Chloe Kathleen Preedy. *Aerial Environments on the Early Modern Stage: Theatres of the Air, 1576-1609*. **Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 352 pp. ISBN 9780192843326. $115.00 hardback.**

By Todd Andrew Borlik

In a pointed corrective to Martin Heidegger, Luce Irigaray accused modern philosophy of fixing its gaze on the earth and "forgetting [the] air."[1] No theatre historian that reads Chloe Kathleen Preedy's bracing new study will commit the same oversight. With perspicacity and zeal, it illuminates the vital importance and surprisingly dramatic presence of the air in the open-air playhouses of the golden age of English drama. Despite the evident difficulty of rendering the imperceptible perceptible, Preedy shows how the theatre enacts the miracle of making the air perform through a combination of verbal cues and "acoustic, kinetic, olfactory, and visual prompts" (23), which the book analyses and reconstructs with acumen. Sifting through the copious aerial imagery of Christopher Marlowe, Robert Greene, Thomas Dekker, Thomas Heywood, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Middleton, the monograph connects this "aerographic" (8) impulse to the playwrights' consciousness of writing for a theatre exposed to the vagaries of the elements and the perils of the urban atmosphere.

In 1600, actors had to contend not only with a passing shower or a rogue pigeon but also with the omnipresent threat of a lethal, airborne disease. In a preface mulling over the unexpected timeliness of this book going to print during an on-going pandemic, Preedy foregrounds how early modern plague outbreaks rendered playgoers hyper-aware of the air as a medium of contagion. The ensuing chapters further elucidate how the air inside the playhouse might be tainted or adulterated by smoke, fog, coal fumes, sewage, tobacco, or astrological influences, rendering it what

[1] Luce Irigaray, *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*, trans. by Mary Beth Mader (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999).

Hamlet terms a "foul and pestilent congregation of vapors."[2] Instead of simply asking the audience to ignore these hazards and disturbances, early modern dramatists pre-emptively incorporated them into the performance by "manipulating" (Chapter 4) and "working" (Chapter 3) the air through poetry and spectacle. Often this involved deliberately conjuring stinks or alternatively perfuming the air to enhance the sensory experience of drama beyond the visual. *Aerial Environments* is particularly attuned to the ways in which the evocation of the "*as if* atmosphere" (75) might deliver a metatheatrical jolt, forcing the audience to reflect on the actual air they breathe and perhaps even raise awareness of air quality issues in London. Yet Preedy advances this latter claim with commendable restraint and nuance, acknowledging that representations of aerial environs in Elizabethan drama would be better understood as attempts to "conceptualize this theatre's affective and performative relationship with the space of the air rather than a consistent focused response to rapidly worsening environmental conditions" (ix-x). The book, therefore, is not staunchly ecocritical but it is eco-relevant.

The Introduction and opening chapter examine treatises on natural history, geography, and medicine to establish what Shakespeare's contemporaries thought about the air. Particular emphasis is given to humoral psychology and the belief (reflected in the well-known etymology of inspiration) that air powered and influenced the imagination. But this breeze, Preedy argues, could blow in two directions. Anti-theatrical tracts deploy airy rhetoric to castigate plays as mere breath (castles in the sky) or, worse, super-spreaders of "contagious affect" (78). This provides a new context for understanding Theseus's ironic dismissal of poetry as "airy nothing" in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and the contrast between Antony and Cleopatra, whose lyricism partakes of the fluidity of air and clouds, and the down-to-earth Octavius.[3] Meanwhile, as Preedy shows, *Macbeth* seems to dramatize early modern fears that befouled air might transmit demonic influence and trigger hallucinations.

Chapter 2 considers a wide range of dramaturgical strategies—such as gestures, stage properties and machinery (ranging from fans to simulated thunder), and costumes—that served to bring air into focus in performance. Divided into four lengthy sub-sections, it investigates 1) airborne contagions and the tendency to confound

[2] William Shakespeare, *Hamlet*, Ed. Barbara Mowat, Paul Werstine, Michael Poston, and Rebecca Niles, Folger Shakespeare Library, 2.2.326.

[3] William Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Folger Shakespeare Library, 5.1.17.

material and moral pollution; 2) geo-humoral theories of the air's variance in different regions and nations; 3) representations of wind, rain, and storms on stage; and 4) atmospheric and celestial portents such as birds, eclipses, and comets, the latter of which affected individual human psyches and whole kingdoms by infecting the air. Aerographic passages from several dozen plays attest that Tudor and Stuart dramatists were fascinated by all of the above but the concentration of them in the works of Heywood and Dekker marks them out "as especially attentive to the shared aerial experiences that implicitly connected their dramatic fictions to the actual air breathed by players and playgoers" (136).

