



The 2013 INSPIRE Lecture on Literature and Sustainability

# Reading with the Grain: Sustainability and the Literary Imagination

Dr Jayne Elisabeth Archer  
Professor Richard Marggraf Turley  
Professor Howard Thomas



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Hay on Earth Stage

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## About INSPIRE

INSPIRE (Institute of Sustainable Practice, Innovation and Resource Effectiveness) at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David is directed by Jane Davidson. INSPIRE is a key component in the University's mission to embed sustainability into its own practices and to provide its students with the knowledge, skills and attitudes that will equip them for their future contribution to the economy, community and environment. INSPIRE won the 2013 Guardian award for the most effective sustainability initiative in higher education in the UK.



Prior to her role with INSPIRE, Jane Davidson was Minister for Environment and Sustainability in Wales (2007-2011). She was responsible for the Welsh Government agreeing to make sustainable development its central organising principle, for the introduction of the Welsh charge on carrier bags, for the establishment of the Welsh Climate Change Commission and for legislation on recycling.

## About ASLE-UKI

The Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, UK & Ireland (ASLE-UKI) was founded in 1998. Its aim is to represent and support scholars and writers, in the Atlantic archipelago and beyond, who are interested in the environment and its expression in the cultural imagination. ASLE-UKI's current chair is Dr Adeline Johns-Putra.



Adeline Johns-Putra is Reader in English Literature at the University of Surrey. She is an expert in environmental criticism, Romanticism (especially women's writing), epic literature and genre theory. Her published volumes include *The History of the Epic* (Palgrave, 2006) and *Heroes and Housewives: Women's Epic Poetry and Domestic Ideology in the Romantic Age (1770-1835)* (Peter Lang, 2001).

*Hay Festival is the beautiful location for the first reading of this winning lecture and one that provides a good fit with the aims and ethos of both ASLE-UKI and INSPIRE. Hay Festival is a world leading arts and cultural festival, running events in over eleven countries. The Festival's sustainability programme, 'Hay on Earth' has been running for six years with three key aims, to reduce its own impacts, to help visitors reduce their own impacts when visiting the Festival and thirdly to organise debates, discussions and lectures around a sustainability theme. For more information go to [hayfestival.org](http://hayfestival.org)*

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## Introduction

The question of how we engage with the physical environments in which we live and work is one of the greatest of the many challenges that we face in the contemporary world. Specifically, what it asks us to consider is this: how can we live on our planet in a way which provides appropriately for ourselves but which also ensures that we leave behind us an environment that can support not just future generations of human beings but also the rich array of non-human lives that exist alongside us? This, in short, is the challenge of sustainability – a notion which, in the words of the UN's 1987 report *Our Common Future*, can be defined as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'.

It is this challenge that ultimately lies behind today's event. The lecture which is presented here – written and researched by the three Aberystwyth University scholars Dr Jayne Archer, Professor Richard Marggraf Turley and Professor Howard Thomas – is a dynamic attempt to address the question of what sustainability might mean within the context of our own cultural heritage. And what their lecture reveals is nothing less than the politics of sustainability at play in the creation of some of our most iconic literature.

This evening's event is the result of a competition that was launched in collaboration between the University of Wales Trinity Saint David's Institute of Sustainable Practice, Innovation and Resource Effectiveness (INSPIRE) and the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment, UK & Ireland (ASLE-UKI). The aim of the competition was to give literary scholars the chance to engage with the idea of sustainability – that most pressing of challenges – by writing a public lecture which would pursue literary study in the light of sustainability issues.

Of course, there is a strong tradition of literary scholarship which addresses environmental questions, with the field of environmental literary criticism ('ecocriticism', as it is called) having flourished – particularly in the USA – since the mid to late 1980s. It is this field and its practitioners that ASLE-UKI exists to support in the United Kingdom and Ireland. However, it is perhaps the case that the concept of sustainability – with its own complex history of meanings and applications – has received less attention from ecocritics than might be expected. So the INSPIRE/ASLE-UKI competition was an attempt to draw sustainability more actively into the environmental debates of literary criticism. Dr Adeline Johns-Putra, Reader in English at the University of Surrey, is the current chair of ASLE-UKI. As she observes, 'Perhaps ecocritics take for granted the concept of sustainability, since it is built into everything that we, as ecologically aware individuals, do. But if ecocriticism seeks, among other things, to interrogate the textuality of the concepts and ideals that comprise ecological awareness, then sustainability, with its "taken-for-grantedness" is just the kind of word we should be unpacking.'

