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“Rather an impotencie”: *Richard II* and the Decay of Nature as Ecology and Commonwealth

JUSTIN KOLB

1. Starlings

In 1890, an eccentric drug manufacturer named Eugene Schieffelin went to New York City’s Central Park and released some 60 European starlings he had imported from England. In 1891 he freed 40 more. Schieffelin hoped to introduce to the United States every bird mentioned by Shakespeare and reproduce the green and pleasant ecology of Elizabethan England, as found in the Complete Works. Skylarks and song thrushes failed to thrive, but starlings proved prodigious, crowding out native species like the American bluebird and darkening the sky in flocks of up to a million birds, moving in hypnotic waves called murmurations. The sheer size of starling flocks, their ravenous appetites, and their copious waste have made them the nemesis of conservationists, whose efforts to curb their numbers with traps, poison, and electric shocks have proven futile.1

Starlings only appear a few times in Shakespeare, most prominently in *Henry IV*, when Hotspur jokes that he’ll taunt King Henry with a starling that has been “taught to speak / Nothing but ‘Mortimer,’ [. . .] To keep his anger still in motion” (1.3.222–24).2 One of the few birds that can mimic human speech, the starling in literature often serves as an unflattering mirror for human behavior, an unthinking, unlovely, insatiable figure of irrational appetites. Dante uses a vast starling murmuration as a simile to describe the wind-tossed lustful in the *Inferno*:

And as, in the cold season, starling’s wings
bear them along in broad and crowded ranks
so does that blast bear on the guilty spirits (5.40–42).3

From Schieffelin’s initial 100, there are now over 200 million starlings in North America.4

The ecological disaster unleashed by one Shakespeare enthusiast is a particularly vivid example of how “Shakespeare” is a product of a particular ecological moment, a carbon-fueled epoch in which florae, faunae, and figurae are sped around the world with fossil fuels and in which the desire to replicate a pastoral landscape of green fields and inviting forests has reshaped landscapes
worldwide. Global Shakespeare is not just about the circulation of Shakespearean texts and performances, but also about the circulation of Shakespeare derivatives—aphorisms, images, brands, memes, landscapes—that often prove more consequential than the texts themselves. Literature reshapes the landscape, as Amitav Ghosh argues:

When we see a green lawn that has been watered with desalinated water, in Abu Dhabi or Southern California or some other environment where people had once been content to spend their water thriftily in nurturing a single vine or shrub, we are looking at an expression of a yearning that may have been midwifed by the novels of Jane Austen. The artifacts and commodities that are conjured up by these desires are, in a sense, at once expressions and concealments of the cultural matrix that brought them into being (10).

I gave a version of this paper in October 2017, for a Global Shakespeare conference at New York University’s Abu Dhabi campus. Ghosh’s warnings about the dangers of thoughtlessly babbling of green fields, like a dying Falstaff, seemed particularly pressing in an oil- and gas-industry funded Anglophone educational institution in a desert kingdom whose summer temperatures are already becoming unendurable. This gleaming campus, both brand new and soon to become a ruin, was a fitting place to think about how Shakespeare’s works both came into being and went global in our carbon-fueled modernity: the Anthropocene epoch. Shakespeare wrote at the dawn of the Anthropocene, his works circled the globe at its height, and we read him now at its crisis, and maybe its end. How was Shakespeare made by the Anthropocene, and what will Shakespeare be when the sand and sea rise up to claim him, and us?

2. The Orbis Spike

While the impact of human civilization on the sediments, oceans, and atmosphere of the earth is undeniable, scientists differ on the question of whether this change constitutes a distinct geological epoch, and, if so, when and how that epoch began. In marking epochs, geologists look for “golden spikes,” clear, unambiguous, and global geophysical changes that are marked in the geologic record: peaks and troughs that index lasting and pervasive changes in the earth’s atmosphere, asteroid impacts, mass extinctions, the maximum extent of glaciers, etc. In an influential article in *Nature*, the geologists Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin survey the literature and identify two human-caused golden spikes, pinpointed to specific years. Global geophysical swings can be dated more precisely than many play quartos. 1964 marks a peak in the radioactivity of sediments worldwide, marking a sudden rise following the detonation of the first atomic bomb at Los Alamos in 1945 and a decline after the Nuclear Test Ban
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Treaty of 1963. Their other candidate, 1610, or the “Orbis Spike” is what interests me.

