

Ecology and Performance in Druid Theatre's *DruidShakespeare*

“Just as politicized radical criticism based on gender, race, and sexual orientation takes in the full range of cultural articulations, so Green criticism has an application beyond the obviously green-world plays such as *A Midsummer Night's Dream* [...]” (Egan 175). Shakespeare's *Richard II*, *Henry IV (Part I and II)*, and *Henry V* are certainly a far cry from the verdant forests of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *As You Like It*, and an initial reading may not lend itself to an ecological interpretation. However, Druid Theatre's production of *DruidShakespeare*, an adaptation by Mark O'Rowe of Shakespeare's Henriad, takes these plays and places them in a natural environment, both by transporting the audience to outdoor performance locations and by bringing natural elements into the theater. By allowing the environment to play an active role in the performance, as opposed to just being textually referenced, *DruidShakespeare* opens our eyes to a world in which human actions have consequences for the environment and vice-versa. This has profound implications for the future of eco-performance, as it proves that plays do not have to be about nature to speak to the relationship between humans and the environment. Nature and ecology are certainly not the central themes of Shakespeare's Henriad; rather, the tetralogy focuses on themes such as divine kingship, class differences, and war. By addressing human-centered conflicts in relation to ecology and the environment, *DruidShakespeare* engages the human and non-human worlds in dialogue with each other—a necessary conversation at this point in human and ecological history.

In her essay *Ophelia's Plants and the Death of Violets*, Rebecca Laroche discusses a lesson plan on *Hamlet*, focusing on Ophelia's appearance during Act IV,

scene v. The lesson goal is to discuss a conceptual production in which Ophelia is given real plants to hold during this scene. Laroche details a number of productions where artificial plants have appeared instead of real flowers; Ophelia has distributed everything ranging from silk bouquets to bones in lieu of actual violets (211). A simple production change like this can generate significant ecological results, as bringing elements of nature into the scene reminds us of the non-human world beyond the stage. As Laroche notes, “Real plants, whether just-picked and fresh or yesterday’s and wilting allude to their gathering and to the green place where they can be found [...]” (212). This allusion to a “green place” is vital, as it creates the “opportunity for plants to ‘talk back’” and allows the non-human world to have a voice (Laroche 212-213).

DruidShakespeare transports much more of the non-human world onto the stage than just a bouquet of violets. Natural elements ranging from a stage floor covered in peat to a torrential rainstorm that drenches both actors and audience allow the non-human world not only to “talk back” but also to become an active character in the production (Laroche 213). In this paper, I will discuss each of the natural elements used in *DruidShakespeare* and how they impact the audience’s interpretation of the play.

In the Galway production of *DruidShakespeare*, the audience spent pre-show and intermissions across the street from the theater, in the outdoor Hall of the Red Earl. The Hall of the Red Earl is a medieval ruin nested in the center of Galway. In the Kilkenny production, *DruidShakespeare* was performed in the yard of Kilkenny castle; both King Richard II and King Henry V stayed in this castle during the Irish wars (*DruidShakespeare* Details Announced).

The site-specific nature of these two productions certainly served to connect to the history behind Shakespeare's *Henriad*, as well as add an Irish touch to the setting of the plays. More relevantly, though, it added to Druid Theatre's uniquely ecological take on Shakespeare. By performing outside (or, in the case of the Galway production, placing the audience outside before the play and during the intermissions), Druid Theatre brought both climate and landscape into focus, allowing natural elements in the play to "talk back" (Laroche 213).

Before the theater opened in the Galway production, the audience stood outside, shivering a bit in the chilly Irish weather. Characters from the production appeared one by one amongst the ruins of the Hall of the Red Earl, and after some time, they joined in song and led us, in procession, into the theater. This movement from outdoors to indoors emphasized the transition from historical events that took place in an outside setting to an indoor theatrical representation of this history. It also put the audience in touch with the literal climate of the play, an aspect that would be revisited later by a rainstorm in *Henry V*.

In his book *Shakespeare's Storms*, Gwilym Jones discusses the importance of weather in the theater. He describes an outdoor production of *King Lear* in which it started to rain at precisely the moment that the storm in the play began (Act II, Scene iv). Jones speculates: "How better to illustrate the irreducible difference between performance conditions for early modern audiences and for our own? [...] How do storms affect current critical discourses, and change the way we experience early modern theater?" (1-2). I will address these questions in more detail later, but it is important to note that the site-specific outdoor nature of *DruidShakespeare* brings weather into

theatrical performance and takes the audience back to a time in which nature played a significant everyday role in the theater.

As the audience was led across the alley from the Hall of the Red Earl and into the theater, we walked through a dark passageway, flanked on each side by a deep pit of peat. To the left, one of the actors was digging a hole with a shovel. We passed by him and into the small theater, only to find that it too was covered in a bed of peat, which we had to cross to reach our seats. From the moment we entered the dark passageway, the scent of earth filled our nostrils, and we were transported into a different world; not the aesthetic, man-made world that one often finds in the theater, but a more natural world, reminiscent of a time when kings and common men alike walked on dirt floors.

