As media evolves over time, so too does the need for contemporary criticism to account for this evolution. In “Shakespeare and Media Ecology: Beyond Historicism and Presentism,” Ingo Berensmeyer presents a mode of addressing Shakespeare that attempts to transcend the multitude of changes in both history and media since the great poet’s era. Berensmeyer employs the term “media ecology” to suggest how Shakespeare’s works function across many mediums. While human culture evolves rapidly, Berensmeyer argues, basic human abilities and drives remain stable, allowing a work like *The Tempest* to transcend a rapidly changing media landscape. Whether read, performed, or presented on screen, the story of Prospero and his trials on the island illuminates many archetypal issues in human history. One such issue develops from a close evaluation of Prospero’s relationship with the island and nature as a whole. In this essay, I will examine how Prospero’s complex connection with his environment relates to contemporary issues of human ecology, and how this relation supports Berensmeyer’s argument for media ecology as an approach to Shakespeare studies.

Centuries after *The Tempest* is first performed in London, students across the globe study the play, wrestling through the unfamiliar vernacular and mythology to discover a meaning that relates to them. This process often requires accommodation and explanation, a certain
“bridging-the-gap” that one might believe detracts from the work’s real meaning. Berensmeyer, however, recognizes both the value and necessity of this process:

Media ecology thus necessarily departs from compartmentalized histories of individual media or art forms (literary history, art history, music history, etc.). It proceeds from the assumption that literature and other products of culture depend on or contain more than one single medium. (Berensmeyer, 521)

Students, Berensmeyer suggests, must then address not only the text, but also the “medialization” of the text—not just what it is, but how it got there. For The Tempest, one might study Prospero’s reign on the island as a metaphor for British colonialism. Contemporary critics, however, might see Prospero’s domination and subjugation of his allies and resources as a more powerful metaphor for human ecology. While Prospero uses Ariel as a resource to conjure up a storm for his benefit, humans also use the earth’s resources for their convenience, causing more dramatic weather patterns. Ultimately, Prospero’s assumption of dominance over his land and people parallel many current attitudes toward the environment.

In Act II, as the noble sailors wash up in their new environment, they discuss the island’s potential as a scene of innocence and abundance rather than one of subjugation, as Prospero promotes. Gonzalo waxes on his ideal government, one situated around nature’s benevolence:

“All things in common nature should produce / Without sweat or endeavor… / …but nature should bring forth / Of its own kind, all foilson, all abundance, / To feed my innocent people” (2.1.155-56, 158-60). Here, Gonzalo proposes a symbiosis with nature so perfect that it excludes the need for any governance or sovereignty. In contrast, Prospero rules the island with power and punishment, leveraging his sorcery to keep his tenants at bay. Though idealistic, Gonzalo’s vision proposes a humanity in harmony with nature and its constituents. This vision shines
through the text as a poignant and relevant commentary on human ecology, one that others might overlook in favor of a more conventional, historicist interpretation that emphasizes the record of colonialism and slavery in the British Empire. By examining Gonzalo’s discussion of nature rather than Prospero’s narrative arch, one can find greater relevance and understand the benefit of media ecology over historicism.

But beyond the freedom in interpretations of the text, Berensmeyer also argues for the cogency of Shakespeare’s work across all mediums, textual or otherwise. Though intended as a play, *The Tempest* survives as a text—Berensmeyer recognizes how the play “oscillates between ephemeral entertainment and sustained efforts of reading and interpretation” (Berensmeyer, 533). Regardless of form, the meaning subsists. The text, however, allows for “sustained efforts” of interpretation. Berensmeyer recognizes the necessity for text to complement performance, and so, too, does Prospero. The tyrant only learns his sorcery through the rich understanding of his volumes. He can only *perform* his magic after (metaphorically) learning his lines. When plotting against him, Caliban comments on the power of text: “possess his books; for without them / He’s but a sot… / …Burn but his books. / He has brave utensils (for so he calls them)” (3.2.88-89, 91-92). For Shakespeare and Prospero alike, their power lies in text. As a medium, text can transcend cultures, yield sorcery, and sustain the kind of performative meaning that one finds in the theatre. Prospero garners his power from text, and Shakespeare sustains his art in text. Ultimately, Berensmeyer recognizes that, though interpretations may differ, mediums may shift, and cultures may change, the text always serves as the cornerstone that sustains these tides and allows for ever-evolving analysis.

*The Tempest* exists as an extraordinarily rich play, rife with consequences, references, and possible interpretations. The project, Berensmeyer argues, is not in discovering what
Shakespeare wanted or intended, but rather in finding what the play means to us, today. While some might seek to contextualize the play and approach it from its position in history, others, like Berensmeyer, find more value in studying what it means now and how it travels across cultures and mediums to arrive in front of us. From this standpoint, the ecological reading of *The Tempest* garners more meaning and relevance. Prospero, in assuming his superiority as a human and establishing a hierarchy on an otherwise innocent island, suggests a poignant insight concerning today’s societies and their attitudes toward the earth. Furthermore, Prospero’s magnum opus, his tempest, quite literally parallels the storms that humans cause through their collective disregard for nature. Though *The Tempest* pays no explicit mention to these ecological issues, it still provides commentary centuries later through this very brand of media ecology that Berensmeyer promotes.