By examining bubbles of air trapped in Antarctic ice cores, scientists have determined that 1610 marks a low point in atmospheric carbon dioxide levels since the end of the last ice age. This nadir coincided with the little ice age of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century, when the Thames sometimes froze and more frequent famines sparked a wave of popular revolt and state breakdown through Eurasia, leading some modern historians to describe the mid-seventeenth century as a climate-caused “general crisis” that included everything from the English Civil War to the collapse of the Ming Dynasty.\(^6\)

This cooling phase was itself, at least in part, the product of human rapacity. After 1492, the population of the Americas was sent into sharp decline by war, enslavement, and above all disease. Between 1492 and 1650, the population of the Americas may have declined by as much as 90 percent.\(^7\) Schieffelin’s Shakespearean starlings prove anthropomorphic again, their displacement of bluebirds mirroring the destruction of America’s first nations. Fewer people, fewer fires, and American farmland reverting to field and forest reduced global atmospheric carbon dioxide levels and cooled the world. By 1610, rising global population and the re-cultivation of American land had begun to reverse this trend. Carbon dioxide levels, and temperatures, began to rise and haven’t stopped rising since.

So the age of Shakespeare coincides with the Anthropocene, and Shakespeare became global in tandem with the carbon-fuelled capitalism and imperialism that disseminated his works. The result is Shakespeare, “the inventor of the human” to use Harold Bloom’s phrase, the bard of the complex, autonomous individual with rich interiority, acting in front of a passive, static natural backdrop. Hamlet, a particularly indooresy tragic hero, not like Lear on the heath or Macbeth facing Birnam Wood, became the symbol of this sort of individualist modernity.

This idea of Shakespeare, still popular in the wider culture despite the best efforts of many scholars, is strangely disconnected from his texts, and from the early modern ideas of nature and humanity’s place in it that structure Shakespeare’s works. Shakespeare, and other early modern writers, offer us a cosmos in which nature itself is intimately shaped by human action, desire, and sin, and acts in turn on a vulnerable humanity. In Shakespeare, we see an already Anthropocene globe, and the creatures that must learn to live on it.

3. The Decay of Nature

Far from being passive or static, early modern nature was an unsettled thing, filled with signs and portents for humanity. The largest earthquake in British history was recorded on 6 April 1580. The following 9 October, a comet burned in the sky. These incidents inspired several pamphlets attempting to make sense of these wonders, including Francis Shakelton’s *A blazyng Starre* (1580).
Shakelton reads the earthquake and comet as omens of “the finall dissolution of the Engine of this worlde and seconde commyng of Christ in the cloudes, whiche by many manifest and inevitable reasons I gather, can not bee farre of.”

*A blazing starre* is an early instance of a particular sort of apocalypse in which original sin corrupts not only humanity, but all of nature as well, turning natural history into a slow “dissolution” in which an orderly, prosperous, durable nature crumbles into its constituent elements and order recedes into chaos. Like the trace radioactive isotopes and CO2 volumes in ice cores that geologists use to mark the start of the Anthropocene, human sin is documented in every drop of water and grain of sand. Ours is a fallen world, and a falling one too.

This slow apocalypse, the “decay of nature,” would become a major strand in little ice age English intellectual culture in the first half of the seventeenth century, attracting comment from writers as varied as John Donne, Ben Jonson, Robert Burton, and Thomas Browne and providing an antithesis to Francis Bacon’s confident assertion that Art could supplement and exceed Nature in extending human empire. This world waiting to be put out of its misery would become a major strand in English intellectual culture in the first half of the seventeenth century, succinctly summarized by the last stanza of George Herbert’s “Decay”:


I see the world grows old, wheras the heat  
Of thy great love once spread, as in an urn  
Doth closet up itself and still retreat,  
Cold sinne still forcing it, till it return,  
And calling Justice, all things burn (13-16)

This article is interested in an earlier response to the decay of nature. William Shakespeare’s *Richard II* both performs the narrative of a prosperous organic unity decaying into a mean and atomized form and inverts it, ultimately arguing that the causes of nature’s decay are not divine but human, as human political action cuts humanity off from an organic connection to the natural world. However, *Richard II* rejects the consolations of apocalypse; there is no imminent end to offer justice and relief. Instead, in Richard’s prison cell in Act V, the play redefines the decay of nature. Instead of lamenting the collapse of great chain of being that placed him at the top of an organic order that encompassed humans, animals, plants, stones, and every other creature. Richard imagines a natural world consisting of constant negotiation between human and nonhuman equals. The uncertainty and breakdown announced by Shakelton becomes an opportunity for humility and fellowship, rather than a prelude to the destruction of the Earth in fire.

