

Female Sexuality and the Land in Shakespeare's Tragedies and Tragicomedies

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Shakespeare's plays repeatedly demonstrate forward-thinking approaches to ecological concerns present both in the Early Modern period and today. Keen observations of nature and of man's interaction with it resist traditional or nostalgic views of nature as source of purity, or as resource over which man, by virtue of divine ordination, acts as steward. The self-reflexivity of Shakespeare's plays – their awareness of their own theatrical artifice and of the instability of their role as “practice of subjectively embodied (re)presentation” (Martin 4) makes them well-suited not just to ecocritical approaches in general but also to ecofeminist criticism in particular. Clark states that ecofeminist thinkers “come to environmental issues expert in controversies about distinctions between sex (‘natural’) and gender (‘cultural’), questions of whether the category ‘woman’ or ‘women’ has any clear natural referent or is not, in fact, an unstable product of social conditions” (111). Ecofeminist criticism is hyper-aware of womanhood as a construction that shares many attributes with patriarchal constructions of ‘nature’ or ‘land.’ Broadly speaking, ecofeminism is “a movement and a current of analysis that attempts to link feminist struggles with ecological struggles; the range of possibilities within this general mandate is, therefore, considerable” (Sandilands xvi). But the range of ecofeminism's possibilities also makes it a useful interpretive lens for Shakespeare's tragedies and tragicomedies, which themselves offer a broad range of representation of the female as simultaneously subject and object. This broad range of representation achieves the effect, like ecofeminism, of rejecting “that tradition of thought and writing that would project [humanity's] illusion of being a detached spectator or observer, either as a kind of consumer of experiences or in the fantasy of an unimplicated objectivity” (Clark 112). In six of Shakespeare's tragedies and romances, or tragicomedies, women and land are linked in ways that subvert traditional associations between the two. *Titus Andronicus*, *Cymbeline*, and *The Tempest* present the land as a distinctly feminine entity, while *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale* offer the inverse scenario of the female body as land resource. These mirrored metaphors simultaneously uphold and complicate conventional assumptions about

both women and the land, and male interaction with and ownership of each. The interplay between the land as female and the female body as the land questions typical gender assumptions as well as typical assumptions about humankind's relation to nature in a way that anticipates contemporary links between feminist and ecological struggles.

Titus Andronicus and *Cymbeline* present certain key topographical features of the plays' landscapes as distinctly female. These feminine characterizations simultaneously uphold and complicate conventional assumptions about both women and nature. *Titus Andronicus* challenges the typical view of Earth as womb-like by linking its various images of pits, holes, and tombs with Tamora's womb. Traditional depictions of the forest as bounteous, giving, and linked to Earth-mother goddesses are overturned when Tamora, who has just been likened to Diana the huntress by Bassianus (2.3.57) describes the forest in terms of sterility and parasitism, calling it "[a] barren detested vale (. . .) Overcome with moss and baleful mistletoe," where "nothing breeds" (2.3.93-96). Not only is what Tamora calls "this abhorred pit" (2.3.98) where Chiron and Demetrius will dispose of Bassianus' body, and where Aaron will lead Titus' sons Martius and Quintus in order to frame them for Bassianus' murder, but this "secret hole" (2.3.129) is also the site of the rape of Lavinia. The image of the "loathsome pit" (2.3.193) is hardly the traditional depiction of the land as bountiful. Rather, Quintus' grotesque description conflates the pit-as-tomb with the dual images of traumatic birth and rape:

What, art thou fallen? What subtle hole is this,
Whose mouth is covered with rude-growing briars,
Upon whose leaves are drops of new-shed blood
As fresh as morning dew distilled on flowers?
A very fatal place it seems to me. (2.3.198-202)

