

Daniel Brayton. *Shakespeare's Ocean: An Ecocritical Exploration*.

Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2012. xv + 260 pp. \$40. ISBN: 978-0-8139-3226-2.

Dan Brayton's study of the ocean in Shakespeare's works provides a compelling argument that the ocean, both as symbol and ecological entity, deeply engages Shakespeare's imagination and his understanding of human identity and humanity's place in the world. For Brayton, it matters not if Shakespeare went to sea: what is significant is that Shakespeare and his contemporaries were fascinated by the ocean and dependent upon its resources. England is an island after all. Brayton's book usefully engages and extends Steve Mentz's *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean*, and, more important, it expands the range of ecocriticism both within early modern studies and the approach as a whole.

It is easy to focus on the terrifying aspects of the ocean in Shakespeare. Indeed, shipwrecks and storms (not to mention pirates) bring real and imaginary loss to many of his characters. Yet Brayton takes a much more nuanced and wide-ranging view on representations of the sea in Shakespeare to argue that the playwright finds a "plasticity of meaning" in the ocean (13). Brayton's study provides fresh readings

not only on obviously oceanic plays like *The Tempest* and *Twelfth Night*, but of more terrestrial texts like *1 Henry IV*, *Romeo and Juliet*, and *The Rape of Lucrece*, among many others.

The methodology of *Shakespeare's Ocean* is pragmatically eclectic: primarily historicist, presentist, and benthic (oceanographic) studies. For Brayton, the sea has a history that is worth uncovering all the more so because it is currently imperiled. This presentist thrust, however, is usually in service of nuanced engagement with Shakespeare's language and culture. Brayton argues that Shakespeare understands the ocean as inseparable from human identity: "an idea that destabilizes the notion of an entirely terrestrial human ontology and of the biblical cosmology of 'the deep'" (5).

The book contains seven chapters along with an introduction and coda. Mosaic-like in structure and argument, each chapter focuses on key words and aspects of the ocean, such as tides, beaches, depths, winds, and fish. The introduction and the first chapter are especially effective in tracing the Western historical roots that construct the ocean as other. Here Brayton looks back to biblical and classical sources, and he also offers up a trenchant critique of ecocriticism. Both Western culture and current ecocriticism turn their backs on the ocean. Indeed, some critics use *green* as a shorthand for ecocritical readings, but Brayton argues that land-centric approaches distort humanity's reliance upon a watery realm that dwarfs the volume of land at the earth's surface. For Brayton, the ocean's immensity and fluidity calls into question human presumptions of dominion over the earth.

Each chapter yields different rewards, and Brayton often examines several plays or poems within each chapter. *The Tempest* receives excellent analysis in chapter 2, "Consider the Crab," and chapter 7, "Prospero's Maps." Both chapters consider ways in which characters and critics try to locate the island and its inhabitants. In the former chapter, Brayton moves beyond the traditional question of whether Caliban is modeled on indigeneous Americans, Africans, or the Irish: instead, he considers Caliban's hybridity as fish-man and how that situates Caliban in the intertidal zone that is neither land nor water. Caliban is both invasive species and adapted to his coastal environment. Chapter 7 focuses on illustrations of wind blowers in contemporary maps as well as wind charts to examine the importance of winds in the play. Brayton argues, "the island domesticates the world's blank spaces by illustrating terra incognita as the product of projection — a European *plot* (as story, locus, and itinerary). The Island, thus, represents the limit-experience of the European ability to mediate and contain alterity (not just the island, but Caliban and Ariel as well)" (194). Such analysis usefully extends and challenges space-place readings of Shakespeare. Brayton might be able to push the significance of his implications further, though, by arguing why terrestrially focused space theory is flawed in overlooking ephemera like water, intertidal zones, and wind.

With a focus on seafood commodities, especially cod, herring, and pilchard, chapter 6, "Shakespeare among the Fishmongers" offers a strong contribution to animal studies. Here Brayton examines the ways in which fish commodities take

on larger cultural significance in plays as diverse as *1 Henry IV*, *Hamlet*, and *Twelfth Night*. Repeated comparisons of human flesh to fish serve to blur categorical distinctions between man and beast, and fish flesh's ability to transform "evoke[s] a universal plasticity of matter" that undercuts both human exceptionalism and individualism.

Much of *Shakespeare's Ocean* is successful. A few of the book's limitations Brayton acknowledges in his coda. For example, gender implications could be explored more where Shakespeare links fish to gendered human flesh. In addition, the author repeatedly mentions that ecocritical and early modern studies neglect the ocean, yet on some occasions he does not follow through and articulate how his approach provides unique interpretations that challenge other readings. For example, one can argue that both forests and the ocean are destabilizing regions that can be defined in multiple, plastic ways that force characters to reorient themselves in the world. Differentiating more strongly between green and blue worlds would help here. But these are minor and local quibbles; Brayton's book is wonderfully suggestive, learned, and provocative in ways that will engage readers interested in ecocriticism, Shakespeare, and early modern material culture.

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