For INSPIRE, the competition represented the chance to expand and deepen the sustainability agenda at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David. Under the leadership of Jane Davidson, former Welsh government minister for sustainability, INSPIRE has set about making sure that principles of sustainability are not just embedded into the working practices of the University itself but that sustainability also becomes part of the learning experience that every one of the University's students receives. As part of this

programme of development, in 2011, the University's School of Cultural Studies began to deliver teaching at undergraduate level that sought to fuse literary studies with sustainability. And this proved to be the springboard for further initiatives, as INSPIRE sought to support two key platforms over 2013 that specifically aimed to foster literary sustainability scholarship: an ASLE-UKI one-day symposium on literature and sustainability (which took place on the University's Lampeter campus in March), and the competition whose winners are speaking today. For Jane Davidson, herself an English literature graduate, this was all a chance for the University to help support scholarship in the area more widely. As she explains, 'Applying a sustainability lens to a subject almost always throws up new insights. So it seemed a perfect opportunity to link up with ASLE-UKI to see if together we could provide a platform for literary scholars who are interested in looking anew at environmental questions.'

It is such 'looking anew' that our winning lecture this evening clearly represents. From the basis of its exemplary scholarship, this is work that manifestly rises to the challenge of understanding the complex web of issues that sustainability itself involves – and in so doing, offers key reconfigurations of our cultural history. INSPIRE and ASLE-UKI are thus proud to present The 2013 INSPIRE Lecture on Literature and Sustainability here at the Hay Festival: Jayne Archer, Richard Marggraf Turley and Howard Thomas's 'Reading with the Grain: Sustainability and the Literary Imagination'.

# The Authors

**Jayne Elisabeth Archer** is lecturer in Medieval and Renaissance Literature in the Department of English and Creative Writing, Aberystwyth University. She is an Associate Fellow of the Centre for the Study of the Renaissance, University of Warwick, where she spent four years as AHRC postdoctoral Research Fellow on the John Nichols Project. She is co-editor of *The Progresses, Pageants, and Entertainments of Queen Elizabeth I* (Oxford University Press, 2007), editor of Volume 3: The Verse Treatises in OUP's *Complete Works of Sir Fulke Greville*, and has published articles on Elizabethan and Jacobean masques, early modern women's receipt books, and alchemy in early modern literature.



**Richard Marggraf Turley** is Professor in Romantic and Victorian Literature and has recently been appointed Aberystwyth University's first Professor of Engagement with the Public Imagination. He has published widely on Romantic literary culture and is author of three monographs, the most recent: *Bright Stars: John Keats, Barry Cornwall and Romantic Literary Culture* (LUP, 2009). He has also published three volumes of poetry and in 2007 won the tenth-anniversary Keats-Shelley Prize for poetry. *Wan-Hu's Flying Chair*, published by Salt, won the 2010 Wales Book of the Year 'People's Choice' award (sponsored by Media Wales).



**Howard Thomas** is Emeritus Professor of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences at Aberystwyth University. He has held visiting professorships at universities in Switzerland and the United States. His research interests include how and why plants die and what are the agricultural and ecological implications. He has a long-standing commitment to exploring the cultural significance of scientific research and promotion of links between science and the arts. He was one of the first recipients in 1997 of support under the Wellcome Sci-Art Scheme, followed by a NESTA pioneer award to develop imaging methodology in collaboration with the artists Heather Ackroyd and Dan Harvey. Subsequently he received a Leverhulme Emeritus Fellowship to support work on music and evolutionary thought, and ongoing research on literary responses to agricultural and ecological change. He is a co-author of the recently published textbook *The Molecular Life of Plants* (Wiley, 2013).