Repeated characterization of the pit as "unhallowed and bloodstained hole" (2.3.210), "detested, dark, blood-drinking pit" (2.3.224), and "swallowing womb" (2.3.239) reinforce the link between the pit, threatened female sexuality, and corrupted motherhood, all of which run counter to traditional comedic or pastoral associations of the land with selfless giving maternity. Rather, linking the image of the pit with Tamora's womb, as Titus does most notably with the line, "Like to the earth swallow her own increase" (5.2.191), challenges the traditional assumption "that women were designed by nature to be mothers and that

they instinctively want to rear every baby they bear” (Hrды 4). Although her desire for revenge is based on the sacrificial murder of her eldest son, Tamora nonetheless challenges pervading notions of self-sacrificing motherhood by using Chiron and Demetrius as tools in her plot of revenge against Titus. As a character with her own motivations who actively chooses her own destiny rather than succumbing passively to the fate meted out to her through her marriage to Bassianus in act 1 scene 1, her existence, like that of the pit, threatens to devour the established masculine centre of power in Rome. While the depiction of Tamora’s agency as a threat that must be eliminated may be seen as valuing the idea of male dominance over women (and, by extension, over the land), the fact that the rape of Lavinia as Tamora’s retaliation against Titus succeeds in bringing about the downfall of the entire Roman power structure along with her, challenges the view of both women and the land as strictly passive, selfless, benevolent and giving.

Cymbeline’s appropriation of the Earth-womb image is not as drastic as *Titus’*, but the play nonetheless questions the idea of the Earth as cradle or womb by setting Belarius’s idealistic depictions of cave-life in opposition to the more pragmatic viewpoints of his two adopted sons. Belarius celebrates the virtues of the life of isolation in the Welsh countryside he has chosen for his family, arguing that their cave’s low roof “[i]nstructs you how t’adore the heavens; and bows you / To a morning’s holy office” (3.3.2-3). The cave is traditionally linked to the womb as a symbolic site of origins and of protection. However, Belarius’ privileging of the protection the cave affords is immediately contested in the lines “[O]ften, to our comfort, shall we find / The sharded beetle in a safer hold / Than is the full-wing’d eagle” (3.3.19-21). The use of the word “sharded” to describe the beetle’s closed carapace in contrast to the eagle’s open (and therefore more vulnerable) wingspan carries with it connotations of excrement which undercut the value Belarius places on the cave’s womb-like protection. The dung-beetle image sets Belarius’ beliefs up for further contestation by Guiderius and Arviragus. Arviragus asks “[h]ow / In this our pinching cave shall we discourse / The freezing hours away? We have seen nothing” (3.3.36-38), likening the cave to “our cage” (3.3.42), while Guiderius, referring to himself and his brother as “we poor unfledg’d” who “[h]ave never wing’d from view o’th’nest” (3.3.27-28), sees the cave as an emasculating space – a “cell of ignorance” (3.3.33) stunting not only intellectual but also sexual development. The two young men have never seen a woman, which leads to their confused mixture of filial and erotic

love for the cross-dressed Imogen, made evident by Guiderius' line, "Were you a woman, youth, / I should woo hard, but be your groom in honesty: / I bid for you as I do buy" (3.7.41-43). Where *Titus* imagines the pit as a metaphor for destructive female agency, *Cymbeline* presents the cave (and, by association, Belarius) as an overprotective mother to two men who are beyond the age of mothering. Both characterizations, however, self-consciously undercut previous trite representations of the land as nurturing and maternal.

