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### Shakespeare's (Un)Natural World

It snowed on March 28<sup>th</sup>, 1461 – the day the of the Battle of Towton. It was a bleak time in England. The Wars of the Roses were being fought between the house of York and the house of Lancaster. This particular battle in *Henry VI, Part 3*, killed 38,000 British troops in six hours. It snowed so hard that day that men hacked away at each other indiscriminately, not knowing whom they fought. As a result, chronicle writers of the time report that fathers killed their sons, and sons killed their fathers, all the while blinded by snow and wind, unable to know their enemies.

Shakespeare was born one hundred and three years after the Battle of Towton, but as a young playwright in the mid-1580s, Shakespeare spent quite a lot of time thinking about this and other battles of civil unrest. While Shakespeare is known among the general public for his tragedies and comedies, it's his history plays that fascinate me the most. He wrote eleven histories plays, eight of which focus on an 86-year time period that was particularly tumultuous in England– 1399-1485.

History fascinated Shakespeare because England was going through tumultuous times. Queen Elizabeth I was on the throne, but she was growing older all the time and had no clear heir. So Shakespeare and other renaissance writers looked to history to see if there were any answers to the biggest questions in England at the time – (next slide) (1) Is primogeniture the only way to produce a

legitimate ruler? (Primogeniture, if you do not know, is the first-born's right of inheritance – almost always favoring sons.) (2) If primogeniture is NOT the only way to produce a legitimate ruler, can a person's merit allow him or her to be sort of "elected" by the people? (3) What are the responsibilities of the monarch to his or her people? And are those responsibilities different if the king is elected or is born into the position? And most importantly, (4) What exactly is it that makes one a "good" monarch?

So for about a ten-year period, as Queen Elizabeth's reign wound toward its conclusion, Shakespeare thought a lot about kingship, and he did so through writing about the kings of the not-so-distant past, starting with Richard II in 1399. (Next slide) Here, we can see a partial family tree of Edward III's line. (next slide) Richard II had inherited the throne from his grandfather at the age of ten, because his father, Edward the Black prince, had died before him. Richard, having had no children, named his cousin, (next slide) Roger Mortimer, the rightful heir to the throne. As you can see, Roger's ancestors were dead, but following the rules of primogeniture, he was the rightful heir. But, in 1399, a man named Henry Bolinbroke, another cousin, forced Richard to abdicate the throne and Henry became the first Lancastrian king – Henry IV. This is important because this seizing of the throne by a stronger politician who was not a rightful king, but who was a more effective ruler than his cousin, Richard, leads to more than 80 years of on and off civil war. After Henry IV, (next slide) his son and then grandson became king. These are the Lancastrian kings, or the Lancasters. (next slide) Despite succeeding through their fathers, the rightful heir to the throne is actually from the original line that Richard

named as heirs. (next slide) So the Lancastrian kings were still thought of as usurpers by Richard II's true heirs – the York family (next slide). Henry VI, the last Lancastrian king, became the king of England at the tender age of 9 months old, when his father, Henry V, died of dysentery. The Battle of Towton, which we're talking about today was being fought between (next slide) the armies on the sides of Henry VI and Richard, the Duke of York.

Now, all of this background is meant to give you a very brief introduction to the Wars of the Roses. These wars were, again, on and off civil wars, but what's really astonishing about Shakespeare's depiction of these wars is the way that nature is evoked time and again in their depiction. In one of the most famous scenes Shakespeare wrote about the contention between the Houses of York and Lancaster, two groups of men from each faction meet in a place called (next slide) the Temple Garden – a place as peaceful and beautiful as one may imagine. They come to the garden in order to get away from the noisiness and congestion of the court. So here, we see that there is a desire to leave the world of politics and enter into a sublime, green space, one that nourishes the soul. And yet, even in this green space, there is no hope for peace. The men argue and the two groups choose emblems from the garden to symbolize their loyalties. Each group picks roses, which shows, in a way, that they are all the same – they are English, first of all. But they are also beautiful, strong, and (next slide) at the same time, dangerous, as is signified by the thorns of the rose. The difference in their chosen flowers is only in the color. The Yorks choose white roses (next slide), with white being the symbol of purity and right. The Lancasters, on the other hand, (next slide) choose the red roses. Red – the color of

blood, the color of battle – symbolizes what the Lancasters have done to maintain and consolidate their power over the last 62 years. While the Lancasters had been effective rulers for the most part, it's also true that they ruled with a bloody sword that put down rebellions mercilessly.