# Reading with the Grain: Sustainability and the Literary Imagination

The intricacy of biological and physical systems on our planet means that any effective approach to sustainable development must be attuned to daunting levels of complexity. Such is the unpredictability of these systems that some commentators warn us to treat 'any new plan' that involves claims of sustainability as immediately 'suspect'. For John P. O'Grady, the concept of sustainability itself may be unsustainable. But for anyone committed to embedding sustainability in public policy – including those, which is to say all of us, who are invited to respond to the Welsh Government's 2013 White Paper on Sustainable Development – the challenge needn't prompt us to counsels of despair. On the contrary, the White Paper presents a welcome invitation to poets, writers and literary critics – for whom the uncertain, ineffable and numinous are in fact familiar ground – to make a transformative contribution to debates around sustainability. Human motivations and responses are at least as complex and unpredictable as the ecosystems we aim to manage, and it is, as O'Grady insists, 'incumbent upon scientists and managers, when compiling taxonomies and generating data sets for environmental decision-making, to take into account the full expanse of the human mind, with all its curious flora and fauna'.

How might the 'curious flora and fauna' of the human mind, then, be deployed to help reimagine the relationship between literature and sustainability? How might we move beyond studies of the representation of the environment in literature and instead foster a two-way conversation between these categories? How might we conceive of a relationship that holds the genuine possibility of enabling the creative arts to help shape the contours of increasingly important aspects of public policy? Mathematician and zoologist Donald Ludwig together with co-authors Ray Hilborn and Carl Waters offer something intriguingly suggestive, though it might at first seem counter-intuitive to writers and readers. They assert that it is more appropriate to 'think of resources as managing humans than the converse' – that, in short, a self-sustaining environment authors its own writers.

Let us consider one historical example of a creative response to the drive for sustainable futures that allows us to navigate the tangled relationship between literature and sustainability. The 'Golden Age' of Renaissance English literature, the years 1575-1625,

coincided with what is now known as the 'Little Ice Age', a time of rapid cooling following the 'Medieval warm period'. During this half century, England, Scotland and Wales experienced climatic disturbances as disconcerting as those we are familiar with in the present. It was – as it is now in parts of the world – an age of heightened awareness of food insecurity. Sharp winters followed by wet summers resulted in many consecutive poor harvests. For large swathes of the population, existence was precarious: people lived, quite literally, on the breadline. Government attempts to manage this crisis targeted the production, price and distribution of arable crops within and without the nation's borders, but anger at the failure of these regulatory measures, coupled with sheer desperation, led to riots erupting across many regions. Not since the Great Rising of June 1381 had food been such a pressing – and potentially revolutionary – political issue.

For most people, it was a time of dearth. For those with ready cash, however, it was a time of opportunity. One Warwickshire man, son of a butcher, money-lender and wool trader, saw his chance. Over a fifteen-year period, he purchased and stored grain, malt and barley for resale at inflated prices to neighbours and local tradesmen. In February 1598 he was prosecuted for holding 80 bushels of malt or corn during a time of shortage. This man pursued those who could not (or would not) pay him in full for these staples and used the profits to further his own money-lending activities. In July 1604 he sued an apothecary, Philip Rogers, for 35 shillings and 10 pence plus 10 pence damages, seeking to recover the unpaid balance on a sale of 20 bushels of malt and a small loan made in March of that year. Profits were channelled into a programme of land purchase, comprising in 1602 not just bricks and mortar (or, rather, timber and thatch, wattle and daub), but 20 acres of pasture and 107 acres of land suitable for the cultivation of arable crops. In addition, and looking to the longer term, he acquired tithes on local produce, including 'corn, grain, blade, and hay', thereby allowing him to cream off the profits from the manual work of others.

Combining both illegal and legal activities, this Warwickshire man was able to retire in 1613, after a working life of approximately 24 years, as the largest property owner in his home town, Stratford-upon-Avon. His two daughters, who inherited their father's leases, land and property, married well and lived in sizeable town houses nearby. This man was William Shakespeare.

It might come as a shock that the Shakespeare we thought we knew considered himself a manager of land and commodities first and playwright second. To return to our starting point, he allowed natural resources to manage his life choices – and profited as a consequence. In other words, the need to ensure a sustainable future for himself and his family informed his literary career. It turns out that the evidence for seeing Shakespeare in the way he saw himself has been there all along. Nicholas Rowe, Shakespeare's first biographer, got it right when he imagined the bard, a couple of years before he moved

to London and started writing, as an unemployed father-of-three so desperate for food that he poached rabbits and deer in the grounds of the Charlecote Park, Warwickshire. But the most arresting evidence for the importance of sustenance in Shakespeare's life really has been all but staring us in the face for years.