While *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline* focus on key aspects of the landscape as distinctly female, in *The Tempest*, Prospero's dual control over the island's climate and his daughter Miranda's chastity blurs the lines between the female body and the land altogether. Both are manipulated to restore Prospero's threatened patriarchy, but Prospero's guilty conscience at the play's end destabilizes conventional assumptions about male ownership of female sexuality. Catriona Sandilands, author of *The Good-Natured Feminist: Ecofeminism and the Quest for Democracy*, critiques early assumptions by ecofeminism that it is woman's traditional role as caretaker of the family that bestows on her a heightened sensitivity to environmental issues, arguing that "[t]he neoconservative aroma of [Earth-mother] discourse should be quite noticeable: a return to patriarchal and heterosexual 'family values' will restore not only a healthy (natural) family but a healthy (natural) planet" (xii). But far from calling for a return to patriarchal values, *The Tempest* critiques the patriarchal assumption of man's "right" to dominion over both land and female sexuality. Contemporary ecofeminism has moved away from what Sandilands critiques as too essentialist and instead takes patriarchal productionist views of nature as its key area of critique. In *Primate Visions: Gender, Race, and Nature in the World of Modern Science*, critic Donna Haraway asserts that patriarchal systems of capitalism and colonialism view nature as "the raw material of culture, appropriated, preserved, enslaved, exalted, or otherwise made flexible for disposal by culture in the logic of capitalist colonialism. Similarly, sex is only the matter to the act of gender; the productionist logic seems inescapable in traditions of Western binarisms" (13). This is the worldview that Prospero holds for most of *The Tempest*. Miranda and the island are analogous resources for Prospero to exploit in his quest to restore what he views as his patriarchal right: his dukedom. In the opening scenes, Prospero is shown to have been hiding his power over the elements from Miranda:

I have done nothing but in care of thee,
Of thee, my dear one, thee my daughter, who
Art ignorant of what thou art, naught knowing
Of whence I am, nor that I am more better
Than Prospero, master of a full poor cell
And thy no greater father. (1.2.15-21)

In hiding his ability to control the island's weather in order to bring about the shipwreck that will bring together key characters implicated in the usurpation of his dukedom, Prospero also hides from Miranda the role, through her betrothal to Ferdinand, she will play in this plan. By wedding Miranda to Alonso's son and heir, Prospero ensures that his grandson will be the next duke, allowing him to restore his royal bloodline. In a comparison between *The Tempest* and the Pocahontas myth, critic Heidi Hutner brings to light the parallels between Prospero's self-imposed ownership of the island and his control over Miranda's choice of partner. According to Hutner, "[d]ivine authority (. . .) is restored by the interlocking discourses of the English courtship narrative and the woman-as-land metaphor in the colonial economy," with Miranda's virginity functioning "as both a symbol of the bountiful, chaste new World that willingly brings material wealth to its white male conquerors and as the vehicle through which royal power is legitimized in a patrilineal European society" (37). Indeed, the supernatural wedding masque that Prospero conjures featuring the image of Ceres, the goddess of agriculture, and Juno, goddess of pregnancy, presents images of "rich leas / Of wheat, rye, barley, vetches, oats and peas" (4.1.60-61), "flat meads thatched with stover" (4.1.63), "banks with pioned and twilled brims" (4.1.64) and "pole-clipped vineyard" (4.1.68); in other words, a landscape that has been harnessed and transformed by man for agricultural purposes, celebrating Prospero's productionist view both of the island and of his daughter's fertility. Minor characters offer further insight into the parallel between the female body and the island as exploitable resource. In act 2 scene 1, Sebastian, speaking of Gonzalo, remarks, "I think he will carry this island home in his pocket and give it his son for an apple" (2.1.91), with Antonio replying, "And sowing the kernels of it in the sea, bring forth more islands!" (2.1.92). Here the island is depicted in terms of genetic increase, echoing Prospero's will to control over his daughter's choice of mate. Audiences are offered an alternative to Prospero's colonialist economy as envisioned by Gonzalo in act 2 scene 1, in which men have "no

occupation" (2.1.155), and the land brings forth "of its own kind all foison, all abundance" (2.1.164). But Gonzalo's utopian vision is seen as naïve by his listeners, who point out the paradox between men's and women's idleness and chastity until even Gonzalo pokes fun at his own "merry fooling" (2.1.178). Still, this short interchange between Sebastian, Antonio, Gonzalo and Alonso destabilizes Prospero's perceived right to control every aspect of the island's climate and of Miranda's reproductive rights. Although Prospero's plan to restore his dukedom is successful, his apparent attack of conscience in the play's epilogue indicates a degree of doubt as to the right of ownership that he has taken for granted in his twelve years spent on the island. His plea to the audience to "be relieved by prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults / Mercy itself, and frees all faults" (epilogue) indicates a purgatorial angst that outlasts the play's seemingly comedic conclusion. Prospero's lingering bad faith casts doubt on his previous assumptions about ownership over the island and of Miranda, in spite of having "won" his genetic war.