*Richard II* reveals that the Eden lamented by preachers of the decay of nature—ranging from Shakelton to John of Gaunt to Richard himself in his early scenes—never existed, and would not be worth restoring if it did. The world has always been a constantly changing commonwealth of creatures, rising and falling, coming together and splitting asunder. Remove the comfort of the eschaton, and decay becomes a constant state of re-creation. Free fall becomes an orbit in
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which all creatures are in a constant state of becoming, together. In his last moments before he is struck down, Richard attempts to redeem a fallen world through a new constitution, codifying the vulnerability and interdependence of creatures as the essence of life, rather than its negation.

Shakelton’s *A blayzing Starre* describes this crumbling world. Even the most stable aspects of the earth are merely temporary assemblages of parts, as history reveals:

> [I]t shall manifestly be proved that this worlde shall perishe and passe awaie, if wee doe but consider the partes whereof it doeth consist, for doe we not see the earth to be changed and corrupted: Sometymes by the inundation of waters: Sometymes by fiers: And by the heate of the Sunne: And doe we not see that some partes of the same doe warre old, and weare alwaie even so, verie age: Doe wee not in some places also read that mountaines have falne doune, by reason of earthquakes: And Rockes have been cracked, and broken so in pieces, that by the meanes thereof, certaine Rivers have been (as it were dronke up, or els, have had recourse an other waie: Also have ye not read, that seas have rebounded bacle, overwhelmed whole Cittes, and utterly drowned whole provinces: And what are these strange alterations els, but evident arguments that the world shall one daie have an ende. (Aiiii-Av)

Shakelton sets himself against Aristotle and Galen, who “both labour very earnestly to prove that the world is eternall: meaning thereby that it hath no beginning neither shall it have any ending” (Aii). For Shakelton, evidence of the world’s finite existence and its downward *telos* can be found anywhere one cares to look. Like an old man whose hair goes white and whose stomach can no longer digest, or a building whose walls totter and roof tiles fall, the world, like everything else, will inevitably age and decay (Biii).

Behind Shakelton’s eschatology is a vision of nature that is charged with radical imaginative potential. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen writes in *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*, “We dwell within the gales and torrents of hurricanes that drown the poor while we look away, the movements of the earth that topple our fragile structures, that remind us that continents are motion, that ground (literal and epistemological) is always shifting, that metaphors are concrete and concrete like all stone cracks, pulverizes, transmutes.”

While Shakelton yearns for the finality of fiery judgment, his trembling world can sustain other forms of relation, as Shakespeare’s play will show.

The ideas articulated by Shakelton were debated in more sophisticated forms in the seventeenth century, especially in Godfrey Goodwin’s 1616 book *The Fall of Man* and George Hakewill’s 1627 rebuttal, *An Apologie of the Power and Providence of God In the Government of the World*. Goodwin argued that man had been created perfect, but had fallen into sin, and was thus in the midst of a long process of undoing his creation, an anti-*poesis*.
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God created all things of nothing, therefore shall all things returne againe vnto nothing? [...] euery thing containes in it selfe a power, or rather an impotencie to retume vnto nothing. (441)

All things contain a tendency toward dissolution, an entropic “impotencie” that can only be countered by God’s grace, which keeps the teetering edifice standing. But God’s final mercy is harsh. Hakewill glosses Goodwin’s eschatology thus: “before it comes to that extreame old age, weakenesse and miserie, God takes pittie on the world, thus languishing in a lingring disease; and seeing death is the wages of sinne, God doth suddenly interpose, hee burnes and consumes the world with fire, that so hee may purge and purifie it” (Hakewill 145). While Goodwin’s tract is much more grounded in precedent and measured in its tone, it preserves the basic framework of Shakelton’s warning. Nature is a terminal case and only God, through an act of euthanasia, can arrest its decline.