At the opening of *DruidShakespeare*, King Richard II entered barefoot onto the stage, his crimson robes trailing in the dirt. As the play progressed, we would see that the king's palace (in *Richard II*) and the commoner's tavern (in *Henry IV (Part I and II)* and *Henry V*) both existed on the same dirt floor. This shared landscape highlights one of the most prevalent themes of the Henriad—the critique of divine kingship. How different can a king be from a common man when they must both tread on the same ground? King Richard asks nearly the same question later in the play:

“I live with bread like you, feel want,
Taste grief, need friends: subjected thus,
How can you say to me, I am a king?”¹

This questioning of divine kingship and the resulting examination of class structures is a theme that permeates the original plays, from Richard's fall from divinely appointed king

¹ The script to Mark O'Rowe's adaptation *DruidShakespeare* is not yet available to the public. All quotes from the plays presented in this paper are taken from the original scripts of *Richard II*, *Henry IV (Part I and II)*, and *Henry V*.

in *Richard II* to young Prince Hal's debauchery with common thieves in *Henry IV (Part I and II)*. In an essay about *Henry V* and *Henry VI*, Simon Estok notes, "These plays...offer ecocriticism a good chance to push its analytical limits, to look at how and why class struggle and environmentalism can profit from working together" (50). *DruidShakespeare's* use of a dirt landscape to illustrate class struggle demonstrates how bringing together human and non-human conflicts on the stage can generate meaningful dialogue about human and ecological interaction.

After the first intermission, the audience exited the theater, and passed back through the passageway flanked with pits of earth. The same man was toiling with his shovel, except this time he was filling in the hole he had dug before the show began. King Richard's body lay inside. After each subsequent intermission (there were three in total), the characters that had died during the preceding performance were buried in these pits, so that by the end of the battle in *Henry V*, the lobby had been transformed into a candlelit graveyard.

This visual served as another method of bringing commoners and kings to the same level. King Richard II was buried in the same ground as Falstaff and his friends, echoing Richard's line in Act III, Scene iii:

"And my large kingdom for a little grave,
A little little grave, an obscure grave"

After such heightened human action and importance within the theater, the audience too was humbled as we exited. We were reminded that we are not so separate from nature, as we all return to the earth in the end, a sentiment that is echoed in King Richard's famous lines:

“Let’s talk of graves, of worms, and epitaphs;
Make dust our paper and with rainy eyes
Write sorrow on the bosom of the earth,
Let’s choose executors and talk of wills:
And yet not so, for what can we bequeath
Save our deposed bodies to the ground?” (Act III, scene ii).

DruidShakespeare also pushed ecocriticism’s “analytical limits” by bringing together environmentalism and issues of national identity (Estok 50). The soil that covered the stage floor was not just ordinary dirt; it was peat, the type of earth that fills Ireland’s bogs. The bog lands have long been a significant feature of the Irish landscape, and have been referenced in numerous Irish literary and dramatic works. Patrick Lonergan discusses the difficulty of staging Shakespeare on an Irish stage in light of the tense historic relationship between England and Ireland, noting that there is an “[...] ongoing problem of finding a way of staging Shakespeare that is both Irish and of a high quality” (236). As opposed to attempting to carve political messages out of the *Henriad*, *Druid Theatre* shied away from making it any more a play about colonialism than it already was. Instead, when asked about what she did to make the production Irish, director Garry Hynes responded that, “We use a landscape — both an emotional and an actual landscape — that’s familiar to us and will be familiar to audiences who have seen, say, *DruidSynge*” (Soloski). By literally “pack[ing] the stage with Irish soil,” the themes and stories of Shakespeare’s *Henriad* were transported to a new landscape (Soloski). Ireland had kings, Ireland had taverns and thieves, and Ireland fought wars; these stories are not unique to a specific locale. In a sense, the specific Irish landscape in

DruidShakespeare allowed the plays to become more universal. As Hynes said, “I’m personally attracted to the histories, because of what they tell us about things that interest me in the theater — family, fathers and sons, the mix of the great kings and those outsiders at the tavern. These plays felt very Irish to me” (Soloski).

The dirt floor of the theater did not just act as a passive backdrop to the action. Hynes noted in an interview that the use of real dirt was especially relevant to the *Henriad* due to the myriad of earth references made in *Richard II* (Soloski). Indeed, during the course of the play, Richard physically engaged with the earth numerous times. Most notably, upon his return to England in Act III, Scene ii he knelt upon the ground and spoke to the earth, running it through his fingers:

“Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand,
Though rebels wound thee with their horses' hoofs: [...]
So, weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth,
And do thee favours with my royal hands [...]”

Bringing real dirt into this scene allows the earth to become more than an abstract reference, and Richard interacts with the peat covering the stage floor as though he is speaking to a real character, addressing and coming into physical contact with the ground he treads on.