The interplay between the female body and the land also works in reverse; *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter's Tale* offer the inverse scenario of the previous three plays by characterizing the female body in terms of a landscape to be exploited by men. These plays complicate the conventional image of a passive, giving female body by offering scenarios where exploitation of female sexuality can have tragic consequences. According to Haraway, the basis for the equation of nature and the female in western narratives is that women, in terms of sexual conflict, are the "limiting resource" (364). Haraway suggests that "nature in a productionist paradigm is a limiting resource for humanist projects; nature is female, the limiting resource for the reproduction of man, loved and hated and needed, but held in check as agent in her own right" (364). This is precisely the scenario offered in these three plays, which each feature heroines who with various degrees of success resist the notion of woman purely as passive resource over which men must compete for access.

In *Anthony and Cleopatra*, the play's titular heroine is described as being "of the Nile," setting up her body as metaphorical site of colonization by Rome. The contrast between Cleopatra's suicide and Anthony's botched attempt at the play's end, however, opposes the notion of woman as object, and, subsequently, of colonized land as Western man's rightful resource. Cleopatra's body is repeatedly linked to the river Nile throughout the play. The audience first encounters Cleopatra in a

domestic scene in which Isas offers her hand to a soothsayer, remarking, "There's a palm / presages chastity, if nothing else," to which Charmian replies, "E'en as the o'erflowing Nilus presageth famine" (1.2.46-49). As opposed to being a necessary element of a male productionist and colonial economy as in *The Tempest*, here female chastity, described this time by women, is a bad omen. Often, Cleopatra's link to the Nile muck is presented pejoratively. Pompey refers to her body as a "field of feasts" (2.1.23), wishing Anthony to be caught up in what Pompey sees as her licentiousness. Agrippa later calls her "[r]oyal wench! / She made great Caesar lay his sword to bed, / He ploughed her, and she cropped" (2.2.234-6), and in act 2 scene 7, Lepidus, in conversation with Anthony, refers to Cleopatra as "[y]our serpent of Egypt (. . .) bred now of your mud / by the operation of your sun; so is your crocodile" (2.7.25-26). Anthony, however, despite his obvious desire for Cleopatra, sees her as a resource to be exploited. In the same conversation with Lepidus he remarks how "[t]he higher Nilus swells, / The more it promises: as it ebbs, the seedsman / Upon the slime and ooze scatters his grain, / And shortly comes to harvest" (2.7.23-26). Anthony shares with Prospero a view of the female body as resource to be controlled. Cleopatra herself seemingly celebrates the link other characters see between her sexuality and the fertile banks of the Nile, as indicated when she says of Anthony, "He's speaking now, / Or murmuring, 'Where's my serpent of old Nile?— / For so he calls me'" (1.5.24-26). At first glance, Cleopatra's tolerance and even celebration of a rhetoric that sees her body as little more than a site of agricultural and colonial exploitation by Rome seems problematic, reinforcing traditional "Orientalist" depictions of the Egyptian queen and her land as Western men's resource. However, like the Nile, Cleopatra is unpredictable and resists exploitation. Enobarbus, by complaining that "We cannot call / her winds and waters sighs and tears: they are greater storms and tempests than almanacs can / report" (1.2.146-148), likens Cleopatra to the sea, whose unpredictability places a limit on human control. Anthony's inability to predict her behaviour is a major source of anxiety, to the point where, after learning Cleopatra's fleet has defected to Caesar's and that her love has seemingly proven false, he questions his own identity in the lines "Here I am Antony, / Yet cannot hold this visible shape" (4.15.13-14) and is driven to murderous rage. Cleopatra actively resists Anthony's attempt to murder her by hiding in her monument, and her eventual suicide as an escape from imprisonment at the hands of Caesar is the ultimate act of rebellion against the colonial powers in Rome, who would seek to

