

# Shakespeare's Beach House, or The Green and the Blue in *Macbeth*

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Where I go, words carry no weight: it is best  
Then, I surrender their fascinating counsel  
To the silent dissolution of the sea,  
Which misuses nothing because it values nothing.<sup>1</sup>

WE GO TO THE BEACH FOR FUN, but right up against the water's edge there's no real comfort. The ceaseless spectacle of surf engages but does not reassure. It's a place to visit, not to live. We like looking because we can't stay. What fascinates is the palpable experience of boundary. A few steps away is the part of our world in which humans can't survive. A fluid body that we enjoy touching with our own mostly fluid bodies, as we dip our toes and submerge our limbs, but from which we always retreat. What's on the other side, past the watery border? What secrets does the ocean keep? What would it be like to cross over?

Shakespearean theater follows a comparable beachy logic of temporary and transformative immersion. The plays create for a brief shared time and space an imaginative world that follows its own rules. Inside the charmed circle, the boundary between "art"—things created by human ingenuity and technique—and "nature"—the physical landscape into which we are born—ceases to hold. The art-nature distinction becomes flexible, textured, and subject to poetic play and refiguring. It's like crossing over without leaving our seats. We dive in without getting wet. Sometimes this seems too easy, and Shakespeare comes to resemble a vacation property. But every beach house sees its share of storms.

The ecological humanities have been drawn to Shakespeare in part because he's the biggest fish in the Anglophone literary sea,

but also because his long and living stage history provides tangible evidence of canonical texts engaging contemporary dilemmas. The current surge of ecocritical Shakespeare, however, risks seeing only the happier side of nature, a beach where the weather is always good.<sup>2</sup> Sustained attention to the Shakespeare's "green" should not occlude his dramatization of a harsher "blue ecology" that locates itself not in cultured pastures or even marginal forests but in the deep sea. Shakespeare's literary works can't get us all the way into this massive blue body—the most basic feature of the world ocean is that humans don't live there<sup>3</sup>—but they can serve as a fictive beach house, providing us with a beguiling window onto an inhuman space. The view from Shakespeare's beach house shows the void next to which we perch our fragile bodies. It locates us right at the boundary that we can only temporarily cross. Like other beach houses, it's vulnerable to coastal storms, and probably built on sand. It's a place to which we return because of (not in spite of) the disorder in front of it.

Shakespeare's dramatization of this inhuman, oceanic ecology appears in two intertwined tropes in *Macbeth*. The play's "green" ecology imagines Scotland as a troubled agricultural land, husbanded by King Duncan, violated by the Macbeths, and eventually renewed by Malcolm. Against this now almost-traditional eco-reading, a "blue" ecological countercurrent exposes the play's fascination with the inhospitable ocean. References to the sea teem in this landlocked drama. The bloody Captain analogizes battle to "shipwrecking storms" (1.2.26); the Weird Sisters assail the merchant ship *Tiger* (1.3.7–26); and Macbeth himself rejects the "sure and firm-set earth" (2.1.57) for "multitudinous seas" (2.2.66).<sup>4</sup> Even Lady Macbeth's fantasy that water can wash away murder represents a fervent plea that the liquid element might serve human purposes. The play's blue ecology combines the Weird Sisters' inhuman perspective with the topos of the mind-stretching sea, which, as W. H. Auden observes, "misuses nothing because it values nothing." The green and blue in *Macbeth* represent different visions of how humans live in the natural world, with green sustainability first displaced by Macbeth's oceanic ambitions and then finally re-asserting itself after the tyrant's death. For twenty-first-century Shakespeareans living in an increasingly oceanic and disorderly world—the summer of this essay saw oil gushing into the Gulf of Mexico—supplementing green narratives with blue incursions feels urgent.<sup>5</sup>

