Shakespeare's *Macbeth*: A Challenge to the Metaphysics of Anthropocentric Presence

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Abstract:

Keith Sagar (2004) in his recent book, *Literature and the Crime against Nature* has referred to Ted Hughes' argument concerning *the* 'role of creative imagination as an essential part of our biological survival gear'. He further says that 'great literature, of any age, already embodies the holistic, biocentric vision now advocated by deep ecology'. Recent developments in ecocriticism have witnessed a debate with reference to anthropocentric and biocentric world-views and a shift towards a biocentric world-view which is in chime with what Keith Sagar calls, 'the healing power of the imaginative atonement'. There is no dearth of books and papers that concentrate on 'the representation of natural environments in Shakespeare' (see Heise 1997: 29n). The present paper is neither a formalist attempt to thematically taxonomize the various elements of biosphere nor a venture in abstract theoretical nihilism. On the contrary, looking at Shakespeare's creative imagination from ' the present day changing perspective when there is a healthy emergent trend to revalidate literature with an ethical, interdisciplinary earth-centered approach' (Prasad 2004) in which ' language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications' (Glotfelty 1994), the paper will discuss how Shakespeare's *Macbeth* questions and resists 'the anthropocentric constructions of environment' (Branch: 1994) by challenging the metaphysics of anthropocentric presence in the midst of Renaissance humanism that believed in the 'central position of human beings in the universe' (Abrams 1999: 116).

Key terms: ecocriticism, deep ecology, metaphysics of anthropocentric presence

Preamble:

I would like to begin the discussion of my paper with two quotations. The first one is by

Frank Kermode who in his article *Writing about Shakespeare* in *London Review of Books*

published in 1999 ruefully predicts:

> It seemed to me that academic Shakespearians would now attend to almost anything rather than to the words. And to persist in this neglect might mean, in the long run, the disappearance not only of Shakespeare as anything but a document like any other historical document …

The second one is from Jonathan Culler who in 1997 in his book *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* writing about the charge made against cultural studies as a devourer of literary studies puts this question: " Have the soaps replaced Shakespeare and, if so, is cultural studies to blame?" Responding to a similar charge made against theory "when it encouraged the reading of philosophical and psychological texts along with literary works" which "took the students away from the classics" he comes out with encouraging observations:

> But the theory has reinvigorated the traditional literary canon, opening the door to more ways of   reading the 'great works' of English and American literature. Never has so much been written about Shakespeare; he is studied from every angle conceivable, interpreted in feminist, Marxist, psychoanalytic, historicist, and deconstructive vocabularies. (47)

Undoubtedly, instead of becoming a neglected forgotten 'historical document" in the sense Kermode has referred to, Shakespeare breathes new life every moment and is very much alive and relevant in the contemporary politics and poetics of literary studies and to quote William Carlos Williams from the *Foreword* to   *The Globe Illustrated Shakespeare* (1979) "Shakespeare is the greatest university of all", and " surely this is the highest compliment one can pay to any man" (xi).

The paper will explore how Shakespeare, the greatest university of all, who has always been ahead of his time,   is our contemporary in his environmental educational programme which ecophilosophically propounds a world-view in *Macbeth*, according to which "the political and the environmental issues are interwoven and interrelated"   (see *Macbeth*: the development of understanding of environmental issues through the study of literary and media texts (i))– a world-view with a significant paradigm shift   from anthropocentricism to biocentricism – from "What a piece of work is a man…the beauty of the world, the paragon of animals" (*Hamlet* Act II. 2: 303-307) to "now a wood/ comes toward Dunsinane" (*Macbeth* Act IV. 4: 45-46) to "be planted newly with the time" (Ibid Act V. 3: 65).

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Rationale:

Rapidly growing interest in recent years in reading and interpretation of literary texts by incorporating biocentric world-view has also "reinvigorated" the contemporary significance of Shakespeare. It reexamines the relationship between human actions and their physical outcome. It has added new dimensions to the metaphors of killing, suffering and healing in *Macbeth* without impairing the validity of the critical tradition following which L.C. Knights(1959) states that *Macbeth* " defines a particular kind of evil – the evil that results from a lust for power" (225) and A.C. Bradley (1904) sees it as an "ironical juxtaposition of persons and events"(103) in all the " vividness, magnitude and violence of the imagery" (101) and praises the "sublime", "tremendous" and "concentrated" (97-98) impact of its poetry and tragic power.