exploitatively “hoist me up / And show me to the shouting varletry / Of censuring Rome” (5.2.55-56). Instead, Cleopatra calls for “a ditch in Egypt” (5.2.57) to be her grave. Her death thus becomes an act of freedom for herself and for the Egyptian land. Cleopatra’s method of suicide is particularly significant in comparison with Anthony’s own botched attempt. Critics Anthony Cousins and Aiman Al-Garrallah note that unlike Anthony, Cleopatra achieves a heroic death which is “a truly Egyptianised version of a Roman attempt to gain freedom through suicide” (164) and that, although Anthony aspires to the same “suicide granting heroic freedom from obeisance to a victor, and from death at another’s hands,” he actually “bumbles his attempt,” where “Cleopatra, of course, does not” (164). While Anthony attempts suicide by stabbing himself, a failed effort that symbolizes his inability to escape his military identity, Cleopatra’s death by asp-bite returns her to the Nile muck of which she is metaphorically derived, allowing her, and the land, to escape colonial control. It is important to note, however, that this link to the Nile is an ironic one. Cousins and Al-Garalla point out that “[w]hen Cleopatra describes her use of the asp in terms of suckling a child, she becomes a parodic but triumphant type of Isis suckling Horus” (164). By the tension created in this moment of parody and triumph, the play questions any full identification of woman as link to the figure of the Earth-mother goddess. The most important aspect of her suicide, however, is that it marks a refusal on the part of Cleopatra to be reductively objectified and for her land to take part in the male-dominated productionist imperative.

Hamlet offers a similar vision of the female body as land-resource. Haraway posits that since females are the investing sex, their need to be selective in choosing a mate accounts for the intra-male competition that objectifies the female as resource. In Haraway’s words, the investing sex becomes “the sign and embodiment of what is most desired and always scarce, never really one’s own, the needed and hated female as prize” (364). This is indeed the case for Gertrude, whose body becomes a battlefield for the genetic war taking place between Claudius and Hamlet; despite the younger Hamlet’s misogyny toward his mother, the play indicates a sympathy for both women and land as object of destructive intra-male competition, while simultaneously distancing women from pure objectification. From an evolutionary standpoint, Hamlet’s view of Gertrude and Claudius’s union as incestuous and unnatural stems from his desire to see his father’s genetic line continued, through Hamlet’s accession to the throne and through any subsequent offspring, over that of

Claudius. Gertrude's body thus becomes the metaphorical site of an ongoing evolutionary struggle for existence. Hamlet and Claudius's genetic struggle parallels the ongoing war between Denmark and Norway. Horatio's speech in act 1 scene 1 indicates that this is specifically a war over land:

[O]ur valiant Hamlet
 (For so this side of our known world esteemed him)
 Did slay this Fortinbras, who by a sealed compact
 Well ratified by law and heraldry,
 Did forfeit, with his life, all those his lands
 Which he stood seized of to the conqueror,
 Against the which a moiety competent
 Was gaged by our king, which had returned
 To the inheritance of Fortinbras
 Had he been vanquisher. (1.1.83-92)

