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In the Storm

Response by JEFFREY JEROME COHEN

Imagine if Noah had been locked outside his ark.

Most artists depict the vessel from its exterior, the perspective of those doomed to drown. Noah and his family meanwhile are snug within as the storms start, their minds already turned to dry land, renewal and rainbows. The rain falls hard, rocks become islands, the valleys swell to oceans and fill with corpses. Noah cannot see the devastation to which he assented when he built the ark. Well pitched gopher wood keeps him dry against the gale. Yet what if the patriarch had boarded the vessel only to be turned out again, perhaps by disgruntled offspring? What would he have done if the gate were closed against him, the tempest raging, water rising, drenched and cold? Would he curse his heirs as the hurricane began to blow? Would he declare himself more sinned against than sinning, his loss of safety the fault of a fallen world rather than the result of his failure to care more for the Earth he consigned to havoc? Would he contemplate his own unwillingness to extend the shelter he once possessed? Where would the old man find sanctuary? In a hovel swamped when the torrents prove relentless? Would the contentious storm so soak his skin that a tempest in his mind would take from his senses all feeling? Would he rail against filial ingratitude? Might he perhaps realize that before the Flood he was so intent on small and gated things that he forgot those abandoned to their exterior—or worse, did not see the misery of those who should have been under his care? Companioned now by those he once left to the elements, would he realize that he had taken too little care of precarious lives, sinners no doubt but many also homeless and starving (“houseless heads and unfed sides”)?

Once the door of a refuge no longer his own is shut against his return and his children leave him to a drowning world, might the patriarch come to know that his belief in better days ahead, a new realm administered by his offspring and their progeny, was always in vain? As anyone who has read beyond the sacrifices, covenant and rainbow in Genesis comes to grasp, the ages that follow the Flood are just as evil as those that precede. Catastrophe cleansed the world of most life but none of its fallenness. Shortly after the business with the dove and the olive branch we witness Noah’s naked inebriation, then the cursing of his own son to eternal slavery. All peoples of the Earth begin with the descendants of Noah (Ham, Shem and Japheth as fathers of nations) but what if the Deluge had not spared even them? Such is the gambit of Shakespeare’s play *King Lear*, which transmutes universal cataclysm into a tempest that sinks an island, robs a kingdom of hope, leaves the audience wondering about the possibility of any future at all. Regan, Goneril and Cordelia replace the unnamed, silent and compliant women

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of the Noah story, challenging daughters (positive and negative) with plenty of personality. They steal the thunder of their husbands: who really cares about France, Cornwall, Albany? The action seems no smaller than the biblical Flood narrative, but whereas Genesis keeps beginning again all that Shakespeare's play offers is a relentless series of defeats, downfalls, and deaths, each bringing the drama closer to apocalypse.

I bring Noah to Lear in part because Julian Yates and I are writing a book about the enduring power of that myth when it comes to the narration of climate change and catastrophe, but also because "Anthropocene Shakespeare" likewise entails finding in ancient scripts new possibilities—not all of which need be as dire as they seem at first glance. The essays collected here meditate powerfully on duration, endurance and materiality, on what lasts and what must vanish over time. The Anthropocene of fire, soot and dust is an age of sea rise and deluge, of refugees not wanted in ark or enclave, of fellow humans barred from walled nations and left to drown on distant shores or heaths. As Sharon O'Dair and Todd Borlik observe, we have always known what to do, and yet we act as if we were still searching for answers to our self-made perturbations. We have also unremittently demonstrated our willingness not to make the choices that would preserve and shelter community without the destruction of the world. The "anthro" in the Anthropocene is what Steve Mentz calls the "Old Man," stubborn patriarchs like Noah and Lear and Trump who do not protest a world given over to storm, who find it convenient to blame everyone else as sinners without acknowledging the high price these people pay so that small and exclusive collectives stay afloat. Not that such saving ever works out all that well. Justin Kolb writes of the consolation of apocalypse (giving up is easy, even liberating), and balances against its allure fraught inhabitation of middle spaces. Steven Swarbrick describes the cold, active yet lasting elemental archive that records the vanishing of possibility and registers the limits of human endurance. John Mitchell makes clear that spaces of negation are states of negotiation, offering that maybe we should seek these difficulties (Kolb calls this constant state a "thin, durable ray of hope"). Molly Seremet writes of the spectator becoming the spect-actor, with Shakespeare offering an archive of narrative possibilities that can be altered in performance. The past is the active producer of futures, not some inert trace to be recognized once it is gone. Sustainability on the other hand is the lie that we can embrace a horizon that keeps widening, Sharon O'Dair points out that we do indeed have to reason the need, or we may drown in our own excess.

Storms never settle and rain saturates story. The vigorous conversation that these essays stage can be situated ethically in a shared space that rejects the easy relief offered by utter catastrophe, by abandoning a difficult world to apocalypse, flood, or Anthropocene. Justin Kolb writes persuasively against the surrender to the "blazing star" as herald of what *must* arrive, urging us to rethink our own agency in making more just futures. The unfolding of that drama we name the Anthropocene (and used to call things like Doomsday or the Flood) is not a pre-scripted narrative with a known conclusion (we all die!) but an enviroing that compels us to act differently before too many of our fellow creatures perish. Shakespeare matters in the Anthropocene for the same reason Noah (as mediated

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through Geoffrey of Monmouth and Holinshed) mattered to Shakespeare. As Molly Seremet and Steve Mentz emphasize, stories from the past offer a storehouse of repeatable scripts that can be altered at every performance to resist the resignation, violence against the innocent, love of cruel justice, and other forms of harm within them. These stories are useful for being time-bound (that is, envired by history). Historicity enables not universality but a speaking across epochs, a relevance via difference, the tender of a storehouse of alternative knowledges.

In the essays collect here, Shakespeare in the Anthropocene is a stand against the cruelty, ire, and narcissism of petty tyrants, patriarchs soaked by the catastrophe they have fashioned with their own hands. Sign me up.

Jeffrey Jerome Cohen is Dean of Humanities at Arizona State University in Tempe, AZ and co-president of the Association for the Study of Literature and the Environment. His research examines strange and beautiful things that challenge the imagination, phenomena that seem alien and intimate at once. He publishes widely in the fields of medieval studies, monster theory, posthumanism and the environmental humanities. His most recent book *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman* (University of Minnesota Press) was awarded the René Wellek Prize for best book in Comparative Literature (2017).