Todd Andrew Borlik. *Shakespeare Beyond the Green World: Drama and Ecopolitics in Jacobean Britain*. **Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2023. 304 pp. ISBN 9780192866639. $105.00 hardback.**

According to a recent definition, synesthesia, or thinking in colors, is what happens when one cognitive pathway triggers another: sound and image, for example, or touch and taste. To experience the world through a combination of cognitive pathways is to develop associations between traditionally discrete practices. To become familiar with the world through color might command a smell or a taste, a touch, or a sound. Understanding the colors of the environment might also activate their textures, and yet for many of the ecocritical agendas, color compartmentalizes: far from triggering multiple neural pathways, it silos nature. In *Shakespeare Beyond the Green World: Drama and Ecopolitics in Jacobean Britain*, we encounter color, not as an experience, but as a code: a shorthand to methodological impulses that seek to carve up nature into agendas, through which we may prioritize weather, the sea, the land, the ecosystem, and their associations with, say, green, blue, or brown.

Moving beyond the "green," and focusing on the Jacobean court, and the monarchical and political ideologies of that time, Borlik's work seeks to show that Shakespeare "pointedly intervene[d] in environmental policy disputes" (1) under the auspice of King James VI and I. Positing Shakespeare as a conduit for Jacobean soft power, Borlik suggests that the playwright's works become trojan horses for the tacit policy advisor, political advocate, or campaigner, arguing that Shakespeare had a far

greater impact in his lifetime owing to the strategic ways in which his playworlds informed national identity. As we face our current climate emergencies on a daily basis, we are often focused on the impacts of a post-industrial world with an emphasis on a rapacious consumptions of fossil fuels, waste, pollution, and warming in relation to global emissions and rising levels of carbon dioxide, but Borlik asks us to see the longer perspective, not as a way to obviate our collective and historic responsibilities, but to situate "environmental policy disputes" as fundamental to the shaping of power, culture, and knowledge. To ask how and why, Borlik introduces the various methodologies through which ecocriticism has sought to define and defend itself.

An unwieldy field, eco-criticism has often been a catch-all term for multiple critical agendas which seek to expose the fault lines between the human and non-human, or more than human, worlds. As a vehicle for diverse agendas, eco-criticism often leans into nature to explain or expose human conditions for knowledge and, in various different keys, works hard to resynthesize a non-essentialist world where the human is both an adjunct to, and a gatekeeper of, the natural world. Here, Borlik recognizes the ways in which nature has been dragooned into critical agendas which serve political purposes: that is not to deny their importance but to recognize the contexts in which such agendas emerge and to understand better the place that nature occupies in human institutions of power. With this in mind, we turn to the Jacobean court and the presiding question: how does Shakespeare engage with the "imperial poetics of Stuart absolutism" (1)? As Borlik sets out his arguments, he color codes methodologies in order to establish the marked distinctions between the Elizabethan and Jacobean agendas, the former being a romp, the latter a risk. Shakespeare, it turns out, is not ambivalent but activist: a politically motivated dramatist who drives impact.

Informed by the imperatives of new historicism, and Clifford Geertz's sense of "thick description," (11) Borlik compiles a study of the layered relationship between James's interests in acting as an activist for habitat protection and his role as an ardent hunter: a plunderer and a protector. Conflating the unpredictable effects of unruly Scottish weather and habitat with what can be accomplished by the firm hand of the monarch, James becomes something of an apologist for both cultivation and conservation. One of the most striking texts, reproduced here, is the petition of 1605 which lucidly synthesizes the degradation of the landscape, the draining of the fens, the privatization of land, over-production, and the monopolizing of crops and fodder by rapacious landowners: deeply resonant of John of Gaunt's speech in *Richard II,* we

hear of devouring landlords beggaring the commonwealth. Hunting becomes a metaphor for "absolute authority" (13): although not unusual for royal petitions—and reflective of conventional critiques of the crown—the activity nonetheless positions James as an outsider who, encouraged to excess by his lords, "doth not understand their English policy" (16). Accused of being poor at "housekeeping" (17), James as royal husband is not only deficient, but his actions are unrepresentative. Unlike Elizabeth I, he comes across as misinformed and vastly inferior to his far more competent predecessor.

James, therefore, has a lot to prove; under such circumstances, Borlik exposes the fault lines through which soft power, drama, Shakespeare, and the King's men, may exert themselves. These men, though not quite eco-warriors or voices of the republic, were nevertheless highly attuned to the landscape and lived experience of the middling sort. Borlik's tone is often lighthearted and conversational; James has an environmental "scorecard," (14) for example, on which we can rack up both his failures and successes. But that it is not to belie the sophistication with which Borlik approaches the subject, or the seriousness with which it unfolds. Each chapter takes specific plays as case studies for the representation of ecological agendas within the wider matrix of James VI and I's reframing of a national identity. The building of the Jacobean nation state requires, Borlik suggests, a resonant deconstruction of Elizabethan sensibilities to acquire a shifting focus towards the ways in which agropolitics inform cultural agency.