There is no denying the fact that the reason behind the tremendous tragic impact resulting from the lust for power is what the Greeks attributed to *hubris* defined by Microsoft Encarta Reference Dictionary 2003 as "the excessive pride and ambition that usually leads to the downfall of a hero in classical tragedy". Keith Sagar in his thought-provoking and 'illuminating' book, *Literature and the Crime against Nature* published in 2004 puts forward his central argument:

> that the most of the world's ills through history, but especially the long, now critical, ecological disaster, are the result of what the Greeks called hubris - a kind of pride which drives men, both as a race and as individuals, to regard themselves, in consequence of intelligence and technology, as outside of and superior to the natural world.

He further argues:

> that imagination is the only human faculty capable of a wider and deeper vision than the anthropocentric, being capable of breaking through the hard shell of ego (whether the ego of species, race, sex, nation, culture or individual) and releasing a vision of the sacredness and miracle of the created world, the ecosystem upon which mankind wholly depends; and that nearly all the great works of imaginative, especially poetic, art, have testified to this.

The phrase " metaphysics of anthropocentric presence " has been adopted from Michael Branch's (1994) paper *Ecocriticism: The Nature of Nature in Literary Theory and Practice*

which is derived from his assumption that the contemporary literary theorists all have spoken of a perceived crisis of authority as we find in Derrida's "metaphysics of presence ", De Man's "blindness and insight", Hokheimer and Adorno's "enlightenment", Ricour's "hermeneutic of suspicion", Foucault's "panoptic society of surveillance", and feminism's "paternalistic discourse". This challenge to the metaphysics of anthropocentric "presence" by the hermeneutics of environmental praxis is not only "liberating" but also restorative and pioneering. It is liberating and restorative in the sense that ecological thinking makes us aware of the dangers of ecosystemic disruption between the human and non-human elements of our planet earth. It is pioneering in the sense that it "involves simultaneous processes of environmental awakening - retrievals of physical environment from dormancy to salience – and of distortion, repression, forgetting, and inattention" (Buell 2001: 18). Glotfelty and Fromm (1994: xviii) describe it as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment". It "encourages others to think seriously about the relationship of humans to nature, about the ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis" and it "shares the fundamental premise that human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it". Glotfelty distinguishes it from other critical approaches in this that it "expands the notion of 'the world' to include the entire ecosphere" (1994) not only society: the social sphere.

Evidently, the range and appeal of ecocriticism is interdisciplinary. It attempts " to understand the connectedness of all things – including the life of the mind and the life of the earth" (Dean: 1994). Ecocriticism is integrative, holistic and "value-centered that honors the interconnectedness of things. As the interconnectedness of things is valued, so too is the integrity of all things, be they creatures of earth, critical practices, spiritual beliefs, or ethnic backgrounds" (Ibid). Contemporary accounts of increasing environmental concerns in creative and critical writings have strong " tradition of such thinking within the domain of literary art" as argued by Branch (1994) in the following lines:

> First, questions about the proper role of humans in the cosmic scheme have always engaged the literary imagination, and concerns about maintaining or restoring a right relationship to nature are both thematically and symbolically present in the literature of every culture. For example, when _Oedipus Rex_ opens with a plague upon the land, or the Bible begins with Adam and Eve's expulsion from the paradisiacal garden, or _The Divine Comedy_ starts with Dante lost in the rank

wildness of the dark wood, we understand that the ethical propriety of individual action is metaphorically conceived of in terms of the health and balance of nature. Second, literature has always struggled with questions of value comparable to those being asked by ecosophy. For example: should humans be valued as creations of God, as Milton might suggest, as creatures of nature, as Rousseau might suggest, or as creations of culture , as Henry James might suggest? Should wilderness be feared, as it was by Puritan exegetes, studied scientifically, as it was by the Enlightenment rationalists, or revered, as it was by Romantic poets? Third, literature has always been concerned with the creation and recreation of a sense of place. For example, Frost's New England and Faulkner's Mississippi are the subjects rather than simply the settings of their work. This powerful sense of emotional location is produced by a convergence of artistic and natural spheres, a kind of literary bioregionalism in which the writer imaginatively inhabits a particular locale. Fourth, a great deal of literature has dealt explicitly with nature, whether to speculate upon our place within it, or to explore or express its beauty irrespective of human concerns. Both ecosophy and literature are born of a meeting between nature and culture; both deeply explore and often deeply question relationship between human and their natural surroundings.

