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REVIEW ARTICLE FOR *WIREs*

Climatic Issues in Early Modern England: Shakespeare's Views of the Sky

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ABSTRACT

Climatic issues pervade early modern English drama, and three main reasons may be adduced for this. First, while in the first half of the sixteenth century Renaissance natural philosophers still felt compelled to acknowledge the accidental nature of weather-related phenomena, in the second part of the century, new beliefs emerged and the dramatization of celestial events allowed for a more immediate access to the natural world. Second, then as now, Shakespeare's 'sceptred isle' (*Richard II*) was often exposed to the wind, the rain and the freezing air, and such characteristics were believed to have a lasting impact on the habits of the English nation. Third, people then had to struggle against the adverse weather conditions characterised by what is now referred to as the 'Little Ice Age.'

As actor and playwright, Shakespeare saw the sky as a theatrical element. While his so-called 'festive comedies' appear far less festive if we pay attention to their climatic specificities, his tragedies offer interesting insights into the way the playwright associates heavens and humours on the one hand, climate and the planets on the other.

I thus argue that climate was for Shakespeare a framing device giving coherence to his playtexts and providing the audience with a natural, elemental, and cosmic background. His interest in the way weather conditions affect human behaviour prompted him to modify traditional points of view and, as a result, to foreground man's ominous capacity to trigger climatic disorders.

ENDNOTES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY AVAILABLE IN THE ORIGINAL VERSION ONLY :

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INTRODUCTION

While ever since Homer, weather references have abounded in literary texts, literary studies have paradoxically long neglected the very idea of climate, partly because literary critics kept confusing celestial phenomena (which do not belong to the field of the humanities) with the way they were perceived (which definitely belongs to the scope of the humanities). New trends in ecocriticism are now fortunately changing this, and since the end of the twentieth century, literary scholars have started paying attention to the representations of the multiple emotions and ideas triggered by our daily contact with the sky.

As the title of this review makes clear, the following development will therefore be focused not on the sky per se, but on its mental and cultural representations, i.e. on the ways the sky is being interpreted in a given context. In *Reading the Skies*, Vladimir Janković argued that early modern meteorological *ideas* (as opposed to events) were worth studying since they reflected specific discourses and structures of thought. He suggested that, in the course of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, 'meteors became concrete "matters of fact"' for English individuals while they had so far only been examined from a purely theoretical point of view. He was followed in a more comprehensive book by the cultural historian Lucian Boia who, in *The Weather in the Imagination*, sought to examine how 'human imagination' was 'stimulated and sometimes even inflamed by climatic phenomena. With her hugely successful *Weatherland*, published in 2015, Alexandra Harris followed in the footsteps of Boia and managed to make the general public realise that the 'rich weather-cultures of Scotland, Wales, and Ireland' actually 'fill[ed] many books,' informed the personal memories of the greatest British writers and thus shaped the literary culture of her country. Intriguingly, the book's epigraph is a shared line taken from *Macbeth* ('*Banquo* It will be rain tonight. / *First Murderer* Let it come down,' 3.3.16), even though very little appears to have been written on Shakespeare and his contemporaries from that particular angle. Yet, climatic issues pervade early modern English drama to the point that we may wonder why Shakespeare and his contemporaries were so obsessed with the sky: surely, the answer must not simply lie in the vagaries of the English weather in the Elizabethan era. In an effort to provide more complex answers to this question, this article draws upon some of the arguments developed in my recent monograph. I will proceed along the lines of three different sections respectively devoted to the various approaches of the sky in early modern England, to the context and to the issues linked to so-called Little Ice Age (a phrase coined in 1939 by the American glaciologist François E. Matthes and which designates the long 1300 to 1900 period which was not uniformly cold but was marked by several atmospheric shifts), and to the dramatization of skyey issues in a few examples drawn from the Shakespearean canon.

I will first discuss some recent engagements with early modern views, be they learned or popular, that circulated about weather (corresponding to the short-term apprehension of unpredictable celestial events) and climate (i.e. the long-term vision of meteorological phenomena arranged into predictable patterns) in Shakespeare's age. This will then lead me to study the impact of the 'Little Ice Age' on early modern English literature. I will finally consider Shakespeare's own view of the sky since a number of Shakespeare scholars now begin to argue that for the playwright climate was a framing device giving coherence and density to his playtexts and providing the audience with a natural, elemental, and cosmic background whose effects and sounds were then made more than perceptible on the stages of the public playhouses. Some, including myself, also show that his interest in the way weather conditions and affects human behaviour prompted him to modify, and sometimes reverse, traditional religious or superstitious points of view and, as a result, to foreground man's ominous capacity to trigger (and not merely endure) violent climatic disorders.

