in verbal and emotional rebellion against his mother and uncle-father, the fact still remains that Claudius is legally the king now. It is apparent that Hamlet must begrudgingly submit to Claudius as Hamlet's request to return to school is denied.

Hamlet's late father may be seen as an authority figure from the green world, while Claudius is an authority figure in the civilized human world. Thus, by being charged with killing Claudius in an act of revenge for a murder that a ghost informs him of, Hamlet is placed in a unique situation of confusion. Beyond grieving his father's recent death and his mother's even more recent remarriage, Hamlet now faces the dilemma of discerning obedience. Should he obey the orders of his dead biological father—a civilized transplant into the green world—or should he submit to the rule of his living stepfather—a cruel, yet legal, authority figure in civilization?

This question of loyalty presents a reasonable excuse for Hamlet to be cautious about avenging his father's death while he is unsure if Claudius is actually guilty or not. The prince of Denmark is now in a place of conflicting responsibilities from even greater conflicting worlds. Furthermore, Hamlet is in a green-world-meets-civilization dilemma that no one else around him has entered before. This interaction completely disrupts Hamlet's loyalty and the question of

Claudius' legitimate claim to the throne and authority, thereby challenging male stereotypes of dominance, power, and tradition.

It may be argued that the late king's request for vengeance is a plea for Hamlet to restore natural order to Denmark. Regardless, Hamlet once more fulfills the prediction laid out in Forker's study. The play does end in a massacre; however, even if Hamlet successfully completed his father's request for vengeance with no error, the fact still remains that Hamlet's interaction with his father's ghost demands inevitable death for someone in one way or another. This exhibits another instance of the green world meeting human civilization and ushering in death.

In conclusion, the green world presents nature in a unique and complex way depending on the genre of Shakespeare's plays. The green world provides a place for conflict resolution in comedy; however, as exhibited in *Romeo and Juliet* and in *Hamlet*, the green world serves as a carrier or catalyst to introduce death to the world within the play. Shakespeare works to use the green world to subvert gender stereotypes and traditional roles, as exhibited in *Romeo and Juliet*'s reversed romantic roles and Hamlet's conflict between the supernatural and the traditional.

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