Later in his speech, he gives the earth an active role in the plot of the play, calling upon it to prevent rebellion:

“Feed not thy sovereign's foe, my gentle earth,
Nor with thy sweets comfort his ravenous sense [...]” (Act III, Scene ii)

These words turn nature into an antagonist in *Henry IV (Part I and II)* and *Henry V*; the environment works against Bolingbroke and the new regime.

Perhaps the most significant antagonistic role that nature took on in *Druid Shakespeare* was during the battle scene in *Henry V*. During this scene, rain began to fall from the ceiling as though we were outside, soaking everything and everyone in the theater. This meteorological feat takes us back to Jones's question: "How do storms affect current critical discourses, and change the way we experience early modern theater?" (1-2). To demonstrate how weather can change the interpretation of Shakespearean theater, I will contrast *Druid Shakespeare* with a film adaptation of *Henry V*.

Henry V is a play that has often been criticized for its idealization of war. The British government's film adaptation of the play in the 1940s was widely regarded as a propaganda piece, using the nationalist themes of the play to present an idealized image of war, and thus inspire the British people to finish WWII. There is no blood shed in this film, despite the fact that most of the play is spent on the battlefield; a convenient adaptation seeing as the British were trying to boost morale in a country weary of death and destruction. The portrayal of the natural world in this film adaptation is similarly idealistic; battle scenes occur on verdant fields under a clear blue sky.

In contrast, *Druid Shakespeare's* rendition of *Henry V* was more reminiscent of the trenches of WWI. Rain fell in torrents inside of the theater, soaking the actors and turning the fluffy carpet of peat into a pit of mud. This change in weather radically altered the image of war presented to the audience—war was no longer a stylish pursuit or a thing of beauty; the battlefield was a dirty place, and everyone who stepped foot on it

was soon soaked to the bone with blood, mud, and rainwater. While this certainly added to the dramatic effect of battle, it also was much more accurate in portraying the realities of war. Allowing the weather to have a voice, as opposed to unrealistically presenting a forever-sunny battlefield, allowed us to see the relationship between man and the earth.

Rain was not the only climate-related element present in *DruidShakespeare*. Throughout the course of the play, scenic elements in the upstage right corner showed the play's progression through the four seasons. These scenic elements not only served to bring Laroche's "green space" into the theater, but also demonstrated the effect that each king's rise to power had on the earth (212).

DruidShakespeare sets *Richard II* in the summer, with apricots hanging from steel clothespins in the corner of the stage—an obvious choice due to the reference to the fruit in Act III, Scene iv, when one of the Duke of York's gardeners calls to a servant: "Go, bind thou up yon dangling apricocks". The gardeners in this scene use nature analogies to foretell King Richard's tragic fate, and their prophecies prove to be true. The play ends on a foreboding note; Richard himself is murdered in his jail cell, and Bolingbroke, now King Henry IV, fears the bad luck that this murder will bring to him and his court. The landscape reflects the nature of this situation in *Henry IV (Parts I and II)*. The apricots appear withered in *Part I*, and as the play progresses and King Henry IV's sickness grows worse, the apricots disappear altogether, leaving barren metal clothespins hanging over a patch of snow. Once again, the environment plays the role of antagonist, obeying Richard's request to "Feed not thy sovereign's foe" by destroying Henry IV's personal health and the health of the land over which he reigns (Act III, scene ii).

Finally, in *Henry V*, we see bright white flowers hanging from the clothespins in the back as a potential symbol of renewal and cleansing, particularly coupled with the rain that washes the young King Henry V clean from his rebellious past and his father's sins. By bringing real apricots, flowers, and other natural elements into this scene, *DruidShakespeare* alludes to the "green space" outside of the theater, allowing non-human elements to have a voice (Laroche 212). These scenic elements speak not only to how human power shifts affect the environment, but also illustrate potentially ecophobic interpretations of the Henriad, in which human problems are presented as the result of "environmentally produced malevolence" (Estok 63).

At such a critical point in history, it is vital to continue not only producing new works with an environmental focus, but also re-envisioning classics through an ecological lens. Plays like *DruidShakespeare* allow us to critique problematic concepts like ecophobia and anthropocentrism, while also opening new windows through which we can see how nature and the environment might play a more active and generative role in the theater. Through the use of natural elements such as earth, water, flowers, and fruits, as well as site-specific performance techniques, *DruidShakespeare* re-interprets Shakespeare's Henriad in such a way that sheds light on eco-centric concepts such as the effect of human power on the earth and the effect of natural powers on human regimes. *DruidShakespeare* additionally ties this ecological focus to more human-centered concepts like class struggles, the reality of war, and divine kingship. In this way, *DruidShakespeare* acknowledges that the course of human and ecological events are intricately intertwined, and rather than "pit coal miners against spotted owls", it addresses these problems with a united front (Estok 50).

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