With the death of one monarch (and, subsequently, his genetic line), the land is passed to his vanquisher. Such is the case with the female body. When Hamlet's Ghost urges his son to "[l]et not the royal bed of Denmark be / A couch for luxury and damned incest" (1.5.80-82), it is a call, in defending the body of his wife against Claudius' genes, to defend his land from ownership by Claudius and his offspring as well. However, the tragic ending of the play, which sees Hamlet's, Claudius', and Gertrude's deaths, complicates this vision of Gertrude as merely a prize for the taking. Rather, competition over Gertrude's body is portrayed as a war that cannot be won by any of the men in the play. In addition to the play's ending, comparisons between Gertrude's womb and a garden further complicate the idea of Gertrude's body as passive resource and suggest that male anxiety surrounding Gertrude's sexuality stems from her own sexual agency. Hamlet establishes this metaphor in act 1 scene 2, when he calls the world "an unweeded garden / That grows to seed; things rank and gross in nature / possess it merely" (1.2.135-137). Though this is a description of nature in general, the immediate juxtaposition of the idea of Gertrude's "frailty" (1.2.146) links the image to what Hamlet sees as Gertrude's loose morals and untempered lust. Hamlet elaborates on the garden metaphor in act 3 when he urges Gertrude not to "spread compost o'er the weeds / To make them ranker" (3.4.147-48). Hamlet's recognition of an awareness on Gertrude's part of her "sin" and a desire to gloss it over demonstrates his anxiety with regard to Gertrude's mate selection, and

shows Gertrude to be more than a passive resource. Despite Hamlet's misogynistic attitude toward Gertrude's sexual agency, the play's recognition of Gertrude's choosiness as the main source of this misogynistic anxiety shows *Hamlet* to anticipate the modern ecofeminist concern with the portrayal of the female body as merely *passive* resource.

While *Anthony and Cleopatra* and *Hamlet* depict the tragic consequences of exploitation and control over female virtue, *The Winter's Tale* arguably offers a more optimistic outcome. However, the linking of female sexuality to commodification of land in the winter plot is set in opposition to the springtime plot's story of free love in a way that depicts the traffic of both land and female virtue as damaging. In Sicilia's winter plot, Polixenes indirectly compares Hermione's virtue to the land as commodity. He describes Leontes, who suspects Hermione of infidelity, as having "such a countenance / As he had lost some province, and a region / Loved as he loves himself" (1.2.364-66). Within the tragic winter plot, land and by association female virtue is commercial property. The seasonal shift in metaphorical significance of the land from commodity to pastoral haven complicates Leontes's perceived ownership over Hermione's virtue, at least temporarily. Within Bohemia's comedic springtime plot, land is pastoral, full of "daffodils" (4.3.1) and "sweet birds" (4.3.6). Rather than being associated with ownership, the land, like the female body, is free, described by Hermione's daughter Perdita as a "bank for love to lie and play on" (4.4.130). Interestingly, the peddler Autolycus, in the scene in which the comedic springtime plot is introduced, links the coming of spring to "the doxy over the dale" (4.3.2), referring to a beggar's mistress or prostitute. Springtime and the renewal of the land is thus linked to female promiscuity. In contrast to the winter plot, however, here female promiscuity is not seen as a threat. Rather, it is seen as the more "natural" state of being. Perdita is "firmly associated with the natural order; likened to the fertility goddess Proserpina, she presides over the rustic feast" (Rosenfield). Perdita's role as advocate for freed sexual energy and natural selection is reinforced by her preference for "natural" phenotypes in flowers as opposed to ones produced by selective pollination. She asserts that "the fairest flowers o'th' season / Are our carnations and streaked gillyvors, / Which some call nature's bastards" (4.4.481-83). Sexual selection is privileged over controlled breeding, which Perdita equates with vain and inadequate man-made attempts to imitate nature. The anxieties of the men of the court, most notably Polixenes, are, in the words of critic Kirstie Rosenfield, "exposed with increasing absurdity. Borne by Polixenes,