Macbeth deals with all the four aspects referred to in the above quote: a) it questions about the proper role of the human beings in the cosmic scheme of things emphasizing the ethical propriety of the individual action, b) the question of value, c) creation and recreation of a sense of place, a sense of emotional location and d) the inner and the outer aspects of nature. But there is something more in *Macbeth*, which is the question of unjust authority that theory contends that, this "stems from a belief in 'presence' while ecosophy holds that it has its source in anthropocentricism" (Ibid: 1994) "whose authority is guaranteed by a divine transcendental signified" (Groden and Kreiswirth:1997).

Discussion:

Renaissance individuals tended to see themselves as independent personalities. Renaissance portrait-painting reflected this tendency in the portrayal of individual human beings. The individual sitter becomes a subject to be glorified; he or she is frequently placed against more realistic backgrounds, and is thus located in a specific world of time and space(Browning's "My Last Duchess" is a beautiful example). The sitter is represented in living attitudes, with realistic facial expressions revealing personality. In novelistic terms Francois Rabelais' *Gargantuan and Pantagruel*, and Cervantes' *Don Quixote* are such studies of the individualized human characters. In dramatic art, the medieval emphasis on allegorical representation of individuals finds expression in Shakespeare's plays - the individualized

human character becomes the legitimate object for study. *Hamlet*, for instance, which presents a man given the task of avenging his father's murder, can be seen primarily as the psychological portrait of an individual man, torn by doubts, and weak because of his own vacillation. In medieval drama, however, such serious explorations of private human suffering are seldom presented on stage. Instead, in plays like *Everyman* (written shortly before the close of the fifteenth century), perhaps the best of the "morality" plays, though Everyman "suffers" the disconsolation of finding that his friends (Fellowship, Kindred, Worldly Goods) will not follow him into the next world, he remains essentially a constituent part of a dramatized sermon or homily. Everyman fails to assume the individuality of Hamlet, or of Shakespeare's Cleopatra, Rosalind, Lady Macbeth, or Falstaff, Richard III, or Othello (see *The Renaissance Introduction*: 2004).

Macbeth's personality has this tendency to see himself as an individual right from the beginning. His reaction after his first encounter with the witches, in Act I, Scene iii, is ample evidence of his thinking in terms of an individual. His soliloquies are also an attempt to rationalize his individuality trying to achieve   a philosophical freedom from a world-view which advocated individualism fostered by ambition and upward mobility in personal terms which caused moral and physical chaos.   His actions are responsible for the moral and physical chaos upsetting the political order in Scotland causing turbulence in natural environment by an "unnatural" act of " A falcon, towering in her pride of place, / Was by a mousing owl hawked at, and killed" (ll. 10-12) which is being described by Rosse to an Old Man outside the castle of Macbeth in Act II, Scene iv:

And Duncan's horses (a thing most strange and certain)

Beauteous and shift, the minions of their race,

Turned wild in nature, broke their stalls, flung out,

Contending against obedience, as they would make

War with mankind. (ll. 14-17)

The Old Man who is "Threescore and ten" is not able to remember such "Hours dreadful and things strange". The same imagery of the individual man vis-à-vis a superior, more powerful, and more sanctified cosmic pattern is continued when Rosse says:

Thou seest, the heavens, as troubled with man's act,

Threatens his bloody stage: by the clock 't is day,

And yet dark night strangles the travelling lamp. (ll. 5-6)

Rosse and the Old Man obviously point out to the ecological balance that is disturbed and as a result "threatening" the scene in which "the travelling lamp" is the sun, which is "strangled " or killed by the darkness "as troubled with man's act". Shakespeare's *Macbeth* furnishes a vision that is profounder than the anthropocentric conception "releasing a vision of the sacredness and miracle of the created world, the ecosystem upon which mankind wholly depends". Shakespeare's *Macbeth* questions about the proper role of the human beings in the cosmic scheme of things emphasizing the ethical propriety of the individual action.