Approaching specific plays within the context of "thick description," Borlik provides a homage to new historicism as he locates the circulation of social energy across texts and contexts: to that end, there are wonderful dips into contemporary accounts of salacious murders, nest robbing, topography, avian symbolism, Welsh mountains, over-fished seas and bodily fluids, many of which provide a compelling matrix through which we discover new connections and readings of not only Shakespeare's plays, but also the various cultural outputs that informed them. Borlik's approach is compellingly forensic, which sometimes comes across as single focused, from the deconstruction of the heath, for example, to a series of wildernesses which take us back to where we started: dispossessed, vagrant, blasted and wild; to the "victory of light over darkness" and "a triumph of green over brown" (37).

The chapter on *Timon of Athens* refers to a "neurotic fixation" (57) with gold, in which mining is located as an ethical abdication which successfully

"'conceptualize[s] the deconstructive energy and epoch-forging power of metals and money" towards a "Gold-induced extinction of the human race" (62). Contending that each play is in search of its ecological agency, Borlik unpacks the scenarios in which Shakespeare's writing can become prophetic, "Of the wide world, dreaming on things to come".[1] In *Pericles*, a "luminous porthole onto the maritime culture of Jacobean Britain," (64) we find a world of oceanic ambition and piscatorial anxiety, where the "subject of the sea," (69) is both human and nonhuman and the desire for abundance and control drives the English economy. Deftly moving from periwinkles to purple, Borlik explains that "with their greater awareness of the materiality of colour, Jacobean audiences, especially at court, might well associate shell imagery in a play set in Tyre [...] with the eco-material traffic for purple in Shakespeare's day, when the king had just renewed the Charter of the Levant Company" (76). Such statements reveal both the best and worst of new historicism: a glorious shot at how things might have been, to paraphrase Philip Larkin, or a tremendous and tendentious leap of academic faith. But ultimately, Borlik, like so many critics, rests on the side of caution. He reads *Pericles*, one of the "late plays," as redemptive: it is "primarily a tale of human resilience", he writes, "but submersing it in its eco-historical context reveals how the recovery of Marina enacts an environmental ritual for the recovery of the turbulent, over fished seas" (86).

We are so often asked to read Shakespeare as an apologist for the environment and thereby settle our vexed souls but the ecocritical agenda can become lost in that most humanist of desires to understand the past through the present. As a central tenet, Borlik affirms that "the poetics of Stuart absolutism had a profound impact in turn on Shakespeare's late plays in that James's vision of himself as a god-like ruler—a royal huntsman, royal poet, divine naturalist, or second Solomon—spurred the playwright to dramatize the limitations imposed on monarchy by the unruliness of the natural world" (19). To that end, the environment becomes, for Shakespeare, a place of protest, through which the landscape and the weather, the habitats and the ecosystems, generate mediated languages of human resistance. What is not always clear, however, is the extent to which nature is autonomous or only ever articulated in response to human need. In *Cymbeline*, for example, we explore the "alpine pastoral," through an understanding that "Shakespeare's contemporaries tended to politicize,

[1] William Shakespeare, 'Sonnet 107', in *Shakespeare's Sonnets*, ed. by Katherine Duncan Jones (London: Arden Shakespeare, 1997; repr. 2003), l. 2.

moralize and monetize mountainscape" (88). Understanding Shakespeare's Britain as informed by Welsh culture and topography, Borlik encourages us to connect with the "vibrant habitat" of Wales, "recognizing that its union with England entails a celebration of greater cultural, topographical, and biological diversity: it is this diversity that makes Great Britain Great" (111).

As we celebrate the Welsh in Shakespeare's England, so *The Tempest* moves to Lincolnshire to highlight the socially divisive nature of fen draining and its Anglo-Saxon ascetic hermit, St Guthlac. Here, Borlik makes a provocative argument that Shakespeare was less inspired by colonial activities in the Americas and more by the "corresponding drive to salvage the ostensibly desolate fens of eastern England." Shakespeare's "gaze," Borlik writes, "was fixed upon creatures much closer to home" and the "chimera known as Caliban is in part inspired by the legends of Lincolnshire fen spirits, and that his plight comments on the displacement of local cottagers by land reclamation projects" (139). To reinvent Caliban, however, as a conflation of a displaced yeoman from the east Midlands and a bog spite, named Tiddy Mun, is not, for Borlik, in contest with post-colonial readings of the play, but in sympathy with them, as "they point to the play's implications for the earth-shaking projects of seventeenth-century English colonists in Ireland to drain bogs and destroy crannogs" (139). The difficulty with Borlik's argument here is that it relies on a singular Victorian source, inspired by the Gothic, through which local folklore remerges as fact. Despite Borlik's sensitivity to the wider implications of the "circulation of social energy," as Stephen Greenblatt now famously called it in *Shakespearean Negotiations* (1988), there is something unconvincing about these isolated and anecdotal readings that are themselves unhinged from their thick descriptions. Whilst the attention to folklore, commercial and political agendas, and the island's fascination with its own (lack of) natural resources, is compelling, the insistence on a "local reading" of *The Tempest* that situates Caliban in relation to the "resentment and hostility of fen-dwellers whose aquatic commons were confiscated by the projectors" and "the grievances of the Lincolnshire peasantry" (145) seems jarringly parochial. The wider focus on fens, with reference to both *King Lear* and *Macbeth*, produces more rewarding readings which unpick the watery and stagnant semantic fields of value through which so many of the playworlds move.