1. THE EARLY MODERN APPROACH TO THE SKY

Traditional approaches

In post-Reformation rural England, the mysteries of the sky were inseparable from the small local events of daily life as well as from the cycle of the seasons. As Wolfgang Behringer explains, '[f]or people living at the time, short-term changes [in climate] had greater importance than medium to long-term ones;' it is no mere chance that most documented accounts of early modern Europe contain 'observations about the weather [rather] than about the climate.' Most of Shakespeare's contemporaries were essentially concerned by the immediate present because their lives depended upon it, leading them to assuage their fears by seeking to predict the weather and play down its possibly negative effects. This follows a long tradition dating back to Antiquity—an attitude which Luther had firmly condemned (like all the traditional beliefs in calendar-divination, prophecies and supernatural protections against bad weather) but which persisted well into the seventeenth century.

On the other hand, in Shakespeare's time, apocalyptic discourses and sermons attributed natural disasters to divine fury—interestingly, this apocalyptic rhetoric in connection with climatic issues has now resurfaced in a number of scientific warnings (Philip Smith notes the rise of an apocalyptic global warming discourse which has fuelled strong 'ethical injunctions' since the late 1980s). If we turn once again to Luther, for example, the theologian argued that the Fall of Adam not only affected man but nature in general. The whole of God's creation, according to him, had degenerated into a corrupt nature (*natura corrupta*), and the situation was made even worse by the destruction of the world due to the Flood. Michael Kempe contends that seeing the deluge as a catalyst for speeding up the world's decay was a fairly common view in Renaissance thinking, especially in the tradition of the pessimistic cosmologies that presented the earth as an ageing world.

The emergence of new beliefs

These traditional approaches to the sky, which promoted the vision of erratic *weather* patterns, did not preclude, however, a more learned vision of *climate* issues and the emergence of new philosophical beliefs in particular. Aristotle's *Meteorology* has been largely influential in Shakespeare's England. In 'Conjecture, Probabilism, and Provisional Knowledge in Renaissance Meteorology,' Craig Martin shows that, for Aristotle, "[g]aining a good account of meteorological phenomena is hampered not only by their irregularity but also by their inaccessibility to the senses.' He thus posited the limits of a purely scientific approach to the sky. Yet as Martin argues, from the mid-sixteenth century onwards, 'an empiricism based on observation, not on matter theory' helped men of science to better grasp the complexities of the sky thanks to sensible signs. So, while in the first half of the sixteenth century Renaissance natural philosophers still felt compelled to acknowledge the accidental nature of weather-related phenomena, Aristotelianism became increasingly questioned in the second part of the century, new theories emerged, and together with the dramatisation of celestial events, they allowed for a more immediate access to the natural world.

The early modern theories of climate

If, according to Mary Floyd-Wilson, 'climatological theory' was regaining ground in early modern England, it must yet be reminded that not everyone agreed on how climate really worked on human temper as several systems coexisted at the time. Two acquired particular prominence. In *Airs, Waters and Places*, Hippocrates stipulated a form of continuity between human physiology and its natural environment, so that the wetness of the Englishmen's humours was then supposedly derived from the rainy climate of Northern Europe. But, according to Aristotle's *Problems* (actually a pseudo-Aristotelian treatise) and to his *Politics*,

the body's complexion was determined in reaction to the surrounding climate, internal heat then resulting from external cold. Floyd-Wilson and Garrett A. Sullivan Jr. offer an overview of these theories in their introduction to *Environment and Embodiment in Early Modern England*. For them, the Hippocratic tradition promotes a form of continuity between the subject and his environment while the Aristotelian one favours a 'counteractive' model. The latter, as a theory of contraries, was often used to explain the English settlers' adaptation to their new environment in Virginia. Jean E. Feerick convincingly notices that, in the early seventeenth century, propagandist tracts commissioned by the Virginia Company argued that Virginia 'would have an ameliorative effect on those settling there' and emphasised 'the constitutive force of climate and geography' to counterbalance possible low spirits in the settlers' minds.