## Revenge of the Green

The forests of Scotland, from the trees surrounding Dunsinane Hill to the “blasted heath” where the Weird Sisters gather, define the green world of *Macbeth*. To rule this kingdom requires engaging a land in which, to borrow the phrase Robert Pogue Harrison adopts from Vico, the forests were *first*.<sup>6</sup> Harrison’s ecological reading of the tree-soldiers of Birnam wood argues that “the moving forest . . . comes to symbolize the forces of natural law mobilizing its justice against the moral wasteland of Macbeth’s nature . . . We see the law of the *land* in a strangely literalistic guise” (104). This reading, filtered through Heidegger’s dream of “dwelling” (265), helps emphasize how Duncan’s early rewarding of Macbeth and Banquo asserts a basic dream of agricultural civilization: humanity can live in harmony with green nature. “I have begun to plant thee,” says the King to Macbeth, “and will labor / To make thee full of growing” (1.4.28–29). To cultivate retainers as growing things requires a vision of kingship as natural stewardship. Duncan’s organic kingdom bridges the separation between human culture and natural cultivation. This green vision echoes much contemporary ecocriticism, especially in its Romantic and Heideggerian strains.<sup>7</sup>

Although he comes second on Duncan’s list for cultivation, Banquo represents a heroism fundamentally attuned to the King’s green vision. When Banquo asks the Weird Sisters about his future, he employs agricultural metaphors. “If you can look into the seeds of time,” he charges them, “And say which grain will grow and which will not, / Speak then to me” (1.3.58–60). Banquo’s distinction between the grains that grow and those that perish suggests that his cultivating vision is more fraught than Duncan’s, but both figures look to plant life for their dominant metaphors. The pronouncement that Banquo’s heirs will rule Scotland places his Stuart line in a tree-like relationship with time, playing a longer game than the “brief candle” (5.5.23) of a human span. After Macbeth’s short-term promises have been fulfilled, Banquo puzzles over the prophecy that “myself should be the root and father / Of many kings” (3.1.5–6). Thinking himself into the role of “root” makes Banquo a spokesperson for a green future within Macbeth’s violent kingdom. His final words to his son—“Fly, good Fleance, fly, fly fly! / Thou mayst revenge” (3.4.23–24)—invoke a temporal continuity that reaches beyond the play.

The vision of agricultural civilization that Duncan and Banquo

share draws on what Greg Gerrard has called pastoral ecology, “the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy and change of human societies.”<sup>8</sup> In *Macbeth*, human violence bursts open this green vision. Inverting Duncan’s planting and Banquo’s root, natural confusion erupts after Duncan’s murder. In Lennox’s words,

The night has been unruly. Where we lay,  
 Our chimneys were blown down, and, as they say,  
 Lamentings heard i’th’air, strange screams of death,  
 And prophesying with accents terrible  
 Of dire combustion and confused events  
 New hatched to the woeful time. The obscure bird  
 Clamored the livelong night. Some say the earth  
 Was feverous and did shake.

(2.3.45–52)

This passage systematically replaces organic images of planting and growth with the broken fragments of human buildings (chimneys), strange voices that recall the Weird Sisters (lamentings, prophesying), and birds of night. The “feverous” earth, which the Old Man later calls “unnatural” (2.4.10), registers the fracture of green continuity.

The play’s two-part structure, which anticipates the late romances, allows Malcolm and Macduff to renew Duncan and Banquo’s green energy. When Malcolm’s soldiers become trees, the symbolic gesture, as Harrison argues, arrays the forces of nature against Macbeth. Harrison’s eco-fantasy, however, overlooks the manipulation of the disguise. “Let every soldier hew him down a bough,” says Malcolm, “And bear ’t before him. Thereby we shall shadow / The numbers of our host and make discovery / Err in report of us” (5.4.4–6). What Malcolm creates is less ecological harmony than “shadow” and error. Like the violence implicit in Macduff’s “untimely ripped” birth (5.8.16), Malcolm’s tree-soldiers represent rupture, which seems more powerful than his father’s harmony. Malcolm damages trees rather than planting retainers. The new king does adopt his father’s ruling metaphor in the play’s final speech, alluding to “What’s more to do / Which would be planted newly with the time” (5.8.65–66), but it’s not clear that Duncan’s planting regime is still possible. The woods can be impersonated by cutting down their branches, but not cultivated or planted anew.