The question of value is linked with the propriety of the individual action of the doer because of his hubristic pride which he considers "outside of and superior to the natural world". Throughout the play it is expressed through such binary oppositions as: lost/won, foul/fair, black/white, night/day, kill/heal, hide/know, good/bad, friends/foes, heaven/hell, holily/foully, done/undone, welcome/unwelcome, darkness/light which reflect a register of difference pointing to a larger scheme of things which are beyond the human-centered theory of value. In biocentric terms Macbeth's and Lady Macbeth's actions are unjustifiable (Lady Macbeth's character is not discussed separately in this paper because I agree with Sigmund Freud (1916:137) when he says that they are " like two disunited parts of a single psychical individuality…").   In biological terms Scotland, the living place must be purged:

Meet we the medicine of the sickly weal;

And with him pour we, in country purge,

Each drop of us. (Act V, Scene II ll. 26-28)

It is as if "they" are medicine going to be poured into the country to cure it. This image of cure for an illness is continued in the succeeding lines with the use of the words: *pour*, *purge*, *drop*, in the process of cleansing the country which is a living entity. The image of healing continues in the following speech of Lennox in the same Act and Scene:

Or so much as it needs

To dew the sovereign flower and drown the weeds.

Make we our march towards Birnam. (ll. 29-31)

With dew, and water they hope to make grow the new king of Scotland, Malcolm, the "sovereign flower' (In Modern English we speak of a "sovereign remedy") and "drown the weeds", Macbeth and his followers (see *New Swan Shakespeare* notes on page 204). Macbeth, the "untitled tyrant" as Macduff calls him, in his madness has caused the sickness of the country. Here the political crisis is linked with   the ecological disturbance in the state as Malcolm speaks of its plight in Act IV, Scene iii - "It weeps, it bleeds: and each new day a gash/ Is added to her wounds" (ll.39-40). The normalcy in Nature will be restored after "Nature here is torn into fragments" by the witches "symbolizing the nauseous violation" (Long 1989: 13)   of the ecological order "even till destruction sicken". With the symbolism of the returning spring, renewal of nature was evoked by the "sacred-magical advance of the forest's 'leavy screens'. Here is what Northrop Frye calls Shakespeare's 'green world' emerges… to repossess a human house fallen into sickness" (Ibid: 13).

Locations and terrains are never accidental matters in *Macbeth* (Ibid. 16). In the very Act I, Scene i of the play we meet the three witches who are planning to meet Macbeth "In thunder, lightning or in rain?"   "Upon the heath". They introduce the present confusion and point to the confusion that is going to come. His meeting with the "weird sisters", the "instruments of darkness" is instrumental in instigating him on the path of the "bloody business" with the "every possible resonance of the verb 'to do' with the repetitions of "Do", "Did", "done", and the cognate noun "deed". In this connection it has been rightly remarked that they "carry the play's cogent exploration of what it is to be a separate, acting individual rather than an unperturbed particle of social acquiescence or the breath of nature's quiet" (Ibid: 32). His separation from others and even from his wife, after the murder of the king, as a result like the sailor described by the witches he shall sleep "neither night nor day", "He shall live a man forbid". For he chooses the path of violence and destruction causing "breach in nature" with his bloody acts of tyrannical intentions. In Act III Scene i, at Forres, in a room in the palace he feels "cabined, cribbed, confined bound in/To saucy doubts and fears (ll.23-24) and realizes the barrenness and fruitlessness of his "deed". The "hurlyburly" of the heath has entered the room of Macbeth's castle at Inverness "with great news" of Duncan's arrival. Act I Scene vi unfolds the complexities of man and his environment with the images of

paradisiacal bliss and procreation. Macbeth's castle "hath a pleasant seat" with all the ideal natural environ of a place with "delicate" air and the possibilities of growth and procreation. It is the place, an emotional location, a psychological space where man is at peace with the other beings of the ecosphere: the birds, the beasts and the elements. Otherwise, one can see in the same place "The raven/himself is hoarse" and the day is dreaded and therefore there is an invocation for the "thick night" so that the "black and deep desires" of the anthropocentric constructions can be hidden in such a way that "Nor heaven peep through the blanket of the dark". Macbeth is like Captain Ahab in Melville's _Moby-Dick_ whose black, destructive rage against a natural world he cannot subdue is as compelling as it is horrible and as daring as it is pointless" (Ibid.: 43). Michael Long, a professor at the University of Cambridge, has found a parallel in Wagner's _The Ring of the Nibelung_ "of the primordial offences against the sacred quiet of the world which relate fascinatingly to the 'deed' of Macbeth that put 'a breach in nature'. He brilliantly elucidates the parallel:

> Wotan and Alberich, like Macbeth, tear something from the primeval fabric of things and cut into its wholeness. They seek power in separation of themselves from what Wagner wonderfully evokes in the music of the forest and the spring, the music of unpolluted water and streaming light, the music of the vast, effortless, radiant quiet which precedes the interventions of his two fatal Alberichs. In the beginning was not the Word. In the beginning was the forest, with the great ash tree in it, and the Rhine flowing through it lit with gold. These things were then desecrated and polluted by the doers, caused to wither and darken as the lonely quest for power began.