In the case of the Yorks and the Lancasters, Shakespeare never really makes it clear who HE thinks *should* win the war, and therefore the kingdom. It's clear that if you follow the rules of primogeniture that the Yorks are the rightful heirs. And yet, the Lancasters, until now, have been extremely successful in uniting the kingdom against the REAL enemy – France – and they make England a powerful contender in northern Europe. That is, until Henry VI is crowned, and then things start going backward for the kingdom. But to the point – while Shakespeare never ends up taking a clear side, what he does do, over and over again, is he makes it clear what he thinks about power. Every king that Shakespeare depicts in his history plays has a speech about the horrors of power and how peasants are happier than kings. Sleep evades Shakespeare's rulers, and each of them focuses at different times on how unnatural it is for one man to have the world at his fingertips, and yet be unable to live a normal life. A king, for instance, is not allowed to indulge himself in ordinary comforts – like friendship – without serious implications. Part of the reason why Richard II was forced to abdicate in the first place was because he has too many close friends whom the people thought had too much influence on him. They were flatterers, and there is a long line of kings who are either killed or thrown out of the monarchy because of flatterers. What Shakespeare does in all of these plays is he meditates on the difficulty that kings have to face over and over again. This difficulty

is frequently juxtaposed with the simple life, the idealistic life of either peasants or shepherds, and each and every king that Shakespeare writes about concludes that the simple life is preferred to kingship.

There is a genre of literature that was very popular in the Renaissance called pastoral literature. Pastoral might sound familiar to you because pastoral leadership, or maybe because of the word pastor, which is a leader of a flock. (next slide) The flock can be metaphorical, as in the church, but it can also be an actual flock of livestock. Particularly, in Renaissance England, the predominate livestock were sheep. Sheep in England outnumbered humans 3 to one in Shakespeare's lifetime, and the wool that they produced was what England came to be known for – textiles. So pastoral literature was literature that romanticized rural life, particularly the lives of shepherds, who were thought to play music and write poetry while tending to their flocks. They led simple lives – lives that were enviable to those in power, as we shall see in the case of Henry VI.

Now, let's get back to the year 1461. Henry VI was 40 years old at this point and had been king his entire life. He was completely unlike his warlike father, and instead, was known as a pious and peaceful man. When we ask ourselves the question, "What makes a good king?" it turns out that pious and peaceful don't cut it – at least, not in feudal England. Shakespeare portrays Henry VI as educated, well-reasoned, and humble. But when it comes to war, he is a disaster. His wife, Margaret, and his son, Edward, lead battles and tell Henry to hide because he's of no use in the field. In the Battle of Towton, shown in Henry VI, Part 3, Henry sits on a hill and watches the battle, ruminating on war. (clip)

Notice some of the words that Henry VI uses here – he calls this battle a “morning’s war when dying clouds contend with growing light.” The images show a sun rising and burning off a low-lying fog that had only moments ago seemed impenetrable. Keep in mind – it’s not in the clip – but this battle is being fought in real history in blizzard conditions, so – that dying cloud could also be a reference to the snow, which Shakespeare’s sources wrote about. The cold of the snow is also referred to when Henry says that the shepherd blows on his nails – in other words uses his breath to warm his hands – at dawn, which is neither perfect day nor perfect night. It’s this in-between moment that Henry is in right now. The Battle of Towton will be won by the Yorks, but it’s just one among many battles. Still, while Henry is sitting apart from the war, he is comparing himself not only to a shepherd but also to a man who is out in the cold, alone, isolated – like both kings and shepherds always are – and Shakespeare also makes it clear that Henry is in an uncertain state in his reign. Is he a legitimate king? Is he just a man? Does he have any authority? Will this battle determine whether or not he stays king? It’s overwhelming for Henry. The implications are huge, and the questions keep coming – and they are the very questions we ask ourselves over time: Who am I? What am I doing here? If I were someone else, how would my life be different? And finally – Do I really matter at all?

So the battle goes on, and Shakespeare continues to use imagery from nature to show metaphorically that war is surprisingly natural if we compare it to how the tide and the wind fight each other. (next slide) The tug and push of the wind and water are relentless battles raging against the constancy of this island of which

England is only one part. As the battle rages on, it, too, ebbs and flows; Henry continues the sea metaphor, saying of this war, “Sometimes the flood prevails, and then, the wind; Now one the better and the other best. Both tugging to be victors, breast to breast, yet neither conqueror nor conquerèd. So is the equal poise of this fell war.”