### The Multitudinous Blue

Into Duncan's green kingdom rides something blue and wicked: Macbeth. Macbeth's crisis of ambition—his desire to jump “this bank and shoal of time” (1.7.6)—ruptures the smooth generational continuity of green ecology. A history that progresses through generations “out to th' crack of doom” (4.1.117), such as the succession of Stuart kings, endorses a linear, progressive view of historical cohesion. Against this smoothness Macbeth inserts urgent, immediate action: “If it were done, when 'tis done, 'twere well / It were done quickly” (1.7.1–2). Naming this temporal velocity “blue” connects it to a poetic topos in the play in which the “multitudinous seas” (2.2.66) represent the inhuman world into which the Macbeths' crimes take them. The ocean is not a literal place in *Macbeth*, but instead, like the storms scenes in *King Lear*, it represents an alien element that intrudes upon and destroys social bonds. To be oceanic and multitudinous means facing the pitiless inhumanity of the world.

This blue force erupts into Scotland through the Weird Sisters, who arguably occupy a hinge-space between green and blue worlds. Their heath is a desiccated limit-case of Scottish forest, but imaginatively it opens onto the inhuman ocean. They appear on land but rove across the seas to torment the master of the *Tiger*, in a resonant passage that prefigures the play's main plot. The Sisters' assault on the ship as symbol of human ambition and mercantile travel underlines their corrosive impact on human bonds. Revenging the curses of a “rump-fed runion” (1.3.6), the first Sister turns on the woman's ocean-going, and therefore vulnerable, husband: “Her husband's to Aleppo gone, master o' the *Tiger*; / But in a sieve I'll thither sail, / And like a rat without a tail, / I'll do, I'll do, and I'll do” (1.3.7–10). Even in a sieve, the Sisters can travel, and “do,” on the world ocean. Macbeth will later figure “navigation” (4.1.50) as a model for human achievement, and the master's troubled fate slowly unravels human self-determination.<sup>9</sup> The ship at sea, which since antiquity has been a master-trope for the orderly state, becomes a toy vessel on a chaotic ocean. The master's experience inverts the steady progress of Duncan and Banquo's green agricultural time. With the Sisters blowing winds against him from every quarter, the master's life becomes non-progressing torment: “Sleep shall neither night nor day / hang upon his penthouse lid. / He shall live a man forbid. / Weary sev'nnights, nine times nine, /

Shall he dwindle, peak, and pine” (1.3.19–23). Macbeth’s own desire to leap into achievement measures itself against the master’s torment as well as against the growth of Duncan’s kingdom. The Sisters cannot destroy the master—“Though his bark cannot be lost, / Yet it shall be tempest-tossed” (1.3.24–25)—but his weary, dwindling, pining torment defines blue, as opposed to green, life. In this world nothing comforts.

Considered from the perspective of blue and green ecologies, the Macbeths’ gambit—that a quick murder can break through to a new model of temporal experience—appears an attempt to sail between the twin dangers of maritime disorder (the *Tiger*) and landed stasis (Duncan). Lady Macbeth’s embrace of murder dovetails with her obsession with the cleansing powers of water. Following an ancient belief in water’s power—“the sea can wash away all evils,” writes Euripides in *Iphigenia at Tauris*<sup>10</sup>—Lady Macbeth believes that the element on which the *Tiger* floats can hide her crimes. “Get some water,” she chides her husband just after the deed, “And wash this filthy witness from your hand” (2.2.50–51). A few lines later, she reiterates, “A little water clears us of this deed” (2.2.71). When water does not do the job, its failure drives her mad. Her imagined conflict between water and blood—“Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?” (5.1.31–32)—underlines her failed attempt to enlist the blue on her side: the ocean, we might recall, is water that tastes salty, like blood.