While some English writers attempted to situate their own territory in the temperate area, neither too hot nor too cold, the climate they actually lived in was nonetheless considered as rather chilly by their European neighbours, especially the Mediterranean peoples, unsurprisingly. In Steven Mullaney's words, '[t]he perfect balance of humors [...] was found […] in people of a Mediterranean climate—unsurprisingly, since humoral theory and its Greek and Roman physicians were native to such a clime.' Following suit with Mullaney, a growing number of scholars have recently paid attention to the early modern logic of what Mary Floyd-Wilson has termed 'geo-humoralism'—i.e. the interrelation of geographical and weather issues and their impact on the human conduct and temperament—and which implied that 'humoral temperance […] was held to be attainable only in a temperate clime.' In sum, bodily humours were then thought to depend on climate and environment, whose external influences were somehow picked through the blood as well as through the skin.

If Elizabethan subjects generally stuck to that widely spread scheme in Renaissance Europe, it often was to their detriment: the English were northerners at heart, which means that they were regarded as 'heavy, obtuse, stupid, sottish' by promoters of climatic determinism such as Pierre Charron. There was no denying the fact that Shakespeare's 'sceptred isle' (*Richard II*, 2.1.40) was frequently exposed to the wind, the rain and the freezing air: in *Henry V*, for instance, the Constable of France famously describes the English climate as 'foggy, raw and dull' (3.5.15). Such characteristics were believed to have a lasting impact on the 'mettle' (3.5.14), mores and habits of the English nation, as pointed out by Floyd-Wilson. One understands why, therefore, Shakespeare questions this theory and tries to show, in a number of plays, that men should not systematically see themselves as fashioned by their climatic environment. Promoting free will rather than passive acceptance of nature's workings, he articulates a new approach to the sky which foregrounds man's ability to influence (rather than to be influenced) by it. *The Tempest*, with its magus expert in weather magic, is a case in point, as will be seen in the third part of this article.

2. SHAKESPEARE AND THE LITTLE ICE AGE

Climate in Shakespeare's lifetime

Independently of England's geographical situation, the reason why Shakespeare's contemporaries were so much concerned with the sky was also due to their having to struggle against the adverse weather conditions characterised by the 'Little Ice Age'. Today, climate historians generally agree on the fact that 'the years from 1560 to 1600 were cooler and stormier, with later wine harvests and considerably stronger winds than those of the twentieth century.' In particular, Mike Hulme observes that, in Shakespeare's lifetime, the climate was much colder than ours and that especially harsh winters had to be endured over the years 1564-65 and 1601-1603, while very poor summers plagued crops and inhabitants alike from

1594 to 1597. Admittedly, Shakespeare and his contemporaries could not rely on any formal scientific measurement at the time and, above all, they were deprived of the retrospective vision supplied by the comparisons I have just made between then and now. They were nonetheless aware that, during the first half of the sixteenth century, weather conditions had been relatively temperate. As a result, Philip Armstrong suggests that '[t]he sharpness of this contrast between the climate of Elizabeth's reign and that of her father's means that Shakespeare would have grown to maturity surrounded by a generational sense that a previously fecund, temperate, and reliable natural environment had been replaced by freezing temperatures, blighted harvests, and sudden, wild storms.' This 'generational sense' may have varied in intensity depending on the sort of family one lived in. How strong it really was, we will never know—but it nonetheless existed.

The apocalyptic weather of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*

A Midsummer Night's Dream is a case in point. In *A Handbook of English Renaissance Literary Studies*, Bruce Boehrer notes that the Fairy Queen's famous speech on the awful weather consequences of her quarrel with Oberon, in act 1, scene 2, provides us with a 'vision of environmental disaster' and he argues that 'Titania's speech now appears quite clearly to reach into the immediacy of Elizabethan eco-historical experience.' Boehrer indeed refers to the comedy's purple patch when Titania acknowledges that 'The ploughman lost his sweat, and the green corn / Hath rotted ere his youth attained a beard. / The fold stands empty in the drownèd field, / And crows are fatted with the murrain flock' (2.1.94-97). Actually, England's fairly harsh climate did not necessarily entail poor harvests since, according to historians like Morgan Kelly and Cormac Ó Gráda, the economic consequences of the 'Little Ice Age' have been overstated. As John Thornes and Gemma Wetherell put it, '[o]bviously, one has to be aware that artists may freely use their "artistic license" to exaggerate and invent' and, in sixteenth-century England, naturalism assuredly did not exist so that the description of particularly bad weather spells necessarily implied a degree of stylization as well as of imagination.