The Shakespeare funerary bust in Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, has perplexed generations of artists and scholars. (Fig. 1, below) Derided by Thomas Gainsborough as a 'silly smiling thing' and by the critic and biographer J. Dover Wilson as bearing the likeness of 'a self-satisfied pork butcher', it may indeed seem better suited to the top of a barrel organ than a church chancel. The bust now on view is not, though, the original. The earliest funerary monument to Shakespeare was installed before 1623 (the precise date is unknown), having been commissioned by Shakespeare's son-in-law, John Hall. It was carved by the German sculptor Gheerart Janssen – a fellow client of Shakespeare's patron, the Earl of Southampton. Made by and for those who knew Shakespeare well, the original monument – there is every reason to assume – depicted him faithfully. A sketch made in 1634 by William Dugdale, historian of Warwickshire, together with an engraving taken from that sketch by George Vertue allow us to see the monument as it appeared to its first viewers. (Figs 2 and 3, below)

The original funerary bust remembers a businessman who is clutching a sack of corn, approximately a bushel's worth, holding it safe and ready to sell to the highest bidder. Shakespeare scholars have dismissed the evidence afforded by Dugdale's sketch, in a very real sense concealing it from public view. Perhaps they are anxious that it provides ammunition to those who deny that the man from Stratford-upon-Avon – a mere tradesman – could also have been the creative genius behind the poems and plays. A similar prejudice was presumably shared by the eighteenth-century renovators who replaced the bushel of grain clearly discernible as such in Vertue's sketch with a velvet cushion and quill. Shakespeare the grain-hoarder has been redacted from history so that Shakespeare the creative genius could be born. With that act of silencing – an act of omission in which literary historians have been complicit – we lose evidence of the symbiotic relationship between the drive for sustainability and literary creativity. Like the wise Pharaoh of the Old Testament who, following the advice of Joseph, stores surplus grain during the good years so that his people can eat during times of famine, Shakespeare could also justify his grain-hoarding as ultimately being in the public interest, since unlike the local authorities he had a ready store of food available for purchase when supplies ran low. This prudent response to an unpredictable supply of natural resources, the first funerary monument perhaps suggests, was something to be proud of and remembered for. Like Joseph the favoured son, however, Shakespeare was not averse to profiting from that same public need.

London playhouses closed during the summer months which meant that in the 'off-season' periods Shakespeare had the coin, time and freedom to pursue the serious

business of sustenance. As the original bust shows, Shakespeare responded to this opportunity both by writing plays and by dealing in commodities, feeding the wants as well as the needs of his fellow countrymen. Far from pulling in opposite directions, these twin businesses of plays and food were inter-related and mutually supporting. Appropriating the means of production as well as the produce itself, he acquired a monopoly in the only thing no one could do without: food. With his profits – minus a few fines for illegal hoarding and tax evasion – Shakespeare bought up land in around the place of his birth, finally returning there on a permanent basis some time before 1616 as one of the most powerful property owners in the region, a purveyor of bread, beer and plays. Having ensured a comfortable, sustainable future for himself and his family, Shakespeare stopped writing.