The bluest gambit in the play belongs to Macbeth himself, who recognizes that in following the Weird Sisters he leaves land to embrace the instabilities of ocean. As he debates killing Banquo, he resolves to plunge himself farther into a bloody sea: “I am in blood / Stepped in so far that, should I wade no more, / Returning were as tedious as go o’er” (3.4.137–39). The image of wading, however, minimizes the extent to which Macbeth has left banks and shoals for deeper water. Confronting the Sisters the second time, Macbeth recognizes that they represent wild oceanic nature, and that following them means rejecting landed order. “[A]nswer me,” he insists:

Though you untie the winds, and let them fight  
Against the churches, though the yeasty waves  
Confound and swallow navigation up,  
Though bladed corn be lodged and trees blown down,  
Though castles topple on their warders’ heads,

Though palaces and pyramids do slope  
 Their heads to their foundations, though the treasure  
 Of nature's germens tumble all together,  
 Even till destruction sicken, answer me  
 To what I ask you.

(4.1.51–61)

These lines show symbols of human civilization—palaces, pyramids, castles, churches—cast down. Winds and waves not only break human symbols; they also “confound” navigation itself, so that even all principles of order or rebirth (“nature’s germens”) are lost. To embark on this sea is to enter the chaos of Macbeth’s imagination: “a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury / Signifying nothing” (5.5.27–28). Once navigation and its principles have been confounded, Macbeth’s world dissolves into oceanic chaos.

### Healing or Swimming: When Blue Meets Green

These blue and green ecological threads in *Macbeth* represent opposed visions of nature and of humanity’s relationship to the natural world. They also parallel two distinct strains of literary ecocriticism. Green ecocriticism posits that a healthy relationship between human beings and the natural world is possible, and critics from Thoreau to Heidegger to Lawrence Buell and Jonathan Bate have proposed ways to repair this relationship.<sup>11</sup> Like Banquo, these critics play a long game, bending toward sustainability. A blue or oceanic ecology, by contrast, puts the emphasis on disjunction and disorder as constituent parts of any natural system. Macbeth’s poetic response to loss—“She should have died hereafter” (5.5.17)—and his final insistence upon struggle—“Why should I play the Roman fool and die / On mine own sword?” (5.8.1–2)—respond to this blue world. Reconciling green hope and blue crisis will be crucial for twenty-first century ecological thought. *Macbeth* itself, which starkly outlines the conflict between green and blue, also contains two brief suggestions about what happens when these two ecological systems touch. These perhaps can structure future efforts.

Healing the land is the ultimate goal of green environmentalists and responders to ecological disasters, but Macbeth’s fantasy about healing Scotland is also deeply blue. He asks his Doctor to “cast / The water of my land, find her disease, / And purge it to a sound

and pristine health" (5.3.52–54). Since Macbeth himself is Scotland's disease, and under his rule the kingdom has become a "wild and violent sea" (4.2.21), the Doctor's affirmative "Ay, my lord" (5.3.59) may seem ironic, but the tyrant's paradoxical fantasy of measuring his land's water underlines the inaccessible and inhuman core of his kingdom. To Macbeth, even Scotland's forests contain both sea and land, indissolubly linked. Malcolm also wants to cure Scotland, but his dry medicine is the saintly laying on of hands he witnesses at Edward the Confessor's English court (4.3). To cure with water, by contrast, requires diving into Macbeth's symbolic ocean. In this play's imaginative logic, water is urine is blood is ocean: the different resonances among these fluids do not overcome their fundamental similarities. All these liquid environments contrast with Duncan's pastoral land, and they all respond to one strong medicine: purgation, the violent removal of an offending substance. As Cathness says, Scotland needs to spill the blood of its soldiers, "each drop of us" (5.2.28). Macbeth asks for a "purgative drug" (5.3.57) to "scour these English hence" (5.3.58). Both sides in the civil war share a violent vision of purgative healing, which amounts to digging canals so that the encroaching ocean can flow outward. It entails fighting a rear-guard battle of land against sea.