What can simply be said at this stage is that the weather did have an influence on the population's daily morale. As the *Dream* repeatedly depicts poor meteorological conditions, the persisting rain or cool temperatures that were likely to attend its performances certainly contributed to arouse, among the audience, strong feelings of empathy with the plight of the Athenian youths lost in the dark labyrinth of the forest and thrashing around in the damp night. At the time when the *Dream* was presumably composed, John Stow notes that, in 1595, 'bitterly cold temperatures prevailed from April 20 until the end of May,' thus ruining the harvests and causing dearth and public unrest. In his 2013 production of the play for the Globe, Dominic Dromgoole highlighted the dismal climatic conditions in the forest of Athens, suggesting a 'perpetual October with miserable temperatures […] akin to those of the little ice age, and leaden skies which threaten frequent drenchings.' In *Shakespeare's Representation of Climate, Weather and Environment*, I push this analysis even further when I argue that, by presenting the weather as a consequence rather than as a cause of chaos, Shakespeare deconstructs the determinist perspective which prevailed at the time, thus making the sky the main source of human troubles.

King Lear's storm

In the same line of ideas, the violent storm and cold temperatures in *King Lear* ('this contentious storm,' Lear says, '[i]nvades us to the skin,' 3.4.6-7) are often presented by critics as a reflection of the poor weather conditions plaguing Shakespeare's England. In *Shakespeare's Representation of Climate, Weather and Environment*, I show that even Poor Tom's obsessional refrain, 'Tom's a-cold' (in 3.4 and 4.1), provides an apt comment on the

old man's hostile surroundings while it also echoes the emotional frigidity and detachment of Lear's daughters towards their ageing father—to the notable exception of Cordelia. The spectators and readers of the play may have made a parallel between Lear's perilous condition in the frightening storm on the heath and the devastating weather conditions of the 'Little Ice Age.' Shakespeare's titular character 'is not wandering through a metaphoric storm that marks his poetic madness and signals the disruption of the natural order, but an all-too recognizable figure who registers the complex connexions between climatic instability and its potential consequences: the loss of agricultural harvests and the fracturing of ideologies of national unity, patriarchal authority, and socioeconomic stability,' Robert Markley asserts. Simon C. Estok, as to him, goes as far as to argue that the tragedy conveys the 'ecophobia' of an audience traumatised by 'bad harvests' and 'cold weather' and that the play proves particularly 'vivid in its foregrounding of environmental unpredictability and in its dramatization of a fear of nature.' Yet, for all its realism in terms of climatic representation, I cannot accept the idea that *King Lear* aims at depicting reality. It basically remains a terrifying dramatic poem, a playtext in which, as Touchstone ironically remarks in *As You Like It*, 'the truest poetry is the most feigning' (3.4.16). Shakespeare's onstage storms, it seems to me, essentially partake of an artistic process that transforms the landscape into a mindscape open to scrutiny and anatomy.

3. DRAMATIZING THE CLIMATE

Science and the senses: Shakespeare's stance

In the sixteenth century, as Carla Mazzio observes, new forms of '*reasoning* within astronomy, physics, meteorology and mathematics were in many ways moving further and further away from an understanding of nature accessible to the senses, the body, the human or intuitive experience of the world' (her emphasis). Mazzio, here, relies on the considerations of Mary Thomas Crane, and what the latter more specifically suggests is that, relying as much on classical knowledge as on new discoveries, cosmographers (who studied the heavens and the earth) and, more generally, early modern men of science, began to give precedence to a counter-intuitive approach in their efforts to read the book of nature. This new stance turning science into an abstract and abstruse discipline, barely accessible to the common man, was however countervailed by the literature and the drama of the period, which, up to a certain point, offered various means of reconciling science with the senses.

While Crane's statement certainly needs to be qualified—physical observation was gaining rather than losing ground by the turn of the seventeenth century—, it places renewed emphasis on the early modern approach to science (one not entirely stripped of religious worship, but taking other standards of truth into account) and it exemplifies its complex relationships with drama and entertainment.