the infection of courtly ideology brings the haunted memory of Sicilia to the pastoral landscape.” Polixenes, in his opposition to the marriage of Florizel and Perdita, advocates eugenics. For Polixenes, “transmission of patriarchal power depends on the purity of his hereditary line in generations to come. The female threat, in this case, contains the pollution of class difference, an unnatural disordering” (Rosenfield). His threat to Florizel to “bar thee from succession, / Not hold thee of our blood, no, not our kin” (4.4.26-27) exposes the hypocrisy inherent in this anxiety; where Polixenes was once perceived as the threat to the purity of Leontes’s genetic line, he now shows himself to be in league with Leontes’s way of thinking. His patriarchal privileging of artificial selection is incompatible with the free love of the spring forest, and the play, by allowing Perdita and Florizel their comedic ending through marriage, privileges the release of female sexual energy, at least for the time being. However, if the comedic plot advocates the freeing up of feminine sexuality, then the conventional comedic ending of marriage is necessary as a means to control this release. While Perdita and Florizel’s companionate marriage upholds Perdita’s preference for natural selection, Leontes’s last-minute betrothal of Paulina to Camillo in the play’s final lines indicates a lingering male anxiety over ownership of female sexuality. Marriage is thus not simply a means of tying up loose ends in a comedic plot but is rather a very specific means of controlling feminine sexual power that is metaphorically released with the onset of spring. The audience is left with the sense that female sexuality must be controlled, even if male anxiety as driving force of this control is unwarranted. Hermione, after having affected her miraculous transfiguration from statue to still “warm” (5.3.109) wife, will, in the end, return to Sicilia without any direct questioning of Leontes’ poor treatment of her. Rosenfield notes that “[f]emale menace transforms to an affirmation of patriarchal order during the play, but that order itself is questioned.” The questioning of the patriarchal order lies in the unsettling knowledge that despite the shaking up of the absolute control Leontes holds in the beginning, the characters will return to Sicilia, and the fertile spring landscape will once again cycle back to the winter landscape of the court.

Shakespeare’s characterization of landscapes as distinctly female and of the female body as a landscape in itself contests traditional assumptions about both the land and female sexuality as a resource to be exploited by men. One caveat of ecofeminist criticism is voiced by Sandilands, who states that reducing women and nature to a very

particular point of connection “essentializes women and domesticates nature, as if gender were a natural product and as if nature were describable in terms of particular cultural conventions of femininity” (xix). This is not what Shakespeare seeks to do. Rather, his tragedies and romances call for *less* gender essentialism and greater self-awareness when it comes to defining what is woman and what is land. *Titus Andronicus* and *Cymbeline* do so by subverting traditional associations of the land with fertility, self-sacrificing motherhood, and maternal protection, while *The Tempest* challenges the patriarchal right to dominion over land and female virtue. *Anthony and Cleopatra*, *Hamlet*, and *The Winter’s Tale*, in their portrayal of female agency, take the subversion of the female-as-land metaphor a step further by showing male anxiety over female sexuality, while a reality, to be at best an unwarranted construction and at worse a destructive force for both sexes. Ultimately, in destabilizing conventional associations between women and the land, Shakespeare moves away from the idea of a Christian right of patriarchal dominion over land and female virtue upheld by the Great Chain of Being toward a more open view of female sexuality. These two states are analogous with competing anthropocentric and ecocentric views of humanity’s place in nature. The traditionally upheld notion of female virtue as a resource to be defined and exploited by men for their own ends is analogous to an anthropocentric view of nature, which reduces land to exploitable resource, whether physically in terms of production, or metaphorically as a source of purity and alterity; as man has been the definer or woman, so has he been the “detached connoisseur” of nature (Clark 9). Clark puts the alternative ecocentric view of nature in ecofeminist terms when he states that “the inner–outer dichotomy is already a patriarchal fiction, a stance of would-be transcendence of the bodily and natural world (. . .) There is no such thing as the private psyche, whether you’re a woman—or a man, for that matter” (118). Through the shifting metaphorical significance of the land and of femininity in these plays, Shakespeare moves away from anthropocentrism and begins moving toward a proto-ecocentric alternative in which distinctions between man, woman, and nature are erased, all the while being aware of the utopian, and therefore constructed, aspect of this view of nature.

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