And the illuminating comparison continues:

> Wagner's sunlit world of bright rivers, forests and eyes is akin to _Macbeth_'s innocent world of the martlets, the 'delicate' air and the green boughs of Birnam wood. The darkness into which it declines is akin to the murk and perversion of _Macbeth_'s 'fog and filthy air' . His profound and somber vision of how the human mind and will ineluctably wound and pollute the world is in close congruence with that part of _Macbeth_ which probes the key words of 'do' 'deed' and 'dare' in its exploration of human agency. In both works the primal crime is the interventionist deed of a great and reckless creature. In _The Ring_ that deed puts out all sorts of beautiful lights. In _Macbeth_ it palls things 'in the dunnest smoke of hell'. In both works it is a matter of stabbing at the beautiful, intricate pattern of things and making thereby 'a breach in nature'. . (Ibid. 45)

In both the works mentioned above the inner reality of man is contrasted with the outer manifestation of the intrinsic value of nature. Alberich destroys nature by tearing the gold from the rocks of the Rhine and plunging its waters into darkness, Macbeth once hailed as "Great Glamis! Worthy Cawdor!",   is a witness to his own degeneration, downfall, and doom from the status of "Valour's minion" and " Bellona's bridegroom" "into the sere, the yellow leaf" which was "ripe for shaking". By witnessing his gradual destruction it would not be an exaggeration to say that in the present day ecological crisis caused by   man's greed and carelessness as one can see it in Leslie Marmon Silko's   *Almanac of the Dead* (1991) as " a healing strategy to reclaim the diseased and corrupted landscape" (Prasad: 2004), Shakespeare's challenge to the metaphysics of anthropocentric presence in *Macbeth* has immense contemporary significance as it is interesting to see how Shakespeare who "may be seen as the last interpreter of the humanistic programme" (Grudin: 2003) is very much our contemporary in his environmental educational programme.

Closing statement:

Distinctly, ecological reading of literary texts can be meaningful and realistic in both pedagogical and theoretical terms and will not take us either to a fixed contour of critical determinism or to a slippery terrain of indeterminacy creating in us a feeling of interpretive fascism or semantic nihilism. It will enable us to distinguish between nature threatened and nature as a threat and this certainly will not be a threat to Shakespearean research and pedagogy today and tomorrow and to those like   Bernard Shaw, and T.S.Eliot who tried to break away from Shakespeare. Perhaps their reason for breaking away from Shakespeare was due to what Harold Bloom calls "the anxiety of influence" of the "revisionary ratios" (Bloom: 1973 quoted in Botstein: ND; Abrams 1999:124-25) or the fact that they were fed up with the repetition of the same critical jargons of the great critics by those who are teaching and reading Shakespeare. If Shakespeare is Harold Bloom's "mortal god" (2003: 2), then he needs to be sacrificed like the burial of the mortal gods of Sir James Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1922) to renew the insipid and unproductive practice of a critical tradition.   If Shakespeare is a university, then his plays are "poems unlimited" to borrow the part of Harold Bloom's title of *Hamlet: Poem Unlimited* (2003). If readers today look for the constructions of environment in Shakespeare, then by so doing they remove the dust of history from Shakespeare as from time to time it has been removed even by those like Roman Polanski and Giuseppe Verdi, people who are from the fields of film-making and music and "the rich

varied story of *Macbeth* in twentieth-century and "its fascinating modulations" as in the case of Kurusawa's *Throne of Blood* or Ionesco's *Macbett* (Long 1989::xv).

Finally, I would like to say that "in *Macbeth* [Shakespeare] makes the dust of history glow with the spirit of imagination" (Albert: 1932:102). And yet time has not been so powerful to wrap it up in the "yellow leaf" of history. Its contemporary relevance can be seen with reference to the present day ruthless struggle of power politics and the fear of being annihilated from the earth's history if we pursue our anthropocentric mind-set which has been contested artistically and in planetary and principled terms in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* which seems to say, "The universe is larger than our views of it" (Emerson quoted in Tag: 1994).

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