With one eye on the arable fields and pastures of Warwickshire and another set on the barren, overpopulated sprawl of the City of London, Shakespeare – it should come as no surprise – placed sustenance at the centre of his revisioning of Britain and her people. He used his writing not only to fund his grain-hoarding, but also to represent and reimagine the contemporary battle of sustainability. Reflecting on his plays with this new perspective, it quickly becomes clear that the politics of sustenance is written into the fabric, into the very grain, as it were, of Shakespeare's characters, language and plots. It is desperation for cheap grain that results in the nadir of English fortunes, the lifting of the siege of Rouen, in *Henry VI Part 1*, where French forces lead by Joan of Arc hide within sacks of adulterated corn. (Adulteration of the food chain – how fortunate such a calamity could never happen in our time!) Treason, whether it takes the form of a 'lean and hungry' (1.2.194) Cassius in *Julius Caesar* or the plebeian 'cockle' that threatens to spoil the patrician 'corn' (3.1.70) of *Coriolanus*' Rome, is figured as a crisis of sustenance. Falstaff, a man who, unlike Cassius, can hardly be accused of thinking 'too much' (*Julius Caesar*, 1.2.195), is equally threatening to the stability of the state – and precisely because he is unable to moderate his appetite. The France of *Henry V* is, in the Duke of Burgundy's estimation, defeated as much by her own inadequate agricultural methods as by the English army at Agincourt: her 'husbandry doth lie on heaps', the French nobleman laments, 'Corrupting in its own fertility' (5.2.39-40). The same is true of the world of *King Lear*, in which a monarch's political errors – errors symbolized by his crown of 'idle weeds', which he plucks from unharvested fields of 'sustaining corn' (4.4.6) – result in an all-consuming 'dearth' (1.2.6).

This politico-environmental discourse, requiring sophisticated knowledge of arable plants and farming techniques, would have been immediately recognizable to Shakespeare's first audiences, many of whom, like the man from Stratford-upon-Avon himself, had come to London from farming families and regions. For them, the contemporary crisis of sustainable food supply, encompassing ownership of land, food purity and supply routes, as well as regulation of measures and prices, was one of – if not the – most pressing political issues. The word 'sustainability' was unknown to

Shakespeare, coiner of so many words. But ‘sustenance’ and the concept we now understand as ‘sustainability’ – namely, ‘human activity... in which environmental degradation is minimized’ – was certainly not. Of the twenty-one allusions to ‘sustenance’ and its variants in Shakespeare’s plays, five appear in *King Lear*, and it is this mature work that realises most fully the fraught intertwining of limited resources and unpredictable and ungovernable natural systems, and also the role of the ‘curious flora and fauna’ of the human mind when attempting to manage those systems. The play reveals this fascinating, most urgent, dynamic in its very first scene. Positioned suggestively next to a map of Britain, an enraged Lear declares that he will divide his retirement between the courts of his two eldest daughters, Goneril and Regan:

... Ourself, by monthly course,  
With reservation of an hundred knights,  
By you to be sustained, shall our abode  
Make with you by due turn: (1.1.126-9)

Goneril and Regan, of course, don’t play ball. Having accepted their father’s bequests of land, they do not agree to ‘sustain him and his hundred knights’ (1.4.282). This isn’t simply ‘sustain’ as ‘endurance’ or ‘putting up with’. This is ‘sustain’ as resource management and as such it conforms to our current understanding of ‘sustainability’: the socio-environmental concept defined in the UN’s Brundtland Commission report of 1987 as ‘development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the needs of future generations to meet their own needs’. In the first act of *King Lear* the ability of ‘future generations’ to meet their own needs – including the long-term security of the ‘bastard’ Edmund – is precisely what is at stake, and this ability is being compromised by the actions of the present ruler. Goneril and Regan, who have their own courts to run, cannot accommodate, feed and maintain Lear – who expects the trappings of kingship without the inconvenient responsibilities – and his retinue for six months out of every twelve.

When one’s father is (or, rather, was) king, the domestic politics of sustainability segues into national and international politics. The ‘bounty’ awarded to Goneril and Regan as payment for their declarations of love at the beginning of the play are portions of land that are not self-sustaining. Here, as in the 2013 Welsh Government White Paper, sustainability is central to the politics of devolution, the division of the kingdoms. Goneril, receiving Scotland and the North, and Regan, taking Wales and the West Country, are assigned, in Lear’s own estimation, very similar lands: ‘shadowy forests... and wide-skirted meads’ (1.1.55-6). Forests and pasture do not produce corn. For Cordelia, Lear reserves the corn-rich lands of central and southern England. Shakespeare’s first audiences would have recognized this filial spat as a resource war and a struggle for the long-term sustainability that alone ensures national security. In the estimation of the Tudor historian William Harrison, England was believed to be more ‘fruitfull’ than Wales and both more ‘bountifull’ than Scotland. Scotland/the North and

Wales/the West – the portions given to Goneril and Regan respectively – were thought to be unable to produce sufficient food to feed their populations (Anglesey, Wales's breadbasket, was vulnerable to seige by sea). When Goneril and Regan are compared to serpents, wolves, ravenous carnivores and predators – as they are throughout the play – it is for a very good reason: neither one owns lands that can produce the arable crops necessary to safeguard the long-term survival of their subjects. They must predate the resources of adjoining land – land reserved for Cordelia.