The play's brief alternative vision entails accepting oceanic disorder and attempting to swim inside it. For early modern Englishmen including Shakespeare, swimming was dangerous and desperate, hardly a recreation.<sup>12</sup> In *Macbeth*, swimming means following the Weird Sisters and attempting to "jump the life to come" (1.7.7). It's a doomed practice, and fear of drowning always colors swimming in Shakespeare. But an early metaphor in *Macbeth* frames swimming as a limit case of survival in a hostile environment. The bloody Captain uses swimming to describe the battle between Scotland and its rebels. "Doubtful it stood," he says, "As two spent swimmers that do cling together / And choke their art" (1.2.7–9). In the play's first invocation of the doubt that will torment Macbeth, the image of the two swimmers represents impending but not yet arrived disaster. The swimmers "cling" together in an embrace that seems both erotic and social while relying on flawed "art" to preserve their lives. The tension between human clinging and physical striving speaks to the dilemma of the Macbeths, torn between their political arts and their desperate desire for human connection. The swimmers are not quite drowned (yet),



though their fates seem doubtful. Their struggle represents green creatures trying, with perhaps only temporary success, to survive in a blue world.

These two images—“casting the water of my land” and “two spent swimmers”—exemplify *Macbeth*'s potential innovations for literary ecocriticism. From Shakespeare's beach house we see both land and sea. We can set out in either direction: off the sand toward higher ground, or into the surf. Moving uphill to cast the water of our land means looking hard at what has happened to the green earth. It means embracing what Timothy Morton claims is the essential task of contemporary ecological thought: “to figure out how to love the inhuman”<sup>13</sup> (92). This task entails a clear-eyed assessment of damage done and remedies forgone. But out to sea the two spent swimmers cry out, urgently and painfully, that we haven't much time. Immersed in the blue world ocean, we cling to each other, choking our art. We need to swim in our poisoned waters, not just measure them. Where do we want to be—down in the water, swimming in desperation, or up at the castle, casting our land's water?

## Notes

1. W. H. Auden, *The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare's The Tempest*, ed. Arthur Kirsch (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 5.

2. See, among others, Gabriel Egan, *Green Shakespeare: From Ecopolitics to Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2006); Robert N. Watson, *Back to Nature: The Green and the Real in the Late Renaissance* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006); and Daniel Brayton and Lynne Bruckner, eds., *Ecocritical Shakespeare* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2011).

3. The term “world ocean,” coined by Yury Shokalsky, comes from the discourse of oceanography.

4. All references to the play are from *Macbeth*, ed. William C. Carroll (Boston: Bedford, 1999).

5. On Shakespeare's blue poetics, see Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009).

6. Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: The Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 1.

7. For a critique of ecocriticism's reliance on Heidegger, see Greg Gerrard, “Heidegger Nazism Ecocriticism,” *ISLE* 17 (2010): 251–71.

8. Greg Gerrard, *Ecocriticism*, (London: Routledge, 2004), 56–58. For related consideration of stasis v. dynamism in ecological models, see Steve Mentz, “Strange Weather in *King Lear*,” *Shakespeare* 6: 2 (2010): 139–52.

9. On navigation in *Macbeth*, see Philip Edwards, *Sea-Mark: The Metaphori-*

*cal Voyage, Spenser to Milton* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1997), esp. 117–28.

10. For an engaging reading of Euripides' phrase in global context, see Kimberly Patton, *The Sea Can Wash Away All Evils: Modern Marine Pollution and the Ancient Cathartic Ocean* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).

11. See Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000) and Lawrence Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis and Literary Imagination* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005).

12. See Mentz, *At the Bottom*, 35–49.

13. Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 92.