

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Sophie Chiari, *Shakespeare's Representation of Weather, Climate and Environment: The Early Modern 'Fated Sky'* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019).

x+309pp. ISBN 9 781 4744 4252 7.

Tom Rutter
University of Sheffield
t.rutter@sheffield.ac.uk

Shakespeare's Representation of Weather, Climate and Environment draws its subtitle from a speech in *All's Well That Ends Well*:

Our remedies oft in ourselves do lie,
Which we ascribe to heaven; the fated sky
Gives us free scope; only doth backward pull
Our slow designs when we ourselves are dull. (1.1.216–19)¹

Sophie Chiari writes that in combining ‘a deterministic logic with the possibility of free will’, Helen’s speech here ‘seems to stand halfway between the medieval and the early modern vision of the skies (p. 2). Chiari’s book thus joins the ranks of scholarly texts (Mary Thomas Crane’s 2014 *Losing Touch with Nature* is an outstanding example) that identify Shakespeare’s age as a transitional one for human understanding of the natural world, as in so many other respects.² It inherited a view of weather as divinely influenced, and as something that could be used to predict future events. But it also saw a growing belief that weather was a natural phenomenon that could be understood through scientific means. Chiari notes that other critics have recently explored questions of weather and climate in relation to discourses ranging from politics and science to race and emotion. However, she asserts that the novelty of her book lies in its consideration of climate ‘less as a means to understand or enhance other types of phenomena than as an end in itself’ (p. 18): as something with material consequences for the human world, and that could be manipulated in turn.

¹ William Shakespeare, *All's Well That Ends Well*, in *The Arden Shakespeare Complete Works: Revised Edition*, ed. by Richard Proudfoot, Ann Thompson and David Scott Kastan (London: Bloomsbury, 2011). All subsequent quotations from Shakespeare’s plays refer to the Arden edition.

² Mary Thomas Crane, *Losing Touch with Nature: Literature and the New Science in Sixteenth-Century England* (Baltimore, MD.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

Both sides of this relationship are on display in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where bad weather afflicts humans with bad harvests (as was the case in England for much of the 1590s) but, as Titania observes, is itself the result of a falling-out among the fairies: 'this same progeny of evils comes / From our debate, from our dissension' (2.1.115–16). The fairy queen's willingness to put up with this state of affairs rather than submit to her husband exemplifies the way in which, in Shakespeare, writing about weather can equate to writing about gender roles: 'it is Titania's surprisingly human behaviour and, more generally, the violence of female impulses that account for the harshness of the climate' (pp. 48–9). Hot, rather than wet, weather shapes human behaviour in *Romeo and Juliet*, whose summer setting (a departure from Shakespeare's source) locates the play in a season thought to be conducive to anger and to disease, and when sex was believed to be unhealthy: 'It is best to vse carnal copulation in Winter, and in Spring time', wrote William Vaughan in 1612 (p. 67).

Early modern writers tended to use the word 'climate' to mean 'latitude', reflecting its origin in 'the Greek *klineio* or slope (i.e. latitude)' (p. 8). Accordingly, for Chiari weather and climate are strongly bound up with a sense of place. She takes the Arden of *As You Like It* to refer the English midlands rather than Ardennes in the Low Countries, and this enables her to read the play in light of classical texts that portrayed Britain as damp and gloomy, its inhabitants grumpy and sluggish: 'winter and rough weather' (2.5.42) figure strongly in her sense of what Arden might be like. A particular type of rough weather is central to her reading of *Othello*, namely storms which, as well as having a decisive influence on the plot (in scattering the Turkish fleet) are a ubiquitous metaphor within the play. The storm at sea 'foreshadows the fierce domestic storm which is awaiting Othello and Desdemona in Cyprus' (p. 127), and which is echoed by airy images from the wind instruments in 3.1 to Othello blowing his 'fond love ... to heaven' (3.3.448), from the wind banging the door in 4.3 to the Moor's literal stopping of his wife's breath and Iago's refusal to speak at the end of the play.

Chiari's ability to find patterns of recurrent images within specific plays is one of the strengths of her book. Another is her considerable breadth of reference: her (relatively short) chapter on *King Lear* moves between Calvin's and Hooker's ideas about thunder, Pliny's view of nature, Samuel Harsnett on feigned possession, Lucretius on atomism, and contemporary accounts of floods. This will make her book an invaluable resource for other scholars working on related topics. However, this same eclecticism sometimes makes the overall arguments of individual chapters a little hard to follow as Chiari moves from intertext to intertext, and this effect is compounded by her willingness to discuss individual phrases from the plays in isolation rather than thinking about how more substantial exchanges or scenes work, or how a particular theme develops over the course of a drama. Another factor (outside Chiari's control) is the fact that classical and early modern authors seem to have been so willing to contradict themselves on scientific topics: one minute we have Jean Bodin writing that inhabitants of the fertile east are lazy cowards because they do not have to work hard (p. 185), the next that Egyptians (who fall within the category of easterners) are active and warlike (p. 186). Given the range of conflicting

views, it sometimes feels that one can find contextual support for virtually any interpretation of the events of a play.

Chiari's final two chapters are on *Antony and Cleopatra* and *The Tempest*. The first of these is characteristically wide-ranging, covering early modern beliefs about what southern climes did to northern bodies, imagery of water and of clouds, and Egypt as representation of an Epicurean atomistic universe. The latter draws together the suggestions in the play's title of storms, of time (*tempus*), of temper, and of tempering, to offer an account of how its interest in weather serves its themes of change and redemption. Again, Chiari makes use of diverse and intriguing contextual materials: if you want to know whether the properties of the storm in *The Tempest* suggest an origin in the north, south, east, or west, this is the book for you, although I would have liked a bit more in the way of mundane signposting to explain the direction of the argument as a whole. But in its profusion of material, this book is like the River Nile as imagined in *Antony and Cleopatra*: fecund and teeming with life.