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Interpretation: LDS Perspectives

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Reading the “Book of Nature”: An LDS, Ecocritical Perspective of
Nature and Interpretation in Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*

In the medieval period, nature was sometimes compared to a “book” that revealed the attributes of God. Nature, like scripture, served as a vital source of religious revelation. The natural world presented symbolic meaning intended for men to interpret. We can find traces of this belief, for example, in the writings of Augustine, who described both words and created beings as signs pointing to God, and of Pseudo Dionysus, who suggests the importance of cosmic symbolism in describing God. The connection between nature and scripture as sources of revelation was so engrained in medieval culture and theology that today “precise explanations of it are scarce” (Otten 261).

Recently, however, the book of nature and its influence on the West’s attitudes toward the environment has become an object of scrutiny and blame. For example, Lynn White Jr., in his 1967 article, “The Historical Roots of our Ecological Crisis,” suggests that the natural theology surrounding the book of nature developed into problematic religious justifications for science that have harmed the environment (196-99). According to White, this and other Christian traditions throughout the years can be looked to as the primary causes of the current environmental crisis. More recently, Christopher Manes has argued that the book of nature has led to destructive anthropocentrism in Western culture. Medieval interpretive practices, Manes claims, objectified animals and other natural life, making them no more than signs to reinforce

interpretations of scripture. Manes also links the book of nature with a “great chain of being” conceptualized during the Renaissance that placed man high above all other kinds of life. The early influence of scripture and Christianity, he claims, continues to make society deaf to nature’s true voice (19-23).

Both White and Manes recognize that in the medieval period, the book of nature did not initially lead to exploitive attitudes and may have actually protected nature for a time. However, there are good reasons to challenge Manes’ and White’s association of the book of nature with later destructive environmental practices. Although there may be truth in their historical arguments, their failure to approach theological questions prevents them from evaluating the moral influence of this religious concept fully. As a result, Manes, White, and subsequent environmental critics have blamed Christian interpretations of the environment, such as the book of nature, without considering crucial theological meanings. What is not often recognized is that the self-proclaimed purpose of the book of nature, regardless of the shortcomings of its interpreters, is not to override nature’s voice with imposed human meaning, but to allow nature to reveal itself as it truly is, or as God created it to be. The book of nature suggests that we can only come to perceive nature’s true voice and purposes in relationship with God and through his choice to reveal these things to men. Thus, nature is perhaps not degraded but honored to reveal something of God otherwise inaccessible.

I would like to offer an alternative, religious perspective of the book of nature and the moral influence it could potentially have. I will begin by introducing how it is depicted in Shakespeare’s comedy *As You Like It*, which approaches this religious concept from a completely different historical position.

Shakespeare lived in a time when thinking was becoming modern, but was still often medieval. *As You Like It* was written around 1600, between the two centuries that witnessed the greatest transitions from pre-modern to modern cosmic paradigms. During the sixteenth century, self-governed reason, Machiavellian political ideals, and a-religious worldviews had threatened the future of Europe in ways they never had before. The frightening prospect of a secularized world was a recurring theme in theater (Grady 33, 26). Many of Shakespeare's plays appear to criticize modern ways of reifying relationships in the world. Because of this, his works can often be used to contest even very specific contemporary viewpoints (Grady 33). *As You Like It* proves capable of challenging certain environmentalists' assumptions about Christianity and redirecting discussion of the book of nature.

Shakespeare's early-modern position is apparent in his allusions to the book of nature. The book of nature had been revived as a topic of discussion in his day. Most people valued and believed there was truth in the notion, although many had the humility to acknowledge that men probably couldn't read it with great accuracy (Willis 65-67). Perhaps this mindset influenced the first depiction of the book of nature in the play. Duke Senior, who is exiled to the forest by his corrupt brother, perceives general moral instruction and meaning in nature. The Duke is perhaps the only character in the play who does not reify nature in one way or another. He perceives "tongues in trees," "books in the running brooks," and "[s]ermons in stones" without objectifying what they say (II.i.16-17). His experiences with nature, including its adversities, strengthen his humility and love for others. He forms a compassionate brotherhood with his exiled men compared to the golden world or an Edenic state (I.i.110-114). While the Duke's interpretation appears to critique the concrete symbols sometimes discovered in nature in the medieval period, Shakespeare does not appear to overturn the concept itself, but to "expose the

complexity beneath the cliché” (Willis 72). The Duke’s relationship with nature is essentially medieval because he perceives how nature reveals divine virtue and instructs like scripture.