Hakewill responds that to admit the possibility of the world’s decay is to question the excellence of God’s work and thus the power of God himself. God would not make a world that gradually spoils, like fruit left on the counter, and the end of the world, like its beginning, will arise from supernatural, not natural causes. Men are fallen and sinful, but Hakewill establishes a quarantine between man and nature, which remains uninfected by human sin. The intimate entangling of man and nature posed by Goodwin is cleanly sliced. Man decays, nature remains as vital as always.

Between Goodwin and Hakewill we see the basic parameters of the debate over the decay of nature in the seventeenth century. Their positions are echoed by poets like Herbert in “Decay,” and by Ben Jonson, who, in Discoveries, declares, “I cannot thinke Nature is so spent, and decay’d, that she can bring forth nothing worth her former years. She is always the same, like herself: and when she collects her strength, is abler still. Men are decayed, and studies: Shee is not” (124-128). However, before the debate over the decay of nature solidified into camps, it produced stranger responses, like Shakespeare’s Richard II.

IV. “Forgiveness, horse”: Richard II and the renegotiation of the world

In his dying prophecy, King Richard’s uncle John of Gaunt laments England’s decay, a rot that begins in the rule of his nephew, but seeps out to infect and exhaust all of nature:

His rash fierce blaze of riot cannot last
For violent fires soon burn out themselves;
Small showers last long but sudden storms are short;
He tires that spurs too fast betimes;
With eager feeding food doth choke the feeder.
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Light vanity, insatiate cormorant,
Consuming means, soon preys upon itself. (2.1.33-39)

Gaunt’s stacked apothegms are a rhetorical commonplace, demonstrating his experience and wisdom, but they also mirror the telos of Shakespear or Goodwin, with the King’s drive toward exhaustion mirrored by the self-consuming telos of fallen nature, as seen in the gluttonous cormorant. It is only after this that Gaunt begins his famous encomium to an edenic England.

Gaunt’s speech frames Richard’s crime as the severing of the mystical connection between the King and his land, meant to be a microcosm of the rule of God over the Earth. Richard also defines himself in Gaunt’s mystical terms, at least early on. Returning to England to find Bolingbroke already on the march, he calls on his subjects, human and nonhuman alike, to come to his aid, asserting his rule over all the creatures below him on the great chain of being:

Mock not my senseless conjuration, lords.
This earth shall have a feeling, and these stones
Prove armed soldiers, ere her native king
Shall falter under foul rebellion’s arms. (3.2.23-26)

Richard imagines himself king of the rocks, spiders, toads, and flowers with adders lurking beneath them. He vows to muster all of these beings to his side, defeat the rebels, and heal and renew an earth that has been wounded by the hooves (and iron shoes) of the rebels’ horses. Echoing the decay of nature literature’s emphasis on God’s grace as the only means of sustaining a declining world, Carlisle assure the king, “That Power that made you king / Hath power to keep you king in spite of all” (3.2.27-28).

It doesn’t work. Standing on the shore, Richard hears a string of bad news, and soon finds himself slumped on the beach, resigned to defeat, his tears “Writing sorrow on the bosom of the earth” (3.2.147).

It is easy to read Richard II as a play in which the world is well and truly fallen and disenchanted, and the old commonwealth that united humans with the land, the plants, the beasts, and the stones can never be recovered, if it ever existed. And that would be the case, if not for Richard’s final scene. Richard finds himself alone in a dungeon, attempting to recreate the world in his mind. He notes his solitude—“And here is not a creature but myself / I cannot do it, yet I’ll hammer’t out” (5.5.4-5).

It’s worth lingering for a moment on that word, creature, for it contains the key to the new relationship Richard crafts toward the world. In the 1590s, creature carried a much broader meaning than the animalistic connotations that cluster around it today. It denoted anything made, by God or by man, any product of poesis. Taking a step toward the macrocosm, creature could refer to the created, and fallen, material world as single entity, distinct and radically distant from God, as in the 1611 Authorized Version of the Bible: “Who changed the truth of God into a lie, and worshiped and served the creature rather than the Creator” (Rom. 8:25). Creature straddled the line between the creations of God
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and man, foregrounding the centrality of poesis and artifice to early modern ideas of nature. Julia Lupton observes:

[derived from the future-active participle of the Latin verb creare ("to create"). creature indicates a made or fashioned thing but with the sense of continued or potential process, action, or emergence built into the future thrust of its active verbal form. [. . .] The creature is a thing always in the process of undergoing creation; the creature is actively passive or, better, passionate, perpetually becoming created, subject to transformation at the behest of the arbitrary commands of an Other.