The final two chapters take a slightly different slant as they move towards a more anthropological reading of selected plays within the contexts of population

control and the "terrors of the night" (214). Beginning with *Measure for Measure* and *Coriolanus*, the penultimate chapter examines "demographic anxieties" within the context of "population management," (167) where "Shakespeare's unruly crowds seem to embody not so much the dangers of mob-rule nor the wisdom of the collective as a demographic crisis, one reflected in miniature in the press of the Globe audience" (169). Borlik associates the "aura of menace" (170) that a crowd brings with the plague and James's approach to the reduction of urban density. Returning to the color purple, this chapter supports a relationship between the "purpura's blotches and livid, purplish boils" and the vibrant purple of the monarch's clothing to suggest that *Measure for Measure* "hints at the inability of the physician-monarch to control the pestilence and hence at James's feeble authority over the city that his coronation procession ostensibly celebrates" (177). Moving to *Coriolanus*, Borlik examines the relationship between over-population and deportation to Northern Ireland: "Coriolanus clearly shares such views; the play's contempt for the 'multiplying spawn' and his exclamation 'take these rats hither to gnaw their garners' would have struck many in the audience in 1608 as an endorsement of the Ulster Plantation as a demographic outlet" (185-186). Sounding more like a retail business park than a strategic eviction of people from their native lands, the Ulster Plantation becomes a repository for the dispossessed and a prototype for colonial activities abroad.

In the last chapter, the good day is done, and we are for the dark: beginning with the paradox that, unlike the early moderns, the Anthropocene has "endangered darkness," Borlik embarks on a journey to understand the spatiotemporal habitat of the night within the context of human "nocturnalization" (193). Confronting the "traumatic onset of modernity," he explores the shift into the "hyper-illuminated" spaces of the court masque and indoor theatres (194). But more than this, Shakespeare starts to write for the light and dark: "Shakespeare has perfected verbal techniques that function like neural density filters to persuade audiences to take day for night" (194). In one of the most rewarding chapters in the book, Borlik explores the textual textures of somatic lyricism and the late-night critique of "nocturnal terror" (194) in *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*. Drawing on the 1599 Act of Common Council which required front facing houses to hang a lantern on "moonless nights," (195) this chapter makes a wonderful argument for the intersectionality of light with Monarchical psychologies. Suggesting that illuminated playhouses "helped endow London with reputable night life" Borlik argues that "Stuart court culture sought to

dispel the darkness of the night" (195). In elaborating on the idea of "nocturnalization," Borlik develops his argument by illuminating the Jacobean conspicuous consumption of artificial light, driven by James's own "psychological and political motives for banishing darkness from the royal presence" (196), predicated on the midnight murder of his father. Reinventing himself as a "night watchman"; "a great watchman … [who] must never slumber nor sleep" (196), this chapter explores the impact of "the monarch's night rule" and its "spectacular expression in the Stuart masque" (197). Picking up on this, Borlik suggests that the judgement of those who fail in their "temporal jurisdiction over the night […] becomes a significant leitmotif in Shakespeare's Jacobean tragedies" (197). The focus on *Macbeth* is especially intriguing as Borlik takes a more intersectional approach to consider the "startle effect": "in the context of state-sponsored nocturnalization under James, the triggering of a startle effect has ideological significance in that it overrides the rational faculties to issue a jarring reminder of the limitations of the human sensorium and, by extension, the limitations of human empery over the night" (211). Heightening the cognitive impairment of humans, the dark becomes a highly sensitized space for human vulnerability, serving to distinguish the human from the "heavenly avenger" (211), god, or nocturnal creature, who can peep through night's blanket to cry, hold, hold.

Like the magpie, Borlik is sharp-eyed and eclectic in his attention to the striking range of texts and cultural outputs chosen from across the period and the various and sometimes inchoate ways in which they may intersect or influence Shakespeare's writing. Whilst some of the readings may appear tendentious at times, they are thoughtful and thought provoking. It has been especially rewarding to trace the author's thought processes through their various iterations, and across different mediums and through different drivers, from images and animals to anecdotes and ideologies. *Shakespeare Beyond the Green World* is a bold attempt to bring the Anthopocene into conversation with the early modern in ways that are not exclusive to critical idioms but far reaching, wide ranging, and richly informed.

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