A second approach to the book of nature in the play, however, seems tainted by modern worldviews and abuses. Orlando is frightened of the forest and decides to cultivate it by attaching and carving his poems on the trunks of trees, imposing *man-made* meaning, fears, and ideals on nature. As he tells the audience, the trees become his “books” (III.ii.5-10). Orlando’s poems are awful, however. His love poetry is full of undesirable comparisons and false optimism. Fears of death and betrayal are separated from poems expressing hope, making his work bland. Orlando’s perceptions of nature and others are troubled, insecure, and very reified. Religious hope and acceptance of adversities are absent and replaced by artificial ideals. Yet what can we attribute Orlando’s problematic worldview to? The major source of his insecurity appears to be the way he has been treated at the Machiavellian court. Orlando has been nearly killed by both his older brother and the corrupt Duke. His reified perspectives of relationships of all kinds are analogous to the consequences of corrupt assertions of power and secularized worldviews on others.

Shakespeare’s dual portrayal of the book of nature serves as one way to challenge the assumptions of White and Manes. In the forest of Arden, reading the book of nature from a religious perspective is not the problem and actually helps create ethical relationships of all kinds. But a-religious politics and failures to find sources of religious meaning in nature *are* presented as problems. It is not a matter of *whether* the book of nature is read, but *how* it is read. Non-religious and self-centered readings of the book of nature have troubled the tradition since the Middle Ages. For example, in the twelfth century when the tradition peaked, Chartrian scholars decided to take a rational and scientific approach to interpreting the book of nature and

scripture. Their methods, however, tended to undermine their intended focus on religious understanding of God and creation. The Chartrians foreshadowed the severing of creator and creation that would occur later in modern world (Otten 267-83). Such problematic approaches to the book of nature, which slip out of genuine relationship with God, seem to explain some of the trends Christopher Manes senses but does not manage to identify. Ironically, environmentalists who focus on historical and empirical arguments surrounding Christianity often only fall into the same trap as those they critique by attempting to secularize and master religious interpretive relationships.

Without approaching the history of the book of nature, I would like to suggest that there is valuable meaning in this religious idea that may even help our relationships with nature today. Scripture affirms in my mind that the concept contains truth that may help us connect our own time and beliefs with our medieval ancestors. I will draw out a few parallels between nature's role in Shakespeare's play and passages from The Book of Mormon and The Doctrine and Covenants to describe the meaning that I see.

First, there is a strong correlation between meaning and hope perceived in nature and the state of human relationships. The book of nature is about much more than how men perceive themselves in relation to the environment—it is also about how they perceive and treat each other. Here are a few examples from the play. Duke Senior connects the lessons he learns from nature with his obligations to others. The corrupt Duke, however, sees the forest as the proper place to exile those he hates. Orlando's social anxiety is reflected in his fear of the forest, which he calls "savage" (II.vii.115). Corin the shepherd has dimly realistic views of both love and nature. And last, Jacques the cynic sees human tragedies reflected in the life of deer. By the end of the play, however, most of these characters have experienced a kind of conversion,

discovering new ways to see others and the forest and a surprising sense of purpose. Many readers have found these sudden changes irritating and contrived (Latham lxxi), but there may be deeper meaning here. I recently noticed that something strangely similar was experienced by the people of Alma in the land of Mormon. Perceptions of this place of spiritual instruction change through their experience. As Mormon writes:

And now it came to pass that all this was done in Mormon, yea, by the waters of Mormon, in the forest that was near the waters of Mormon; yea, the place of Mormon, the waters of Mormon, the forest of Mormon, how beautiful are they to the eyes of them who there came to the knowledge of their Redeemer; yea, and how blessed are they, for they shall sing to his praise forever (Mosiah 18:30).

In both narratives, three changes happen at once: a change in human relationships, a change in nature, and an increase in humans' perceptions of its beauty. All of these changes stem from revelation that alters the world of its receivers. The verse I have read from Mosiah may unlock meanings in Isaiah's prophecy, "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings" that runs as a theme throughout the Book of Mormon (Isaiah 52:7). The exclamation "how beautiful" in connection with the experience of the people of Alma seems to describe the emotional and phenomenological experience of receiving truth through the testimony of prophets. Revelation changes our perceptions with and relationships with the world, including the natural world. We can link Alma's people's newly gained perceptions of beauty and truth in the land with the formation of a Zion society, in which men learn to perceive and love each other differently, and to bear each others' burdens (Mosiah 18:9). This resembles how Duke Senior's discernment of religious meaning and beauty in nature is linked with his attempts to create an ideal, bonded society. It is as if men begin to restore earth to the glory of the Garden

of Eden as they respond to revelation. This doesn't mean that adversities disappear, but as revelation teaches its receivers how the earth and their relationships can and should become, *both* begin to become more glorious and burdens are lightened in this hope.