Next, Henry gives the cares of this war into God’s hands, saying that whomever God would like to win is fine with him. Henry wishes he were dead; that would be better than having to be part of a war that will kill so many people over something as unequivocally depressing as power. Think about what a depressing life Henry must have led – never to have a friendship that was not suspicious. Never to have a moment without being guarded, both psychologically and in fact. Can you imagine how unnatural it would be to be a king?

Henry imagines that it would be a happier life to be a “homely swain” – that is, a shepherd. (next slide) Here we come back to the idealistic world of pastoral, where many of Shakespeare’s kings have let their imaginations roam. Henry thinks about how he would organize his life – in seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, and years. He thinks about carving out a sundial and deciding what he would do with his time as the sun rose and fell over the rustic adventures of his shepherd’s life. As a king, Henry is already associated with the sun – a common Renaissance metaphor for royalty – and yet instead of being the star of his people – Henry would prefer to watch the machinations of the sun as it glided overhead, a sun oblivious to Henry’s existence.

Shepherds are not only appealing to Henry because they are rustic; more importantly, they are anonymous. They have responsibilities, yes, but they are also men of agency. In other words, they can make their own decisions. Even more advantageous, though, no one wants to kill a shepherd over the way he tends his flock, unlike a king. The way a king rules can get him killed very easily, as history tells us. But shepherds? They have it made. They have the luxury to pay attention to the sun, to time as it sails away, and to their own selves – how they sport, how much time they have to contemplate life, to sleep, and to tend their flocks. In Henry's mind shepherds live their sweet, lovely lives and find themselves quietly slipping into the grave after a life well lived. It is so much nicer, Henry says, (next slide) to sit under a Hawthorne bush than it is (next slide) to sit under the canopy of a king. Henry concludes that "the shepherd's homely curds, his cold thin drink out of his leather bottle, his wonted sleep under a fresh tree's shade, all which secure and sweetly he enjoys, is far beyond a prince's delicates." So from Henry VI, as well as some of his predecessors, we see that life in the green world, the pastoral world is far superior, in fact, to the world of a king.

This particular scene in *Henry VI, Part 3* – act 2, scene 5, is a perfect moment where the natural and the unnatural come together in one dire conclusion, if you know the history behind the event shown. The snow is killing the roses on either side. (next slide) The men fight and fight, and don't know who or what or how or why. Just after Henry gives his speech, he witnesses two men dragging in corpses of foes that they killed. While the soldiers loot the bodies for gold, each discovers that



he has killed a family member – a son has killed his father, and a father has killed his son. The father, pitifully, cries over his son's dead body, saying:

See, see what showers arise,  
 Blown with the windy tempest of my heart,  
 Upon thy wounds, that kills mine eye and heart!  
 O pity, God, this miserable age!  
 What strategems, how fell, how butcherly,  
 Erroneous, mutinous and unnatural,  
 This deadly quarrel daily doth beget!

We think it is not natural for a father to kill his son and that it is not natural for a son to kill his father. But in the history of the world, we see the destruction and confusion that nature itself can cause, and Shakespeare asks us to contemplate if the natural is so harmless after all.

The surprising juxtaposition in this scene comes when we think about the raging nature metaphors that Henry uses first to describe war. Nature, according to Henry, is capable of the same sorts of disaster that is unfolding before his very eyes – the irrational and arbitrary deaths of men who once loved one another. We, too, in the year 2013, witness nature's raging and warring factions – predatory animals, floods, earthquakes, and wild fires. But we also can see that nature can be calm and beautiful, contemplative, and life giving. All this regal fantasizing about the simple life of shepherds is probably a case of the grass being greener elsewhere, especially considering that a shepherd always has to be wary about wolves hunting his sheep – just like a king has to be wary of his advisors seeking more power than is their right.

But I think this juxtaposition of destructive nature and life-giving nature for Shakespeare makes sense. Why? Because life is unfair. There is no way to have it all. There is no way to live life without facing disaster, struggle, and peril. Perhaps life in the natural world is preferred because it is less controllable, and you can escape some of the responsibility that we hear Henry bemoaning. But living in the natural world doesn't mean you don't have problems. The secret that Shakespeare whispers across the ages is that kings and shepherds alike have darkness in their lives. So do we. In the end, Shakespeare says, it doesn't matter if you are a shepherd or a king – the ultimate struggle of humankind is the struggle we all have with that darkness.