Richard hammers out a series of model worlds, attempting in his isolation to build a better life than the one he has fallen from. While his meditations are wonderfully rich, he repeatedly fails in his task, constantly circling back to the realization that man “With nothing shall be pleased till he be eased / With being nothing” (5.5.40-41). This circling around the drain echoes Goodwin, who sees in every thing “a power, or rather an impotencie to retume vnto nothing” (441). Impotency seems the telos of the world.

Until the second half of the line: “Music do I hear” (5.5.41). Alone, Richard can breed an army of thoughts, but they offer him no way out of his existential bind. Alone, he cannot recreate the world. As the music penetrates his isolation, the world begins to fill up again. At first, the music “mads” (5.5.61) Richard, making him imagine himself a “jack o’the clock” (5.5.60), a passive automaton. To have an outside force impinge on his morose isolation offends Richard’s last shreds of royal pride, but imagining himself as a “jack” is the bridge that allows him to move from his unfruitful solitude into a new relationship with the creatures of the world, human and inhuman alike, whom he can now engage as a fellow. The impotency, mortality and finitude he shares with all things—and with the temporary world itself—become a source not of despair and isolation, but of humble, egalitarian connection.

Richard turns from lamenting the music to offering a

blessing on his heart that gives it me
For ’tis a sign of love; and love to Richard
Is a strange brooch in this all-hating world.” (5.5.64-66)

A poor groom of the stable enters and Richard, in the first sign of his transformation, calls him “noble peer” (5.5.67), addressing him as an equal. The groom tells Richard about seeing Bolingbroke riding Barbary, the former king’s favorite horse, through London, the horse stepping “So proudly as if he disdained the ground” (5.5.83). Richard notes that Bolingbroke is not punished for his pride, and that his once-loyal horse is happily serving another master.

Goodwin warns that animals in the fallen world will prove unreliable servants:
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We cannot vfe any creature with sufficient fatetie and securitue of our liues: the Horfe, though hee wants hornes, yet he hath hoofes; though by him wee find some eafe in our travel, yet wee muft take heede of his tripping. (104)

Instead of dwelling on Barbary’s betrayal, as Goodwin might, Richard looks on the horse an equal. The world is reordered from a strict hierarchy into a series of cleavages, as natural bodies bond and split in endless, temporary societies. The horse transforms from a metaphor to a creature, from symbol of pride to a living, thinking beast with a will of its own:

Forgiveness, horse. Why do I rail on thee, Since though, created to be awed by man, Wast born to bear? I was not made a horse, And yet I bear a burden like an ass, (5.5.90-94).

In contrast to Goodwin’s post-dominion paranoia, Richard sees himself in the experience of the horse, and, crucially, offers forgiveness to the animal and asks it in return.

One of the oddities of the decay of nature discourse lies in its foreclosure of compassion between creatures. If the world is irretrievably doomed, then any mercy humans and other creatures might show each other is ultimately meaningless. According to Goodwin, by eating animals, wearing their skins, and forsaking the Edenic legacy that placed them on another plane than the beasts, humans have surrendered their rule over the natural world. The Anthropocene nature of the fallen world is not one of human mastery, but human abjection in the face of a crumbling nature and a distant God.

Richard recognizes this abjection, but comes to very different conclusions than Goodwin. Instead of defining life in the falling world through paranoid competition, he sees opportunities for camaraderie. By asking his horse to forgive him, Richard both approaches a nonhuman creature on terms of equality, much as he does the groom, and creates a thin, durable ray of hope. If God’s creatures can forgive each other, regardless of God’s will, then that is a bet that the world, though it will change radically, is not irretrievably doomed.