Second, as human relationships and nature transform, nature serves as a site of revelation. Its spiritual voice comes to be heard. In the play, it is the *combination* of encountering the forest and recognizing spiritual meaning that transforms the characters. For example, the corrupt Duke Frederick develops faith and repents of his abuses as he travels through the woods, where he meets an old religious man. The sacred instruction and covenants received by the people of Alma causes the land of Mormon to become a site of revelation not only through its beauty, but also because, as Mormon writes, the land sings praises to the Lord forever. A similar description of how revelation and spiritual events bring out a revelatory voice in nature is found in a passage written by the prophet Joseph. Here Joseph rejoices in the unfolding of ordinances for the dead and describes how the natural world may respond to these acts of restoration and redemption:

Let the mountains shout for joy, and all ye valleys cry aloud; and all ye seas and dry lands tell the wonders of your Eternal King! And ye rivers, and brooks, and rills, flow down with gladness. Let the woods and all the trees of the field praise the Lord; and ye solid rocks weep for joy! And let the sun, moon, and the morning stars sing together, and let all the sons of God shout for joy! And let the eternal creations declare his name forever and ever! And again I say, how glorious is the voice we hear from heaven, proclaiming in our ears, glory, and salvation, and honor [...] (Doctrine and Covenants 128:33).

In both scriptural accounts, nature itself testifies, like the medieval book of nature, of the character of God and the blessings he brings to earth. The song of nature resonates with the voice

of heaven. The voice of nature cannot be separated from its relationships with men or God. In Joseph's description, nature rejoices in its unfolding redemption, just as men do in theirs.

Joseph appears to desire for revelation to transform all the face of the earth. There is no place or person so ordinary or low that it cannot be made glorious through Christ. This is a third idea that intersects with the play. Shakespeare's use of the pastoral genre is often recognized as unusual. He adds satire, cynics, clowns, and realistically adverse relationships with the land to the normally loftier English pastoral. Nevertheless, he chooses to assert high ideals of love, marriage and harmonious relationships with nature and in communities similar to those normally found in pastoral. Here the glorious, religious, and ideal are found suitable for the real and fallible (Cirillo 19), which empowers the ideals. This combining of the real and the ideal resembles what Richard Bushman describes as Joseph Smith's delight in the mixing of the mundane and magnificent in the events of the restored gospel (478). As Bushman identifies, an example of this mixture is found in Joseph's description of otherwise mundane physical locations of past and present spiritual discernment:

And again, what do we hear? Glad tidings from Cumorah! Moroni, an angel from heaven, declaring the fulfilment of the prophets—the book to be revealed. A voice of the Lord in the wilderness of Fayette, Seneca county, declaring the three witnesses to bear record of the book! The voice of Michael on the banks of the Susquehanna, detecting the devil when he appeared as an angel of light! The voice of Peter, James, and John in the wilderness between Harmony, Susquehanna county, and Colesville, Broome county, on the Susquehanna river, declaring themselves as possessing the keys of the kingdom, and of the dispensation of the fulness of times! (Doctrine and Covenants 128:20).

As in the play, seemingly ordinary places come to reveal something glorious. And just as the Lord transforms ordinary places, he makes it possible for each person to be redeemed and glorified, which is a large part of what Joseph is celebrating in his writings. No person or place is ignored, forgotten, or unimportant to the Lord. This resonates with the medieval book of nature in the way it suggests the even the small and seemingly ordinary parts of creation have spiritual significance. All are connected with the Lord and might be transformed by him. Therefore, the medieval book of nature, in teaching that one can find traces of God's hand in all of the natural world, does not necessarily build destructive and prideful hierarchies of power (over earth or man), but it can serve to destroy them.

My interpretation of *As You Like It* and the book of nature suggests there may be much more to the medieval tradition than critics like White and Manes can account for. The belief that nature reveals the attributes and works of God may serve as a way to understand how in Christianity, human relationships with God, scripture, and nature can be intricately connected in ways that help create hopeful, compassionate, and ethical relationships. Resources to understand how these relationships are connected are needed in contemporary discussions. In a largely secularized public world, the links between how we perceive and treat other people and our attitudes toward the environment are often vague, although these connections continue to be powerful. Unfortunately, cynicism toward religion and misleading arguments about the influence of Christianity tend to dismiss the possibility of finding solutions in Christian faith. Thoughtful religious perspectives are needed to combat reductive viewpoints and help others perceive ethical meaning in our relationships with the environment in religious faith.

In addition, uniquely LDS interpretations like my own might play an important role in this discussion and in ecocriticism. The presence of LDS beliefs and scripture in the world today

remind me of the strong ideals of love and hope amidst realistically difficult relationships upheld in Shakespeare's play. Both LDS beliefs and Shakespeare's ideals are remarkable in the way they persist despite the cynical and rational worldviews that surround them. Shakespeare's forest is a place where nothing can be reified because hidden sources of meaning unveil themselves without expectation. LDS beliefs can similarly assert that Christian faith, the natural world, and the moral implications of our relationships cannot and should not be reduced by purely secular perspectives. Inexplicable sources of religious hope for relationships of all kinds persist in the contemporary world. Belief in eternal marriage and family relationships, eternal relationships with the earth, mysterious spiritual qualities in nature, and literal resurrection challenge contemporary, closed perspectives of the world and Christianity in striking ways. LDS beliefs and scripture provide us with eyes to see ways we might stop ourselves and others from blaming the past, creating misleading arguments about Christian scripture and religion, and reifying nature itself.

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