

The Non-Human as a character in Shakespeare's Plays. An Ecocritical Approach to the Second Tetralogy

Local Stories and Local Soil in *Henry IV*

(...) ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment (...). [It] takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (...) all ecological criticism shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it (Glotfelty, 1994).

I intend to explore how Shakespeare builds local culture, or local soil (Berry, 1988), precisely through construction of the English founding myth, in terms of distance or proximity to the state of nature (as opposed to the state of society), explained by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in his *Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality among Men*¹ (1923). I also follow here Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's 'Concept of Enlightenment'² (2002) which construes the whole eighteenth-century Enlightenment as a fall from the natural world caused by hyper-rationality; a situation that necessarily led to nature's enslavement and the exploitation of the masses. On the strength of these ideas, I plan to show how pre-Enlightenment Shakespeare, and his even prior stories, deviate temporarily from the course of natural law and order, only to return to the right track later on, making everything still more perfect and peaceful if possible.

In *Henry IV* Part One, this deviation from the natural law is apparent in two different conflicts: the one dealing with Prince Hal's affective and moral distance from his father, his relationship with Falstaff, and Henry IV's subsequent wish that Harry Hotspur were his real son; and the one related to the corruption, the stain, that lies on Henry IV's crown, which has been gained by deposing the rightful king, Richard II.

Going from the smaller to the bigger picture, the former conflict contradicts the law of nature regarding local, or community, culture. Prince Hal's distance from his father, from the crown that he is to inherit, in one word, from the royal family itself, represents a break in the generational succession, a negation of one's own story, an attempt to cut original ties. If we consider that without a past there is no identity, Hal, the King's son, behaves in

¹ Written in 1754 as an answer to the subject for an essay competition proposed by the Academy of Dijon.

² In *Dialectic of Enlightenment, Philosophical Fragments*, originally written in German during World War II.

a manner that directly goes against Shakespeare's avowed purpose in writing the play: Hal's break threatens the continuity of the English myth; his rebellious attitude stands against the perpetuation, not only of his family, but of the royal lineage in general.

The latter conflict, notwithstanding, speaks to the audience, and the reader, about something of a more serious order. Bolingbroke (Henry IV)'s accession to the English Crown has also violated the order of nature according to the beliefs of the time. He was not the lawful heir to the Crown, and the stain cannot be erased.

Both conflicts speak about corruption, one as a lack of moral or honest conduct, the other as a direct cause and consequence of political inequality that is not as easy to solve. If we consider the meaning of corruption in a natural sense, the process of decay, putrefaction (Oxford Dictionaries, 2015), it is easy to detect the connection between both levels. Moral and political corruption will necessarily lead to natural corruption. If Hal does not return to his father's side, the king is weakened, worried, sick; if the English crown is not lying on the rightful heir's head, plots and treason will threaten the throne. England, the country, the nation, and the territory, will be suffering and in danger until the corruption is rooted out.