Against the backdrop of Francis Bacon's *The History of Winds,* Chapter 3 presents the open-air playhouse as a testing ground for human mastery of the air through "propulsive mechanisms" (143) such as sailing ships, projectiles, and flying machines. Indeed, the first section reminds us that the rise of Britain's commercial empire depended on an ability to understand and harness the power of the winds, as foregrounded by the opening of Marlowe's *The Jew of Malta*, when Barabas inspects a kingfisher's bill (regarded as a sensitive wind gauge) and weathervanes to monitor the progress of his argosy. In the middle third of the chapter, Preedy traces how bows and guns like those wielded by, respectively, Shakespeare's Titus and Marlowe's Tamburlaine might launch the audience's imagination skyward. The final segment continues this trajectory with a survey of flight fantasies in Dekker's *Old Fortunatus*, Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. Preedy argues that levitation stunts seem to nurture the dream of flight by generating "kinaesthetic empathy" (142) in the spectator but cautions that Greene and Dekker deflate the prospect with comedy, while Faustus's grisly fate checks humanity's aerial ambitions: "projectiles rise only to fall, and so do mortal aviators" (196).

Preedy's Chapter 4 decants the "smellscape" of the early modern playhouse. It reveals how actors manufactured artificial odours through perfumes, burning herbs, incense, poisonous fumes, or tobacco. It gathers urban air samples from city comedies like *Every Man Out of his Humour*, *The Roaring Girl*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. This is followed by a lucid analysis of the atmospheric impact of gunpowder artillery in both the world of the play and the playhouse. Preedy makes a compelling case that Tamburlaine weaponizes the air, conjoining the smoke of war with plague, and that the sulfuric reek of onstage ordnance could provoke audiences to think about London's insalubrious air quality.

Although the book's subtitle indicates an endpoint of 1609, the conclusion deftly and helpfully extends the enquiry after this date when the King's Men opened the indoor playhouse at Blackfriars. It sniffs the air in *Cymbeline*, *The Alchemist*, and *The Tempest*, asserting that theatre companies were less likely to deploy pungent and smoky pyrotechnics indoors, where they would take much longer to dissipate and thus linger to pervade and perhaps clash with the atmosphere of ensuing scenes.

Given the intensity of the book's focus and the depth of its coverage, its lacunae are very few. Chapter 4 says relatively little about the smells wafting from food, either onstage or off, which is somewhat surprising given that contemporary documents (such as Philip Henslowe's agreement with the grocer John Chomley to set up catering operations at the Rose) and archaeological excavations confirm that playgoers consumed a variety of snacks, including seafood. Could audiences smell the nauseating hell-broth boiling in the witches' cauldron in *Macbeth*? Some more detailed consideration of sea-coal and suet candles would also have been welcome and upped the ecocritical stakes of the enquiry. Some readers' brows may furrow at several references to air as a "technology" of "transmission" (138) or to theatre as an air-based technology. What isn't? Some of the commentary on archery and firearms in Chapter 3 felt slightly digressive. As the book is thematically structured, it attempts only a few sustained readings of specific plays. There are four pages on *Macbeth* and befouled air, six on *Faustus* and flight, five on *Tamburlaine* and smoke, and nine on wind and weather in *The Tempest*. For this reader, at least, these sections proved some of the most riveting in the book. Yet others may appreciate its steady accumulation and clever juxtaposition of evidence from a vast range of texts, and the attention given to non-Shakespearean drama is refreshing. Preedy is especially illuminating on Marlowe, having written a monograph on his religious scepticism and recently co-edited *The Jew of Malta*.

Overall, *Aerial Environments* is an exceptional achievement: an authoritative study of an underappreciated topic that is of tremendous and growing significance given the prevalence of open-air Shakespeare and the need to harness the power of drama to combat climate change and air pollution. Preedy persuasively demonstrates that Elizabethan theatre can be a forum for promoting greater awareness of the fragility of a vital resource we too often take for granted. Moreover, she manages this feat with fidelity to the historical conditions of Shakespeare's era, undergirding her arguments with a robust archive of early modern texts and a bevy of secondary sources.

Chapter 2, for instance, contains 243 footnotes, the majority of which reference multiple works. In sum, Preedy's book ranks as one of the standout contributions to Oxford's Early Modern Literary Geographies series—not least because it expands its horizons, prodding readers and playgoers to gaze upwards and attend to aerographies as well.

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