Sustainability forms a deep structure in *King Lear*. It works – imaginatively, emotionally as well as intellectually, and strategically – because the family drama is so tightly folded into the politico-environmental crisis. It, and other plays by Shakespeare, ask to be read – re-read and reimagined – in light of, and as a continuation of, his career as a grain-hoarder, a dealer in commodities and the owner of food-producing land. We need to read his plays with the grain. To revise Ludwig et al.'s formulation in light of the insights yielded by *King Lear*, resources manage humans and humans manage resources: the relationship is reciprocal. Mediating that relationship is literary creativity, through which the environment authors its writers and those writers author their environment.

What, then, do we see when we view the Shakespeare funerary monument today? Perhaps we see a middle-aged man resting his manuscripts on a tasselled velvet cushion; a man whose genius transcends time and place. A soul, to misquote Ben Jonson, of all ages? But perhaps we now also see something more challenging, and ultimately more revealing: a playwright who lived during a crisis of sustenance, who wrote about that crisis, shaped the ways in which it was imagined, contributed to public debates about its management and amelioration, and who took smart measures to protect himself and his family from its worst depredations? If the latter, then Shakespeare is a soul for our age, too, and his life and works can teach us invaluable lessons about our own precarious relationship with food.

The editors of the recent anthology, *Ecocritical Shakespeare*, ask whether 'reading, writing about, and teaching Shakespeare [can] contribute to the health of the planet'. We should be sceptical of such claims. All the same, 'reading, writing about, and teaching Shakespeare', as acts that encompass the stories Shakespeare told as well as the stories told about Shakespeare, can certainly help us to think critically and creatively about 'the health of the planet'. The original Shakespeare funerary monument remembers what we in the well-fed West have largely forgotten: namely, the insistent and urgent coupling of food and literature, sustenance and consumption; the continual digestion and transformation of matter, energy, ideas and information. It memorializes the strange alchemy by which literary manuscripts are translated into performance, playhouse takings are transmuted into natural resources, and commodities are converted into land

and property. If we recoil from this equation, then it is because we, unlike the young Shakespeare and his contemporaries, believe we know where our next meal, our warmth, light, and our night's sleep are coming from. Creativity is inspired by hungry bellies just as much as by the satisfied paunch traced in the Holy Trinity effigy, and the periodic crises of sustenance that have shaped the tumultuous history of these islands have been fuel for poets and playwrights as much as for politicians. As readers and writers, we are at the heart of that process.



Fig. 1. William Shakespeare's funerary monument, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. Modern-day photograph.



Fig. 2. William Shakespeare's funerary monument, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. This sketch was made in 1634 by William Dugdale for his 1656 publication *The Antiquities of Warwickshire*. The original autograph manuscript is Dugdale's *Warwickshire* (vol. 4, p. 933) in the Dugdale Library at Merevale Hall, Warwickshire, residence of the present Sir William Dugdale.



Fig. 3. William Shakespeare's funerary monument, Holy Trinity Church, Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwickshire. The engraving was made by Wenzel [Wenceslaus] Hollar from the sketch by William Dugdale.

*"Literature has a vital role to play in the ways we understand our relationship with the environment"*

*"Great literature of the past can be used to help us engage responsibly with the future"*

- Jayne Archer, Richard Marggraf Turley, and Howard Thomas, explaining the significance of their work which has won the first Literature and Sustainability lecture competition, organised in collaboration between INSPIRE at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David and ASLE-UKI.



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## Reading with the Grain: Sustainability and the Literary Imagination

The collaborative authors, Dr Jayne Elisabeth Archer, Professor Richard Marggraf Turley and Professor Howard Thomas, will lecture on 'Reading with the Grain: Sustainability and the Literary Imagination'. Their work invites the audience at Hay to reconsider Shakespeare's writing for imaginative insights into how we might engage sceptically and stringently with the future.