Rather than Shakelton and Goodwin’s prayer for cleansing fire, or Hakewill and Bacon’s confidence in the integrity of creation and the ability of art to improve it, Richard II introduces a third position into the decay of nature debate. Between the poles of abjection and mastery, the play re-imagines a decaying hierarchy as a dynamic commonwealth, a republic of creatures who approach each other as wary equals, on grounds of sympathy and love, and exist in a constant state of negotiation among themselves. The constellations of kings, prisoners, horses, grooms, and jacks o’the clock are in constant motion. The mutability of the world becomes a sign of hope and vitality, rather than one of despair and decrepitude. It’s all too brief, but for moment Richard manages to convene what Bruno Latour calls the Parliament of Things, an assembly of human and nonhuman actors combining to make a world.22
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Unfortunately, Richard’s new constitution arrives at five minutes to midnight. His murderers are already on their way when the music starts. Nevertheless, the possibility he floats remains a vivid alternative to both apocalyptic despair and the false hope of sustainability. In our own era, of seemingly intractable political, economic, and ecological crises, the blazing star can be a tempting sign. Apocalypse, and the release from responsibility it offers, is tempting, as the pervasiveness of apocalyptic themes in global popular culture shows. Liberation via obliteration appeals.

Richard considers becoming “nothing,” and then turns away, imagining a new commonwealth in which all constituents, human and nonhuman alike, are acknowledged. Not as subjects of the king, but as subjects, acting on their own behalf. This world-picture sits in opposition to both the discourse of decay and to Baconian science’s promised “enlarging of the bounds of Human Empire, to the effecting of all things possible.”

Instead, we might read Shakespeare as giving us the means to imagine a world where the human relationship to nature is not an extractive empire, but a level commonwealth, united by interdependence, shared fragility, finitude. Stripped of his power over other human beings, Richard begins to see his relationship to nature anew and takes his seat as one member among many in a teeming commonwealth. As our own world sits at five minutes to midnight, we might learn from this commonwealth, and consider convening our own parliament of things.

Notes

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12. Godfrey Goodwin, *The fall of man, or the corruption of nature, proved by the light of our natural reason Which being the first ground and occasion of our Christian faith and religion, may likewise serve for the first step and degree of the natural mans conversion. First preached in a sermon, since enlarged, reduced to the form of a treatise, and dedicated to the Queens most excellent Maiestie* (London: Imprinted by Felix Kyngston, and are to be sold by Richard Lee, 1616), Early English Books Online. Web. 12 Jan 2015, STC 888:11.
13. Godfrey Goodwin, *An apologie of the pouwer and providence of God in the gouernment of the world. Or An examination and censure of the common error touching naturaesperpetuall and universall decay divided into foure bookees: whereof the firsttreatises of this pretended decay in generall, together with some preparatiusethereunto. The second of the pretended decay of the heauens and elements, together with that of the elementary bodies, man only excepted. The third of the pretended decay of mankinde in regard of age and duration, of strength and stature, of arts and wits. The fourth of this pretended decay in matter ofmanners, together with a large proofe of the future consummation of the world from the testimony of the gentiles, and the ries which we are to draw from the consideration thereof* (Oxford: 1627), Early English Books Online. Web. 12 Jan 2015, STC 1069:21, Book V, 145.
15. Ben Jonson, *Timber, or Discoveries*, vol. 8, Ben Jonson, ed. C. H. Herford, Percy Simpson, Evelyn Simpson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1947). Jonson’s court masque *Mercury Vindicated From the Alchemists at Court* also develops this theme, liberating Mercury from the alchemists who have enslaved him in the name of supplementing a decaying world, thus restoring Nature to her throne.
18. Lynne Bruckner sees this as the moment in which, “No longer land, the earth is assigned agency; Richard and the earth form an assemblage of living entities” (138-9). While I see Richard as here failing to assert his reign over the natural world, Bruckner, drawing on Elizabethan gardening, husbandry, and stewardship literature, reads this scene as Richard, formerly despooier of the earth, acknowledging his dependence upon it and his responsibility to be a good steward of it. Lynne Bruckner, “Consuming means, soon preys upon itself”: Political Expedition and Environmental Degradation in *Richard II, Shakespeare and the Urgency of Now*, ed. Cary DiPietro and Hugh Grady (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013) 126-47.
21. “Clocks and instruments of iron are alwaies out of fquare, and still want mending” (Goodwin, 74).

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