As actor and playwright, Shakespeare certainly saw the sky as a theatrical element. But as I argue in my own *Shakespeare's Representation of Climate, Weather and Environment*, he, as provincial man turned Londoner, must have realised how much the vagaries of the weather fashioned his native environment with, for instance, the building of the massive Clopton bridge in Stratford-upon-Avon under the reign of Henry VII in order to replace the former wooden bridge then ill-adapted to times of flood. As a result, his plays offer a pragmatic as well as a poetic approach to climate issues.

Clima(c)tic issues in Shakespeare's tragedies

Tragedies such as *Romeo and Juliet* or *Anthony and Cleopatra* offer interesting insights into the way the playwright associates heavens and humours on the one hand, climate and the planets on the other. The tragic action of *Romeo and Juliet*, a play composed in the mid-

1590s, is supposed to take place during the summer, and the Verona dog days partly determine the fates of the two heroes. Philippa Berry was one of the first to trace the origins of the tragedy back to the dog days that plague the city of Verona. Shakespeare of course relied for this on widespread sources and popular conceptions. In early modern England, the July heat waves were generally thought of as the unhealthiest period in the year. The encyclopaedist Stephen Batman explains that these 'Canicular daies' are particularly evil ones. During this month, he affirms, 'all hot passions [and] evils increate […].' The phrase 'dog day' itself stems from astrology and climatology as it designates Sirius, the brightest star in the Canis Major (or Great Dog) constellation which rises about the same time as the sun in the month of August.

Written twelve years or so after *Romeo an Juliet*, *Antony and Cleopatra* is yet another play in which hot temperatures play a crucial part, and it is especially interesting from a geographical perspective. In his seminal *Shakespeare and the Geography of Difference*, John Gillies reminds us that Egypt was then situated in the 'scorched and burnt up,' middle region, while Rome presumably laid in one of the temperate zones adjacent to this middle area, right in '*medius mundi locus* (the centre of the world).' The tragedy thus reveals how Roman and Egyptian self-definitions are tied to Stoic and Epicurean philosophies based on climatic conditions. In freely yielding to his passion, Anthony, a man otherwise only truly at ease when he crosses mountains and faces the harshness of the freezing air, behaves exactly like a Northerner ill-suited to the clime of Alexandria. As Caesar remembers his past feats, he reminds us that, 'like the stag when snow the pasture sheets, / The barks of trees [Anthony] browsed' (1.4.65-66).

If the cosmic frame of *Antony and Cleopatra* has traditionally drawn much critical attention (Cleopatra compares Antony's face to 'the heav'ns' where 'A sun and moon' light 'The little O o'th' earth,' 5.2.78-80), the most often probed of all Shakespeare plays in terms of sky-related issues is probably *The Tempest*. Dagomar Degroot sees the tragicomedy as a 'cultural respons[e] to the Little Ice Age' and insists, following many others before him, on the metaphorical quality of its storm that conveys 'upheaval and confusion.' Instead, one should perhaps start with the play's title which immediately suggests the playwright's renewed interest in climatic and scientific issues at the close of his career as well as his fascination with illusion and the invisible. As Keith Whitlock explains, the main character, Prospero, bears a name which 'signifies both material prosperity and, in its classical and Renaissance sense, good weather. [...] Prospero, then, is God on earth, an absolute and controlling force in human and meteorological terms.' We should probably add in magical terms as well. Gwilym Jones reminds us that, because of what the magus tells his daughter Miranda in the second scene of the play (Prospero suggests that there was neither a real shipwreck nor actual drowning), the harsh weather conditions plaguing the crew of Alonso's ship have often been 'exposed as magically derived rather than natural.' Prospero is indeed clearly portrayed by Shakespeare as one who masters nature thanks to the help of his faithful spirit Ariel. Commanding the elements into obedience is one of the play's central concerns, and the exasperated boatswain makes it clear that the old Gonzalo is totally deprived of such powers: 'You are a councillor; if you can command these elements to silence and work the peace of the present, we will not hand a rope more. Use your authority. If you cannot, give thanks you have lived so long […]' (1.1.19-22).

The play's main source was probably the account of the wreck of the Sea Venture on the Bermuda shores. The ship was on its way to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1609, when a huge storm, probably a hurricane, blew it onto one of the uninhabited islands of the Bermuda archipelago. In a private letter, William Strachey gave a strikingly detailed account of the expedition. Steve Mentz explains that 'Strachey's description of the storm's arrival contains detail to recognize the typical counterclockwise rotating northeast winds on the left-hand side

of the rotating storm […].' A manuscript version of this narrative was first circulated in England in 1610 before being put to print fifteen years later in the travel narratives compiled by Samuel Purchas. Even though critics still wonder how Shakespeare may have been acquainted with Strachey's manuscript letter, most agree that the playwright did borrow several ideas and phrases from a few 1610 pamphlets using Strachey's narrative, including Sylvester Jourdain's *A Discovery of the Barmudas*, *Otherwise Called the Ile of Divels* and *The True Declaration of the Estate of the Colonie of Virginia*. According to Alden T. and Virginia Mason Vaughan, Shakespeare probably had a direct access to Strachey's account, either by word of mouth or in manuscript form, while Gabriel Egan posits that the playwright may even have had contacts with 'those involved in the Virginia project'. This implied a number of scientific weather experiments before 1610 since a thermoscope, for example, was discovered among the artefacts dug out in the Jacobean settlement of Jamestown. Prospero's attempts at mastering the climate may thus reproduce some of the Jamestown experiments. 'The play is utterly ambiguous about the kind of control over the physical world that Prospero's knowledge gives him,' Egan observes, 'and by probing this question (what *is* his "art"?) we begin to perceive the ecological significance of *The Tempest*.'

Important as it certainly is, this 'ecological significance' was not systematically part of the concerns of the travel narratives that circulated in Jacobean England. As J.M. Nosworthy makes it clear, Shakespeare surely 'did not need an actual shipwreck and its concomitant pamphlets to tell him that vessels sometimes come to grief in squally weather,' and the fact is that, in *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*, 'storm and shipwreck find a place without any topical prompting.' The playwright undoubtedly found part of his inspiration in the vast reservoir of storms, sea travels and magical practices in Vergil's *Aeneid* as well as in various biblical and theological sources more discreetly woven into the texture of the play but nonetheless present. Staging a proto-scientific experimentation with climate actually allowed Shakespeare to engage in a debate opposing those who ascribed foul weather to natural causes to those who explained and justified it by resorting to some godly intervention.

CONCLUSION: BETWEEN SUPERSTITION AND RATIONALITY

All in all, by the turn of the seventeenth century, the observation of the sky had established 'a point of contact' between 'experts' (natural philosophers, astrologers) and 'laypersons' (seamen, shepherds, artisans). Poets and playwrights bridged the gap between these two broad categories. While the quest of the sublime traditionally associated with the changing English skies only became an obsession in the second half of the eighteenth century, John Gillies remarks that, in early modern England, most public stages of the 1599 period onwards were already the product of a potent 'cosmographic imagination' and the Globe, where many plays by Shakespeare were performed, had a roof protecting the actors from bad weather with images of the zodiac and of planets painted on its underside. As a result, plays by Shakespeare and his contemporaries were informed by early modern views of the sky. Most importantly, these plays were all, in various ways, affected by weather and climate issues and by what Gwilym Jones has called 'environmental irony,' i.e. by the unnerving intrusion of real weather into the playwright's fictional world.

No wonder if Shakespeare's contemporaries still believed that climate determinism affected humankind as a whole. In an early tragedy like *Romeo and Juliet*, the influence of the stars turns out to be preponderant in the lovers' fate and weather determinism plays a central role in the tragedy. Yet in many other plays, Shakespeare qualifies this. In *Antony and Cleopatra* for example, life is defined by its mutability so that, in spite of their predictable interactions with their climatic conditions, the main characters evade any form of determinism. Even more strikingly, in *The Tempest*, science or proto-science enables Prospero to rewrite his own fate

as master of the elements. As a result, from the traditional view of the sky put forward by *Romeo and Juliet* to the experimental and pragmatic approach staged in *The Tempest*, we can assert that Shakespeare offers a panoramic view of the early modern sky. He suggests that a poised stance is possible, somewhere between superstition and the cold rationality prefiguring Descartes's theories. Influenced by Greek medical and meteorological thinking, his plays allow men and women to undergo a sensory and sensitive experience of the weather and of sky-related phenomena, one that could free them from dread and which could make them dream of a 'brave new world' (*The Tempest*, 5.1.186), one, above all, that enabled early modern playgoers to accept contingency and to feel unconstrained by the limits of the 'wooden O' (*Henry V*, Prologue, 13) of the playhouse and of '[t]he little O o'th' earth' (*Anthony and Cleopatra*, 5.2.80).